

# 7

## Achievements and Victories

To stay in this work you have to have a proud achievement every week in my opinion, maybe every day. But certainly every week. Every month, you have to be able to say, "This was good; this worked."

—Patrick Sweeney

We asked the organizers to tell us stories of their proudest achievements. The stories they tell represent a great cross-section of American organizing: a broad range of issues and constituencies using people power to get things changed.

### *There's not an incinerator*

There was a medical waste incinerator we were fighting in Tennessee. It started with four people at a county commission meeting who got up and said, "We don't want this coming into our town." And six weeks later, there were 500 people out at things. It was on the front page of the paper. The incinerator proposal moved to eight different locations and got stopped at all of them. One of them was right at an interstate exit, and every time I drive by there, it's like "Yeah, right back there, there's *not* a medical waste incinerator."

—Bob Becker

### *Power in numbers*

I think it's exciting any time you have several hundred people in one room that are focused on the same agenda and confronting a powerful decision-maker and pinning them to make a commitment. We've done that in a lot of different issue campaigns over the past thirteen years. It's always exciting to see that and to see the power of people and to know that if there were five people in the room instead of 500 we would be treated completely differently. The result would be completely different. We've seen that time and again.

One time we had not gotten the kind of follow-through by the school district administration that we expected on a particular issue. So we decided

to go to the school board meeting and engage the superintendent directly. This was after having had the superintendent out to a meeting of 600 where he made some commitments but wasn't following through on. So we went to the school board meeting to make that public. This was a meeting at which they were going to present the budget. Nobody was to be there. It was going to be a very small meeting that they expected to be over very quickly. It was preceded by the superintendent presenting his strategic plan for the district in a press conference. Then there was a break and then there was going to be this brief budget hearing.

We knew the media would be there because of the press conference. We decided that would be a good night to show up at the school board meeting. So we mobilized at a church nearby and had a rally there. Then we went by buses over to the school district building where the school board meeting was. We arrived with about 200 people right as the superintendent was finishing the presentation of his strategic plan. In fact, as we arrived the media was packing up their cameras and getting ready to get back in their vans and go back to the station. But when they saw 200 people show up they set their cameras back up again because they knew they had an exciting story.

We packed this school board room, which has chairs for maybe 175 people. It was wall-to-wall people. When the budget meeting convened we requested to be on the agenda. The way the rules are for school board meetings, you can only speak for three minutes at a time then they ring the bell. So we had about twenty people sign up for their three-minute speech. We had a lot of people prepared to say different things related to the same issue. The final demand was for the superintendent to consider a new reading program as a part of this overall strategic plan that he had just presented. We knew it was not in there, so we wanted to highlight that.

Whenever we'd show up at meetings before, the president of the school board had basically responded to public comment in a very perfunctory obligatory way. Whenever the superintendent had an objection to what was being said by someone from the public, the school board president would just bow to whatever his response was. Usually it was just, "Thank you for your comment. We'll be sure to look into that." This particular night the school board president actually turned to the superintendent and said, "I can see to the obvious large public interest in this issue we've seen here tonight. I believe that you ought to look into this one more time, Mr. Superintendent." And he sheepishly nodded his head.

That was a very empowering victory for our group. As a result of that action that night, and other actions that followed, we were able to get the school district to implement a new reading curriculum that made a big difference in some of the lowest performing schools. In fact, out of all eighty-eight elementary schools in the district, the top two in terms of improvement in reading scores are schools that are using this curriculum. And one of them had been the lowest performing school in reading in the whole state of Kentucky! This victory proved to our leadership that if

action works—that we have to demand change if we want it to happen. As Frederick Douglass said, “Power concedes nothing without a demand; it never has and never will.”

—Robert Owens

### *Turning on the gas*

There's this community called Salem [New Mexico]. Salem was one of the early communities with whom the CDC [Colonias Development Council] worked. They didn't have an infrastructure; there was no water or waste system. It had very, very inadequate housing. There was a time in Salem where people would bring in butane gas from Mexico. These are illegal tanks, and people were connecting their butane gas to their mobile homes. It was a very dangerous situation. There was no safety for anybody.

The people were able to say, “Look, this is a dangerous situation. Let's see what we can do.” They mobilized. Someone from CDC could have called the gas company and said, “We need gas. We have the critical mass that you need to put this in. Do it.” But the organizing effort was to prepare people to negotiate, to meet with the gas company and get the signatures themselves. It involved a process in which the community negotiated a payment plan on their own to be able to procure natural gas for ninety-eight percent of the population.

—Diana Bustamante

### *Not a drop to drink*

There was a subdivision in Mingo County [West Virginia] that got all its water from a common well, and this coal company had done longwall mining underneath it, and sunk the well. There were fifty people out of water and man, they were pissed. They were all coal miners who'd just bought their new house or new modular home and moved it in and they were totally out of water. We had the state giving us the runaround and not doing anything.

So we put together this action where we went down to the state Division of Environmental Protection's Logan office with all these milk jugs and water bottles and everything. We said, “All right, guys, we're here to fill up. If you don't order that company to provide us water, then here we are to fill our jugs and we ain't leaving until we do.” We handed them a letter to fax to whatever the name of that jerk was—David Callahan—he was head of the DEP [Department of Environmental Protection], saying, “These are our demands, and we want you to fax it to the coal company right now and tell them we ain't leaving until you write that order.” And before we left, they had written the order. Everyone in the subdivision had the coal company delivering water to their doors.

—Allen Cooper

### *Making a stink (go away)*

We had some great battles. In 1972 we won a big fight against Union Carbide, which was polluting the neighborhood with hydrogen sulfide smell of a fart. This is a smell that came from the manufacturing of C Mayer hot dog casings. People had their doors and windows shut even the hottest summer days. We organized in this very blue-collar comr

This was a time when women were not yet working, for the most outside the home. With ten days notice you could get fifty to a hundred people on a bus going down to Chicago to confront the chair of, say, railroad corporation who happened to be on the Union Carbide board. You could take these people into a high-rise office building, to the third floor, with cameras from the TV stations, a hundred angry people re: confront him.

We often used ridicule as a gimmick and humor. In this case Joanne Wilhelmy, the chair of the committee, confronted him and asked if he what it was like to live with this smell. And she then took out a bottle of trick perfume that smelled like a fart. And on the front page of the *Chicago Daily-News* the next day was a photo of Joanne holding a bottle up to her nose. He had his eyes closed and his face scrunched up and his mouth crossed. It was the height of [Saul] Alinsky's ideas about putting pressure on people who were indirectly, in some ways, connected with our issues. They were on the board of a corporation like Union Carbide, and getting them to respond.

And we won that fight—forced them to put in a scrubber that cleaned up the smell and made the neighborhood livable. The leaders were very excited and proud of their win. It made a big difference in what it was like to live there.

—Ken Galdston

### *Sitting in at Woolworth's*

On February 1, 1960, the sit-ins happened. Students in the North were organizing sympathy demonstrations at their local Woolworth's. I, along with two other students at Skidmore—an African-American student and a Jewish student from Chicago—organized these incredible meetings where we debated and discussed the issues of segregation and the sit-ins and what the Southern students were doing. There were 100, 150 people at the meetings debating and discussing. They got very wild and very heated and it was very exhilarating. So we organized a demonstration at the Woolworth's. Two hundred women out of the 1,200 women that were students at Skidmore marched from campus to the Woolworth's. We marched around the shopping center a little bit and then came back to campus.

We got back to campus and a little knot of students formed on the corner outside the senior dorm. Thea, Ruby, and I were the leaders who

were all seniors. The sophomores, juniors, and freshmen insisted, "We have to continue this! We have to do more!" So we figured out that we would send four students every hour, starting the next morning, to picket the Woolworth's. We sent four students down to picket on two-hour shifts. We were going to swap people out after every two hours to keep a presence up. They had signs saying things like "Segregation Unfair" and "Equal Rights For All."

The first four students who went down were arrested by the police and told that they were trespassing and in violation of a union-busting statute. We didn't know that it was a union-busting statute at the time, but it said that you could not carry a picket sign within a certain number of feet of an establishment. The four students were taken to the police station. They never were booked, because luckily one student's father was a lawyer and she knew that you had to be charged before you could be booked.

—Betty Garman Robinson

### *Saving the farm*

One pretty exciting experience was when I was working for DRC [Dakota Resource Council] in North Dakota. We were organizing farmers who were getting foreclosed on, and we helped pass the 1987 Agriculture Credit Act that allowed for debt restructuring for FmHA [Farmers Home Administration] borrowers.

Reagan signed that on January 6, 1988, and within ten days of him signing it, FmHA burned this farmer's house down. It had been in foreclosure for years and had been run down. One of the provisions we had won, however, was the homestead exemption part of the bill that allowed farmers to keep their homestead and ten acres, so that they could maybe rent land and eventually get back to farming. It's kind of hard to do that if they burn it down.

We organized an action with this guy. We called the TV stations and went in with a dozen of our members to the FmHA office, and he applied to get his homestead back under this new act that had just been passed. The TV cameras were rolling and this poor secretary said, "I'll go back and see



if the director's here." She comes back and says, "Well, he's not here now." Somebody saw him; he was slinking around the back trying to. Somebody says, "There he goes!" and all of the cameras were on him slunk out of the FmHA office and ran away. That was the lead story on news.

The next morning, Ralph Lee, the head of FmHA under Reagan, at a press conference saying, "The Reagan Administration does not have scorched earth policy to burn farmers off the land." That was a pretty story.

—Dennis Olson

### *Speaking truth to power*

I was brand new on the job [at Kentuckians For The Commonwealth] think it was my first legislative session, and we were trying to pass an oil and gas bill. This same bill had been blocked the last three sessions or last six years running because it had been sent to a hostile committee, year we had finally gotten our bill into a good committee so we were excited about its prospects. And the industry got the chair of the hostile committee to drop in a bill that mirrored our bill in terms of its structure. It had three main points of our bill but had absolutely zero substance so he dropped it in one night and it was up for a hearing in his committee the next day, and clearly their intention was to get a bill moving so they could say, "Yea, we passed an oil and gas bill," and the issue would be

It was a very snowy day, and lots of people had planned to come to Frankfort that day, but it ended up that little ol' me—brand new—an old KFTC's star lobbyists, Patty Wallace and Ruth Colvin, were the only ones who could make it to Frankfort. The first thing we did was to go visit the chair of this hostile committee to at least ensure that he would allow us to testify that afternoon. We met and we strategized and we planned, and I was very earnest, trying to do everything right. I think Patty and Ruth both nodded and humored me and said, "Oh yes, that makes sense."

We went in to meet with him, and the meeting went pretty well. I agreed that we could testify and then Ruth Colvin—for those who are not familiar, these women are just the sweetest grandmothers you've ever met in your life except they're as tough as nails—Ruth reached into her bag and she said, "There's just one more thing," and she pulled out a rope noose. She said, "Years ago I told you we ought to string you up by your neck so I brought you this present as a reminder that you shouldn't be doing what you're doing."

I was about to crawl under the table. I was thinking, "Wait a minute, this was *not* in the script." And there was this awkward moment and then he laughed and brought all of his buddies into the room and showed them the noose and put it up on the wall. He started the hearing that afternoon.

several hours later by putting it around his neck and tightening up like a necktie and saying that he wanted to thank his friends from Kentuckians For The Commonwealth for this thoughtful gift.

Well the long and the short of it was, they testified, there were a couple of good folks on the committee and we won and the committee chair lost. At the end of the day, he had his rope noose around his neck and we went home. I had almost wet my pants. I was like, "This is not in the plan." It was just one of those moments when I realized that folks who have a direct stake in this have courage on levels I don't even know to really do some truth telling and to claim a voice that is their own and not feel like they have to play the game, with all the niceties.

—Lisa Abbott

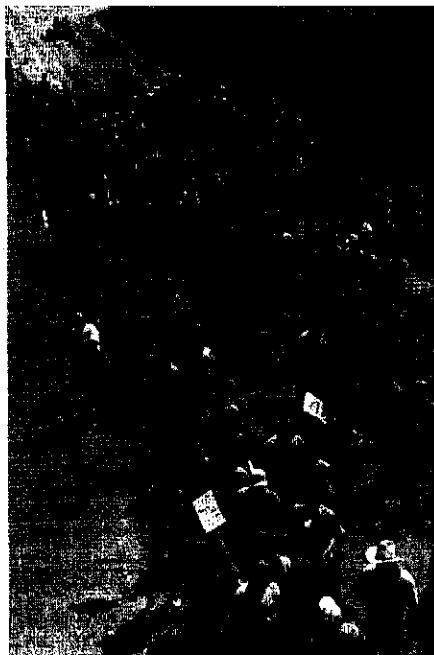
### *There's power in numbers*

One of the biggest actions that I ever organized was a border rally in Sweetgrass [Montana] on the Canadian border in July of 1999. We had over a thousand people show up at the border. We actually did civil disobedience and stopped agricultural trucks coming in from Canada. At the same time, back at the coalition building, we had the president of National Farmers Union of Canada as one of the keynote speakers saying, "This isn't about American farmers hating Canadian farmers. This is about farmers on both sides of the border being screwed by this unjust system." That was one of the pinnacles of my career as an organizer.

—Dennis Olson

### *Organizing for fair housing*

The need for affordable housing is something that's been affecting the members of all of our congregations, so we had a big annual assembly. We had about 500 people come together. Affordable housing won by a landslide as the issue to work on this year. Now we've been doing



More than 1,000 people came to a rally on the U.S.-Canada border in Montana to protest free trade agreements.

research, and it's really been a fascinating process because we're all becoming housing experts. You really have to be, to understand this here. This is very complex, but we've been able to bring in some experts from the Center For Community Change and other places that have been working with our folks to understand what it means to serve people at 50 percent median income or below that or above that.

When we get to the research, my role is to identify the right people who need to be a part of this committee and engage them. That's not because you're who's an expert in housing; that's based on who's a real leader and who can produce people for the action. I do one-to-ones with them to get them about why it's in their interest to be part of this housing committee.

Right now everybody has agreed that there's a housing crisis and that the county has committed that they're going to do something about it. So that's great. The bad news is when you start to get into the details of what they're talking about. They want to set aside money for people who are at 120 percent of median income. That's people making about \$60,000 to \$70,000 a year. What about people making less than that? Most of the people who are being displaced from apartment complexes and mobile home parks are making a lot less than that. The county has been very interested in those people; they are very focused on home ownership programs. That's nice, but people making \$15,000 a year or less can't afford any of those programs. You have to have some affordable rental options for our community.

We've been doing a lot of research meetings with experts in our community and we've been doing those as meetings to get information about the housing problem, but also as forums for really training people and getting them ready for the type of actions coming up and getting them to understand more about the power dynamics in our community. It's very funny . . . one county official started off the meeting with, "We just want you to treat me like family." At the end he was saying this "Don't call me Mr. Jones. Call me Anthony." So afterwards we had really good discussions about why he was doing all that. He's trying to confuse us between public and personal. We're here to try to get public business done and act professionally. He's here trying to make this because he doesn't want us to hold him accountable. He's hoping that we can confuse us and have us leave saying, "Aw, he's such a nice guy." He was a very personable guy. But then we'll get distracted by that and not notice that he's double-talking us here and saying that he'll do one thing and really not.

So there have been some really great learning opportunities to look at the dynamics in our community. We have leaders looking at the dynamics of which county leaders are getting campaign funds from developers. What are the relationships like here? In our initial discussion of approaching the idea of changing that, we're meeting with a lot of resistance. Recently the county released its Housing Trust Fund Ordinance.

that they're supposed to be voting on on March 14. We've had to very quickly become experts to really dissect that and understand the details of what it means. We've learned that when they say people at 120 percent or under can be served by the trust fund, that's nice, but in most communities, the money ends up going to the people at the very tippy-top of that grouping. So you do a mandate that it has to go to the people below. We've learned that when they say that it has to be given out in the form of loans, there are big repercussions in the terms of providing rental housing for folks. We're learning about what state law will or will not allow in terms of what becomes affordable. Leaders have been studying inclusionary zoning ordinances and what has worked well in different communities. We've learned about credit and that there's all sorts of credit issues involved in these housing programs.

—Haley Grossman

### *Going to jail*

My first semester in college I organized a vanload of people to go to the School of Americas protest at Fort Benning, Georgia. That was really a turning point for me, because the whole first six months of college I felt sort of on my own. Even in the activist community I felt like I was more out there than anybody else. There wasn't much of a sense of community. I was looked at as a leader in the World Bank/IMF protests. Everyone expected me to be the one who was going to be arrested and spend all the time in jail. Nobody else was as decisive as to what their commitments were. When we went ahead of time, some people were saying, "Well, I have to get back for class," or "I can't stay for more than a couple of days." But as things went along everybody got really energized by what happened. We had a really great affinity group of people from the university and some high school kids from the area and a couple other folks. What wound up happening was that we had a very strong first day of protests [at Fort Benning]. Then the second day was the day that a lot of the arrests happened. I remember actually going ahead and getting arrested with a couple of different people from my affinity group even though we were in different places.

It was a very intense experience in terms of the standoff between the riot police and our group of demonstrators. We were very well organized and very nonviolent in the way we stepped forward to challenge that police line. When that happened we ultimately got arrested. I went into jail with a large group of people and it was an amazing experience being in the cell that night with a group of guys that I got to know really well. But at the same time I was concerned whether any of my group was going to be outside when I got out, or whether they had all packed up and gone home.

The next morning I had my arraignment and the government papered my case because they wanted to get people out of jail. I made my way back

to the place where we were staying, knocked on the door and was v moved when I realized that everybody from my group was still there only that, but two of the other people from our group were still in jail. Those two wound up staying in jail for a week of solidarity, which they hadn't planned on. I went from being concerned about being a lead everybody else being finicky to being on the outside doing support people who actually were in jail. That was very good for me and I told them. That week helped galvanize a much stronger sense of community a more committed group of activists at the university. That wound up being the group that did a lot of work on a lot of other issues, in terms of economic justice in Latin America.

—Nicholas Graber-Grace

### *Campaign for immigrant rights*

In 1997 I coordinated a legislative campaign around immigrant rights where we were seeking to create a basic safety net of services and support for people who were going to lose SSI [Supplemental Social Security] food stamps and health care as a result of the 1996 Federal Welfare Reform Act. People that don't remember, the Federal Welfare Bill basically cut off present immigrants from a variety of public services even though they had followed all the rules in coming to this country. They had green cards and everything. Many of them were on route to becoming citizens. Gingrich and his pals said, "They're no longer eligible for a basic safety net."

We developed an agenda whereby we were trying to replace the state-funded programs and extend those so that people would not be in dire straits and would still be able to get food stamps and health care and some supplemental income (for disabled people). The reason that it was such an amazing work is that I was working for a coalition called the Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Coalition. They had about 103 member groups throughout the state that weren't particularly tightly tied to the coalition. They saw it as mostly a resource and information entity. It had never really engaged them in developing their leadership around organizing grassroots lobbying because most of their legislative work had been federal stuff. So when I was hired—in January, at the start of the legislative session—it was to really use this crisis as an opportunity to engage those groups in a more meaningful way at the state house and push to win the agenda.

It was a whirlwind few months because I had to think of those 103 groups and how I could prioritize. I couldn't involve all of them equally. Would we focus in certain parts of the state where we needed to impact certain legislators? Would we focus with the groups who had the most capacity? Would we focus on the groups that had the least capacity? [a great deal of] interest and therefore this was the moment to really ci

that interest? We had to figure out how to create a structure that would build some new leadership and deal with the fact that we have a legislature in Massachusetts that is a very insider's game.

The groups were mainly service providers. Most of them were not organizing groups, but they wanted to get involved. In a fairly short period of time we had an Immigrant's Day at the statehouse, pulled together with a steering committee. We had somewhere between 500 and 700 people. It was fabulous. The end result was that we won a lot of what we set out to win. We didn't get everything. But we have a very conservative speaker who's very cautious about money, particularly about doing anything that might have long-term implications in the state budget. He was saying no to everything. We turned him around, basically, through a carefully-orchestrated campaign that focused on his inner circle of legislators that he trusted to push him.

There were people that it was their first time testifying in public. There were people who it was their first time at the statehouse. The experience of both building on that leadership as well as winning a lot of what we had set out to win—that was definitely my best work.

—Janet Groat

#### *Laughing all the way to the bank*

One of the finest organizing experiences I've had was in Duluth, Minnesota, where we were trying to negotiate with First Bank, which was the largest banking system in Minnesota. We had gotten them to agree to negotiate with us. We were all set to go to a meeting in the president's conference room to get the bank to negotiate more home mortgage and home improvement loans in the neighborhoods and community of Duluth. We get a call a half hour before the meeting and we are told that we are not going to be negotiating and that instead he had brought in some of his cronies to give us a lecture about economic development. At that point we were strategizing in our office. We quickly thought, "What should we do? We should not just back out of this meeting. We should go find out what we're going to do."

On our way over there, in the lobby of the bank, was this little concession stand that sold popcorn. Cindy Evanson, a single mom who was one of our leaders, grabbed a bag of popcorn and went upstairs. We all sit down. Right before the bank president speaks—he had also invited the media—Cindy Evanson stands up and says, "Well, we thought we were coming to this meeting in order to negotiate an agreement with Mr. Gelb, the president of the bank. Instead, it looks like we've been asked to come to a show. Whenever I go to a show I buy a bag of popcorn. We're here to listen. We figure that after all these people have spoken we'll start our meeting." His business buddies from the chamber of commerce and the local utilities couldn't laugh out loud, but you could see them kind of

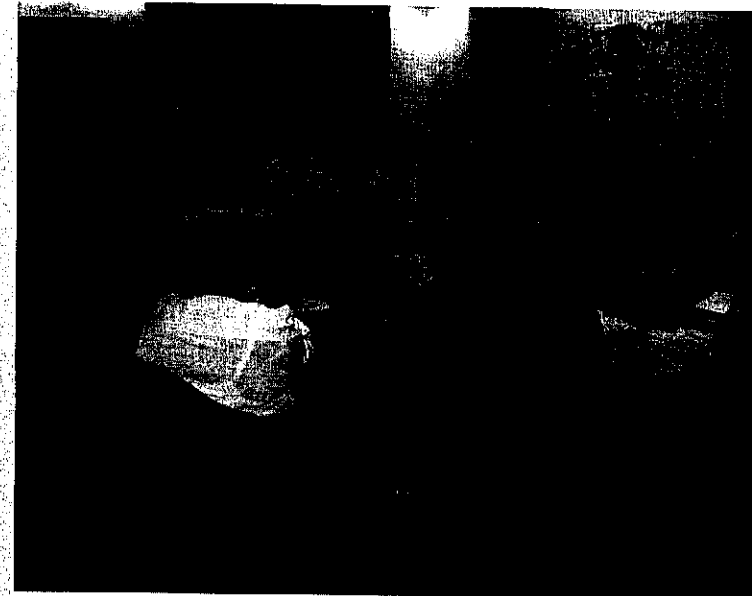
giggling under their breath. The media turned all their TV cameras us and then put them right back onto him. They were audibly laughing so much fun.

—Paul Cromwell

#### *Demanding safer schools*

One of the most fun actions I ever had was an action in an elementary school in a blue-collar neighborhood in San Francisco, called Excels District. My director asked me to go there because she had met some parents. This school was mostly Hispanic and Asian. It was a very poor elementary school. A large percentage of the classes were in trailers at the school. So I did one-to-ones with members of a parent's group at the church. They would have a little group in one corner with a Chinese woman interpreting. Then there would be another large section that was Spanish. It was three languages.

It was all these parents, concerned about their kids, speeding traffic, potential gunshots, and stray bullets. They were worried about abduction because the property wasn't very secure. People could walk in and out of the school as such an old school that some kids on the bottom floor had to go



Organizing helps community members learn how to negotiate with public officials on important policy issues. Members of CLOUT (Citizens of Louisville Organized and United Together) meet with Mayor of Louisville.

to go to the bathroom. There were no bathrooms in the trailers. There were these benches that were built into the wall at the playground. Kids could fall off on their heads. These teachers weren't doing well in this chaotic situation.

The school superintendent at that time was writing his Ph.D. and experimenting with school district work. He would take every single faculty and staff member out of the school if it didn't meet strict standards. He'd take all of them out and bring an all-new faculty in. This school was on the list because the scores were so bad. The teachers were working so hard, and the parents didn't want to see the teachers taken out. It was just this radical philosophy that this guy was doing. So that was the situation.

For that short spring, I went in and did visits and got to know people. It didn't take long for them to get a list of concerns. They got the interim principal comfortable enough to allow it to happen. Then we put pressure on the city because the superintendent hated the mayor. So that's the route we took, that the city has a responsibility. The school district is a public safety issue. We had this action. We had three months of work and like 200 parents and their kids packed into this cafeteria. There was this one Hispanic guy. I can't remember his name. He was one of the "pinners," so he was going to ask the mayor's assistant a question about having crossing guards. This guy [the mayor's assistant] was sharp. He was good. He was deflecting every question. He was very slick.

The stage had a set of stairs going down the hallway, so I grabbed this dad and took him aside. I said, "When you ask your question, you're going to have to be really tough." He didn't speak very good English. I said to him, "I want you to think about something. If you don't get that crossing guard, what could happen to your little girl?" He said, "Well, she could get run over." I said, "That's what I want you to think about when you're up there."

So he got up to the mic and he asked the mayor's assistant about this crossing guard. The mayor's assistant sort of glossed it over and said, "Well, we're doing the best we can, blah blah, blah." Then the guy, in his broken English, essentially said, "You didn't answer my question." He raised this tension. I saw the mayor's assistant just sit back in his seat and smile because he knew that he was being pinned. Then he said, "Are you going to tell the mayor to give us a crossing guard or not?" The guy said, "Yes."

I think that type of experience is what keeps me in the work. It's those moments like that.

—Ray Higgins, Jr.

### *Making schools safer for gay students too*

I worked as an intern with the Virginia Organizing Project [VOP] during my third year at UVA [University of Virginia]. One day I come in and Joe Szakos says, "I have a project for you." And I'm thinking, "Well, this will be cool. I'll do something and then get to talk to someone on staff." But he

tells me, "We've got a campaign we're thinking about doing." So two school students—Lillian Ray and Nora Oberman—and I started n together. The city of Charlottesville school system did not have sexual orientation in their non-discrimination policies. This left the door for a lot of harassment with no redress. So we decided to do this and get sexual orientation added to the non-discrimination policies of Charlottesville schools.

The three of us would meet with Ellen Ryan, the Lead Organizer VOP, about the things that made sense in developing the campaign. I talked about how to meet with an official, how to write a letter to talk effectively, how to talk to folks about this issue. We would role-play. I would sit down: "You're the mayor, this is so-and-so," for example.

In the second part of the meeting, the three of us and Joe and some of folks who had worked on this issue in the past met to strategize. I came in and strategize in terms of what we needed to do to get this changed: letters to the editor, endorsements, and meetings with school board members. It was the first time I was held accountable for getting this stuff in: "All right Brian, you're going to get five letters to the editor on this issue. When you come back, we're going to ask you if you got all five."

Seeing the role that strategy played in this process was a new perspective for me. I had been involved in other things where stuff would happen and it was very reactionary. We would go out—"We're really mad, this is wrong"—and get a group of people together, but there was just no strategy. There wasn't much thought into what we were doing and what the outcome was. So this was the first time that I was beginning to see strategy as an integral part of this whole thing.

There are definite steps that will get you to the point where you start meeting with officials and school board members. And that's what we ended up doing. We had a bunch of letters in the paper. We got to the point where we were getting letters in response, in the paper. People were involved. And then we prepared a couple of groups to go in and make key votes on that school board. There were seven on the school board and we needed four. So we said, "We've got these two for sure, we need to get this one and we need to swing some others." For the first time I was thinking through this in a concrete "this is what needs to happen in order for this change to take place" kind of way.

They did change the school board policy as a result of this pressure. It was the group of citizens who had come together. And it wasn't just citizens. It was groups that had worked on living wage. It was groups that had worked on race issues. It was churches. It was a broad base of support to win this change. That was the first campaign I got into.

—Brian Johns

When I came on staff at Family Matters, they had recently organized a community-built park; 600 people participated in the building of it, and that happened right before I started. There was a plan for a Chicago Park District field house to be built in this park, and the plan had been on the table since 1998. So when I came into the office and saw these plans, I wondered why it was 2001 and we still didn't have our field house. The answer to me was, "Well, the talks have been sort of stymied, and the Park District doesn't really want to build it anymore." They made this commitment to the community; they had a public meeting in 1998 where they presented the plans for this building. People in our neighborhood have a long history of broken promises that have been made to them, and this was just one more thing.

So, we restarted talks with the Chicago Park District. To begin with, we kept it on a leadership level, the leadership of different community organizations. I put together a coalition of organizations in the neighborhood who had been involved with this issue back three or four years when it was first going on. We had the leadership of those organizations, and then some of the key leaders from the parent groups that we run going to these meetings with the Park District. Finally, the Park District agreed in October that they'd build a field house, but they didn't want to build it in the park. They wanted to build it as an attachment to the school, which is about a block away and across a busy street, because then they could just build a small, little space in the parking lot and use all the school's facilities as a field house. And there are tremendous issues with that. The Chicago Park District is moving in that direction in the city of Chicago of using school facilities. They don't give the school any extra money for custodians or security purposes, which means the burden falls upon the schools to clean up, to keep it safe, and it means the community can't use a gymnasium or anything until the school is out of there, which on most days is 5:00 because there are sports programs. So we told them that was unacceptable, and they said, "Well, this is your option: take it or leave it."

So we went to the streets and did a petition campaign for the Park District to put it in the park; we collected over 1,000 signatures. That didn't go anywhere. We did a postcard campaign to the mayor because in Chicago, the mayor is king and the alderman are princes of fiefdoms, basically. We had over a thousand postcards sent to the mayor. He said to the Park District, "OK, these people are annoying me. What are we going to do about this?" The mayor had us go on this tour of school parks in the city so we could see how well these school-use facilities are going. We didn't see how well they were going.

I had been saying for a long time that the only way the Park District was going to agree that the building needed to be in the park was to see the

community and to hear the community, beyond petitions. Our ald was dead set against us having a community accountability session the Park District because his experience of those types of meetings they only turn into screaming matches and nothing is ever accomplished from them. We decided to plan a community meeting in the spring a lot of work out in the community talking to people so they were on the issue so when they came they were giving opinions and were in rather than just reacting. We worked with people on communication how to stand up and say what you think without screaming and

We had 250 people attend this community meeting, and the Park District was sitting up there and the alderman was sitting up there. Park District presented their little plan for why they thought it needed to be attached to the school and then we had the local school council rebuttal, because the local school council didn't want the building in the school. Then we opened up to community comments and over forty stood up and spoke, and they just spoke so passionately and so articulately. No one yelled; no one called the Park District names. Everyone just said, "You know, these are kids; we don't want them crossing the street to the field house. We know what's best for our community. We know what's best for our school. Give us what we want."

The alderman had told me he wanted to speak last. He takes the floor and he says, "Park District, you have listened to my community. Take this back downtown: give my community what it needs." That was stronger than anything he had ever said. But he'd never seen 250 people present in a room. We had media there covering the meeting. The Park District said at the end of the meeting, "OK, we hear you. We'll come with some different plans."

A week later we got a call, "OK, you win. We'll put it in the park then we worked with them that the community is going to be involved in the whole process so they're going to be able to vote on which design like for the building, where they want the entrance to be, etc.

It's weird to be at the close of that now because that's been such a part of my life for the last year. Not that we haven't been doing other things because we have. But when you win something that you devoted all your time to, what do you do now?

—Emily Gruszka

#### *Getting students involved*

We had a situation in Alaska where we found out that the Anchorage district was spraying pesticides throughout the schools. We did some research and found out that these were chemicals that were very harmful, particularly for children. I began working with an organization called Alaska Youth for Environmental Action. It was a relatively small group of young people and people from our organization that worked together



more than a year. We were able to convince the administration of the school district and the school board to implement a policy of least toxic pest management. So we were able to get the chemicals out of the schools.

Probably the most important thing, though, is that young people were involved in this over the course of time at teach-ins where we worked with them to learn techniques of organizing: how to research the health effects of the chemicals, how to do interviews with the media, how to write testimony, how to give public testimony—how to make the change that we actually created while we were doing it. That, to me was one of the most satisfying things, because the results were fairly apparent quickly, and it was really great to see the young people inspired to be able to take off and do some stuff on their own and then see them continuing in other areas of organizing because of their great success.

That was really fun. So many of the things we do, we may not see the results for . . . we may never see the results of what we do in our lifetimes. That was one example of something that had a fairly immediate and measurable success, and it was very satisfying.

—Pamela Miller

### *Starting young*

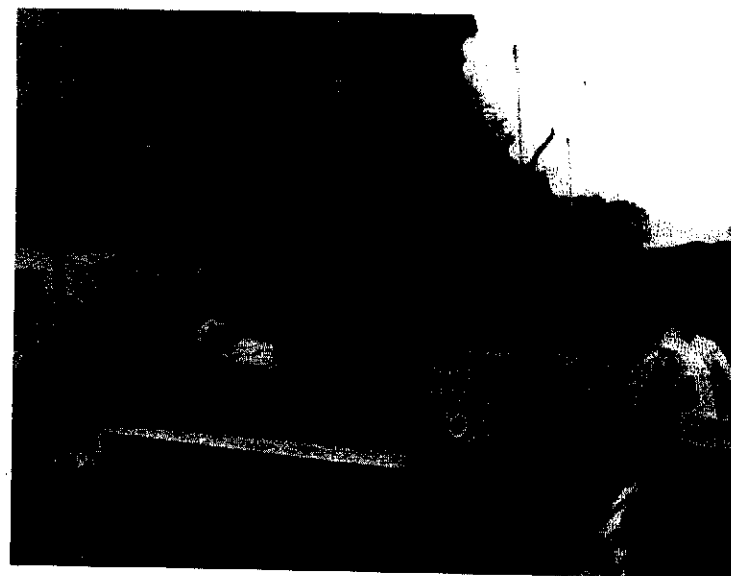
I came into organizing very early, around the age of fourteen. I organized my fellow classmates to do a sit-in, civil disobedience, around the militarization of the island [Puerto Rico] and the Navy and what have you. We did it secretly. We actually told our parents that we were going to the bio center. There's a biology center that used to be at one of the sites on the islands. We were part of the advanced classes so we had all these classes that allowed us to do field trips and whatever. We told them that we were doing this field trip to Vieques.

—Lisbeth Meléndez Rivera

### *National People's Action*

As a young organizer, I really got hooked on organizing at the National People's Action annual meeting in Washington, D.C., in 1976. National People's Action is a federation of local organizations around the country, with a home office and training center, the National Training and Information Center, in Chicago. In 1976, I was a twenty-one-year-old organizing apprentice put in charge of the logistics of getting several bus loads of people from Providence, Rhode Island, to Washington, D.C., for the National People's Action annual meeting.

We had a wonderful time. The logistics were a mess. But when we finally arrived in our Trailways buses, we spent three days running around Washington and the suburbs in little yellow school buses with hundreds



Puerto Ricans demand the demilitarization of the island of Vieques.

of people from all over the country. We went to visit government of usually unannounced and often at their homes, to talk about affordable housing, crime, utility rates, and all the other issues we were working on our local neighborhoods at the time. It was exhilarating to do direct with specific, reasonable demands on so many issues with so many at one time.

—Ellen Ryan

### *Demanding representation*

I think one of PHAR's [Public Housing Association of Residents] finest hours was when we were in this struggle with Charlottesville City Council to get two public housing resident seats on the Housing Authority Board of Commissioners. One evening the group got itself together, turned out over fifty people to City Hall, big enough to make it look full. They marched and brought their kids.

We had a lineup of speakers and they each said their piece to City Council, explaining why it was so important to have residents on the council which was making key decisions that would affect residents' lives. They were cheering for each other after each speaker and holding up signs. We had some of the leaders' kids in there holding up the signs. It was just energy. It was good. And they won it. They got the seats. I think they

sense, at that point, that they could really affect how the city works, at least the part of the city that directly governed them and their neighborhoods.

—Ben Thacker-Gwaltney

### *Keeping in touch*

One campaign that I liked a lot was in Minnesota. Members of a small, rural, county organization were upset because after their school district was consolidated with another small school district nearby, parents suddenly started getting upwards of \$200 in long distance charges on their telephone bills because their kids were calling each other. They were in separate local telephone exchanges even though they were only twelve miles apart from one another, and every call was an intrastate long distance call. It was cheaper to call New York or California than it was to place calls between the two local exchanges.

The parents thought it would be simple enough to get the state Public Utilities Commission to give them something called extended area service, which would combine the two exchanges into one local calling area. However, the Public Utilities Commission denied their request, saying, "Oh no! You don't have enough population to justify that."

Rather than give up, this small group of people managed to take on the major telephone companies and the state legislature and win. They did it primarily by talking to people in other school districts who were in the same situation. The most powerful conservative Republican legislator in the state happened to live in the same school district as the local group and happily introduced a bill to create local telephone dialing areas in consolidated school districts throughout the state. Rural legislators from around the state stood up with their phone bills in their hands in committee hearings, waving their phone bills around saying, "Yeah, my own kids need this! Look at this! It's a \$125 phone bill!"

I think what I liked about it most was that the legislature offered to cut a deal with the group, to allow only their two local exchanges to be combined and leave the rest of the state the way it was. The group wouldn't go for it, and held out for statewide reform. I felt really proud to be working with people who cared about their own predicament, but weren't willing to leave out the rest of the rural communities in the state in order to get what they wanted.

Even though the telephone industry had thirty-two lobbyists in the legislature trying to kill the bill, it passed. Maybe twenty-five people in a town of 1,600 spearheaded a statewide effort to get the legislature to pass a new kind of extended area service in Minnesota called School District Extended Area Service.

—Ellen Ryan

### *Making neighborhoods safer*

In 1983, I helped build a coalition that consisted of several disenfranchised neighborhoods in Denver. We pulled in Metropolitan Organizations People, the institutionally based organizing group. We did original door-to-door organizing in neighborhoods north of the downtown area. I grew up in a neighborhood used to be a city itself absorbed by Denver during the twentieth century. It's been a long time since I've been there so I don't know what the constituency of the neighborhoods looks like now, but at the time the older folks were Eastern Europeans who had settled to work in steel smelting and the industrial part of the city. Then there were newer immigrant communities that had settled in the neighborhood more recently and more recently, Southeast Asian new immigrant communities.

We were organizing around hazardous material transportation issues. There was this history of transportation planners just forcing all kinds of transportation corridors on the neighborhoods. The primary neighborhood called Globeville, had literally been split by rail lines and two major interstate highways. One portion of the neighborhood was on one side of the highway and the other portion was on the other side of the highway. The intersection was nicknamed "the mousetrap" because instead of facilitating traffic it caught traffic. It was always a problem.

In 1982, a railroad car full of chemicals had been busted open. It filled the air with nitric acid fumes and a bunch of other stuff and forced everyone to evacuate. We were capitalizing on that. We had already held house meetings and were in the process of organizing. Then in August 1984, a truck carrying military torpedoes overturned in the mousetrap intersection of Interstate 25 and Interstate 70. The containers were punctured and fuel was leaking into the road. One of the torpedoes was literally lying in the backyard of one of the people who ended up being the primary leader. It just spilled off the highway and rolled into the backyard. The accident prompted the evacuation of several neighborhoods, about 10,000–15,000 people. This ended up being a high profile campaign. We bought test bombs, which are empty shells that look like real bombs from a surplus store. We invaded the mayor's office with these test bombs and said, "This is what it feels like."

We ended up working with a couple national groups to create a model nuclear and hazardous material transportation ordinance. We got the ordinance in Denver and then moved that into a couple of other cities in Colorado. Finally, the state intervened and we were able to influence some state legislation. That was one of the more fun campaigns I've ever engaged in.

—Gary Sandusky

### *Protesting NAFTA*

Our members in Montana and North Dakota had become very frustrated with the North American Free Trade Agreement and had gone through all the usual channels trying to get something accomplished. And so they decided to block the border with Canada for a day. It was a great action. A lot of work went into cultivating allies, so we had the churches there, the unions, rural small business people, farmers, and ranchers. We worked with the border guards and blocked truck traffic for about half a day. No one was arrested. One of the best visuals was of a member who had a wheelbarrow that was loaded with manure, and a sign stuck in it that said, "Free Trade and US farm policy." That photograph made all the papers in Montana and North Dakota, and some of the national press picked it up. It was a fun action; people enjoyed it.

—Kevin Williams

### *Walking for justice*

I participated less as an organizer and more as a participant, but this was kind of a formative thing for me: In the summer of 1992, before the Measure 9 vote, there was a two-week walk from Eugene, Oregon, to Portland, called the Walk for Love and Justice, which was a semi-interfaith effort instigated by the lesbian community of Portland, a group called the Lesbian Community Project. In each of the towns they stopped in, the goal

was to have a social event to talk to people about the situation and I was really lucky in that I was the one who was picked to go from organization.

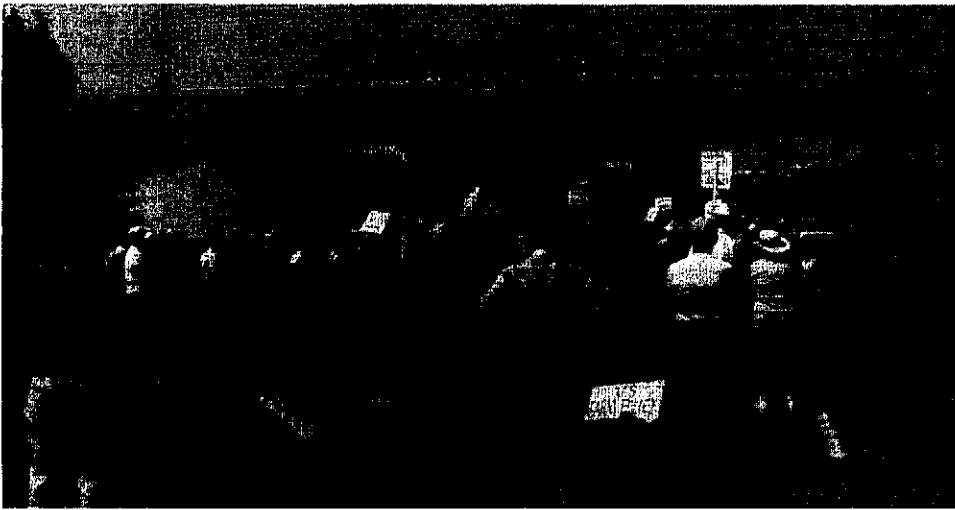
Walking through the Willamette Valley and through lots of the tiny towns, when this was still a very new issue and people were still freaked out about it, there were times when it was pretty scary. It was the first time I think I truly felt at risk for standing up for what I believe in. We suffered vandalism and all kinds of insults and things. Sometimes when we were near a bigger town, there'd be lots of people with us. One time the core of the group was only twenty people, it was really small. One day we were walking on some little back road, and it was very quiet, and then a pickup passed our group twice, with the gun rack and all that. It was those moments when you're thinking, "Okay, there's no one around, we are with our little flags." It was one of those moments when you start strategizing like, "Okay, where's the ditch? Where could I hide?" Well, fine, nothing happened, I guess he was just curious. God only knows.

—Kelley Weigel

### *Controlling waste*

I think one of the first victories I had was in 1996, with a group of people I had originally brought together to try to stop an out-of-state waste dump. They lost on that issue, the dump was built, although they got some restrictions put on it, and then the organization broke up because of some internal conflicts. I went up [in 1996] and started the organization, person by person, and the first thing that they took was they looked around themselves and said, "You know, in a way it's a slate for the present dump, but dumps draw dumps, and what we need to do is go through and get municipal solid waste zoning in Ward County. And they set about to do that, with incredible leadership from people who had one woman who basically wrote the ordinance, with a lot of help from other professionals and so on, but she just did that. She was good at it. We had another bunch of guys who were good at talking to people, and they knew how many meetings they had with different county commissions and they swung several votes around. And even though there was a multinational corporation that didn't want that zoning to happen, they got that zoning through the county commission, and there's never going to be another big, out-of-state waste dump in that county, I'll guarantee you. So that was a really proud moment. It was really the first time I had that kind of experience where a group that I had built, members that I had recruited, leaders that I had helped to come into leadership, pulled together an effective campaign to get an important win for the community, and it was very elating, it really was.

—Mark Trechock



NAFTA opponents in Montana block the U.S.-Canada border to protest the trade agreement.

I got assigned to work on this massive national housing problem, which was the potential loss of subsidized housing units. A lot of people in Washington would have said, "Well, I've got to work on this problem so that means I have to talk to people on Capitol Hill and talk to experts and write papers and get op-eds placed." A lot of that never even occurred to me. What did occur to me was that I needed to get a bunch of tenants together. There were 400,000 tenants, or whatever—I knew the number then; I don't remember it now—who were potentially affected by this and none of them knew about it, except for a few in Chicago and I think some in Boston. Nobody else even knew this was coming at them and it was coming at them like a freight train. I figured, "Well, if there's a solution, the tenants have to be part of the solution." I got quite a bit of flack from Washington people for this.

I called a meeting. My boss, Barry Zigas, who was a real Washington insider, was very supportive of me. I called a meeting and I invited the experts and the advocates and the Legal Aid people and some tenants. The experts and Legal Aid people said, "Well, why should we go to that meeting? If there are tenants there it's going to be at such a low level. We can't really have a serious discussion on the issue because they don't understand the technical aspects of the issue." So basically it became a meeting of tenants and tenant organizers. There was a guy named Victor Bach from New York. There was a lawyer named Jim Grow from the National Housing Law Project and a couple other people who were experts and kept coming. They were great.

So we built a whole network of tenant groups that were working on this in Boston, Chicago, Dallas, San Francisco, L.A. These folks kept meeting together, mostly people of color, mostly African-American women. They decided that they wanted to form a national organization, a national alliance of HUD tenants. I wasn't sure that was a good idea. I had some sense of how difficult it would be to sustain an organization like that. At this point they were like a committee under the umbrella of the National Low-Income Housing Coalition. We could get them scholarships to conferences and all those kinds of things. I had a salary to staff them. But that's what they wanted to do. They were very clear-minded about it and it was their business, not mine. I was like, "We'll support you if you do it. Is it a good idea? I don't know. But it's not my decision." So they formed that organization that's been around now for eleven or twelve years. It's had quite an impact on HUD. A lot of the local groups have preserved a lot of housing. I don't know if anybody has a number, but I'm sure it's thousands of units. It never would have happened without those tenant groups and without some of the legislation that we got passed.

—Larry Yates

It's funny because if you had asked me six months ago what my proudest achievement was, the answer would have been different, but today I tell you that having every women's group on the Eastern Seaboard low-income women and women of color and go to Washington, D.C. on April 25 [2004] for the March for Women's Lives was one instance of incredible pride. When I was working as a senior organizer our collective goal was 1.2 million people, and in fact the official number came out to be 1.15 million. To stand at the Mall and see that number of people there was all of these people from many walks of life. For one moment we all there understanding how important reproductive justice was an important eliminating sexism was. It was incredibly anticlimactic when everybody went home. I think they should teach organizers a lesson about adrenaline crash because we all go through it and it's hard.

—Lisbeth Meléndez Rivera

*Addressing local needs*

I am often reminded of an important organizing lesson I learned when I was the first group I was Lead Organizer for, in Absarokee, Montana. That community was actually the first hard-rock mining area that we organized. Prior to 1976 we had been organizing almost exclusively around coal issues. Most of our board members were farmers and ranchers and other community people who at that time cared about the expansion of strip mining from the East to the West and how to control it. We had an incredible discussion at a board meeting about whether we should go to other issues. This was one of our first major organizational crossroads—should we go beyond coal and energy issues—it wasn't like coal and energy issues weren't complex and organizationally consuming enough.

Coal and energy involved water problems. We were engaged in a major campaign to institute the first water reservations system in the Yellowstone River. There were air pollution issues going on, and we were working to make sure that large coal-fired power plants associated with new strip mining would be clean. And we were working on the mining reclamation, so there were a lot of complicated pieces to the campaign.

In the midst of all this comes this group that says, "Well, we're working on coal mining. We're working on hard rock mining, but it's all of the same thing. We really like the model that your outfit is using where you build a local affiliate, you build a local community group in the area and the leaders in that county decide what they want to work on, the issue, and then you all get together and figure out how to lobby the legislature collectively. We like this model, but you know we're not on coal."

There were tensions around staffing and resources. Could the organization really cover all its current campaigns? Finally, I think it was probably Bob Tully, one of the leaders of the group who hadn't said a whole lot, who finally said, "You know, in the long-run, all of these issues are pretty much the same. It doesn't matter whether it's a coal company or a hard-rock mining company. This is all about whether we as Montana farmers, ranchers, citizens, or whatever, whether we're going to be in control and be able to decide our own future and destiny, or we're going to let these companies decide our future and destiny." Everybody said, "You're right, Bob," and they voted unanimously to expand the organizing to communities impacted by hard-rock mining. So they said, "All right, send the organizer out there to organize the affiliate."

So I go out to organize a new affiliate and I must say it really is one of the most rewarding and fun things you ever get to do as an organizer—to go meet new people, go door-to-door in a new community, be part of creating a new organization. One of the people I found in the Stillwater was Mary Donohoe. She was a rancher who we had known through family connections and was a member. I went up and sat down with Mary at her kitchen table, and I said, "Mary, who are some people in this community that you think would be interested in helping form an organization?" Mary pulls out the rural phone book. Under Absarokee and the surrounding community maybe, oh I don't know, 1,000 names in the phone book, something like that. And she started in the A's, and we sat there for four hours to get to the Z's, and she told me about everybody and who was there and who might be interested. I went out and talked to a bunch of the names on that list to build our organizing committee.

We called the first organizing committee meeting in town, and we had it at the community center, which is always a great place to have a meeting. We had about twelve members there. The community center was right on the main street of this little town, and the highway is the main street, like in many little towns. The traffic goes right through town, and the community center is right on the corner, and it was the summertime, a hot day, and the doors were open, so you could hear the traffic.

One of the things we were talking about in this agenda was, what would be a good first local issue for the group to organize on, what are some local problems that you think a organization could address and deal with in this community? People were struggling with this question. Then this rumbling, huge truck goes by and it's so loud we had to stop the meeting. So everybody stops for a couple seconds; truck drives by. And then the organizer, me, I'm prodding people again, "Well what are some local issues; what are some local problems that we could address here?" About ten minutes later another truck drives by, and we have to stop the meeting again, right? So we're still struggling away; we're about twenty minutes, thirty minutes into this conversation, and the third truck comes by. And we stop the meeting, and I finally turn to somebody and said, "Well, what are these trucks?"

The meeting just erupted into a discussion about all these truck down the road from this old mine. They're dangerous as heck, and are at our bus stops, and they're running twenty-four hours a day, a bridges are wrecked and the roads are terrible. All of a sudden there incredible conversation about the problem of these trucks hauling a surplus mineral that was stored at the top of this old mine at the t this farming community. They had to haul this chromite, a very hea in these huge trucks. So that night people said, "Can we do anything this? If this is a problem, what can we do about it?"

People said, "Well, we could ask them to only go during the day hours. They shouldn't be hauling at night, and they shouldn't be haul when the kids are on the school bus. You know the school buses are 6:30 in the morning picking up kids. And they shouldn't be hauling kids are getting dropped by the school buses."

"Okay, that's a good idea. What else could we do?"

"They should be paying the county to fix these bridges and mair roads because of all these potholes."

"Okay, that's a good idea."

They came up with a whole bunch of things they thought they c do to make this trucking company solve the problem. So that was th organizing issue. They went on to have their first great action with t of the trucking company, who came to a town meeting that they cal is a little town again, so when you turn out 125 people at the comm center for a town meeting, and you figure out the percentage of con people you turn out to this meeting, it's like, if you were doing this i York City, you'd have a million people at your meeting. The member were organized—they placed their essential demands in front of thi company who, of course, did not capitulate at all.

So they did a petition drive, ended up collecting up and down tl over eighty miles, and talking to every single neighbor, every single on the road. The petition eventually went to the county commission had a county commissioner meeting and successfully limited the tru traffic hours and got more money for the road maintenance and bui fund and that sort of thing and got the road fixed. They won this issi they won it because they were tenacious, and they got out there and to every single neighbor and friend they had up and down this road.

With this first issue we started the first hard rock chapter, the af called the Stillwater Protective Association. That affiliate was built i and they are still a chapter of Northern Plains Resource Council nea thirty years later.

—Patrick Sweeney