

GOING PUBLIC

AN ORGANIZER'S GUIDE
TO CITIZEN ACTION

"If you want to know how ordinary Americans accomplish extraordinary things—build affordable homes, create effective schools, win living wages—then the story and the strategy reside in this remarkable book. *Going Public* is at once pragmatic and profound."

—Samuel G. Freedman

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FOR SHEILA

him the credit he deserved: he was willing to provide land and subsidy so that thousands of citizens could afford to buy homes of their own. He assigned several of his most competent and creative associates and commissioners to work with our team. And he remained in an uneasy but productive relationship with leaders he grudgingly recognized, but clearly never "got." In the world of power, in the world as it is, that's a pretty good deal.

CHAPTER 5

Merit Means (Almost) Nothing

Insisting on recognition, developing the power to reward and punish, practicing both flexibility and persistence—our mothers, fathers, and civics instructors rarely if ever emphasized these important public qualities.

We were taught that merit mattered. If we just presented the facts in a full and fair manner, if we got the words right, the slogan right, the tone right, the photo-op right, then others would realize the errors of their ways and move in our direction. We learned a great deal about what ought to be—how to describe it, communicate it, promote it, and defend it—and very little about the dangerous undertows and cross currents of individual and institutional interests.

We headed to the library and pored over texts. We mastered the most meritorious research work conducted by the best experts in the field. We scribbled their insights on our index cards and made our cases in long term papers and intense debates. We sat for hours in meaningless hearings so that we could fill two minutes with our distilled facts. But we spent little or no time tracing the source and

the flow of money, the quirks of personality, the dense webs of relationships, or the presence and impact of evil. When our opponents remained unconvinced, when behavior did not change, when the neutral moderates failed to fill the seats and pews, we often assumed that we had failed to make a persuasive case. So some just studied harder, jotted more notes, and wrote better briefs. Others grew tired and cynical, others more isolated and self-righteous. Many activists adjusted their expectations to a lifetime of speaking out, bearing witness, and raising consciousness rather than generating reactions and making change. Moderates, sensing confusion and defeat, lost patience and did the sensible thing: got a second job or took a course, improved the yard, or finished the basement.

We constantly run across situations in our organizing where merit doesn't matter and where a different kind of response is called for. Here are just a few examples.

A number of years ago, EBC leaders who attended a series of house meetings reported that conditions in local food stores had reached a crisis level. The area was impoverished. Major chains did not serve the community. And local corner stores and mid-sized markets offered customers few options. Shoppers found aging meat, poor produce, coolers and freezers that barely cooled and rarely froze, dirt and dust on the shelves, and prices significantly higher than in areas and stores several miles away. The owners and managers of these stores often sat in balcony roosts, overlooking the aisles of the store, so that they could yell at anyone they suspected of shoplifting.

In a world of merit, customers would call the city or state inspection or consumer affairs departments and demand attention to these conditions. We researched both departments, met with their representatives, and learned that they were woefully understaffed and basically toothless. It would take more than a year for the state to send out an inspector and then a lot more time for the results of

the inspection to be analyzed. A negative report would lead to a small fine. Many of our leaders believed that the local inspectors, when they did appear, were easily deterred by gifts of cigarettes from the store owners.

Our team decided to design its own inspection system. We pored over various inspection forms and drafted our own. We ordered buttons that said: "Official EBC Food Store Inspector." We bought clipboards and thermometers and weights and measures. We studied the rules regulating food stores and became expert at them. We role-played how a team of ten "inspectors" would enter a store and conduct a thorough review without interfering with other shoppers. And we called the police and briefed them about our plans.

On a bright Saturday, in the middle of a busy morning, one hundred inspectors, organized in teams of ten, appeared at ten different stores. Each team entered its store and began to inspect. Several people went up and down the aisles with a cart and a budget of fifty dollars. They bought the greenest meat, the fuzziest grapes, the most rusted cans, and the hardest loaves of bread they could find—which was not difficult to do in these stores. Another team went to the coolers and freezers and monitored and recorded the temperatures there. A third team did a price comparison of twenty preselected items. The impact was immediate. Other shoppers recognized the EBC "inspectors," encouraged them in their work, and brought over more evidence of shoddy merchandise and unsanitary conditions. Suddenly, the morning of shopping turned into a morning of inspecting. The stores buzzed, in a way they never had before, with complaints, information, and mutual support.

The store managers, aloft in their perches, watching the mutiny grow below, behaved in predictable ways. Some yelled—to no effect. People couldn't hear them. A few waded into the aisles and

threatened our leaders with arrest. Our team leaders pointed outside—to the police car that we had summoned to protect us from owners who might overreact. One manager tried to stop our designated shoppers from purchasing the spoiled and rotten food. “Why do you want that stuff?” he pleaded. “I’ll get you some good food.”

We had entered the stores with EBC Letters of Agreement. Once we completed each inspection, we gave the owner a list of the conditions that required correction and asked him to sign an agreement to do so. If he refused to sign, we assured him that we would publicize in every congregation and housing project in East Brooklyn the fact that he was unwilling to maintain minimal standards of cleanliness and sanitation in his store. We told him that we would be back, with larger teams of inspectors, next Saturday, every Saturday, with the media, for as long as it took for him to see the light. Seven of the owners signed that morning—eagerly, enthusiastically, willing to do anything to get our teams out of their stores.

Three held out. The EBC leaders launched an intensive campaign of spot inspections for several weeks, then invited the three holdouts to a meeting of four hundred EBC members. When the three arrived to the session, in the basement of St. Paul Community Baptist Church, they were asked to wait in a quiet room outside the assembly hall. At the designated moment, they were called in and ushered up the center aisle, right in front of the podium occupied by a young and forceful Roman Catholic priest, Fr. Leo Penta. Fr. Penta read them the riot act and told them that the days of bullying, abuse, and dehumanizing conditions in the food stores of East Brooklyn were over. Then, in a powerful voice, filled with authority, he intoned, “You are dismissed.” For a moment, the hall was still, stunned. These petty autocrats, these men who humiliated shoppers as they searched filthy aisles for better prices and

decent food, turned on their heels and hurried out of the room. Then the audience exploded—with humor, with joy, and with a new appreciation of their own potential and power. The three signed within days—but not before one tried to bribe a leader with a case of cigarettes.

The one hundred leaders who spearheaded this action celebrated their victory and began to digest the important lessons learned. If the formal process doesn’t work, or, worse yet, is a fraud and a trap, don’t waste much time depending on it. Figure out how to create your own. If the existing authority has collapsed, if the inspectors and the agencies and the local politicians have abdicated, then carefully and playfully generate your own authoritative approach. If the owners won’t respond for the right reasons, because it is wrong to cheat and overcharge and verbally abuse responsible shoppers, then make it clear that they might consider responding for other reasons. They may not want ongoing inspections. They may lose business to the stores that do comply. They may cringe when they read about themselves in the *Daily News*. And leave race, class, and faith out of it. It was easy in this case, because the ten owners were wonderfully diverse. But even if they are not, stay focused on the basic conditions. Don’t whine. Don’t dwell on discontent. Don’t rely on the merits. Take charge. Be irreverent. Test how plastic the world really is. And learn how to enjoy a win.

Two more stories from Chicago illustrate this point. In the late seventies, a developer on the northwest side proposed to build a condominium complex in a quiet neighborhood of single-family homes. The local homeowners, many of whom were leaders in our organization there, objected. The condominium complex would tower over the bungalows and alter the nature of the community. The research we did was not encouraging, though. The developer had bought the property. The zoning permitted the use he hoped to construct there. And the local Democratic Party leaders were in

the developer's pocket. There would be hearings, meetings, protests, and the like, but the fix, literally, was already in.

One afternoon, a team of leaders examined the property and took a closer look at an old and long-abandoned farmhouse there. It was a terribly sorry sight—unpainted, sagging, tilting to one side. On a hunch, we decided to do a title search of the house. We discovered that a farmer named Rinker had built the home in the 1800s. It was no longer a decrepit and potentially dangerous structure. It had historical value. We called in the preservationists, who found an intricate and rare form of woodworking done by the craftsmen who designed the windows and the eaves of the home. The home had architectural and aesthetic qualities that were rare.

Our leaders shifted away from the issues of the height, density, and neighborhood impact of the condominium—the merits of the case—and repeated a theme that they couldn't have cared less about: "Save the Rinker House!" The media echoed the cry. And suddenly the developer and his political supporters found themselves on the defensive.

The developer became desperate as the tide of publicity turned. After all, he had bought the property. He had made all of the obligatory contributions to local politicians and party faithful. He had played by the both the written and unwritten rules of the city at the time—and was struck with a piece of land that had lost most of its value because of the presence of a shack. He thought he had a solution to his problems.

Our leaders woke up one morning and looked out their back windows. The Rinker House had disappeared. In the middle of the night, a truck had pulled up, hauling a bulldozer. The bulldozer had made quick and quiet work of the house, smashing the rare filigree to smithereens with the rest of the structure, before being towed away. We cried foul, and the press had a field day. It didn't take long for the police to identify the owner of the bull-

dozer, to track the bulldozer owner to the developer, and to assemble sufficient evidence to indict him for his desperate act of demolition. Months later, the threat of towering condominiums receded as the powerful developer caught in a relatively petty offense trudged off to jail. Another, more famous, Chicagoan, Al Capone, went to prison for *tax evasion*, the least of his crimes, not for murder, fraud, assault, burglary, bribing city officials, corrupting cops, or bootlegging.

Around the same time, back at Our Lady of the Angels, a team of leaders struggled with a sensitive and dangerous development. A group of drug dealers had set up shop on the street corner right outside the office of the school's principal—Sr. Marian Murphy. Every day, through the afternoon, even at dismissal time, the dealers dominated the corner and sold drugs to cars that seemed to line up as soon as the sellers arrived and to older kids in the school. Sr. Marion could see and hear it all, could reach out and touch some of the sellers from her window.

The same school that had burned in 1958, the same neighborhood that had smoldered and reseeded in the late 1960s, was now seared by open, flagrant, constant drug dealing. Sr. Marion did what citizens are supposed to do. She called the local precinct, the Shakespeare District, and reported the crime. No response. Then she called again. Still no response. Then she kept a log of all of the times and days that she called and what the response was—a neat notebook filled with dates, times, and precise descriptions. She was direct, low-key, and unrelenting. She earned an A+ in surveillance. She had called the cops more than forty times. The police, for the most part, did not respond, and, when they did, they drove by belatedly, long after the dealers had dispersed.

Sr. Marion, on her own, began to film the drug dealers from her office. They had become so emboldened, they saw no reason to hide their faces or secrete their drugs, so she recorded everything

on tape. Because we knew that the police couldn't be called in, and we had no idea how the police commissioner would respond, we took Sr. Marion's tape and the entire story to the local CBS affiliate. Bill Kurtis was the affiliate's young, up-and-coming anchor at the time. He liked what he saw and was particularly impressed by the principal's courage and spunk. So he assigned a camera crew to film the drug dealing as well.

It was December in Chicago—a bitter December, with deep snow and layers of ice on the sidewalks and the streets. One afternoon, as I left the rectory after a planning meeting, I noticed a police cruiser parked right behind my Dodge. I inched very slowly from the curb, west on Iowa Street. The cop fell right in behind me. On the slick street, I could go no faster than fifteen miles per hour. After a block or so, the cop flashed his lights and pulled me over.

The only thought I had was to jump out of the car, get to the middle of the street, and be *seen* by somebody. But the streets were deserted. The two-flats looked dark in the dull dusk. Sensible people huddled inside. The cop climbed out of his car and walked right up to me. He was young, in his twenties, tall, blond, severe. He moved closer to me, right in my face.

"You're going too fast," he said.

"What?"

"You're going way too fast. And if you keep it up, you're going to get hurt."

Then he moved away and returned to his car. I stood in the street until the cruiser had gone. Then I went home and discussed with my wife whether or not this was the time to leave town for a while.

Sr. Marion and our team of leaders had nowhere to go. So we urged CBS to get out there quickly. The word was out. The cops knew. Which meant the drug dealers might know as well. The

camera crew arrived on a Monday—in the middle of a blizzard. No dealing that day. The second day was the same—nothing but blowing snow and a quiet street corner. The reporter and camera crew grew impatient, grumbled about all of the traffic accidents they could be covering, and began to doubt us.

On the third day, they called to say that they couldn't make it. We were both frustrated and afraid. We thought about it for a while and decided to call the CBS people back and thank them for their interest. We were sure that they wouldn't mind if we took the story to another channel.

An hour later, they were on the third floor of the school, with their camera in place and a microphone, dangled by a wire, slipped down a crease in the side of the building, so that it could pick up the sounds of the drug dealing at street level. The weather was better. The dealers returned. The corner became a lively marketplace. The CBS crew shot all the footage it needed.

On the night the story appeared—the lead story, an exclusive, with graphic shots of the dealers and the buyers—all hell broke loose. Cops seemed to be everywhere. Dealers trooped into paddy wagons all over the area. Little did we know that the media-savvy precinct commander had tipped off the ABC affiliate and had given it an exclusive: Police Respond. Dealing Derailed. Commander Cripples Crime. Saves the "Angels" of OLA.

We used the sudden notoriety to push forward on a wide variety of fronts—demanding meetings with city officials on sanitation, housing, and other issues that had been stalled for months. Commissioners who had refused to meet could not do enough for the children and families of Our Lady of the Angels. Would they meet with us? Of course. Did we need to come downtown? No. They would come to us, with cameras in tow, to solve whatever problems we presented. Even Phil Donahue called, inviting Sr. Marion to appear on his show.

For a week or so, public officials rushed to do the right thing for the wrong reason. We played it out as far as it would go. Then the media drifted away. The commissioners returned to their downtown lairs. The precinct commander was promoted, not investigated or dismissed. And we took a break—tired out by the tension of the days leading up to the CBS story and the energy it took to take advantage of the opportunities that developed during our week or so in the media sun.

In these cases, we had become experts in freezer temperature standards, farmhouse architecture, drug selling patterns, police response, regulatory authority and effectiveness, but we knew that the facts and the merits, the research and the tactics, in and of themselves, did not matter. Even worse, focusing on these issues diverted attention away from what was most important. The leaders themselves—their grit and their spirit, their discipline and playfulness, their willingness to imagine and take risk—mattered more than anything. They mastered the facts and understood the merits as a small part of their preparation for new and creative public action. But they themselves, in the planning, execution, and evaluation of these actions, were the heart and soul of this new machine.

CHAPTER 6

Chutzpah Helps

This may be all well and good for leaders of organizations trying to deal with mayors, governors, and local elected officials, with school boards, state authorities, and lending institutions, with drug problems, housing problems, and municipal wage standards, but what about the “bigger” picture—the nation? The question is valid and important, and I will spend the next section describing how we have begun to answer it. But, first, a few cautions.

Those who want to make an impact on the nation often have contempt for the local. They have grand ideas and interesting notions but no appetite for building relationships, no patience for the daily deal-making that goes on within institutions and between institutions, and no respect for the art of politics and inevitability of compromise. One frustrated foundation executive told an IAF team one day, “Most groups come in here with a Washington address and a national website and a claim to influence this policy and that policy—and have no local base, no strength, no leverage. You are just the opposite. You have a local base, plenty of strength, lots of leverage—and no national presence or impact.”