

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

mental—the most basic sign of respect, the start of reciprocity, and the precondition for a working public relationship.

One early action focused on the city's director of major construction projects. In several house meetings, leaders mentioned that a very important park and pool—the Betsy Head Park and Pool—had been closed for several years for renovation. The problem was that very little renovation had taken place. We put together a research team of leaders and learned that about 80 percent of the three million dollars budgeted for the renovation had been spent but that only about 15 percent of the needed work had been completed. Armed with these facts, we called the city's construction director for a meeting.

Alice McCollum headed a team of twelve leaders the morning of the meeting. Mrs. McCollum, a bright, middle-aged African American, who was a leader in her Baptist church, was a single mother of ten children who lived directly across the street from the closed park and pool. Her younger children had all made great use of the recreation facility when it had opened. For years now, they'd had no place to play except the bleak courtyard of her apartment complex.

The game plan for the meeting was straightforward. Mrs. McCollum would thank the director for the meeting, lead our group in the rounds, explain what our research had uncovered, and then ask one simple question: "When do you expect to complete the renovation of Betsy Head Park and Pool?" We knew that the city officials would try to distract us from this fundamental matter. But that—the completion of the facility—was the specific issue that concerned us.

The director considered himself a liberal, a proud alumnus of the progressive Lindsay administration who was now serving Mayor Koch. He welcomed our group enthusiastically and said that he was pleased that so many people had taken the time to visit

CHAPTER 4

Introducing Your Larger Self

In the early stages of the development of East Brooklyn Congregations, after thousands of individual meetings and scores of training sessions, after one hundred house meetings and extensive analysis of issues and concerns, after scores of talented leaders began to emerge from these meetings, we began a series of "introductory" actions. Each action involved specific issues that needed resolution. But addressing the issues was not the primary purpose of these actions. Each action was designed to introduce our leaders to other power players in the city, to communicate that this organization was not just *another* group but a different *kind* of group, and to shatter any stereotypes that others might have about us. We were after much more than attention: we sought something different and deeper, called recognition.

Intelligent action, even public confrontation, is at bottom an attempt to engage and relate. Most activists fail to appreciate this. Bureaucrats seek to stifle it. Reenactors have lost sight of it. Celebrity self-promoters try to monopolize it. And terrorists long to destroy it. Our leaders study and practice it. Recognition is funda-

him in the middle of the day. "This is really democracy in action. This is something Thomas Jefferson would appreciate and applaud. This is what makes New York . . ."

Alice McCollum gently interrupted. "Sir, when do you expect to complete the renovation of Betsy Head Park and Pool?"

"Before we get into details, let me introduce my assistant and the fine staff of this department. These are the people who make the city run as well as it does. First, on my left, is Mr. . . ."

"I'm sorry to interrupt again," said Mrs. McCollum, even more moderately, "but when do you expect to complete the renovation of Betsy Head Park and Pool?"

"Well," said the director, "we have done some research into this matter. It is very very complicated, with many contractual considerations that would just bore you all this morning."

"Sir," said Mrs. McCollum, her voice lower and softer. The room was very quiet now. The director was standing at the head of the boardroom table, with three staff people seated around him. Our team of twelve was arrayed around the table. Mrs. McCollum was seated at the far end, directly opposite the director. "When do you expect to complete the renovation of Betsy Head Park and Pool?"

The director's positive and upbeat tone had disappeared. He seemed, suddenly, sullen. "I don't know what you think gives you the right to come in here and raise your voice and treat me this way. You think this is the only project behind schedule?"

Alice McCollum raised her hand very slowly, like a teacher calming a student, and whispered, "When do you expect to complete the renovation of Betsy Head . . .?"

The director exploded, "You people! You people! How dare you?" Now, everyone in East Brooklyn, everyone black or Hispanic, everyone who has watched taxis rush past them on a street at night or stood in line in a welfare office knows what the phrase

"you people" means when it's used by a white person in power. It means, "You nobodies. You uppity minorities. You interlopers." And worse.

Alice McCollum went for the jugular in a voice so soft that you would only have known what she was saying because you had heard her repeat it four previous times, "When do you expect to complete the renovation of Betsy Head Park and Pool?"

The director was screaming now. Thomas Jefferson, the sage of Monticello, the theorist of democracy in action, the Lindsay years, the New York melting pot—these were all distant memories. Mrs. McCollum shut her notebook, put her pen in her handbag, and stood. The closing of the notebook was our cue: we all collected our materials and stood as well. Silently, she led us out of the room and down the hallway. The director followed us to the door and yelled down the hallway as we waited for the elevator. When we all got in the elevator and the door finally closed, the entire group exhaled. We could hear him screaming, high above us, his screams growing fainter and fainter, as the elevator descended.

In the evaluation in the lobby downstairs, I asked the leaders how they felt. "Whew," one leader said. "Shocked," some said. "Surprised," others said. "I've never seen anything like that," one said. I turned to Alice McCollum and asked her how she felt. She thought for several seconds. "I have never felt so much in control in any meeting ever. *We* were in control. And I feel we are going to win."

We had planned this action carefully and role-played it repeatedly. I had warned the leaders that if the director overreacted we should watch out for two tendencies—the tendency to argue back and the tendency to giggle out of nervousness. No one said a word in the meeting. No one laughed or smiled or nodded his or her head to break the ice. The discipline, as the director unraveled and became more and more volatile, was superb. The group followed

Alice McCollum's excellent leadership as if it had been training for this event for years. We had gotten more of a reaction than we had bargained for by being simple and quiet and focused—not by waving a sign or shouting a slogan. And we knew that, because the director did consider himself a Lindsay-era progressive, he would be worried about who we would speak to about his overreaction. The media? The mayor? Other political leaders in the city? We decided to do nothing right away. We agreed to just let him react for a few days to his own overreaction.

Several days later, work crews appeared at Betsy Head Park and Pool. The renovation went on at a feverish pace after years of delay. Within months, the entire facility was upgraded, and the city scheduled a grand reopening. Our team attended. On the dais, sat the director, with other city officials. Alice McCollum approached him. He nearly flinched as she walked up to him. She smiled a broad, warm, welcoming smile and stuck out her hand. "Congratulations," she said. "We appreciate your prompt response and your fine work. You've returned to our children a place to swim and play." The director was wary. Slowly, he extended his hand and thanked Mrs. McCollum. From that day on, he was one of the most responsive and professional public officials that our leaders had the pleasure to relate to.

Whatever stereotype the director and his staff may have had of leaders from East Brooklyn—easily put off, not well informed, thrilled to be complimented by a powerful city official, or, even more negatively, ragtag, loud, unorganized, gullible—was shattered by the precision of the action Alice McCollum led. He recognized her, the quality of her organization, and her ability to turn the tables on him. And whatever preconceptions our leaders may have had about a high-level government official—professional, knowledgeable, in charge, unflappable—evaporated as well. They learned how to agitate a public official. They learned how quiet discipline often is more effective than loud and chaotic activity.

They learned how to stifle their own nervousness and follow a capable and powerful local leader. And they learned, at the groundbreaking, months later, the value of depolarizing a situation once a public official has responded effectively.

Several months later, still focused on the issue of recognition, we had scheduled two meetings, back to back, with the city's housing and sanitation commissioners. The adviser to the mayor coordinating the two meetings reserved a beautiful City Hall hearing room, called the Blue Room, for the sessions. The day before the meetings, Stephen Roberson, the EBC associate organizer, went down to City Hall to scout out the space. When he returned for the final briefing meeting that night, he sketched on the chalkboard the layout of the room. At the head of the room was a raised dais, with fifteen very plush leather chairs. In front of each chair was a microphone. Here, on high, in comfort, powerful public officials were supposed to sit. In the center of the room, in a cluster, were eight or so rickety wooden chairs—places for the peons. We stared at Stephen's drawing and started to discuss the possibility of arriving a little early and occupying the fifteen leather chairs.

The next day we arrived twenty minutes early for our two o'clock meeting. No one greeted us at the door of City Hall. No one escorted us to the Blue Room. So we found our way there and entered. The room was empty. The fifteen chairs beckoned. Reverend Youngblood was the key spokesperson for our team, so he sat in the central chair, with seven other EBC leaders and staff arrayed on either side of him. We occupied every chair and the entire dais.

At two o'clock sharp, the city's housing commissioner, Anthony Gliedman, a large man, balding at an early age, who was energetic and savvy, entered the room with an entourage of four aides. He moved toward the dais, saw us arranged there, and joked, "Hey, what's the matter here? Are we under indictment or something?"

"Not yet," said Reverend Youngblood, also joking.

Commissioner Gliedman took a few more steps toward the dais. "Ummm, we'd like to join you up there . . ."

Reverend Youngblood looked up and down the table. The chairs were occupied by an EBC leader, several elderly women, two elderly men, two other pastors, Stephen Roberson, and me. "Well, we're already settled in up here, and we know that you wouldn't want any of the senior citizens who have come today to move."

"Uh, no," said Gliedman, clearly seeing the problem he faced, "but how about if we bring these wooden chairs up there . . ."

"I don't think that would work," said Reverend Youngblood, "We wouldn't be able to see you over this high dais. So why don't you just sit right there, where we usually do?"

Gliedman hesitated, and then slowly, reluctantly, lowered himself onto one of the wooden chairs. It creaked a bit. His staff followed his lead. I have never seen five more uncomfortable men. They weren't just physically uncomfortable, they were *politically* uncomfortable. They were having the tables turned on them, literally, and they couldn't figure out how to respond.

Reverend Youngblood led them through our agenda of housing issues that we had set up for the day. Then, at the end, after fifteen minutes, he told the commissioner how much we appreciated his time and said, "Thank you for coming."

"Thank you . . ." Gliedman muttered, mostly to himself.

We remained in our chairs as Gliedman and his crew stormed out of the room. We knew that, out in the hallway, the second commissioner and his staff were mustering. We would no longer have the benefit of surprise. We could hear the two teams of city officials arguing in loud voices—the housing team exasperated and outraged by being told to sit in the citizens' section and the sanitation team declaring that they would never submit to such a humiliation.

The doors banged open and the sanitation commissioner led a

kind of charge. He and the three aides with him marched right past the wooden chairs and right up to the dais. We looked down on four red, frustrated faces—their chins at the level of the dais.

"Anything wrong?" Reverend Youngblood asked, clearly enjoying the dynamic, as was the rest of our team.

The sanitation commissioner realized that he could not lead his men over the top of the dais. He had only two choices, retreat back to the wooden chairs or just leave the room entirely. He opted for the chairs. Fifteen minutes later, we thanked them for coming and ended the second meeting.

Just when we thought the day couldn't get any better, it did. Both commissioners, in high dudgeon, went over to the City Hall press room, Room 9, and complained about how we had treated them, how our leaders had occupied all of the best chairs, how they had been made to sit in the wooden seats, and how they had been thanked for coming by upstarts from some godforsaken corner of Brooklyn. The reporters, intrigued by this tale of woe, rushed over to the Blue Room and interviewed our leaders. Several filed stories about this new group, from the boondocks of East Brooklyn, that had had the temerity to turn the tables on two city commissioners.

Six months later, after a follow-up meeting with the housing commissioner, Tony Gliedman said that he wanted to ask us a question that had been really bothering him. "That day in the Blue Room—what was that really about?"

"Recognition," I said.

Gliedman sat quietly and thought. "Now I get it," he said. And, more importantly, he had begun to get *us*.

But his boss, the mayor, Edward I. Koch, feisty and aggressive in this phase between the end of his first term and the start of his second, had not. We were just beginning to get to know Ed Koch at the time, not through direct contact (this was years before my memorable evening at Gracie Mansion), because that was quite

limited, but more through our dealings with his aides, deputies, and commissioners, and through the sources we had begun to develop in the press. The Ed Koch who emerged through this period was—and still is—a complex man. He had the ability to attract and retain some of the finest women and men we have encountered in public life. Gordon Davis, Stan Brezenoff, Felice Michetti, Lillian Barrios Paoli, Herman Badillo, Jeremy Travis, and the late Bobby Wagner—it would be hard to imagine a more diverse, more talented, and often more contentious group.

Koch had other qualities that we grew to admire. He had the capacity to work with those he distrusted or disliked—people like us. He could rally the city and represent the city at crucial times. And he wasn't pretty or slick: he had the face and physique of a normal person.

In late 1981 and early 1982, as we began to negotiate with the city the terms of what became known as the East Brooklyn Congregations Nehemiah Plan, we noticed that he would not say the name of the organization. He would not utter "East Brooklyn Congregations," "EBC," or "Industrial Areas Foundation." Instead, he referred to us as "those churches," "the religious people," or some other half-descriptive, half-dismissive term. He would always act exceedingly gracious in the presence of our strongest ally, Bishop Mugavero, whom he adored and who eventually received the prestigious La Guardia Medal from the mayor, but would be cooler, harsher, and more hostile to the rest of us. Privately, he referred to us, as he did to many he disagreed with, as "wackos."

As we prepared to begin construction on our first one thousand homes, we invited the mayor to attend the ground-breaking ceremony. After all, the city had agreed, after much tugging and pulling, to provide the land and the subsidy to allow us to build our homes. We told the mayor that we would turn out five thousand

EBC members for the outdoor event. We had hired a bulldozer to break the ground, not just a few shovels. And we expected plenty of press.

We then asked the mayor if he would be willing to lead the countdown for the ground-breaking—the ten, nine, eight that would lead to the moment the bulldozer bit into the earth. The mayor expressed surprise. Our invitation for him to play the central role, the master of ceremonies, at the pivotal moment, with the crowd cheering and the cameras flashing, caught him off guard. Really? He asked. Yes, we said. He accepted.

When he arrived on Stone Avenue (now Mother Gaston Boulevard) on the afternoon of the ground-breaking, he was excited. Reverend Youngblood, Reverend John Heinemeier, Fr. John Powis, Alice McCollum, Celina Jamieson, and I greeted him and said that we would like to prepare him for the countdown. We sat in a circle on the stage, with the enormous crowd building before us and the bulldozer growling in the rubble, and informed the mayor how the countdown should go: "ten-EBC, nine-EBC, eight-EBC, seven-EBC . . ." He looked up at me and barked, "You son of a . . ." "six-EBC, five-EBC."

We weren't sure what the mayor would say or do until he went to the podium, nodded to the bulldozer, and began the countdown. He dutifully said "EBC" ten straight times. The bulldozer surged forward and scooped an enormous load of brick, broken glass, and dirt out of the field of rubble. The crowd roared—fifty-five hundred midwives—at the sounds and sights of the community being reborn.

In the photos we've kept from that day, the mayor doesn't appear particularly pleased. We, on the other hand, are grinning like crazy. From that afternoon on, the mayor used our name, not some weak substitute, whenever he referred to us. We never failed to give

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