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COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

Conflict and Consensus

In this chapter, you will learn:

- ◆ There are many different community organizing approaches and methods.
- ◆ Saul Alinsky is the most famous community organizer of all time.
- ◆ Definitions of conflict organizing and consensus organizing.
- ◆ Your own personality shapes the method of community organizing you will like.

If you have any image at all of a community organizer, you probably picture a person (male, I bet) with an angry look, firing up a crowd of people to march on down somewhere to get somebody to take notice and start treating some group better. The organizer looks a little disheveled. The organizer talks fast. The organizer is pretty upset. If this were your image

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of a community organizer, I would equate it to the image of a therapist with a notepad gazing over a client stretched across a leather couch, saying with concerned reflection “hmmmm.” The therapist is pondering. The therapist is detached. The therapist is analytical. In other words, your image would be stereotypical. Therapists come in all shapes, sizes, sexes, and sexual orientations and use approaches that are not only varied and complex, but also are sometimes contradictory. Community organizing has the same mixes and matches. There are a variety of approaches. Community organizers come in a variety of packages and styles. They sometimes contradict one another. So you can already see, you might have a little learning to do. You do not want to look at community organizing in one narrow, stereotypical way.

Robert Fisher (1994), in his book *Let the People Decide*, takes you through the history of community organizing. He shows you in detail how economics, politics, and world events shape and influence different community organizing approaches. Many other writers have tried to categorize these approaches by model, type, and definition. Many of these writers are academics trying to fit people’s works into boxes and diagrams. In the real world of community organizing, nothing fits neatly into a box on a page. Many organizers think much more flexibly. They approach each day willing to do almost anything that might help a community. So let’s start from a different spot. Let’s look at why those who practice community organizing enter it, and try to see if you would fit into it. Later, we’ll examine some of the different methods and approaches.

As Fisher (1994) says, no matter what historical era you choose, there seem to be some of the same things that drive people to want to be community organizers or at least gain some community organizing skills. Try to imagine the hilarious blue-collar comedian, Jeff Foxworthy, taking his trademark routine “then you just might be a redneck,” but applying it instead to community organizing. If you aren’t familiar with Foxworthy, he sets up his jokes (available on his website), many with an activity or tendency followed by “then you just might be a redneck.” For example, “If you list ‘staring’ as one of your hobbies, you just might be a redneck” and “If you put ammo on your Christmas list, you just might be a redneck.” So let’s try it with the community organizer. “If you ever looked into our public school system and saw that it was unequal, writing off millions of low-income students, saying they can’t learn, then you just might be a community organizer.” “If you ever fumed over our two-tiered health system and saw poor and working-class people avoiding medical treatment because they can’t afford health insurance, then you just might be a community organizer.” “If you ever felt that it is unfair to have a federal minimum wage that keeps full-time workers and their families in poverty, then you just

might be a community organizer.” In each case, you see something grossly unfair and want to work with those suffering these injustices. That desire makes you a prime candidate to become a community organizer. If you have a sense of outrage at the unfairness in our society, you are already halfway across the water, swimming toward the goals and aspirations of community organizers throughout history. You now just need to gain some skills and techniques and focus on an approach or approaches you are comfortable with.

If you have a desire to create change that leads to fairness and equity, you have many different choices and paths to get you there. Sure, some organizers really do get people angry at large rallies, but that is just one of the methods you can choose. Let’s look at four approaches among many. (Hey, now’s the time for that neat little chart with the bullet points.) Throughout the evolution of community organizing, people have tried to explain it in different ways. My attempt is simple. Don’t get lost in the terminology. Instead, try to imagine each approach and how you would do if you selected one or another.

FOUR APPROACHES TO COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

Saul Alinsky and Conflict Organizing

The practice of community organizing is associated with one person more than any other: Saul Alinsky. A good parallel in the practice of therapy would be a person you may have heard of at one time or another: Sigmund Freud. Alinsky was born in Chicago in 1909. He was the son of immigrants, yet he managed to get through college studying archeology and criminology. His professional goal became the empowerment of everyday people. His work began to attract attention when he zeroed in on the famous Chicago neighborhood, Back of the Yards, and organized the Back of the Yards Council. This neighborhood acquired its unusual name because cows were sent by railroad from farms to be slaughtered and processed into meat at stockyards right in the middle of the community. Alinsky was interested in this particular Chicago neighborhood partly because it was the very same area that Upton Sinclair (1906) wrote about at the turn of the century in the book *The Jungle*. Most of the wretched conditions that Sinclair described still existed more than 50 years later. People felt trapped in either joblessness or in jobs that paid low wages with dangerous working conditions. Workers lost fingers and hands using unsafe equipment. They were fired and replaced by new immigrants. They lived in unheated buildings without indoor plumbing.

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Alinsky came into the neighborhood as an outsider using one of his most important skills—listening. He listened to the complaints and frustrations of the people there. He saw a pattern that prevented change. Each person felt isolated and alone, that only he or she was stuck in these miserable circumstances. He knew he needed to be trusted by the residents. So he made a special effort to befriend the Catholic parish priests who could legitimize his organizing effort. The “father” could say it was not only right for the members to participate, but he could also prescribe or even require participation. Alinsky also painstakingly contacted other neighborhood institutions and organizations.

Alinsky distinguished between grassroots efforts and the efforts of various social service programs, which he felt were under the control of wealthy donors or unsympathetic government officials who would never choose the side of the oppressed when conflict occurred. He felt that social workers were do-gooders who were strong on rhetoric but nowhere around when things got hot. He knew that the residents were suffering from despair, apathy, and helplessness. He knew he had to confront these barriers or the neighborhood would remain powerless and continue to suffer.

He attacked feelings of “there is nothing we can do about it” head on. He first explained that residents needed power and that power comes in two different forms—money and people. Of course, the people had very little money but, on the other hand, there were certainly plenty of people. In this set of awful circumstances, he was able to point out that there was great potential for change that could come from collective action.

Alinsky used tactics he became famous for—boycotts, strikes, and pickets. He disrupted meetings. He brought community people to places they were uninvited and unwanted. He organized the “have-nots” against the “haves.” He would use anger as a motivator. He turned politicians against one another. He polarized situations as a strategy. He personalized his attacks. Instead of going after the bank, he went after the particular bank president, naming him and blaming him. He worried his targets by unification. After pressuring and pressuring his targets, concessions would begin to be granted. Rents were reduced. Municipal improvements were initiated. More equitable mortgages and bank loans were made. Fairer wages and benefits were paid. His successes made him famous and in demand. This style of organizing that puts pressure on personalized targets to create improvements is referred to as conflict organizing. It is still practiced today all across the country.

Conflict Organizing—Using anger and blaming a selected, targeted individual by putting pressure on the target to create a concession and cause change

Women Centered Organizing

Alinsky talked about power as something others had. Often, those in power did not treat the poor, women, or minorities fairly. He believed power should be removed from those who abused it and transferred to the oppressed. Feminists and women centered organizers, on the other hand, believe in a different principle: power sharing. They are committed to creating balanced power relationships through democratic practices of shared leadership, decision making, authority, and responsibility. Many women centered organizers believe that, without this approach, they would mirror more traditional, hierarchical institutions. They would become part of the problem instead of a part of a solution and a shining example. They believe in equality and inclusion. One Canadian-centered group, the Advisory Council on the Status of Women in *Feminism: Our Basis for Unity*, succinctly summarizes its view of power sharing:

Through the healthy practice of power sharing, we nurture an environment that is peaceful, empowering and respectful. We share power through inclusion, consensus building and skills development. Other practices include validating women's experiences, anticipating challenge and conflict, including diverse voices, creating safe places, evaluating our work and sharing roles and responsibilities. Respect is at the root of successful power sharing, as is a genuine commitment to the principles, practices and processes of feminism. To foster healthy and equitable power relationships among staff, board members and volunteers we must demonstrate our commitment to feminist leadership rather than simply assume authority. (Advisory Council on the Status of Women: Newfoundland & Labrador, n.d.)

It would be fun to bring back Saul Alinsky and have him compare approaches with members of this advisory council. They have distinctly different ideas about power. Some observers, such as Kristina Smock (2004) in *Democracy in Action*, have commented on some of the trade-offs of what she calls the women centered model. She says there can be tension between process and product.

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The emphasis on internal relationship building and inclusive decision making can hinder the achievement of tangible action oriented outcomes. Providing participants with the personal support while helping them to discover the connection between their own problems and public issues can be an extremely time consuming process, one that frequently slows down the organization's ability to move toward broader action. Similarly, the insistence on including all voices and reaching genuine consensus can make it difficult for women centered organizations to move effectively from deliberation to action. (p. 253)

The women centered model emphasizes that relationships should not be built on self-interest but rather on understanding and responsibility. It puts a high priority on personal development as well as community development.

Community Building Approach

Community Building—Forming collaborative partnerships among a neighborhood's stakeholders to strengthen their internal capacity to solve their problems

Community builders believe that the internal social and economic fabric of a neighborhood needs to be strengthened. They believe that the biggest challenge that people in neighborhoods face is the lack of capacity to address their own needs. Because many low-income communities are isolated and cut off by the traditional power structure, the rebuilding must come from within. Because people in these communities have been systematically isolated, they need to “learn to trust one other, establish roles, and improve from within.” This represents a new form of community organizing. Organizers are faced with the challenge of developing the residents' assets and skills. They must not only harness and expand the skill base, but also then build collaborations throughout the community. These collaborations must be built among various stakeholders in the neighborhood. This approach sometimes tilts heavily toward staff. It includes some residents, but often those already in leadership positions, such as block club presidents, civic association chairpersons, and so on. It may shy away from other residents not affiliated with existing efforts. Also, the complexity of comprehensive, neighborhood-wide efforts may overwhelm the “average” citizen, let alone the nonnative, non-English speaker or someone with very

little formal education. Organizers may have to overvalue those with degrees and expertise and existing positions of power and, by default, leave out others. There is also some concern that the community building approach requires multiple trade-offs and compromises to get everyone on the same page. Many problems are not challenged or addressed.

The community building approach has been supported heavily by regional and national philanthropies. They find comfort in the comprehensiveness, logic, and order of entire-community efforts. One community group steps forward and presents the philanthropy with an opportunity to play an investment or grant-making role that feels comfortable and appropriate. Some of these philanthropies might not have supported conflict organizing (too disruptive) or women centered organizing (too process oriented).

Consensus Organizing

Consensus Organizing—Tying the self-interest of the community to the self-interest of others to achieve a common goal

This has nothing but pluses, no shortcomings, and the guy connected with it is nothing short of a genius! Meanwhile, back on the planet earth, I will try my best to make this an objective introduction to a community organizing approach I happen to like. Consensus organizing requires you, the organizer, to do two parallel, simultaneous jobs. I can hear you now, “Hey, I already don’t like this one. It’s twice as much work!” Come on, where’s that sense of dedication and commitment?

Some community building efforts are heavily reliant on government funding. They can become dependent on this support for their continued existence. Saul Alinsky would call this “sleeping with the enemy” and feel that such efforts would be in serious jeopardy of being co-opted and never building power.

A consensus organizer brings together interests within a neighborhood in a way that is similar to the community builder approach, while at the same time bringing together the political, economic, and social power structure from outside the neighborhood. We see both the internal and external players as equal participants loaded with dedicated, honest, fair participants. After both groups are organized, articulate, and focused on their self-interest, you bring them together. This approach runs very

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contrary to the conflict organizing ideas of Saul Alinsky and his disciples, and has something in common with the other two approaches. Alinsky would never see the power structure as a potential ally. In his mind, elites were the cause of problems and never part of a solution. They were only valuable when they did what the community group demanded. On the other hand, power sharing is talked about in the other models. The major difference is that nobody else looks at the external forces affecting the community in quite the way a consensus organizer does.

The consensus organizer recognizes the value and power of mobilizing honest and dedicated people from both groups—the community and the power structure. Of course, there will also be prejudiced, self-serving, and arrogant individuals from both groups. The idea is to work around them.

Those who embrace consensus organizing see it as the most logical, natural, and sensible way to proceed. It resonates with how they think, choose their friends, and lead their lives. Others see it as a sellout, a public relations–driven, superficial effort that doesn't begin to address the root causes of problems. There! I told you I'd be fair. Is the world composed of a variety of people who need to be skillfully brought together? Is it something you'd like to know more about?

I've always been fascinated by the personalities of community organizers and how their personalities might match some approaches better than others. I bet in your case, right here in Chapter 1, you feel you match up better to one more than the other three. In my experience, most of those who are attracted to Alinsky and the conflict approach have a drive to correct unfairness by putting the blame where it belongs. You know the personality, "I'm right, you're wrong, and I'll prove it!" They see women centered groups as not serious about taking action because they won't take power away from those who "don't deserve it." Community builders see the need to create order and harmony from within. You know the personality type, "Here we are, we've met, gotten to know one another, and we agree." A consensus organizer has the kind of personality that sees the actual and potential good in everyone. Think of pop icon Madonna. Some see her as a manipulative, media-conscious chameleon that changes her image over and over to maximize her earning power, never really believing in anything. A consensus organizer could see her instead as a fascinating woman who started with nothing, came to New York from Detroit at 17, refused to be packaged and manipulated into someone's idea of who she should be, and has evolved into, among other things, a caring mother and a writer of children's books.

YOUR PERSONALITY AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

Some students in the helping professions end up working in agency or institutional settings. There, they tend to have the expertise and control, and the parent, resident, or child is the “client” who benefits from their expertise and goodwill. The “helpers” see no connection to the messy business of community organizing. They see no need to gain community organizing skills. They believe their personality suits the more structured, set approach of building a one-on-one relationship. Well, I’d like you to look a little deeper into this with me. Let’s talk about the power relationship in more “clinical” settings. Sure, you have read ad nauseam, and have been taught time and time again that you and the client are equals, but, the last time I checked, that’s not how the client sees it. In fact, I would venture to say that no matter how hard you try and no matter how sincere you might be, the client will never believe it. The client sees *you* with the expertise, *you* with the insights, *you* with the answers (also *you* with the paycheck, *you* with the degree, and, most times, *you* with a house or apartment in a different neighborhood). Most important, when there are only two of you in a room, there is no ability for the client to help someone else. It is hard and sometimes downright impossible to create reciprocity. All you have done is to create a one-way street—you give, the client receives. In all forms of community organizing, however, the resident gets help and gives help. There are no one-way streets. Ideas come up as a group of people think together. Everyone feeds off of one another, which enhances creative thought. There can be a sense of belonging to the group and there is a sense of helping to work toward the greater good. Your role as an organizer can change from moment to moment. This fluidity can increase effectiveness at moving along strategies for community improvement. One person might need your help in thinking ahead. Another might need your praise. Another might need you to be firm and consistent.

So I now ask you to imagine using one or more of the organizing approaches mentioned. Do you have the type of personality that can thrive by getting in people’s faces and pushing them to do what is needed? Do you have the type of personality that is comfortable with finding similarities and commonalities to minimize conflict? Do you feel equally comfortable with both? What types of life experiences have shaped your view of fairness and justice? Try to go back in your life and remember some sets of circumstances when you were justifiably upset. Try to remember the times you most wanted to change something that was bothering you. These are the times when you have seen your true organizing personality come out. It was

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when you felt the need to change something that you chose strategies. It was when you were upset and frustrated yet determined to “fix it” that your own organizing style began to emerge. Did you try to appeal to someone else’s sense of fairness? Did you force someone into doing the “right” thing even though they didn’t want to? Did you get other people involved rather than trying to change things all by yourself? You will see that you already might have done some community organizing even though you didn’t know that was what it was called. You might have tried to organize your brother and sister, an eighth-grade class, a high school coaching staff, or fellow church members. These are all examples of organizing and you were the organizer. If you think and reflect, you may find that you already have begun doing some of the work we are going to talk about. Some of you even may have practiced consensus organizing. You even may have had some success. You may have done it naturally and never even known it by its name.

So let’s take a deep breath. Let’s go back to a time long ago and far away to my hometown. Let’s hear a few stories about what it was like before the turn of the 21st century. What happened back in those dark days and how did it affect the shaping of a different theory of community organizing? So put on your boots. Put on your scarf. Put on your gloves. Button up that parka or you’ll catch your death of cold, because you’re heading for Buffalo, New York.

THAT’S A SHAME

It snows a lot in Buffalo. It’s pretty windy, too. Some would describe it as terribly bleak. Summer is nice, the whole 6 weeks. The other 46 are a little rough. One old Buffalo joke goes, “What color do kids from Buffalo prefer the most? Gray. It’s the only color they have ever seen.” I get to tell such jokes because Buffalo is my hometown. My family’s neighborhood for the first 21 years of my life was the Eastside of Buffalo. Holy Name of Jesus Parish was our parish. Schiller Park was our park. We had stability on the Eastside. We did not have a lot of upward mobility. We never expected to move, let alone move up. Most families were big families, four, five, six kids. Almost all of these kids had Polish names—mine the German exception. I had to learn enough conversational Polish to drop a phrase here and there to fit in with my friends’ families. Almost all these kids went to Holy Name School. I did and I remember it. What I remember most is that life on the Eastside of Buffalo had a series of absolutes. There was good and bad, right and wrong—nothing in the middle. There were the golden gates of Heaven and

the chance of rotting everlasting in Hell. On a typical school day, I walked 6 blocks to school, 6 blocks back home for lunch, and then repeated the trip each afternoon. I estimate that on the walks I would meet 10 to 15 adults. Everyone knew my name. Every one of them had authority over me. If I were up to anything, and I mean anything, every adult would feel obligated to discipline me and then to tell my mom and dad, who would repeat the procedure. Adults would never tell other adults that it was none of their business. They all believed it *was* their business.

My neighborhood had everything. I could walk or bike to Schiller Park, two movie theaters, two bowling alleys, three candy stores, a used comic book store, a model train store, “the woods” (trees and open land to play in), railroad tracks with real trains and real hoboes, a public library, two pizza shops, four delis that sold baseball cards, and an ice cream parlor. I mean, what else do you need? I can honestly say that as a 12-year-old boy, I couldn’t imagine a better place to live. That is, until one day when I went to the dentist.

Our family dentist had his office in another neighborhood. My parents did not own a car so we had to get to the dentist by catching two buses. I went with my mom on each trip until I turned 12. At that time, she announced conclusively one evening without debate at dinner that I was old enough to go by myself. I had a mixed reaction to this pronouncement. I liked the recognition that I had reached this rite of passage, but the dentist’s office was in a different neighborhood. My mother gave me bus fare, wrote out the bus route numbers, and pushed me out the door. I felt like I was going to Siberia. (Hey, no more Buffalo jokes.) It seemed so far away. Years later, out of curiosity, I checked a street map. It was a journey Marco Polo would have admired—6 miles. I arrived on time with no mishaps, but the block walk from the bus to the dentist’s office was strange. Not one adult recognized me. I did not like that. I went up to the receptionist, just past the tropical fish tank, and gave her my name. She, of course, wanted to know where my mother was. Parking the car? “No, she had sent me by myself.” The receptionist then, matter-of-factly, just making conversation, asked where I lived. I, equally matter-of-factly, told her. She looked up from the appointment book, dropped her pen, and made a distinctive strange sort of clucking noise with her tongue against her teeth. She slowly rotated her head from side to side and said pointedly from deep inside her throat, “Oooh, that’s a shame!” It was odd. I remember feeling neither happy nor sad. I was completely puzzled. The only time I remembered a reaction like this was when my friend’s dog died and he told my mom. Only now, there wasn’t a dead dog. All I did was tell someone in a dentist’s office where I lived.

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All the way home on the bus, I replayed what had happened. Slowly, I put this puzzle together. The lady felt sorry for me. This made me mad. I did not want her pity. She hadn't been mean, but she might as well have been. If my dad had been there, he might have said she "meant well." But I did not feel that she did. Why was I getting so upset? I got off the second bus and carefully looked around. My neighborhood looked even better than I had remembered. It felt wonderful to be back. Then, something even stranger happened to me. It was a new feeling, starting from within my stomach, moving up my chest, and eventually spilling into my head. I felt resentment. I fought it at first because she was an adult, she was to be respected, and she even worked in an office. She was clean when she came home from work. She didn't need to wash up. I was supposed to look up to her. If I had had a sister, she would have hoped to be successful like her. Despite all the thinking and analyzing, this deepening feeling of resentment could not be stopped. I couldn't stop it because it felt so justified. She started it, not me. I did nothing to provoke this. I did not bring it upon myself. I resented her and her neighborhood. There was no way that she was better than my friends, my family, my school, or my street. The fact that she thought she was better proved she wasn't. I didn't need to discuss this with anyone. I assumed everyone older than me already had figured this out. I had sorted it out and come to an adult conclusion. I resented her and my whole neighborhood would have resented her. That I felt this, I suppose, was just a shame.

When it was time to choose a high school, I chose a Catholic one. It was located way over on the other side of town. It advertised and promised that every kid who graduated would go on to college. I took that to mean even kids from the Eastside. Most of the students would be Italian from the Westside of Buffalo. I surmised that I had little to worry about. My theory was that the receptionist would have put these kids down, too. I was pretty sure that because I felt I was equal to them, they would feel the same toward me. I was right. It was easy to be friends with them. It was a long trip back and forth, though. The bus trip required me to remain very, very alert. After all, I was required to wear a suit coat and a tie every day and carry Latin books while all the other Eastside kids got off at a public school along my bus route. This public school was not just any public school. It happened to be the public school you went to when you were thrown out of all the other public schools. After a few weeks of taunts, stares, and dirty looks from most of the other kids on the bus, I started to develop additional theories. Because I had done nothing to merit the negative treatment I was receiving, maybe I was a sort of representative of all the other kids who were forced to dress like me. Maybe other kids who went to private schools thought they were superior

to my fellow travelers. I certainly didn't. Slowly, it started to sink in. They thought that I looked at them the way the receptionist had looked at me! Now, it all made sense. I guessed that this kind of stuff never ended.

My high school years were 1964 through 1968. I rode that bus route all 4 years. Through riots, burnings, shootings, and curfews, I went to school. Bishop Fallon High School met its end of the bargain. I applied to and was accepted at three colleges. The cheapest by far was Buffalo State College so, of course, that's where I went. I had a conversation with my parents about my preferred choice, Syracuse University. I talked for at least 20 minutes about why it was the best school for me. Syracuse had an excellent faculty, great facilities, solid academic programs, and so on. I was into my presentation. I did everything I could to convince my parents. At about the 15-minute mark, I noticed something. They had stopped listening. The last part must have sounded to them like blah, blah, blah, blah. I finally came up for air. My mother said just eight words and with that it was all over. Those eight words were "How are you going to pay for it?" Man, Buffalo State never looked so good. We had never discussed college in my family. It was always understood that if I wanted to go to college, it was up to me to figure out how to do it. If I did not want to go, it would also be fine. Steel mills, the rubber plant, and the auto plant were all hiring. You could find work if that's what you wanted. I saw another life that I wanted instead. I wanted people to stop resenting me and to start respecting me. I wanted people from my neighborhood to know that I was not better than they were. I wanted people from outside the neighborhood to know that I was not inferior. I did not think it was too much to ask. I wanted to find something within my new giant college that would become my balance beam. I felt my future would always be filled with judges and competitors. I needed to be a gymnast on a beam. I wanted every judge to see me differently by finding something they admired. I wanted something that made each of them score my performance most positively. No matter how distinctive the particular judge, I wanted to give each of them something they appreciated and respected. I was going to find my way to do it in this college.

THE OUTSIDE AGITATOR

I started college in 1968. If I graduated on time, I would finish in the year 1972. Many historians now rank those 4 years as some of the most, if not *the* most, turbulent in United States history. There was anything but apathy on campus. During 2 of the 4 years, we had final exams canceled because of

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antiwar protests and violence that ensued. The administration considered it too dangerous to continue teaching. In my 4 years, I was teargassed, chased, and interviewed by the FBI. It is still hard for me to relate college to anything but politics and foreign policy.

Buffalo State evolved from what was originally a teacher's college. By the time I entered, it had developed into a full-blown college with more than 40 majors to choose from. People in my neighborhood, however, when hearing about my acceptance, invariably showed their enthusiasm by shouting, "Mike's going to State Teacher's!" Whereas some of the students were local commuters like me, many took the New York State Thruway to Buffalo from other parts of the state, usually from New York City. It only took the first hour of orientation to discover that the New York City kids were different. First, they seemed to think that Buffalo, the second-largest city in the state, was a farming community. I learned this because they said so, loudly and frequently. When they made a point, they would use references that almost always escaped me. Every 18-year-old from New York City seemed 35 years old to me. They had so much experience and so much attitude. How could they all have done so much, seen so much, felt so much at such a young age? The point was, I found them fascinating. I never let their attitude build a wall around me and stop me from befriending them. One of my favorite ways to bond was to invite them to my family's home and show them my neighborhood. My gritty community was suddenly an asset. It worked pretty much every time. They then treated me as an equal. I learned a lot about politics from them. Many of them were very active in the civil rights, women's rights, and antiwar movements. They read a lot and would loan me their books. I joined the Student Convocation Committee, in which I helped select the speakers who would be invited to campus. The committee was almost entirely composed of New York City activists. You can imagine how the members leaned politically when they selected their speakers. They leaned decidedly left (very liberal).

Committee members had responsibilities for each speech. Some wrote press releases, some put up posters, some distributed tickets, and some did the grunt work. Once a year, however, when you were selected to organize the entire convocation, the duties became even more intense. The responsibilities were more complex. You negotiated the contract, did the introduction, fielded inquiries, and assigned all the other committee members to the various tasks—excellent experience for a 19-year-old. If you had to take on all this responsibility, you certainly wanted it to be directed toward a famous person that you wanted to meet. You wanted *your* speaker. You were prepared to lobby and twist the arms of other committee members to get your first choice.

In one of my sociology classes, *Analyzing Social Problems*, we read a book called *Crisis in Black and White* (Silberman, 1966). We read about a community organizer named Saul Alinsky from Chicago. He caught my attention. He motivated people to have much higher expectations, an idea that thrilled me. Every page seemed like free gas flowing into an empty tank. I must have been like the young actor, musician, or athlete who screams excitedly one day, "You mean, I can get paid to do this?" What he was doing resonated with me. Here I was reading about this guy who went into neighborhoods like mine, got all the residents together, and fought and won improvements from government, corporations, and landlords. I was mesmerized. Not only was he able to do this, he was also alive *and* he made speeches.

At our selection meeting, committee members chose Bernadette Devlin, Father James Groppi, Jonathan Kozol, and Cesar Chavez. If we successfully negotiated with their agents, we would then be promoting them, meeting them at the airport, eating dinner with them, introducing them, and getting to know them. I couldn't believe my good fortune. I was on the committee because the members thought I brought some perspective, ability, and good work habits. Timidly at first, I dropped the name of Saul Alinsky. After all, I had read that he was the guy who helped train Cesar Chavez, the successful leader of immigrant farmworkers. It was Chavez who organized an effective national grape boycott, forcing the growers to improve workers' wages and living conditions. As luck would have it, the more I dug up about Alinsky, the more excited I became, and the more excited committee members became. It turned out that his organization, the Industrial Areas Foundation, had trained and sent organizers to Rochester, New York, just 70 miles away. That information paled in comparison to his reported exploration of expansion into Buffalo, New York. Actually, the Industrial Areas Foundation saw great possibilities in one particular Buffalo neighborhood, the Eastside! That meant that Alinsky himself would be coming to work in my neighborhood. He would be flying in from Chicago, landing at the airport in Buffalo, and be driven into my own neighborhood to cause trouble. He would be legitimately referred to as an outside agitator. I was more determined than ever. He had to speak at my campus and I had to organize it. It was in the cards, it was fate, it was destiny.

The committee unanimously approved my recommendation and I was put in charge of the operation. By this time, I was completely engrossed in the idea of community organizing. I befriended a faculty member who introduced me to the local Industrial Areas Foundation staff member assigned to build the Buffalo program. I felt that with some experience,

I could do what he was doing. I could motivate, engage, and I could strategize. Organizing strategy, staying ahead of everyone else became my main interest. I attended every meeting I could. I met and admired paid professional organizers. I thought all of this would help prepare me for the night of my life when I would meet and introduce the most famous community organizer in the entire world, Saul Alinsky.

Without my knowledge, however, another group of New York State taxpayers had their own take on the situation. They had organized to express their distress about their taxes being used to pay people who “hated America” to come to our campus and poison students’ minds. They targeted a group on the Buffalo State campus that had taken the lead in the poisoning. It was my committee. The last straw, apparently, was the decision to bring in Saul Alinsky, identified by them as a communist. Unlike other potential speakers, he wanted to stir up trouble right in Buffalo. These New Yorkers wrote letters to the newspapers, appeared on television, and demanded to meet the campus president and the New York State University Trustees. They also intended to show up, in force, to protest Alinsky’s speech. Ironically, they were going to protest the protester. Alinsky, upon hearing this from his staff, was ecstatic. With no small ego, *he* was now the center of controversy, a place he found warm and comforting. I realized I had fallen into a wonderful situation myself. Reporters constantly called my house for quotes. The protesters wanted me to cancel the appearance. The entire swirl was rapidly leading to my first opportunity to meet Alinsky. What a great set of circumstances in which to be introduced. I got to do my favorite thing—strategize. How could I use this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to show him my organizing ability? What would he do if he were in my shoes? I remember how clearheaded I felt when a light bulb slowly floated into the air and paused above me.

I called the media and announced that because of massive pressure from citizens groups, I would reluctantly be making an announcement about a major change in committee policy on bringing in speakers. The announcement would be made immediately prior to Mr. Alinsky’s address. I suggested that all the concerned taxpayers attend. Then, I also called all the activist groups on campus and told them the same thing. This meant we were guaranteed an overflow crowd, some who were there in hopes of hearing about a future ban on people like Alinsky, and some who were there to put pressure on making sure that there was no change. I hoped this would impress him. The committee designed posters with Alinsky’s quote, “When I die I’m going to Hell and organize.” There was a huge buzz all over campus. Even people who a month earlier had never heard of Alinsky were now

keenly interested in him. I felt like a boxing promoter. My job was to fire up both sides, so they would all show up.

Controversy can create interest. Interested people get involved. I felt that the more controversial his visit became, the more successful it would be.

I invited my parents to the speech and some of our neighbors as well. The activists from campus showed up in full force. The taxpayer activists also showed up in droves. All the chairs were filled 30 minutes before the scheduled start. The aisles filled up as well. I prayed the fire marshals wouldn't show up. The television stations, radio stations, and newspapers were all there and all set up. I had organized it. Alinsky barreled into a room behind the stage with a few of his staff members, right on time. He wore a dark suit and a narrow tie. I remember that he looked huge and I felt very small. I spoke aggressively about the circumstances surrounding his speech and said I was going to make a major announcement. I was trying to make him nervous. He wasn't. He listened very well. He said very little. I brought my parents backstage to meet him. My dad told him I wanted to be a community organizer.

It was time. I walked onto the stage and faked nervousness. I was in front of the largest crowd I had ever spoken to. I cleared my throat. The audience was markedly and physically divided. The activists on both sides had their own signs and posters. Pockets of people with pointed opinions clung to one another in clumps woven like a giant quilt patched together. I spoke very slowly. Alinsky was staring at me from behind the curtain at the side of the stage. "As you know, me and our student committee have been under tremendous pressure these last few weeks." I wanted each word to mean something to both sides of the audience. Now this was fun. I spoke about how we as students were obligated to listen to criticism with respect and reflection. As students, we were bound to the wishes of our financial supporters, the taxpayers. I pushed it so far; all the activists were on the edge of their seats, ready to explode in fury, as I appeared to be caving in. There they sat and stood, watching me apparently sell out. Then, with the rest of the audience drawing the same conclusion, I put the hammer down with my final remark. "So, with very careful thought and consideration, I stand before you all tonight to announce that the convocation committee of Buffalo State College will no longer be bringing young, radical, left-wing, liberal speakers onto our campus. (Pause.) We are instead going to bring in *old, left-wing, radical speakers!* Ladies and gentleman, Saul Alinsky!" The whole room erupted; it was like a

courtroom hearing the verdict for an accused murderer, “Not guilty.” I felt like I was 10 feet in the air, as if time was standing still. Alinsky came charging out from behind the curtain, leaned down, grabbed my shoulder hard, and yelled in my ear “That was the worst [expletive]ing introduction I have received in my entire life.” His smile, however, told me all I needed to know. I had impressed him. I was going to be a community organizer. I felt that I had a “feel” for moving large groups of people to where they needed to go. I felt that maybe I had found the “gift” that all of us seem to have: a gift for something. Some have an athletic gift, some an artistic gift, or some a gift for sales or law or medicine. I felt my gift was in organizing, to get justice for those who deserved it. I felt an obligation to use my gift. What if a gifted artist could please Vincent Van Gogh or the gifted basketball player could please Larry Bird? Wouldn’t they, then, want to paint or play ball? I had just successfully performed in front of the greatest community organizer in the world and he had recognized my gift.

The world we live in is full of injustice. There are things you see every day that need to be changed. Change can be achieved through many different approaches. We all see the world we share through different eyes. I wanted to create change. I had begun to choose a path to get there.

Now, I want you to start to think about yourself. We are at a spot at which you get a chance to reflect. Please do not skip ahead. Take some time and ponder the following questions. Some of them will be fun; but some will take some time. Share your thoughts with others and be curious about how they answer the same questions. Check in the back of the book in the “Answers” to Reflection Questions section for some input from yours truly. This is important because it should make you think even more. Look under the “answers” for Chapter 1. Then, and only then, move on to the next chapter.

Reflection Questions

1. If Saul Alinsky were alive today, what would he be doing? What issues would he be addressing?
2. Which speakers would you bring into your school if you were in charge of the convocations committee?
3. What has happened in your life that makes you want to help people?
4. What style of organizing matches your personality?
5. How did the community you grew up in affect you as an adult?
6. Would you ever want to visit Buffalo?

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