

## It all starts in community

By Lewis Finfer / As You Were Saying | Saturday, August 9, 2008 | <http://www.bostonherald.com> | Op-Ed

Barack Obama has gathered up stories and dreams so he can empathize with the pain people feel now and point toward how it can be different. He can think strategically how to get there in an incremental way.

In 1991, I met with Barack Obama while he was attending Harvard Law School to see if he was interested in continuing his work as a community organizer.

He told me then, "I want to build on what I learned in community organizing and I have a plan to return to Illinois and go into politics."

Depending on how you see his candidacy, you may be thinking that either it's fortunate he had that plan or why couldn't I have done a better job in persuading him to stay in Massachusetts.

Obama has spoken many times during the campaign about the importance of what he learned during his three years of community organizing in Chicago during the 1980s. Let me tell you what he did as a community organizer and what community organizers do every day.

Listening is the key. Organizers engage residents of an area through one-to-one meetings. These are conversations to explore several areas of a person's life. Then questions are asked about what a person is particularly worried about with where he or she lives or works and why, and whether there's a story here. The last and most important part of this meeting is the community organizer proposing the next step for the resident to do something about his or her concerns.

In his book, "Dreams From My Father," Obama described these one-to-one meetings: "That the self interest I was supposed to be looking for extended well beyond the immediacy of issues, that beneath the small talk and sketchy biographies and received opinion people carried within them some central explanations of themselves. Stories full of terror and wonder, studded with events that still haunted or inspired them. Sacred stories."

Research is essential. Community organizations look to move from a general problem like youth violence prevention to a specific realizable issue such as increasing funding for teen centers. This involves research meetings to find out what is being done now about a problem, what are the gaps, what are the best practices done on this elsewhere, how much does it cost, who has the money and who makes the decision.

Next comes the action phase. An example of action is organizing community meetings with a large gathering to show support for proposed solutions. These meetings need to have dramatic testimony of stories from people affected by the problem, sound research presented that backs up the proposed solutions the organization makes, and the ability to engage decision-makers in attending and considering making commitments.

Evaluation is difficult but crucial. Obama had the humility in his book to describe both an unsuccessful and successful action meeting. The first was a meeting on crime concerns, but only 11 residents showed up. Yes, organizers and organizations have meetings like that. He describes another action meeting dealing with asbestos present in a public housing development. The meeting had great attendance and got the Chicago Housing Authority director to take action.

I think his experience as a community organizer enables Barack Obama to listen well. He has gathered up stories and dreams so he can empathize with the pain people feel now and point toward how it can be different. He can think strategically how to get there in an incremental way.

However, if he is elected president, with the great power comes a distance from people. There's a tendency of advisers not to feel the confidence to tell a president what needs to be done and when he might be going in the wrong direction. I hope Obama would find ways to continue to listen and initiate change month after month.

But just to make sure he does, I believe that the work of community leaders and organizers must continue if our country is to change for the better. President Franklin Roosevelt once told a group of representatives of supportive organizations, "You've heard me promise to do this, that and the other thing that you've asked for. Now go out and make me do it."

If we do go out and organize, then we will enable many to write new stories filled with hope and opportunity.

*Lewis Finfer has been a community organizer since 1970 and is director of the Massachusetts Communities Action Network. He lives in Dorchester. The Herald welcomes 600-word submissions to [oped@bostonherald.com](mailto:oped@bostonherald.com). Columns are subject to editing and become Herald property.*

Article URL: [http://www.bostonherald.com/news/opinion/op\\_ed/view.bg?articleid=1111913](http://www.bostonherald.com/news/opinion/op_ed/view.bg?articleid=1111913)

**Related Articles:**

**Hillary Clinton gets her own night at Democratic National Convention**

</news/national/politics/2008/view.bg?articleid=1112214>

**Monday Morning Briefing**

</news/regional/politics/view.bg?articleid=1112205>


**Obama policy book coming out Sept. 9**

</business/media/view.bg?articleid=1112192>

[Contact us](#) | [Print advertising](#) | [Online advertising](#) | [Herald history](#) | [News tips](#) | [Electronic edition](#) | [Browser upgrade](#) | [Home delivery](#) | [Herald wireless](#)

**\$ave on Boston Herald Home Delivery**

[Jobs with Herald Media](#)

For back copy information and more information on other collectible copies please call  617-426-3000 Ext. 7714. [Click here for Celtics, Patriots and Red Sox back copies](#)



© Copyright by the Boston Herald and Herald Media.

No portion of BostonHerald.com or its content may be reproduced without the owner's written permission. [Privacy Commitment](#)