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Community organizers are staple of democracy

BY LEWIS FINFER

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The way to make the case for John McCain should not be by tearing down the work of Barack Obama's early career, which is the hard work that thousands of community organizers are doing daily to make democracy more vital and improve our lives.

Community organizing was mocked by Gov. Sarah Palin and Rudolph Giuliani in speeches to the Republican National Convention. Yet community organizers work for groups made up of countless average Americans like the PTA volunteer that Palin once was.

McCain defended his running mate's jab that a mayor is like a community organizer with responsibilities as a response to the denigration of her experience as a small-town mayor by the Obama campaign. But the senator added in a CBS interview that Obama's experience is "very honorable."

That's a good thing, because last spring McCain said this about Rep. John Lewis (D-Ga.) in a speech in Selma, Ala.: "I've seen courage in action on many occasions in my life, but none any greater or used for any better purpose than the courage shown by John Lewis and the good people who marched for justice with him" during the civil rights movement. And Lewis was a community organizer.

Why is that kind of work ridiculous, Obama asked after the GOP convention. "They think that the lives of those folks who are struggling each and every day, that working with them to try to improve their lives is somehow not relevant to the presidency?"

I first got a glimmering of what community organizing was in 1968 in Rockville Centre. I was a high school senior and Martin Luther King Jr. had spoken in my hometown shortly before his assassination. This inspired me to think that our school should be doing something to help improve conditions in our town's black community. I went to the office of the Rockville Centre Economic Opportunity Council and soon was organizing to raise funds so that local people could attend the Poor People's Campaign's March on Washington.

I met others - whites, blacks, Christians, Jews - who were organizing to get the town to honor its commitment to spend part of its federal urban renewal funds on new housing to replace the rundown buildings it had demolished in the minority neighborhood. It took over a year to get this to happen.

I was learning as a 17-year-old that civil rights had to be fought for town by town all over the country, including mine. This required local organizing, which later became my profession. Now, almost four decades later, I'm still doing it.

"When I got out of college as a young person, 24, 25 years old, I moved to Chicago and worked with churches, who were dealing with steel plants that had closed in their neighborhoods, to set up job training programs for the unemployed and after-school programs for youth ... community service work ... John McCain has been talking about putting country first and extolling the virtues of national service," Obama told ABC. "I would think that's what we want all our young people to do."

Having been a community organizer, Obama should be a good listener. He has gathered up stories and dreams, so he can empathize with the pain people feel and point toward how things could be different. He has had to think strategically how to get there in an incremental way. These are all key skills for a president.

The crucial requirement for successful community organizing is the ability to listen. Organizers have to draw out people's deeply-felt stories of pain and injustice and then to challenge them to do something about it in collaboration with others. Organizers must also know how to develop practical solutions that will give people concrete opportunities to improve their lives and communities. And they have to mobilize support for these proposals and constructively engage those with power in the public and private sectors in trying to solve these problems.

Conversations are the rituals of community organizing, and they are occurring one-on-one every day in coffee shops, living rooms, and congregations across America.

I have chosen to stay in community organizing all my life. I've been privileged to learn so many people's life stories and to work with them, sometimes to change laws or increase appropriations or change corporate practices - so that more of them had opportunities in their lives to write more hopeful stories.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt once told a group of representatives of community 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." That's as good a statement as any of the important role that community organizations and organizers play in a vital democracy.

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