



## Community organizing preps leaders

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Recently, Barack Obama's work as a community organizer in Chicago became the stuff of punch-lines at the Republican National Convention. Essentially, the argument was made that being a community organizer does not prepare someone to be an effective public servant and leader.

Certainly, people should decide for themselves which candidate would make the best president. However, as a faith-based community leader for 16 years in San Bernardino at Our Lady of the Rosary Cathedral, I have benefited immensely from the wisdom and mentoring from local community organizers.

I would beg to differ with Mr. Guiliani's and Ms. Palin's assessment of the value of community organizing. Organizing has taught me that devoting yourself to developing the leadership skills in others is the hallmark of a great leader. When the fruits of these labors are harvested, we witness peace within and prosperity in our community.

But before we talk about this, let's first define community organizing.

Across our great country, good people are grappling with rising health-care costs, gas

prices and grocery bills while wages are stagnating and adjustable mortgages are resetting. All this while our public schools are being characterized as "dropout factories" and ethnic tension is increasing violence in neighborhoods.

While these issues have a direct impact on millions of Americans, you'd be hard pressed to find many ordinary people who feel they have the power to have a meaningful impact on most of these issues. These problems feel too overwhelming.

Community organizing seeks to bring people together - common, everyday people - to work on creating solutions to these issues - themselves. Rather than wait for the "experts" to come up with an answer to our shared problems, community organizing gets regular people involved in the process of creating solutions to their own problems.

Through this work, people learn how to have deep, meaningful conversations with their neighbors, friends and fellow congregation members about what really matters in their lives, bringing out their highest aspirations for themselves and their community.

Through community organizing, we learn how to work together as a team, to collaborate, finding the common ground in any situation, aligning ourselves for a greater purpose. We learn how to conduct research, explore possible solutions to our problems. We figure out how to get people who agree with you - and those who do not

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agree with you - to come to the table and find a way to make a plan of action workable.

If these aren't the sort of leadership qualities we want in a public leader, then our notion of leadership in this country is truly adrift.

The best community organizers I know are deeply motivated by love and respect for all people. They have tremendous patience when they spend countless hours actively listening to the needs of people. They build and nurture trusting relationships and teach leadership skills to diverse people who can utilize this empowerment as they become active participants and critical thinkers in our valued democratic process.

Lastly, they guide and launch us into our community prepared to use self-determination and collective power to hold those with power accountable to the people they represent. This gift keeps on giving as we continue to use our faith, hope and knowledge to serve each other in our city.

While there are many aspects of public leadership that one can learn, in our eyes, this ability to bring people together across race, religion and party affiliation is foundational to community organizing.

I feel strongly that we should be respectful of those who answer the call to lead and organize for the advancement and dignity for all, not demean their hard work or minimize their efforts to improve communities and expand

opportunities for families.

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