



September 17, 2008

Democracy is about everyday people

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Before vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin even finished her acceptance speech at the Republican convention, every community organizer in the country was outraged. Her derisive comment, that as an organizer Barack Obama didn't really have the responsibility that she did as a former mayor, certainly cost John McCain the "organizer" vote.

Democracy isn't about mayors and their policies or programs. What makes democracy a vibrant force in our society is the participation of everyday people in the public affairs of our towns and cities. This citizen participation is motivated by a sense of patriotism, of hope or of anger about what's going on around them. Whatever it is that rouses citizens to become engaged, democracy cannot survive without their participation.

The job of an organizer is to help prepare and support citizens as they join together to express their hopes and dreams or to address their grievances in the public arena. Understanding how government works and having the skills to navigate the halls of power provides citizens with the tools to shape the community in their own image. An engaged citizenry develops a sense of its own power and community interest that can sometimes be at odds with the narrow political interests.

Just as often, community organizing is embraced by mayors or governors who see it as a way to recharge and revitalize. And, that can lead to some remarkable results.

In California, organizations that are part of the PICO National Network as is Interfaith Action, secured \$50 million in funding to support visits by teachers to the homes of their students. These home visits aimed at building relationships with parents were recognized as having a direct impact on improving student learning.

Locally, in partnership with the Rochester Police Department, Interfaith Action helped to launch foot patrols in four city neighborhoods. These patrols reduced violent crime by 70 percent.

I was introduced to organizing by my mother, who served on the Recreation Commission of the village on Long Island where I grew up. My mother regaled me with tales of her battles to keep village ball fields open and available to all children, not just those in organized sports. She was a woman of profound faith who believed in an inclusive community that valued respect and dignity.

Community organizing is a proven tool for citizens. It has a long track record of positive results in communities and states across the country. Rather than become fodder for a political candidate, community organizing should be embraced as a way to invigorate our democracy and our communities.
