

## A story of organizing

By: Rena Greifinger

This is a story about organizing, in the rawest sense of the term. It is the story of four students who, journeying from worlds apart, came together around a simple issue and disrupted the normal flow of a day. Over the course of a few hours, they witnessed first-hand how in the context of diversity, common interests are born, and that those common interests are what fuel activism and change.

At 8:30 a.m. on Saturday February 7, 2009, eighty bleary-eyed graduate students slowly made their way into a conference room at the Harvard Kennedy School, unable to discern exactly what they had signed up for when they enrolled in a community organizing class. They were reminded by the words of their professor Marshall Ganz – civil rights activist, United Farm Workers organizer and Camp Obama pioneer – “suddenly the investment banking classes are empty and everyone wants to learn to organize!” A tide has certainly shifted in this country, for better or worse we still do not know. Yet, with an administration built on grass-roots campaigning, the Internet and most importantly a reliability on citizen activism, I argue it is for the better. This particular Saturday was our first entrée into the world of community organizing and what better way to learn it, Professor always says, than by *doing* it.

Ganz has been teaching the art of organizing at Harvard for ten years, charging students with the often-difficult task of using reflective practice to mobilize an “organized” citizenry around a common interest. He begins with a powerful lecture on the five key elements of successful leadership: personal narrative and creating shared values; building relationships based on a commitment to work together; designing dynamic structures that foster creativity and teamwork; harnessing available resources; and challenging people to take specific, measureable action for which they are accountable. One of the invaluable tenets of this practice, he teaches, is the existence of diversity. Diversity fosters creativity, capacity and resources, and provides a foundation on which to unify people around a common goal.

Our first task was to identify a shared interest with three other people, using our personal narratives to drive a collective identity. For reasons not entirely known (we were all strangers to one another that morning), the members of our group were immediately drawn to one another. We were a motley crew at first glance – black, white and brown and each from a different academic discipline. Together we told our stories – stories of orphan hood and drugs, adolescent marriage and repressive cultures. Stories of privilege and of self-discovery; of being a teenager desperate to be heard. Our personal histories were completely dissimilar but each strikingly profound. We could all identify conflict and inner-struggle. For some of us, youth was characterized by hopelessness and survival. For others, it was finding the compassion and the strength to dedicate a life to service.

In a matter of ten minutes, our common interest became markedly clear. Through our experiences as teenagers and then working with them, we had all come to

understand the value of giving young people a voice. We live in a society that continues to overlook the richness and power of youth culture. We dismiss those teenage years as the frivolous and experimental, reiterating phrases such as: "I was young and stupid and didn't know anything." With a new administration promising to listen to its citizens and most importantly its youth, this is a perspective that is bound to change. We would go out into the streets and harness that voice. "Do not think of what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country," said the beloved, young Kennedy. In 2009, it seems, this generation wants to think about both.

Equipped with eight large sheets of white paper, pens and tape, our crew made its way out into Harvard Square and set up shop next door to the 7-Eleven to test our theory: If you give young people a platform to share their views of the world, you will encounter a world of thoughtfulness and wisdom beyond what you could ever imagine.

We threw the paper up on the wall, circled together for a brief team meeting and then exploded onto the street with calls for all young people to take part in our effort. Two questions were written on the wall: What do you want Obama to do for you and what will you do for your community?

The act of soliciting willing volunteers on the street, whether to sign a petition or donate money is always met with trepidation and guilt. Fear that no one will stop to talk to you and guilt that if they do, they will fail to appreciate your cause. On this particular Saturday, those fears were quickly quelled. At first it was just one or two teens, mindlessly loitering in front of the 7-Eleven, but shooting quick and inquisitive glances our way. After a little persuasion, they sauntered over and grabbed a pen, enticed by the idea that perhaps the President would read this after all. A couple minutes later, the rest came in droves.

The scene was nothing less than inspiring. Young people were everywhere, tagging the mural like graffiti on a train; but rather than cartoon letters and song lyrics, they wrote about their hopes and dreams for a better world. Children as young as 10 let go of their parents hands and put their pens to paper. High school and college students from all over the world flocked to our corner, not only scribbling their ideas but talking about them with us and one another. Two of the teenagers, basking in the idea of civic engagement, went out and recruited young people for us. We had inspired new organizers without even meaning to. In one hour we heard from over 120 young people.

In the space of one day, a group of four strangers witnessed the great unity that is formed in the presence of diversity. Using narrative, they found one another and a common purpose on which to mobilize. They took their meager resources, their energy and new teachings, and started a campaign of unfathomable potential. On the street, the young people came from all corners of the 'Square'. They rapidly established a collective identity around getting their voices heard that went beyond race, age, appearance or background. They came together with a simple message:

Together we can change this world. If you make the effort, we will too. Here is what they had to say:

**What do you want Obama to do for you?**

Make America the leader in clean energy development – Ari, 28

Fix some of the economic problems

Bring the troops home – Emma, 14, Robert, 18

Equal rights for LGBT people – Michael, 21, Alex

More money for public schools

Stop wars in Iraq and Afghanistan – Sabrina, 10, Holly, 12, Noor, 26

Save the women of the Congo – Jonathan

100% of our energy from clean, renewable sources – Ryan, 24

No more prescription drug ads

More libraries – Anita

Legalize marijuana

Equal access to health care – Pon

Don't cut languages from public schools

Equal working opportunities and more rights for children – Ricardo, 14

Respect in all of its forms

Free public higher education – Amy, 21

Uncompromising support of reproductive and gay rights – Talia, 19

Action against genocide, multilateral diplomacy – Yuna, 21

Better organization

Fix education – R. H. 18

I want Obama to help global warming and improve health care. Help Zimbabwe! I love Obama. – Sophie, 15.

Listen – K.B.

Money and support for our neighbors – Kaymo

More bikes and bike lanes

Support the arts for students – T.J. 18

Larger stimulus package – Oiseau

Help the environment – Brit, 16, Kim, 20

Help the homeless – Sarah, 16

Save the Midwest – Adam, 28

Help Haiti – Myriam, 17

More people from my community elected to public office – Emerita, 23

Fix the Bronx

Feasible college tuition for more kids – Katherine, 17

Better foreign policy – Alexis, 19

Address racial and ethnic disparities – Olo, 23

I want the education I always dreamed of – Tory, 20

Better education for our future generations and help the poor cities take care of our people – Sarah

Stop screwing the atmosphere up – Matt, 18

Geothermal energy all the way – Aaron

Create jobs – Katy, 18

Science funding – Dio, 25

Better schools please – Josh, 23

Help stop hunger – Kassy

Renewable energy – Gena, 18

Please help stop the persecution of Falun Gong in China

Please don't forget Japan – Shoko, 21

Better housing development and less gentrification

Support stem cell research

Less unemployment – Hannah, 23

I want better foreign policies and I want Obama to do more about global warming. I will turn off my lights. – Rachel, 10.

Appoint a special envoy to Sudan – Maggie

The opportunity for each child in this country to have access to equal education, regardless of race, gender, socioeconomic status, geographical location, etc. The greatest asset any country can have are educated constituents – let us not falter in this mission – Eesir, 21.

Stay cool – Jeff, 20

**What will you do for your community?**

Encourage people to drive less

Teach kids to be good citizens

Get people to stop smoking

Be more energy conscious – Chris, 23, Ari 28

I won't fail – Roger, 18

Support local farmers – Amy, 21, Meg, 28

Ride my bike – Katherine, 17

Meet my neighbors – K.B.

Be a role model – Tim, 22

Take the bus more

Volunteer – Rena, 26

Use less electricity and turn off the lights – Alexis, 19

Support local businesses

Eat organic – Kris, 23

I'll work hard if you do

Volunteer at a food kitchen every week

Teach for America – Eesir, 21

Plant an elm tree

I will not stop believing in America and the American dream – Gena, 18