



THE PLAIN DEALER

Community organizers help ordinary people solve local - and national - problems

Community organizers help people become self-reliant

Sunday, September 14, 2008

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At this month's Republican National Convention, vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin and former presidential candidate Rudy Giuliani derided community organizing. Specifically, they attacked Barack Obama's faith-based community work in Chicago, characterizing it as not having actual responsibility.

Community organizing is the bedrock of a healthy democracy, strengthening civil society and tackling problems without relying on government. Community organizing holds a major tenet - which the Republican leadership seems to discount - that the people have the power, ability and ideas to solve the problems of society. The role of the organizer is to facilitate common people in coming together to work collaboratively to create the society they desire. That is a sacred and real responsibility.

Obama is part of a tradition of community organizers who have changed their community and the world. Lech Walesa united his people, and Poland became the first Soviet bloc country to overthrow Communist rule. He went on to become the democratically elected president of the new Poland. Dorothy Day put her Catholic faith in action to improve the lives of the poor. Cesar Chavez led migrant workers to achieve better wages and more humane working conditions. And giants on the world stage - Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King, Jr. - all used community organizing as their principle tool for change. And don't forget the countless, unsung heroes who organized their communities to provide aid and assistance to the victims of Hurricane Katrina when their government failed them.

Community organizing isn't a liberal or Democratic tool. Colin Powell understood the importance of community organizing and voluntary service. He chaired America's Promise, a bipartisan effort backed by four former presidents and, eventually, 49 sitting governors. America's Promise expanded the Corporation for National Service, a government agency that supports young people who serve their country through Americorps/VISTA. Community organizing is an essential tool of those who serve.

Even Mayor Giuliani collaborated with community organizers to revitalize East Brooklyn.

Ever critical of big, bad government, the Republican leadership berates anyone outside of the military who works to build up our country. And, now, private citizens serving their community, sometimes for no pay, are seen as not holding real responsibility. These community servants create the pathways for those on the

margin to participate in American politics, starting with the PTA and going all the way to Washington. When delegates waved "service" placards at the RNC, what did they mean?

Community organizing strengthens democracy and provides the greatest national defense: a strong and united citizenry capable of overcoming any problem. Sen. John McCain seems to have forgotten his own message that he has faith in the American people to chart their own course. One wonders if McCain and Palin have lost touch with the struggles of working Americans who rely on organizers.

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