



# Taking it to the Streets!

## Engaging in the Praxis of Community Organizing

Presented by:

Paul Force-Emery Mackie, Ph.D., MSW  
Associate Professor  
Minnesota State University, Mankato

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# A little about me...

- Education:
  - Undergraduate: Psychology & Economics
  - MSW: Social & Economic Development track
  - Ph.D.: Lots and lots of research methods, theory, policy, socio-economic development
- Practice experience:
  - East St. Louis child protection
  - Pine Ridge family mental health services
  - Hospital (St. Louis City, Pine Ridge IHS)
  - Researcher
- Research expertise:
  - Rural social work labor force issues
  - Social worker burnout and job satisfaction
- Teaching expertise:
  - Macro communities and organizations
  - Chemical dependency
  - Core social work curriculum (intro, HBSE, research)

**Sound familiar? Experience yes, BUT NOT IN COMMUNITY ORGANIZING!**



# Introduction

- The purpose of this presentation is two-fold.
  - **First:** Address a concern often experienced by community practice social work instructors
    - We often lack the “real world” experiences of our macro colleagues – makes conveying information through examples and experiences more difficult.
  - **Second:** Present a case study of a successful community organizing activity that incorporated students using Saul Alinsky’s techniques.

# First Purpose: The Dilemma of the Professor

- Community organizing is a core knowledge area of social work education. Our programs all teach this content.
- Often, the macro educator does not have the same level of experiences at those teaching more micro oriented courses.
- This creates a dilemma in our ability to incorporate first-person, real world experiences. Do we really have them?



# First Purpose, Con't

I too lacked the “experience” of macro community and development practice.

- From my education, I “experienced” community work through classroom-based activities,
- I learned how to “become” a community social worker, but had not actually done so in a meaningful, purposeful way.
- Saul Alinsky (1971) differentiated between the “rhetorical radical” and the “realistic radical.”
- Like it or not, I was a “rhetorical...”

# First Purpose, Con't

- Pippard & Bjorklund (2003) conducted a literature review between 1995 and 2003 and failed to find ANY articles devoted to identifying community organization techniques.
- Other literature discussed how social workers *can* or *may* evaluate outcomes, encourage engagement, or identify key concepts. But little to no empirical information about “social workers” on the front line of community organizing.
- Therefore, I was limited to disseminating theories, assigning case studies, showing videos, and making references to community action icons such as Jane Addams, Saul Alinsky, Upton Sinclair, Russell Means, etc...

# First Purpose, Con't

- In fair defense of these observations, Alinsky wrote:

“...a man (*sic*) of action does not have the sedentary frame of mind that is part of the personality of a research scholar. He finds it difficult to sit quietly and write. Even when provided with a voluntary situation of that kind of writing he will react by trying to escape the job of thinking and writing.”

The nature and works of the community organizer does not necessarily fit well with the expectations of research realm or ivory tower. It's not that it isn't being done, just that **it never makes it into the literature.**



# First Purpose, Conclusion

- If these observations are accurate, what can we do? What should we do?
- We can take our skills, knowledge, abilities, AND students to the streets...(or country roads, depending on where you live)
  - There is no lack of need for our services, opportunities abound.
  - Students get to **learn about, experience** and **practice** the coursework – engage in the **PRAXIS** of community organizing.



## Second Purpose: Teaching Community Social Work in Washington Park Neighborhood

Central to this project was the participation in a community organizing activity that included BSSW students.

### **The problem:**

- A local neighborhood was experiencing excessive conversions of older homes from single family housing units into rental properties.
- These properties were often the only affordable homes lower to middle class wage earners could afford in a housing market where prices were often out of reach.
- Converted properties were often poorly maintained, eyesores, reducing livability of neighborhood further.



## Second Purpose, Con't

- Additional problems:
  - Cost of rents were high - \$1,500 to 1,750 per month per house. Affordable for targeted groups, but not families or those with lower incomes.
  - Average cost of a home for single family: \$80,000 – \$130,000. Affordable at around \$1000 (or less) per month mortgage payments. Loss of affordable housing.
  - Many more adults residing in single-family structures = more people stressing resources (electricity, water, sewer, streets, garbage, parking)

## Second Purpose, Con't

- Residents complained about noise, garbage, street congestion, vandalism, and even harassment of those who file complaints with city officials.
- People were scared, tired, and frustrated.
- Worse, they did not feel city officials were listening to their concerns.

## Second Purpose, Con't

- I was made aware of the problems, and understood the frustrations. But what could I do?
- I could organize...
- **They** could organize...
- **WE** could organize!



# Organize!

- **“A community is like a ship; everyone ought to be prepared to take the helm”** ~ *Henrik Ibsen, Norwegian playwright (1828 – 1906)*
- I teach from Alinsky’s *Rules for Radicals* (1971). Students read this book in the community class.
- Understanding the “rules” the best I could, I began to implement Alinsky’s techniques.
- Neighbors began to meet. A plan was developed. The real problem was zoning. Rezone the neighborhood, shut down the development.

# Organize!

- Meetings were held with key city officials.
- A petition was started to call for a vote by the city council to rezone.
- At the same time, letters to the editor were written, and “friendly” council members were identified.
- In addition, landlords and property developers in favor of rezoning were identified.

# Organize!

- Petition worked! City Planning Commission to hear the case. Students encouraged to attend.
- Need for a plan at the meeting – neighbors plot strategy.
- Tip from “sympathetic outsider” – rally the people.



# Applying Alinsky's Rules

- Alinsky taught: When you don't have money or power, have people, lots of people!
- About 60 community members attend planning commission meeting and speak out... and so did the developers... Oh my!



# Alinsky's Rules

- Arguably, I knew Alinsky's work the best. After one particular developer spoke, I employed the 13<sup>th</sup> rule: "Pick the target, freeze it, personalize it, polarize it."
- What he said... Put down the neighborhood, criticize the community.
- What I said... Defend the neighborhood, deflate the developers argument, defend affordability, identify overuse of infrastructure.

# We Won!

- After much debate, the commission voted unanimously to support the rezoning.
- Effective arguments from neighbors...
- Not so much from developers!
- 6 weeks later – City Council approves! Done!

# Why and So What?

- Alinsky claimed that he wanted to start organizing the “middle class” to build their power, which would help the poor. Real, lasting social change would come from here.
- But he died before he could move forward.
- Was this project simply an exercise in protecting the middle class, or were they being “powered up” to benefit all?



# Implications for Them...

- A community positively changed.
- Alinsky's rules tested.
- A professor became more experienced.
- Students' "front row seat" on an organizing project:
  - Concepts addressed were social justice, equality, opportunity, economics, housing stability and affordability.
  - Added benefits of being local. Students could see the impact up close.
  - Students witnessed how to access government, policy, change processes within and among government agency.



## Implications for Us...

- We as educators can participate, we can take the helm. It's our knowledge base.
- We develop experience in working with communities. The theoretical becomes real. Praxis.
- We remain current in relevant knowledge.

# Postscript

- Students and Professor began work on developing a neighborhood association.
- Blanketed the neighborhood to get the word out.
- Attended meetings, offered support and suggestions.
- Neighborhood Association officially recognized by city January 2009.
- It may not be Bedford Falls yet, but at least no more “Pottersville.”



# THANK YOU!

## Questions?

For further information, this presentation is based on the paper “Grassroots community practice: Applying Alinsky’s rules in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” (in press) with *Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping* (publication anticipated Summer 2009)

