

DEMOCRATIZING CLEVELAND CHAPTER 10: LEGACIES

Randy Cunningham

Cunningham, Randy., *Democratizing Cleveland*. Cleveland, Ohio: Arambala Press, 2007.

EISBN: 978-1-936323-17-3

This digital edition was prepared by MSL Academic Endeavors, the imprint of the Michael Schwartz Library at Cleveland State University January 2013.

**Permission for MSL Academic Endeavors and Cleveland Memory Project to reprint
granted by the original rights holder.**



Chapter 10

LEGACIES

Bottom line, it was the development corporations. That was the legacy.¹

George Barany, *Buckeye Woodland Community Congress*

It may be a tiny thing, such as learning how to ask a question in public, or it may be a huge thing, such as standing up in front of a hundred people to make a speech. Those things change people's lives. That whole process of showing people that they have an impact makes a difference for the rest of their lives. I don't know the impact of the organization on the city, but on the people, it was huge.²

Eileen Kelly, *Near West Neighbors*

Community organizing's legacies continue to reverberate throughout the life of Cleveland. In many instances, these legacies show themselves in still-active institutions, programs, and ongoing projects. Many legacies are more personal, and are harder to track and describe. We see these legacies in individual lives that were changed forever by organizing, in informal networks of former activists, and in skills learned and taught to others. We will begin with the legacy of the movement as represented in the institutional geography of Cleveland's neighborhoods.

A Community Development Establishment

Cleveland today benefits from the presence of dozens of neighborhood-based development corporations working for housing and economic development. Many have come together in coalitions such as the Cleveland Housing Network. They are served by city wide support and funding organizations such as Neighborhood

Progress, Inc., The Local Initiatives Support Corporation, the Enterprise Foundation, and the Center for Neighborhood Development.

It is unlikely that the neighborhood development corporations and their supporting networks would have developed as they did without the earlier community organizing movement as their foundation. The organizing groups won the victories that the development groups consolidated and developed. They also won formal recognition of the value of neighborhoods, even if the major focus of post-Kucinich Cleveland has been on downtown development.

This legacy of a community development infrastructure of Cleveland is the consummation of one of the goals of the earliest founders of the movement. As Hank Doll of the Gund Foundation explained, the desire to empower people was not an end in itself when the Gund Foundation began its relationship with the Catholic Commission. The other goal was to use community organizing as a launch pad for successful development work in the neighborhoods. Since the 1950s, Cleveland had seen the failures of urban renewal and the Model Cities program. In the 1970s, organizing was perceived as a way to sustain neighborhoods and prepare them for development.

This time, there was some success. Neighborhoods defied formidable forces of poverty, crime, and unemployment to make advances in housing and business development. Inez Killingsworth, a leader of Union Miles Community Coalition, saw progress in her neighborhood:

I see neighborhoods across the city being revitalized. I see lots of new construction. I see lots of rehab work happening. Lots of homes are being painted up because of that. I see people's gas and light bills getting paid because of the organized efforts we had. I see a better police-community relationship.³

Another veteran of UMCC, Hugh Kidd, commented,

I think it gave people an opportunity to take a look at some of those problems and to do some positive things about it. I think that most of the development corporations have been effective in a number of areas, not only in trying to maintain the housing stock, but also in making banks aware that they were not making loans. And so now there are a number of banks who are making real efforts to come up with new programs so they can provide at least mortgage financing in the city of Cleveland.⁴

One of the greatest accomplishments was renewed investment in the neighborhoods by the financial industry. Not that it matched in any way the amount the financial industry had removed from the neighborhoods through redlining. Much of

the bank activity was just glorified public relations. The financial industry still controlled lending policies. However, what investment was made was because of the use of the Community Reinvestment Act and the threat to use that act by community organizations that were determined to break open the closed doors of the Cleveland banking industry. Even if the early campaigns won scanty, partial victories, the work they did made it much easier for the city of Cleveland to make truly impressive breakthroughs in later years.

The long list of accomplishments, attainment of respectability, and creation of a community development establishment has had its downside, as well. The veterans of the old organizing groups often complain that the development sector doesn't recognize their contributions. As Frank Ford said:

They don't even know it. Some of the staff people are totally oblivious of how they are benefiting from past organizing in how these banks treat them. They just don't understand.⁵

Killingsworth agreed:

I don't think they understand or see the need to empower people. Their goals are just mainly to develop real estate. They don't do any other type of organizing.⁶

Failure to give the past its due blinds the development groups to the long-term harm of not having organizing going on in their neighborhoods. Without organizing, there are limited opportunities to discover and to develop new leaders to serve on boards and committees. The pipeline from the grassroots is shut down. The development corporations discovered that, without organizing, they were frequently flying blind in their own neighborhoods. An idea or a development project that looks wonderful at the board level might be viewed as the exact opposite on the street. Without organizers in contact with residents, the boards never know when they were about to step off a curb and get hit by a bus.

Changing Lives

Community organizing not only changed the city, it changed those who participated in it. Neighborhood residents, especially women who came from traditional blue-collar backgrounds, found a window on the world in the organization's activities. They met their peers from all over the country in conferences sponsored by National People's Action. They traveled to Washington, D.C., for the annual NPA convention. They gained knowledge from experts and authorities on issues of concern in their neighborhoods.

They also were exposed to fellow Clevelanders from across the racial divide. In

one of the most segregated cities in the United States, the community organizing movement was an unprecedented example of interracial cooperation and action.

Neighborhood women learned how to run organizations, how to research issues, and how to speak in public, and gained enough confidence to be able to go toe-to-toe with members of the political and economic elite. They gained recognition for their work and their expertise, and their public and private lives would never be the same. The entire experience of working in the movement was an experience in personal education and development that was unavailable to them from any other source. Eileen Kelly of NWNIA described these changes:

The successes were very personal in staff people, but mostly in the people you worked with in the neighborhoods. There was Gloria Aron, who became a different person. Not that she was terrible before, but she learned so much from being involved. She's still a force in her family and her immediate neighborhood. She is still able to accomplish things.

Kelly also saw how the process could backfire for the groups:

Maggie Britton (a fellow organizer) and I used to joke that our biggest successes led to the downfall of the organization. Most of the single women with children felt empowered. They got jobs and left. It was self-defeating in that we were helping people, but it was hurting the organization. You teach people that they have control, or they find it. They do better for themselves. That's why I said it was very personal.⁷

Marita Kavalec saw much the same as Kelly had in how organizing changed the lives of individual people in the Union Miles neighborhood. She said:

I think in terms of the individual people who never felt they could make a difference and who didn't think they had much to offer. That is the most significant thing. Dorothy Zeigler was a typical housewife and parent who didn't think she could do anything like speak in public, chair a meeting, write a speech, or say to the secretary of HUD what she thought. There were a lot of Dorothy Zeiglers in those communities. For me, that's what it was all about.⁸

Leaders and activists from the grassroots movement were not the only ones to benefit from the experience. One of the greatest legacies of the period has been that veterans of the era can now be found in responsible leadership positions throughout city government and in the non-profit world. Although fifteen to twenty years have

passed since the end of this era, it is still common to find a stint of pounding the pavement as a block club organizer on resumes of leaders of Cleveland. George Barany, Norm Harrison, and Marita Kavalec were all organizers who felt they benefited from the experience.

I think there are people around today who, like me, who went through those experiences who still are committed to doing this kind of work. It certainly was a learning experience that allowed some of us to move on to a more sophisticated level.⁹

George Barany

I'm very proud of the three-and-a-half years I spent in organizing. It helped me grow. I contributed to the community. I got some great skills and had real fun doing it. I have the opportunity from time to time to employ those skills and I have some basic skills I can utilize when confronted with a problem that requires organizing. Nothing intimidates me.¹⁰

Norm Harrison

Those of us who did this as a way of living, what we learned, how we grew up: We can still use it. I will appreciate it for the rest of my life.¹¹

Marita Kavalec

A More Democratic Cleveland?

Individuals in the staff and leadership benefited from the community organizing movement. It is much harder to assess whether the city of Cleveland really became more democratic because of the movement or if the legacies of the era live on in the collective capability of the neighborhoods to control their futures and meet challenges. While veterans of the era are emphatic about the positive impact of the movement on individual lives, they are more uncertain about the larger legacy.

Frank Ford of the Ohio Training Center felt that, for all the power that was developed, empowerment did not survive and neither did the democracy that came with it.¹² Kathy Jaksic of St. Clair Superior Coalition thought the question was hard to answer, but: "The activism did change the neighborhood. People were willing to bring up issues and concerns as they would never have before the coalition began."¹³

Tom Gannon agreed with Jaksic: "I think there is also a latent power sitting out there. I think someone could mobilize them." Marita Kavalec of Union Miles Community Coalition felt that it broadened the perspective of people in the neighborhoods to start to look at the city as a whole.¹⁵

It may be impossible to assess the contribution of the community organizing for the democratization of Cleveland during this period until the conservative lockdown

of American politics and society ends. The lineages of activism, the way the ideas and experiences of America's insurgent traditions survive and develop are seldom noticed by the mainstream and are dismissed even by activists. The democratic legacy of this time probably will remain unclear until another period of activism takes the stage. Until then, the question remains unanswered.

The Great Failure

Veterans of the era are clear about where the community organizations failed. Sharon Bryant felt there was not enough development of skills of the individuals and activists of the groups. A failure of funding was also mentioned. However, the greatest failure of the community organizations is that few of the original groups still exist, creating a vacuum of advocacy work in Cleveland's neighborhoods that is felt to this very day. Marita Kavalec commented:

Nobody took the responsibility to figure out where we were going. We had a number of well-developed, solid organizations with quality leadership and staff. We never made that a priority: Where do we go from here? That's the biggest problem with the movement and why it ended.¹⁶

Perhaps the greatest legacy of this era of activism in Cleveland is that it happened at all and that its values, issues and history is now part of the common heritage of all Clevelanders.