

Community organizers have deep roots in democracy

The title may be nebulous, but the job of helping citizens bring about change -- once held by Democratic presidential nominee Barack Obama -- is 'as American as apple pie.'

By Richard Fausset, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
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DETROIT — The elementary school moms didn't ask a lot of questions about this man Bill. They were too eager to tell him -- to tell *anybody* -- about the loose and snarling pit bulls, the gun-toting gangsters, and the dogcatchers and police who always seemed to come too late.

The principal, Helena Lazo, had introduced him simply: "*Bill nos va a ayudar.*" Bill is going to help us.

When Bill O'Brien faced the five women at Roberto Clemente Learning Academy, he encouraged them to enumerate the problems plaguing their Southwest Detroit neighborhood. He propped an elbow on a table and listened.

When they had finished, he asked, with an impish grin: "So what else do kids do after school around here, besides shoot guns and let dogs loose on you?"



Longtime community organizer Bill O'Brien, center, talks with young people in Detroit. "You have to be a teacher, you have to be a strategist, you have to be a politician," he says. (Jim West / For The Times)

O'Brien, 60, stands out in this tough industrial neighborhood of working-class blacks, Appalachian whites and Latino immigrants. He is balding and tall, with the pinkish hue of an Irishman who has spent too much time in the sun. This morning, his open-collared dress shirt was tucked into a pair of gray slacks. He looked like a priest, perhaps, or a kindly English teacher.

He has, in fact, been both of those things, but for the last 30 years O'Brien has mostly been a professional community organizer. As job titles go, he is aware it is a nebulous one: For years, he said, he struggled to explain his work to his own mother.

These days, however, it isn't just his mother who is asking. Because Barack Obama spent a few years after college as a community organizer, the nation is weighing whether this little-understood job is a suitable prelude to the presidency.

Obama, the Democratic nominee, holds up his three years of organizing on Chicago's South Side, along with his stints in the U.S. Senate and Illinois Legislature, as proof of his commitment to public service.

Republicans have taken a harsher view: At the GOP convention this month, former New York Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani drew a big laugh by simply uttering the phrase "community organizer" -- then adding, after a stand-up comedian's pause, "What?"

Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin, the GOP vice presidential nominee and former mayor of Wasilla, said that a small-town mayor is "sort of like a community organizer, except that you have actual responsibilities."

Some liberals contended that the attacks carried racial undertones because Obama, like many other community organizers, worked largely with poor minorities.

The confusion over the role of community organizers may stem from the fact that, by their own admission, anyone can qualify to be one, so long as they take a lead in motivating people to bring about change. The title could apply to the leaders of the Boston Tea Party or to modern-day antiabortion protesters.

Robert Fisher, a professor of social work at the University of Connecticut, argues that organizing, with its focus on helping citizens make their voices heard, is "as American as apple pie."

But O'Brien's style of organizing, like Obama's, also belongs to a specific tradition, one closely allied with the labor movement, the civil rights struggle and Christian peace and justice movements.

Both Obama and O'Brien worked for a time for nonprofits aligned with the Gamaliel Foundation, a group inspired by the work of Saul Alinsky, who organized poor neighborhoods around the Chicago stockyards in the 1930s. This month in the *National Review*, writer Stanley Kurtz cited Obama's organizing work as a "connection with the world of far-Left radicalism."

O'Brien winces at the idea that his is partisan work. The problems he tries to solve, he says, are practical.

Like the problems the mothers were having on the streets around the Roberto Clemente school. Everybody was complaining at the parents' meetings, they told him, but nothing was getting done.

"OK. Let's imagine the dogcatcher or the City Council person comes to your parents' meeting," O'Brien said, leaning casually in his chair. "You could demand something of him not on the telephone but in front of 100 people."

Audrey Troyer, 43, cocked an eyebrow. "You know what they'd tell us?" she said. "That they are short-handed."

"Do you believe it?" O'Brien asked.

The group agreed there were probably enough dogcatchers but it was more likely they were in the neighborhoods that complained louder. The squeaky wheel gets the grease, O'Brien told the women. They needed to squeak.

O'Brien gently suggested the next stage of the plan: Let the moms go talk to five equally ticked-off friends and persuade them to attend a meeting the next week. There, they could plan an even bigger meeting.

And maybe they could pressure public officials to show up at that bigger meeting. Maybe the parents could force them to promise more cops, more animal control. It is a tactic common to the Alinsky organizing style, one also used by Obama: Hold a big meeting and extract public promises -- the way to organize power for people who can't afford campaign donations.

The women left the room energized and chatty, even though all they had done was agree to another meeting. Later, O'Brien was asked if he'd seen the joke circulating on the Internet: What's the difference between a "community organizer" and a Chihuahua? The Chihuahua will eventually shut up.

O'Brien laughed. Organizing, he said, involves a lot of talking, a lot of meeting. All that organizers usually have, he said, is talk -- the reason he thinks the job is tougher than being a mayor.

"We start with no money, we start with no relationships, we start with nothing," he said. "You have to be a teacher, you have to be a strategist, you have to be a politician. . . . But you don't have any power backing you up."

On this day, O'Brien would have four meetings -- including those with another school principal, the producer of a benefit concert, and the organizers of an anti-crime summit in his own neighborhood, a few miles north. At the end of the day, he hadn't achieved much more than promises to hold more meetings.

But O'Brien was not dismayed. He had built a big movement before on little more than talk.

He first came to Southwest Detroit in 1991 to work for Most Holy Redeemer, the big neo-Renaissance Catholic church built for the German and Irish factory workers of another era. But those factories were closing, many whites had fled, and the neighborhood was fraying. Drugs and gangs were spreading, and a new wave of Latinos had moved in, their language and culture estranging them from the old-timers.

O'Brien had left the priesthood eight years earlier. As a Jesuit, he had taught high school. He also had done a little organizing, believing it was a different way of doing God's work. A product of the '60s, his heroes were people like Martin Luther King Jr. and the Kennedy brothers.

"Look," he said. "If somebody were to tell me tomorrow that there is no God, I'd still do this work. Because it's fun."

In Southwest, he began by asking the same question he asked the women at the school: What would you like to see fixed?

At first, he took on small quality-of-life projects. Touring the neighborhood now in his beat-up Toyota Camry, he can still point them out with pride.

There was the concrete sound barrier walling off the freeway from a string of modest backyards. It didn't exist until he sent dozens of locals to the state Capitol to complain.

There was the cheerful park across the street from the Waterfall Missionary Baptist Church, with its fancy playground equipment. It had been a ratty place until he threatened to bus the Baptists downtown to embarrass the parks department.

There were the corner bodegas, which he had pressured into covering up their porn magazines and ending the sale of drug paraphernalia.

He also pointed out the work yet to be done, pulling the Camry up to a mound of trash that had built up in an empty lot near Cesar Chavez High School. The principal had already complained to him.

"You see?" he said, gesturing toward an old sofa among the weeds. "This is what the students walk by every day."

By 1994, O'Brien had built a coalition of more than 20 churches, which later grew into a larger regional group called MOSES, a Gamaliel-affiliated group that still exists.

His agenda became more ambitious: In 1994, his group pressured then-Mayor Dennis Archer to tear down hundreds of abandoned houses. In 1996, they convinced President Clinton's drug czar, Barry McCaffrey, to designate Greater Detroit a "high-intensity drug trafficking area," which unlocked millions in federal funds to fight the drug war.

His chief tactic was the big, Alinsky-style meeting. It was a kind of theater, he said, that could even annoy the elected officials who generally shared his goals. Sometimes they complained that his mau-mauing fouled up sensitive coalition building.

Paul Tait, executive director of the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments, remembers watching colleagues promise MOSES they'd do more about public transportation issues -- then never make good on their pledges.

Many of those promises, Tait said, could only have been fulfilled by asking voters to tax themselves for more buses and trains. Selling such an idea, he said, often requires more than a boisterous meeting.

"Those tactics, with some issues, work fine," Tait said. "But more complicated challenges that we have for public policy require different tools in the toolbox."

In 2003, O'Brien went to work directly for the Gamaliel Foundation, coordinating the work of organizers in five states. But he eventually burned out on the bureaucracy. He missed the streets.

In May, he was hired by a local nonprofit, Southwest Solutions, to start over again. The agency was founded in 1979 with a focus on mental health but has since taken on the more expansive goal of rebuilding the community. It hired O'Brien to address the plant closings and drug epidemics, the dropout rates and the dearth of block clubs.

Back on the streets of Southwest, O'Brien noticed that the factory jobs were even scarcer -- now the jobs, especially for Latinos, were in construction and restaurants. A generation of black factory workers were dying off; their children had moved away, and now their houses were full of renters with tenuous ties to the neighborhood. The gangs he had fought so hard to get rid of seemed to be experiencing a resurgence.

O'Brien's work hasn't made him rich; he said he makes about as much as an assistant high school principal. He considers the job a calling. His wife is also a community organizer.

"This is what we do," he said. "This is what I do."

It was late afternoon, and O'Brien was hanging around in the halls of another public school, Phoenix Academy. It was back-to-school night, and O'Brien was hoping the principal, Norma Hernandez, would introduce him to some motivated parents.

But the parents were too busy meeting teachers. O'Brien found himself in the cafeteria, talking to four sophomores who, as it turned out, had been dabbling in grass-roots organizing themselves.

Last year, the students had received a small grant to start a neighborhood website. Now, said 15-year-old Danyell Daniels, they were trying to organize clubs representing each micro-neighborhood.

"There used to be a lot of block clubs around here," O'Brien told her.

"Yeah," Danyell responded. "That's what my mom said."

"But how do you work toward that?" O'Brien asked.

The students kicked around a few ideas with the man with the puzzling job. They told him their plans would be refined at their upcoming meeting.

O'Brien made a point of inviting himself to it.

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