

Speed-hump victory: Community organizing

by [Scott M. Kershner](#) in the [May 20, 2008](#) issue

On the campaign trail, both Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama have spoken of their backgrounds in community organizing. Clinton refers to formative experiences knocking on doors in south Texas when she ran the state Democratic Party's 1972 voter registration drive. Barack Obama worked as a community organizer for two years on Chicago's South Side after finishing his bachelor's degree and before entering Harvard Law School. While both cite organizing experience as formative, they have drawn from it slightly different lessons.

Community organizing is both a philosophy and method of civic engagement. Its contemporary incarnations in North America descend from the work of organizing pioneer Saul Alinsky, beginning in the 1930s in the industrial neighborhoods of Chicago. Alinsky sought to mobilize the poor and working class to achieve particular pragmatic goals—from better schools and public services to nondiscriminatory hiring practices. Urban churches became vital allies. For his work for social justice, Alinsky was awarded the Pacem in Terris Award, named for an encyclical by Pope John XXIII. Alinsky died in 1972, and the community organizing movement he set in motion continues to grow and change. For many urban churches, organizing has become a vital part of their public witness.

Clinton wrote her senior thesis at Wellesley on Alinsky's techniques: "There Is Always the Fight: An Analysis of the Alinsky Model." But she rejected his confrontational, populist methods. She concludes in her memoir *Living History*, "I agreed with some of Alinsky's ideas, particularly the value of empowering people to help themselves. But we had a fundamental disagreement. He believed you could change the system only from the outside. I didn't. Later, he offered me the chance to work with him when I graduated from college, and he was disappointed that I decided instead to go to law school. Alinsky said I would be wasting my time, but my decision was an expression of my belief that the system could be changed from within."

Obama's memoir, *Dreams from My Father*, recounts in highly personal terms the challenges, disappointments and small victories of directing the Developing Communities Project in Chicago. For Obama, organizing was connected to a personal desire to forge a sense of belonging in light of his cosmopolitan, biracial heritage. Of his motivations to become an organizer, he writes:

Communities had to be created, fought for, tended like gardens. They expanded and contracted with the dreams of men—and in the civil rights movement those dreams had been large. In the sit-ins, the marches, the jailhouse songs, I saw the African-American community becoming more than just the place where you'd be born or the house where you'd been raised. Through organizing, through shared sacrifice, membership was earned—because this community I imagined was still in the making, built on the promise that the larger American community, black, white, and brown, could somehow redefine itself—I believed that it might, over time, admit the uniqueness of my own life. That was my idea of organizing. It was a promise of redemption.

The Spanish translation of Obama's campaign slogan, Yes we can—*Sí, se puede*—suggests his organizing roots. While the phrase may sound trite, to an organizer it is a compact political philosophy. *Puede* is from the infinitive *poder*, to be able. As a noun, it means “power.” In everyday English usage, the word *power* tends to suggest Corinthian columns and imperial decrees. Its connotations tend to be somewhat antidemocratic. But in organizing, to have and exercise *poder* is to be an empowered citizen, to have agency, to be able.

I didn't know anything about community organizing when I first arrived at the church I serve in Brooklyn. We had just begun to get involved in the local faith-based community organizing group. Local churches, mostly Roman Catholic, founded the organization in the early 1990s to mobilize around issues of justice and quality of life—from things as headline grabbing as police-community relations to those as mundane and essential as trash pickup. As I sought to establish myself in a new city and a new vocation, the group provided me with an instant ecumenical network of collegiality and shared mission.

When our church first got involved, I attended a six-day crash course in organizing philosophy and methods. We learned to conduct the one-to-one meetings that form the foundation of all organizing—to listen for a person's passions and deep concerns.

When people come together around shared concerns, effective organizing can come about, making use of insurgent power and energy. As Obama's memoir suggests, it is not always easy to locate discrete, winnable issues on which action might be taken, but I knew I had located such an issue when one day I asked in church, "How many people think traffic moves too fast on Newkirk Avenue?" Nearly every hand shot up.

The church I serve has a parochial school. The school complex is on the north side of Newkirk. The church complex, where the gym and lunchroom the school uses are located, is on the south side. With several blocks between stoplights, cars race down this largely residential but very busy street. Every year, there are collisions as drivers attempt to cross Newkirk at the corner on which our church and school sit. And every day our students cross the street multiple times to travel between the school and church complexes.

We began the step-by-step process of organizing around the traffic issue. We decided to request a stoplight on our corner. We scheduled a meeting with an official with the Brooklyn Department of Transportation (DOT). In every meeting, we were disciplined and prepared. Our principle organizer and members of our church were always present. Each person had a role to play—to ask a particular question or to take notes. If the official we spoke to claimed not to have final decision-making authority over our concern, we asked who did, and requested a meeting with that person. The DOT told us a study would be conducted regarding the speed and volume of traffic on Newkirk.

After several months, we received a letter from the DOT saying that traffic patterns on Newkirk did not warrant intervention. But we did not give up. We met with our local City Council member, who seemed uninterested but assured us of his support and concern. We met with our local community board, whose members promised to write a letter to the DOT on our behalf. We took videos of the traffic. We collected signatures. We gathered photographs of accidents that had happened at the intersection. We went back to the DOT, this time meeting with its head, and were told that though it ran against guidelines, an exception would be made and we would be able to get a speed hump on Newkirk Avenue. We sensed a small victory and invited the Brooklyn president of the DOT, our City Council member and the head of the community board to a public meeting at the church. Such meetings are called "actions" in organizing lingo and are a public demonstration and celebration of grassroots organizing *poder*.

The action took place in the church sanctuary. At the front were three chairs, each with a large sign with the name of its intended public official. We had been given assurances that three would be in attendance. If they failed to show, they would be represented by an empty chair. A member of the church led the proceedings. The invited public officials arrived on time and occupied their designated seats. We began with statements from the school principal and an eighth grade student, who mounted the pulpit and spoke of the dangers that speeding traffic poses to the children. The photographer from a community newspaper took pictures. Video we had taken of the traffic was shown. Photos of the church's wrought-iron fence broken by a car at the corner where schoolchildren regularly pass were shown. Next, another member of the church outlined the steps we had taken to remedy the problem.

Finally came the "pinning question," the dramatic moment toward which the events of this particular evening and our months of groundwork had been leading. A church member approached the microphone and addressed the Brooklyn DOT president: "Do you commit to having a speed hump installed on Newkirk Avenue to slow the dangerous traffic and have it installed before the beginning of the school year in September?" Yes, she said, and she was handed a marker as she walked to the poster board on which the question had been printed to sign her name at the bottom. The other officials followed suite—all smiles, cameras snapping. Each was given two minutes to speak. All three spoke as if making Newkirk Avenue safer had been their idea all along, belying the bureaucratic indifference we had pushed hard against every step of the way. But that was OK with us. We knew better. We knew who made this happen. The headline in the community newspaper that week read, "Trying to Get Over the Hump: Speeding Traffic Endangering Flatbush Kids." It wasn't lost on us who was exercising power that night.

We didn't get our speed hump until November, but we did get it. Cars still move faster than we'd like on Newkirk, but they are slower than they were, and once in a while one hears an undercarriage bottom out on the hump. It was a lot of work for a small victory. But even more important than getting the hump installed are the lessons we learned in accomplishing it: *sí, se puede*.

Since our organizing to slow the traffic on Newkirk, our group has expanded beyond the parishes of Flatbush and East Flatbush to include churches—and now a synagogue and a mosque, and hopefully more in the future—across the borough. Our platform includes issues of affordable housing, education, economic equity,

youth—especially job training and readiness programs—and immigrants and immigration policy. As the organization grows, we have become better equipped to address broader policy concerns. However, whatever we take on, we will never stray far from the skills used and lessons learned in acquiring our little speed hump. Organizing stubbornly insists that all human beings can be agents in shaping their world, whether one wants slower traffic in the neighborhood or immigration reform for the country.