

A PERSONAL EXPERIENCE IN 1990'S COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION: Back to the Future

For most of nearly 40 years in social work, I taught about rather than practiced community organization. It was good to discover, in 1995, during a local dispute over environmental contamination, that much of what I had taught still worked.

**By Leon Ginsberg, MSW,
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When I was invited to teach at the University of Oklahoma School of Social Work in 1963, it was because I knew about and could teach social group work, a subject which had few adherents in the Southwest of that era. The single specialization at the School was social casework.

The School's faculty assumed I could also teach some other subjects that the Council on Social Work Education Curriculum Policy Statement of 1961 required of MSW programs and for which there were no qualified or willing professors. One was a new course on social science concepts, to supplement the psychoanalytic theory that was the foundation of the School's curriculum, just as it was throughout social work education. Another course was community organization. Although I was well-prepared by courses and practice to teach group work and had some preparation in the social sciences, community organization instruction during my MSW preparation at Tulane was modest.

During my five years at Oklahoma, I enjoyed introducing the social sciences but especially began to appreciate community organization, which

had little attention in the 1950's and early 1960's. The community organization literature, which was then just a few books, was easy to master. And I had "done" C.O., as it was then called, by organizing a group work program in Tulsa. In fact, one of my first scholarly articles was called "Mineral City: An Experience in Process-Oriented Community Organization" (1968), which was about that program.

The more I learned about it, the more convinced I became that community organizing had greater potential for solving social problems than the other classic social work methods. Although I was no expert of the sorts I came to know at Brandeis, Columbia, and Chicago, I seemed to know more about teaching community organization methods than anyone else in the area. Some of my students not only learned enough to pass the curriculum's one community organization course but graduated and became leaders in community work. They followed the course's concepts directly, they reported.

Perhaps my star student was Ruth Messinger, who is now the President of the New York Borough of Manhattan. She was "converted" from an aspiring

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clinician to a community activist during her second year of studies at Oklahoma.

Amazingly, all sorts of other groups suddenly wanted to learn the methods, which they often called "community development." Community organization became a high profile, high priority method throughout the U.S. I spent summers helping prepare people for service in the Peace Corps, Vista, Community Action, Job Corps, and many other programs.

For almost 20 years after leaving Oklahoma, I was more the subject — as a dean and a state government official — of community organizing than a practitioner. I taught tamer subjects when I returned to a faculty position at South Carolina — courses on research, social welfare policy, and management.

Contamination and The Fight Against It

Suddenly it was 1995. The Republicans were in control of Congress and threatening to destroy programs in the arts, human services, and protection of the environment. My neighborhood, an upper middle class Old South suburb of Columbia, South Carolina, was concerned about ground water contamination. A computer component manufacturing corporation a mile away had polluted the neighborhood's many lakes and some of its privately owned water wells with a toxic chemical, trichlorethylene. The corporation, Amphenol, closed the plant with no warning to its employ-

ees and withdrew to its headquarters in Connecticut. Several property owners lodged federal lawsuits against the firm for the pollution to their land or lakes. Some business-oriented owners won their suits and were paid damages by the company. All the individual homeowners whose federal suits were heard, however, lost in sometimes bitter trials.

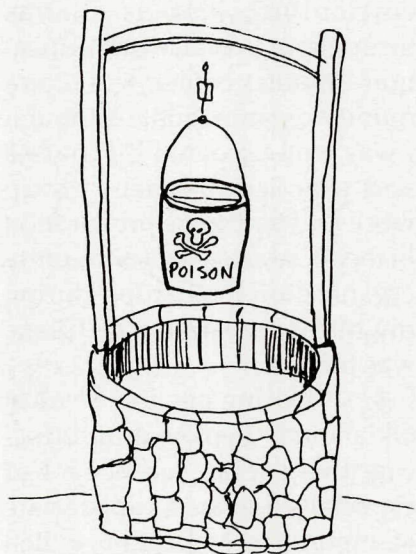
As soon as the federal appeals court refused to overturn those losses, the company quietly began planning to open a similar plant on the same site, using some of the same toxic chemicals that had been used in the past. Quietly does not fully characterize their efforts. Their moves were secret. Part of their plan involved exchanging pieces of property with the local board of education. Discussions of contracts, prior to specific action, can be secret in South

Carolina, so all the early negotiations with the school board were conducted in "executive session." However, a friendly board member told one of the families of the company's plans. That family, which was especially upset by the earlier pollution, reached three others, one of which was mine. Suddenly, we were embarked upon a community organizing episode.

The Organized Discontented

Essentially, our core organizing effort — the discontented group, as Murray G. Ross (1967) might describe it — was seven people. What we did was traditional community organizing, some of it confrontational. It worked, even though the environmental laws were changing and the political trends favored reducing government regulation.

As is often the case in community organizing efforts, we were sometimes frustrated and thwarted by those who were either indifferent to or opposed to our efforts, neutral forces or forces of resistance in community organization language. For example, because we knew how important it was to build broad-based support, we tried to enlist large numbers our neighbors in opposing a new Amphenol operation. However, many, especially those who had lost their cases, had no desire to fight the company again, even though they were sympathetic to keeping Amphenol out. They were



afraid that more publicity would further harm property values or make their homes unsaleable. Others did not want to offend local business people, such as realtors, who saw the plant's promise of 200 new employees a source of lucrative business. Privately, most of the homeowners wished us well but did not want to be involved. They also told us how pleased they were when we were successful, even though they were unwilling to be involved.



Opposition from the Press and Government

The foes were formidable, diverse, and powerful. Amphenol is a \$25 million publicly held corporation. We learned that when we asked the local daily newspaper, the state's largest, which is appropriately named The State, to report on the controversy. As mentioned earlier, South Carolina law required no disclosure of the school board's discussions with Amphenol during the contract negotiation phase. The proponents of re-opening the plant

hoped that the issue would become public and the property exchange approved by the school board all at the same time, with little chance for public awareness or, especially, protest. The newspaper decided that opening the plant was a good business development for the area and supported the re-opening with columns and news stories that only marginally reported our side, even though they had learned about it from us. Several of us wrote letters of protest to the business editor, who was responsible for the supportive policy. He answered none of the letters.

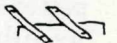
We wrote and called our representative on the Richland County Council—the county government. She answered no one and supported re-opening the plant as a means of promoting economic development, as did a majority of the Council members, when the economic development authority asked for the Council's support.

We wrote, on a letterhead calling ourselves "Concerned Citizens of Richland County," to the president of the corporation and told him we wanted the plan abandoned. Similar letters went to the local economic development authority chairman, who was a strong supporter of opening the plant. We also solicited letters from others. Neither the Amphenol president nor the economic development authority chairman answered any of the letters.

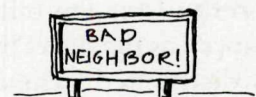
We also wrote to other public officials such as the governor and the speaker of the House of Representatives, who

had been the leading opponent of a nuclear waste disposal site in another part of the state. Neither answered any of us.

In the process, we seven



opponents of the plan attended school board meetings because the corporation apparently needed the property exchange to make their plan work. One of us was an expert on the school property and reported that the proposed exchange would wipe out an athletic practice field and a day care center. Another of the seven had studied Amphenol and made posters calling the corporation a "polluter" and a "bad neighbor." The posters were placed on the walls at all the school board's meetings. Another of the seven, probably the most important, was a prominent business leader — a vice-president of one of the area's largest corporations. All of us took advantage of the school board's public comment time, but only the business leader seemed to garner the board's interest and attention.



Losing seemed inevitable. The school board, if our vote count were correct, was likely to approve the exchange of property that would make the re-opening possible. Local business people attempted to silence our business leader through pressure on his boss, who refused to intervene. The newspaper continued its support of Amphenol and ignored its opponents. When we finally won, the story of Amphenol's decision to cancel its plans was the lead news story. We were described as "small, but vocal."



Among the group of seven, operations of our efforts were largely informal. We checked with each other by telephone, took charge of one task or another, without formal discussions of roles, and rarely held face-to-face meetings. We each performed work that made the most sense for us, because of our community status. For example, the most expert among us — and probably the hardest working — was a woman who had already been involved in an unsuccessful lawsuit against Amphenol. She knew the details of the contamination better than anyone else and had devoted days of study in the Court House and public health libraries. She was a whiz with computer graphics and arranged for the billboard copy as well as the flyers that we widely distributed. The corpo-

ration vice-president was probably the most influential person because of his position and his involvement in some school board election campaigns, as well as because he was articulate and passionate about the issue. Another couple in the group were well-informed about the potential impact of the property exchange because she was a teacher at the high school that would be affected. He was from a long-time, prominent Columbia family and, partly for that reason, the school board members and others were especially attentive to his well-presented arguments. I, on the other hand, with three decades of lecturing behind me, some of which people pay to hear, bored the audiences. I was a relative newcomer (nine years is too short a time to establish oneself in many Southern communities) and, one might say, "ethnically diverse." Some of my personal communication with legislators was a bit more successful than my speeches. I did a combination of things such as helping refine some of the materials and positions we took, writing letters, stuffing flyers in newspaper boxes, helping pay some of the costs, and helping exploit our advantages when we had them — such as insuring we had an accurate list of our supporters. But I — and my wife — were far



from leaders of the group. I used my professional knowledge to an extent but without the rest of the group members, I would have been looking at a revitalized plant in the neighborhood within a few months.

The Search for Allies

As we worked, we developed a few allies. Two members of the House of Representatives were sympathetic and told us so — although they also said there was no way that a corporation could be stopped from operating a legal enterprise on its own property in an area that was already zoned for the kind of operation they wanted. Still, our core group remained at seven.

There were three actions that probably made the difference, all of them techniques that are classic in community organization:

1. We found a billboard for \$800 directly across the street from Amphenol's property. We leased it, splitting the cost four ways, and posted a sign notifying the public that Amphenol was trying to re-open, that a similar operation had contaminated the neighborhood in the past, and that those who were concerned should call their school board members.

2. We argued against the property exchange at school board meetings and at a public meeting sponsored in the neighborhood by Amphenol. Our chief spokesperson, the corporate vice-president, made a strong case against the plant. He also demonstrated that his company's employment and in-

vestment in the community dwarfed all the promises of Amphenol.

3. One of our group printed thousands of leaflets explaining the Amphenol intentions and urging people to protest at the next school board meeting. The telephone numbers of all the members were included. All of us took quantities and placed them in the newspaper boxes of residents all over the area. At the last school board meeting before Amphenol announced that it was abandoning its plans, a dozen other families turned out to protest, apparently because of the leaflets. Most asked for a chance to speak during the public comment portion of the meeting, even though the board president said that Amphenol was not on the agenda.

Within a few days of the board meeting, Amphenol announced that they were moving their proposed plant to Arizona, instead. Their property in our neighborhood would be for sale and they would not operate the new factory in South Carolina.

Some Lessons for the New Century

We learned a good deal from the experience. Perhaps the most salient learnings were these:

1. The classic community organization processes suggested by writers such as Alinsky (1971) and Ross (1967) still work. Identifying and mobilizing discontent; focusing on a well-understood evil (water pollu-

tion); and using a variety of public challenges such as writing letters, using billboards, and making statements at meetings are examples.

2. The continuing importance of "elites," especially in relatively conservative environments such as South Carolina, was evident. Although all of the families were relatively prominent and prosperous (a physician, a professor, a public school teacher, a volunteer agency director, and an insurance company owner), only the major business executive appeared to have major influence. Without his support, the out-

come could have been different.

3. Some elected officials are likely to be sympathetic to organizing efforts, while others are not. Therefore, the importance of trying to enlist the aid of all of them is clear.

However, the most important lessons were about the behavior of corporations engaged in conflicts with community groups. Most corporations are directed by hired chief executive officers and their staffs, who must respond to their corporate boards. When they are criticized and put into conflict with community groups, they may lose credibility with their

We Need Your Help in Stopping An Old Polluter from Coming Back to Northeast Richland County!

It's no secret. Polluters are hurting our property values, ruining our precious natural resources and putting our health at risk here in Northeast Richland County. Now the Richland County Council and the Central Carolina Economic Development Alliance want us to welcome back one of these old polluters—The Amphenol/Times Fiber Communications Corp. Amphenol/Times Fiber Communications wants to reopen and expand its facility on Two Notch Rd. near Sparkleberry Lane. To do so, it must obtain some of Spring Valley High School's property (specifically, the soccer and football practice field). The company is currently negotiating a deal with the Richland School District II Board to get this land.

Amphenol has a dismal environmental record in our state. It broke the law and polluted our community when it operated in Northeast Richland County before. It then suddenly shut down and put more than 200 good South Carolinians out of work. The pollution this company left behind continues to spread and is still fouling our waters. Company officials have stated that if the plant reopens, they intend to use the same hazardous chemicals they used before. This is hardly the type of economic development our community needs!

A vote by the School Board to sell the land to Amphenol means a vote to welcome a known polluter back into our community. It's a vote in favor of trashing our county's environment. And it's a vote that opens the door to a company with known, flagrant, hazardous waste violations to carry on its business literally in the backyard of Spring Valley High School and the Little Vikings Day Care Center.



You Can Make the Difference!

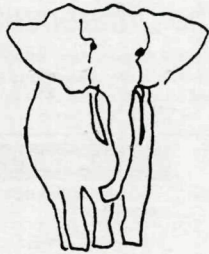
Our community and especially our children deserve a clean, healthy and safe environment. Please call the following School Board members and tell them to vote **NO** on any land deals with Amphenol/Times Fiber Communications.

The Honorable William McCracken, Chairman Business: 699-1874 Home: 788-3952	Call Today!!!
The Honorable Melinda Anderson, Vice Chairman Home: 786-1519	The Honorable Rebecca Michel Home: 736-1904
The Honorable Stephen Shellenberg Business: 788-4140 Home: 736-5530	The Honorable Lois Probst Home: 736-9476
The Honorable William Fleming, Jr. DMD Business: 794-6464 Home: 736-0015	The Honorable Philip Truesdale Home: 736-0554

Then, please attend the next School Board meeting on **Tuesday, June 27th at 7:00 p.m.** at Pontiac Elementary School to show your opposition to the land deal with Amphenol. Our quality of life in Northeast Richland County depends on your active participation!

**It's time the residents of Northeast Richland County
stood up against polluters who hurt us all!**

stockholders and boards and, ultimately, may lose their jobs. Therefore, they are probably more sensitive to public criticism than individual owners or entrepreneurs would be. If the pressures are great enough, they are likely to capitulate to those who oppose them. If the community or part of it appears to be hostile to them, many corporations are likely to withdraw or modify their plans.



Even though, under the Gingrich-Dole Republicans, there may be some diminution of environmental regulations and the advent of some public policy choices that provide for fewer restrictions on the uses of property and on enterprise, in general, corporations are still likely to be cautious in their responses to community groups that oppose them. In this case, a few loud families, an \$800 billboard, a few letters and telephone calls, and the distribution of some flyers turned a multi-million dollar corporation's plans around. And for one former community organization teacher, the episode showed that the old ways still work. □

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