

GRASSROOTS COMMUNITY PRACTICE: APPLYING ALINSKY'S RULES IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Community organizing is a core knowledge area in which social work educators often lack practical experience. This narrative traces the author's involvement in a grassroots action in his own neighborhood, where single-family homes were being excessively converted into rental units by property developers. By helping to mobilize the homeowners, the author studied how theoretical and practical knowledge from community organizing can be combined to help facilitate social change. Specifically, community organizing techniques proposed by Saul Alinsky were applied to assist the neighborhood in their campaign. As a result, the community gained a greater sense of place within the larger system, the author successfully tested theoretical concepts in a real-world setting and gained confidence as an instructor, and his students made connections between academics and practice.

Introduction

The purpose of this narrative is two-fold. The first is to address a concern often experienced by community practice social work instructors: as a group, we often do not have the same bank of personal and professional experiences to draw upon for classroom examples as our micro practice colleagues. I have observed over time that many of us who have worked in micro or mezzo environments prior to entering the ranks of the professoriate can carry these experiences into the classroom. However when we teach macro social work, specifically community organization, we are less likely to have the same level of practice or real world experiences to enrich and inform our teaching. While this does not negate our ability to teach effectively, it does limit our capacity to convey information in a core knowledge area.

The second purpose is to provide a case study of a successful community organizing activity led by a social work faculty member, which was guided by Saul Alinsky's techniques (1969, 1971). This community action project emerged from a grassroots effort to empower, support, and lead a body of people forward to resolve a neighborhood-based social problem. The result of this activity was a successful outcome for the community of focus, for me as a social work professor, and for my students of community organization and practice. The community gained a new sense of power, pride,

and place within the larger system. As one of the co-leaders of the project, I successfully applied Alinsky's (1971) rules and techniques and showed that propositions and suppositions presented by Alinsky thirty to sixty years ago remain effective today. In addition, my students of community practice learned how to successfully apply Alinsky's techniques in a real-world, real-time event.

Saul Alinsky's Rules for Radicals (Abbreviated)

- Rule 1:** Power is not only what you have, but what an opponent thinks you have.
- Rule 2:** Never go outside the experience of your people.
- Rule 3:** Whenever possible, go outside the experience of the enemy.
- Rule 4:** Make the enemy live up to their own book of rules.
- Rule 5:** Ridicule is your most potent weapon.
- Rule 6:** A good tactic is one your people enjoy.
- Rule 7:** A tactic that drags on for too long becomes a drag.
- Rule 8:** Keep the pressure on.
- Rule 9:** The threat is usually more terrifying than the thing itself.
- Rule 10:** The major premise for tactics is the development of operations that will maintain a constant pressure on the opposition.

Rule 11: If you push a negative hard and deep enough it will break through into its counter-side.

Rule 12: The price of a successful attack is a constructive alternative.

Rule 13: Pick the target, freeze it, personalize it, and polarize it.

Adapted from Alinsky, S. (1971). *Rules for Radicals*. New York: Random House.



Personal Statement

I am a social work educator employed in a mid-sized, Midwestern university. Like many in our profession, I am familiar with the broad concepts of community organizing from a social work perspective, having focused on it academically throughout my social work education. Professionally, I have the practice experience required to teach “practice” courses as prescribed by Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) accreditation standards (CSWE, 2007), but these employment experiences were largely grounded in micro and mezzo practice environments. What about macro practice, specifically, community organization and development? Had I ever actually participated in a “real” community change activity? Had I organized people in such a way that improves living conditions or place in society, or did I only sufficiently study it to be able to teach these concepts and knowledge to my students with some level of confidence and competency? In one sense, I had “experienced” community organization by participating in activities via classroom and natural laboratory environments, but I had not been a community leader, advocate, or grassroots organizer—I had only learned how to “become” these things if the opportunity presented itself. Discussing this dilemma, Saul Alinsky (1971) differentiated between the “rhetorical radical” and the “realistic radical.” As the terms imply, the rhetorical radical is

largely consumed with talking about the problems; the realistic radical works to fix the problems. Whether I liked it or not, according to Alinsky, I would be defined as rhetorical.

I struggled with this as an educator. Looking upon colleagues teaching micro and mezzo practice, I observe the connectedness between them, their students, and the subject matter. They are able to teach how to facilitate positive changes as caseworkers, counselors, or advocates augmented with personal knowledge and experiences. I, on the other hand, was limited to describing and disseminating theories, assigning readings and case studies, showing videos, and citing examples of works from social pioneers such as Jane Addams (1893; 1902), Saul Alinsky (1971), Russell Means and M. J. Wolf (1995), or Upton Sinclair (1906). I was aware that access to journal articles related to social welfare is limited due to the near absence of up-to-date, peer-reviewed, published information outlining effective techniques of community organizing. Supporting this statement, Pippard & Bjorklund (2003) conducted a literature review of several social welfare-focused journals between 1995 and 2003 and failed to locate *any* articles devoted to identifying community organization practice techniques. That said, some empirical works do exist concerning the role social workers play as community organizers (Arches, 1999; Hardina, 2003), but these are discussions about how social workers *can* or *may* evaluate outcomes, encourage empowerment, or identify key concepts. They lack the concreteness of describing the details, processes, and struggles of being a “front line” organizer. This is not to say that published works do not exist to assist in teaching community practice. For example, Johnson and Grant (2005) provide a casebook displaying several community practice case studies. However, this particular text is limited in that it offers only a few “real world” examples of community social work. Therefore, I was not only unable to share my personal experiences in the realm of community organizing (I had none), but was also largely unable to expose students to a body of works describing techniques of community organizing from a

uniquely social work perspective. Using Saul Alinsky's terminology, I felt that I was preparing more rhetorical instead of realistic social workers for community organizing practice.

In defense of these shortcomings, I was reminded of the writings of Patton (1990) when he stated that too often these types of activities are not published because they do not immediately lend themselves to the parameters of scholarly writing. I was also consoled with the knowledge of what Saul Alinsky (1971) wrote:

"...a man of action does not have the sedentary frame of mind that is part of the personality of a research scholar. He finds it very 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..." (p. 157)

While I am not in full agreement with Alinsky on this statement, I appreciate his perspective. The nature and works of the community organizer do not necessarily fit well with the expectations of the research realm or ivory tower. Reporting community action techniques or outcomes can be cumbersome, even awkward. Typically those engaged with the action are not members of academe, meaning they are less likely to pursue publication in a traditional refereed journal. As organizers working on the behalf of others, they will report outcomes to those affected, and move on to the next project. Thus, the outcomes of the community activist often never arrive in the empirical literature. Here is where we in academe can make a difference—we can become engaged in community organizing as well as report back to the discipline on both process and product.

The Educator Becomes an Organizer: An Opportunity to Engage

My struggle with the aforementioned questions changed when I found myself facing

an issue in my community that called for the expertise of a community organizer who could bring together a neighborhood to confront a shared problem. Given my rhetorical knowledge and background, I volunteered.

For years, property developers (increasingly absentee landlords) bought older, often turn-of-the-century-built houses and converted them into high-occupancy rental properties in the Washington Park neighborhood of Mankato, Minnesota, a city with a population of about thirty thousand residents and fifteen thousand college and university students. The aforementioned property conversions were almost exclusively developed to house multiple individuals who were either college students or young adults, as this type of housing is often preferred by these groups to apartment complex living. All too often, houses were converted with little or no concern for esthetics, and the norm was to maintain the properties at minimal standards. Many of these stately, pleasant structures would soon devolve into eyesores with overgrown lawns, peeling paint, broken windows, and refuse scattered about.

Ethnically, the Washington Park neighborhood is quite heterogeneous, with European American (White) accounting for 93.9% of the population, African American residents representing 3.6%, and Hispanic or Latino individuals representing 2.2%. The remaining residents identify as Asian Americans or members of two or more races (U.S. Census, 2000a). Economically, this neighborhood is largely inhabited by families with modest incomes as well as younger, college-aged individuals. While the average age of neighborhood residents is 25.5 years old, 11.5% of the residents are elderly (U.S. Census, 2000b). Monthly rental prices of converted houses are high and typically based on the number of bedrooms available. For example, a five bedroom house would rent from \$300 to \$350 per room, or \$1,500 to \$1,750 per month. This is considered "affordable" to multiple single individuals living in a house where each pays their share from their own resources. However, the affordability factor drops for families who may have at best two incomes but need the larger living space.

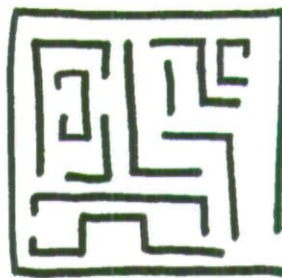
Families, regardless of size or income, would be charged the same price.

Over time, conflicts between renters and homeowners had grown strained, cantankerous, and even confrontational. Homeowners complained of noise curfew violations, poorly maintained rental properties, garbage problems, street congestion, and harassment (including vandalism) from renters who had retaliated against neighbors for filing complaints with city officials. In return, renters, landlords, and developers complained that neighbors were unfairly targeting their properties. For example, landlords claimed that they were unfairly blamed for problems in the neighborhood, and were not responsible for the ill-acts of a few "problem" tenants.

While negative relationships between rental and private property owners existed, positive aspects abound in the Washington Park neighborhood. The remaining single-family homes are affordable, selling within a price range sought after by first-time homebuyers in lower- to middle-income brackets. This is a neighborhood where many purchase their first homes, especially among those who could not otherwise afford to buy in more affluent neighborhoods. Many of the homes are of sufficient size to meet the needs of families—three-to-five-bedroom homes with yard space large enough to encourage outside activities and play areas. In addition, the neighborhood boundary includes a city park with a playground area for children and a large, open green space.

Negatively, the rate of development had advanced to such a point that the high-density rentals were reaching a saturation point. In 2006, new rental license applications accounted for 2.3% of all properties in the Washington Park neighborhood, the highest rental property conversion rate of any neighborhood in the city (Linehan, 2006). Some streets in the Washington Park neighborhood were almost exclusively lined with rental units, whereas others were not yet so saturated but considered to be at risk. The conversion of these homes from single-family housing into rentals was a concern among residents and city officials alike. The goal of city leaders to have affordable housing options available for

lower- and middle-income residents was being compromised. One city council member complained that there was a shortage of affordable housing for home buyers, yet at the same time an excess of affordable rental opportunities across the city, and questioned the long-term impact of these conversions on the social and economic health of the greater community (Mankato City Council, 2006). However, the Washington Park neighborhood was being targeted by property developers because the homes were affordable, easily convertible, and sought after by a select group of individuals who preferred to live in a house instead of an apartment.



The Neighborhood: A Brief Historical Overview

The history of Washington Park neighborhood dates back to the turn of the twentieth century. Homes in this area were largely built between the 1890s and 1930s, and represented some of the largest residences per lot size within the city (Mankato City Council, 2006). Young families are well represented in the neighborhood, but there are also a number of long-time residents. Several community members boasted living in the Washington Park area for twenty-five to forty years. While this was considered a primarily residential area, it was zoned to allow up to five unrelated people to live together in a rental unit, locally known as "R-3." Over time, many single-family homes had been converted into multiple-living units, and typically housed between five and ten individuals. This was problematic in many ways. The neighborhood was originally designed under the assumptions of single-family density. The increase of individual residents was placing strain on parking space, streets, and public utilities. After considering the

strengths (and weaknesses) of the neighborhood, it was concluded that above all else, this area was experiencing a zoning problem and needed to be rezoned.

Across the city, other neighborhoods had confronted similar problems and successfully lobbied the city for rezoning classifications. For example, in 1992 the nearby Lincoln Park neighborhood fought for and received a rezoning classification, where the community was "down-zoned" to discourage the continued conversion of homes into rental units. Community members later pursued and were granted the distinction of becoming the Lincoln Park Historic District and the neighborhood was placed on the National Register of Historic places (National Park Service, 2006). Over time, the Lincoln Park neighborhood began to return to its historic identity and façade, while at the same time maintaining a blend of single-family homes and rental properties. The hope among many Washington Park residents was that this could also occur in their neighborhood, but only if rezoning could be realized.

Processes to Facilitate Change: Getting Organized

Before beginning the process of organizing, I needed to decide what approach or strategy I would use. I chose to apply Alinsky's *Rules for Radicals* (Alinsky, 1971) for two reasons. First, Alinsky's ideology centered on grassroots development, and as an organizer, his techniques were considered effective (Horwitt, 1989; Jamison, 1994). Second, I used Alinsky's works in my classes, and testing Alinsky's rules in a "real-world" situation, regardless of the outcome, would provide me personal experience and knowledge I could incorporate into the classroom.

Getting Started

The true starting point of the rezoning issue in the Washington Park neighborhood is difficult to identify. Long before any formal discussions were held with city officials, neighborhood residents shared with me that concerns about the rental conversion problems had been discussed often. According to long-time residents, community members began

talking about the property conversions as early as the mid 1980s, around the same time the Lincoln Park neighborhood began their pursuit to rezone. However, for reasons not fully understood, the goal of rezoning in the Washington Park neighborhood never gained the momentum needed to move the process forward. This is where the goal to rezone stood until 2006. For the purposes of this narrative, I identify the starting point as February 2006 because this is when I first met with neighbors to discuss the problem of property conversions and began to develop strategies to address neighborhood concerns.

Getting Politically Involved

Around the time Washington Park neighbors had renewed their interest in rezoning and were expressing concerns about the conversions, the city's mayor stepped down, leaving the position open and requiring a special election. The city council member for the political ward encompassing Washington Park was elected to that position, leaving this council seat open. To encourage political support, I reviewed the platforms of the several candidates running for the position and met with the one that appeared likely to be the most sympathetic to our neighborhood concerns, including drug dealing, noise, refuse, parking, traffic, and the state of disrepair of many rental properties. As a long time resident, he was aware of the problems and would support efforts to improve the neighborhood. Convinced that this candidate would represent our concerns, I wrote a letter to the editor (Mackie, 2006), which outlined his qualities and asked for Washington Park residents' support. I assisted with his campaign and rallied support for him in my neighborhood. The candidate won the position, and the neighborhood had a new ally on the city council.

After the election, neighbors met and agreed that we needed to start a grassroots effort and develop a plan to pursue rezoning. The first step would be to meet with the city's Community Development Director (CDD), the point person for city development efforts. He was also recognized as a supporter and ally of our goal, and very knowledgeable about the politics of the city. During our meeting, the

CDD expressed his support, but cautioned that the current city council would be more receptive to the request for rezoning if it came directly from the community. He encouraged us to start a petition requesting that the city council down-zone the neighborhood from the current status of R-3 to R-2, which would result in reducing the continuation of high-occupancy rental conversions. We recognized that the political theme was emerging. Residents had support from the city staff and elected officials but needed to do the work.

Zoning and Down-Zoning Defined

In this community, R-3 zoning refers to a zoning tolerance allowing up to five unrelated people to live together in a single rental unit. Based on size of property, this often meant that smaller houses could have up to five unrelated individuals living in them as one unit, and larger houses could have two or more units (duplex or triplex) with multiples of five or a combination. Under R-3 zoning, homes originally designed to house a moderate-sized family were now often housing between five and ten adults within the same space. In contrast, R-2 zoned areas allow for up to two unrelated people to reside within a rental unit. It is largely understood that R-2 zoning reduces density of population; therefore reducing the multitude of problems associated with high-density properties.

It is important to note that rental properties developed under R-3 zoning rules would remain so (grandfathered) after down-zoning. Additionally, conversion to an R-2 zone would not disallow future development of rental properties. Mankato city code states that under R-2 limits, no more than two unrelated people can live in the same domicile. Rental properties could continue to be developed, but would be limited to the lower density limits. However, there is no upper occupancy limit under R-2 zoning restrictions for related residents; meaning families of any size comply with the R-2 code.

Developing a Petition for Change

The informal nature of a few neighbors discussing problems needed to be more formalized to obtain volunteers to educate

residents about the benefits of down-zoning and obtain signatures for the petition. The critical first step of identifying the players at the governmental level had been accomplished. We knew we had support from at least one council member, as well as the Community Development Director. Based on the information we obtained, we felt we also had support from at least one other council member, the city manager, and the police chief - but these were not confirmed. However, this optimistic information provided the group with the energy needed to move toward the next step: circulating a petition requesting that the neighborhood be rezoned.

The petition turned out to be one of the most important elements of the process; but at the same time, the most difficult and frustrating to complete. One neighbor and I offered to gather signatures, while the rest of the core group would spread the word about what we were doing. We soon realized an error in our plan. Two people—especially two busy people with families, jobs, and personal lives—were not enough to successfully canvas approximately twenty six city blocks of homes. We learned that going door-to-door with petitions consumes considerable time and energy.

During the evenings after work, my colleague and I would map out where we would go to collect signatures in an effort to avoid wasting time and energy with overlap. With great intentions, we anticipated being able to gather several signatures from neighbors on any given night. However, we quickly learned that because people were excited about the down-zoning proposal, they wanted to discuss it further with us. We were not meeting resistance, but progress was slowed as we worked our way through the neighborhood. In the end we learned a great deal about our community, but at the cost of not meeting our goal to get to all of the homes.

Regardless of the arduous process of collecting signatures, a timeline to complete the petition needed to be established in order to get our request on the city Planning Commission schedule as well as in a public forum. Timing was important because city code and state law required that letters be sent

to all residents that would be affected by the rezoning. Upon receiving the petitions, city officials mailed letters to all property owners in the Washington Park neighborhood informing them of the public hearing scheduled two weeks later. This letter explained the proposed zoning change and invited interested parties to attend the public hearing before the Planning Commission.

After the property owners received their letters, the group of homeowners who had initiated this process regrouped to discuss strategies for the public hearing. We had been tipped off by a sympathetic outsider that landlords (especially absentee and property developers) were also organizing their forces and planning to attend the public hearing. This information helped us strategize on how to best approach the meeting: who would participate, and how they would do so. I felt Alinsky's Rules (1971) would be a useful guide for our pursuit, and we applied them when appropriate. I also employed my knowledge of social and community development theory (Payne, 1997), and empowerment theory (Solomon, 1976; Miller, 1983; Rappaport, 1987). However, I was cautious to not allow these theoretical influences to overpower the use of the more concrete approaches proposed by Alinsky (1971). My concern was that while theory is important, practice techniques were what community members wanted to see and learn.

Applying Alinsky's Rules

The core group's first strategy was to get as many supporting homeowners to attend the meeting as we could; we needed as many bodies in the council room as possible as a show of force and unity. Our plan was that whenever a landlord spoke *against* the proposed change, we would have someone on our side ready to stand and speak *for* the change, as well as refute the statements of the opposition if their statements were inaccurate or otherwise challengeable. We went one step further by "seeding" the room, having members of our group sit in different areas to make it look as though we were not all together. We also addressed the need to be concise in our rebuttals: take verbal aim at a specific statement made and counter it, which

would show confidence in the cause. Finally, we utilized Alinsky's third rule to go outside our opponent's experiences whenever possible to cause disruption and confusion. As community members, we could talk about problems clearly and use specific examples, whereas the opposition would likely offer little more than opinion and speculation. We felt this could be an especially effective strategy as the landlords and developers almost exclusively did not live in the neighborhood. We knew that most of those who did live in the community were sympathetic toward our cause. In fact, two landlords who both owned rentals and lived in the neighborhood were members of our core group, and were prepared to speak in support of the rezoning.

The Planning Commission Meeting: Conflict

About sixty community members attended the Planning Commission public hearing. Attendees included a broad spectrum of interests: including homeowners, renters, property developers, and landlords. Of those, over twenty people spoke during the public testimony segment of the meeting. An analysis of the meeting minutes showed (predictably) that homeowners were in favor of the rezoning, and the property developers against. Renters also expressed support for the rezoning. Many were concerned that their housing was often substandard, and supported shedding light on and exposing these problems.

Landlord and Developer Testimony

One landlord stated that he and his financial partners owned several rental properties in the rezoning district, had invested over nine million dollars in the community through property development, and continued to develop properties. He told the commission that if the rezoning passed, his company could not afford to buy and convert new properties. This developer further stated that, in his opinion, young families did not buy homes in this area, preferring to live in the suburbs instead of buying a home in the city to "fix up." He threatened that he and his partners would no longer invest in the community and possibly pull their business from it. This

sentiment was also expressed by another developer who stated that he would no longer invest in his properties if the rezoning were to pass. These developers argued that the conversion of these properties was actually good, as they were often better maintained and made more visually attractive than the single family homes. Both were clearly attempting to exert power by threatening to pull their investments if the Planning Commission did not vote in their best interests.

Another developer told the Planning Commission that his company bought foreclosed homes and renovated them into high density rentals, doing the neighborhood a service because nobody else would buy these homes in the condition they were in. He stated that he was frustrated with the attempt to rezone, because he stood to lose money on a proposed building project to raze an older home and replace it with a four-plex building. He said he felt that the neighborhood was "stabbing him in the back," because he'd been told elsewhere that they approved of what he was doing. However this was an individual whose previous work on another property had been halted by the city officials due to serious zoning and code violations; clearly he had credibility problems with his neighbors. It was also obvious that the developers were aligned and exerting power by throwing their wealth and influence around the community. They further attempted to reduce the residents' power by marginalizing their right to organize, challenge, and ask questions of the developers. Sometimes, they just lied.

Homeowner Testimony

Homeowners represented the remainder of those who spoke. Several described how they live near high density properties and experience noise, refuse, and parking problems. Others argued that the developers' statements that rental properties were maintained better than single family homes were simply untrue. Some homeowners stated that they were unable to find affordable housing for purchase elsewhere in the city similar to the size of the homes and lots in the Washington Park neighborhood. In response to the developer who stated that people didn't

buy rental properties and convert them into single family homes, one resident shared that she and her husband did just that, and now had a beautiful home to show for it. Another homeowner challenged the statement that people do not buy foreclosed-upon homes, stating that he had done that in recent years and was now raising his family in the renovated home. He shared that this was the only way he could afford to own a home with his income. Single-family homeowners were not the only people speaking in support of the rezoning - one member of the community said that he is both a resident and a landlord in the neighborhood. He understood both sides of the debate, but supported the rezoning as there was a need for balance between rental units and single family homes to have a quality community, which had become skewed toward rentals.

Finally it was my time to speak. Recognizing the need to maintain momentum, I followed Alinsky's thirteenth rule: pick the target, freeze it, personalize it, and polarize it (1971), which I combined with reiterating what had already been said so as to keep the discussion going. I stated that street parking was problematic because landlords had often not provided adequate parking for their properties. Even among those properties that had off-street parking, many occupants did not use it and took up limited available space in the street. I argued that while landlords provided sufficient minimum off-street parking slots required by zoning rules, they did not always fit the actual number of cars owned by residents. Refuting the statements that many single-family homes were in disrepair, I stated that visually distressed properties typically were in fact rental properties, and the statements made by some of the landlords were false. While families had bought and improved properties in the neighborhood, these conversions from rental properties were not keeping pace with conversions to rentals. I reiterated the importance of maintaining affordable housing stock for purchase. My goal was to further deflate the arguments presented by the developers and landlords.

A final blow to the opposition occurred when one angry homeowner stated that he

was sick and tired of absentee landlords collecting rent, allowing their properties to fall into a state of disrepair, then leaving the neighbors to battle with the problems of parking, garbage, and noise. He felt that absentee landlords had little to offer in the discussion as they did not work to preserve the community, but in fact compromised the livability of it. His statements were met with applause.

After the public forum was closed, the Planning Commission members held a brief discussion. One member shared his concern that landlords and investors could lose money as a result of the rezoning action. He was especially concerned about the developer who stated that he planned to remove a house and replace it with a four-plex but was now likely stuck with the property. Other commission members stated that, while this was a concern, public policy could not be written to favor a select few. Another commission member reminded the attendees that even if the request passed, it would take several years to see significant changes in the neighborhood and a return of balance between rental and single-family homes. Overall, the commission expressed support for the rezoning, noting that this was a community out of balance between rentals and homeowners. In the end, when the vote was called, the motion to rezone the neighborhood passed unanimously.

There was a sense of elation in the room among the residents, and (by the looks on their faces) anger among the developers. We had crossed the first hurdle and won, but we were only halfway to the goal. While the Planning Commission would recommend that the rezoning be passed by the city council, the council would make the final decision. We had six weeks before the council meeting to reorganize, plan, and prepare for the final vote, but then so did the developers. They still had two things we did not have at our disposal: time and money.

The City Council Meeting

Six weeks later, the city council was scheduled to hear the rezoning request. Again, a letter was sent out to all property owners in the Washington Park neighborhood inviting the

community to attend the public hearing in front of the city council. Unlike the Planning Commission meeting, no landlords or property developers attended. Similarly, fewer community members were in attendance. We had lost some of the energy we had in the first meeting, but then so had the opposition. It appeared that the challengers we met in the Planning Commission meeting had given up. Alinsky's ninth rule was accurate: the threat is often more terrifying than the thing itself. As a result, the council meeting was largely quiet. A few of us stood and spoke in support of the rezoning, but all we were doing was reaffirming our predictable positions.

At the end of the meeting, two council members and the mayor openly commented on how impressed and excited they were about the community organization efforts of the Washington Park neighborhood. The council member representing the neighborhood stated that he was particularly impressed to see such effective and successful grassroots community action. He mentioned how surprised he was to see this come in front of the council so quickly. I was pleased to see that Alinsky's seventh rule was also valuable: we didn't let the tactics or process drag on too long. Speed was essential to win, and we did not have the financial resources to battle the developers in a long, drawn-out fight. I am not sure if we had the human power either. Regardless, the city council voted and unanimously passed the motion.

The Big Question: What Would Alinsky Say?

Saul Alinsky was committed to fighting for those who were oppressed, marginalized, underrepresented: the very poor. Did Washington Park homeowners fit this description, or were they little more than a well-intentioned but otherwise naïve group whose primary focus was to preserve their own property values? Worse, were the truly poor pushed to the margins and further isolated by being shut out from access to affordable rental properties? Because Alinsky is no longer with us, we cannot know for certain what he might have said. However, from the writings and legacy he left us, we can speculate.

This is not a neighborhood that is known for its affluence or political power. It is a place where most residents are working lower to middle class, and most live here because this is where they can afford to live. The Washington Park neighborhood is in the urban core of Mankato, a city that has for years been growing out and away from its center, with little growth within. That said, most other neighborhoods in the city are more affluent, and the homes are subsequently more expensive. The very reason property developers found it attractive are the same reasons homeowners found it attractive - homes are large and affordable. The two groups were at odds with each other: homeowners were working to protect their property values as well as care for their neighborhood, and many property developers were seeking to maximize profits with little regard for the greater community. The intent of the homeowners was not to deny the poor affordable housing (recall the discussion about actual rent prices), but to maintain a balance of socioeconomic diversity and sustainability. Neither the intent nor the outcome of the developers' conversions was to create affordable housing that would benefit the poor; they focused on a select group and charged them relatively high rents.

By Alinsky's own writing (1971) and from an interview by Norden (1972), we know where he planned to move next with his campaign for social change: America's middle-class. Alinsky readily agreed that mobilizing the middle-class seemed to deviate from his previous work among the poverty-stricken. However, he argued that the potential for real change lies within this very group. These are the people who stand between the rich and the poor. They possess some of the power, yet are simultaneously exploited within the economy. They see themselves both as "making it," yet they're also at the economic edge. Alinsky was deeply concerned that when one counted all of the poor, they represented only a fraction of the total population— and lacking raw numbers, would struggle to gain real social power regardless of their actions. Conversely, the middle class represented a majority and, according to Alinsky, with majority

comes power. That said, he argued that "...the only hope for genuine minority progress is to seek out allies within the majority itself as part of a national movement for change." (Norden, 1972, p. 60). At the time, Alinsky felt that the middle class was apathetic and going nowhere; either moving toward "native American fascism" or "radical social change." Sadly, not long after sharing these thoughts Saul Alinsky died and was unable to carry out this campaign, leaving us to carry it forward. Three decades later the debate over which direction the middle class ultimately went is another discussion and outside the scope of this article, but it's likely that many of us have developed serious ideas about it.

Regardless of the direction, I kept Alinsky's forecasts in mind and worked hard to interpret what he meant by organizing the middle class. When the Washington Park residents began isolating and classifying the renters as "bad," I educated them and insisted that they understand the real issues—not slip into the abyss of the blame game. I encouraged participation among renters who, like us, shared concerns about poor quality housing but, unlike us, did not have the same power. Like the poor described by Alinsky, they were simply too few and lacked the power that comes with majority. Homeowners were the ones who could effectively fight for grassroots change. I tapped into that power, organized it, then worked to educate the majority about their responsibility to meet the needs of the greater community, which included both their concerns and the concerns of others.

So what would Alinsky say? I would hope that he would make at least two observations. First, I would like to think he would applaud the application of his notion that the middle class majority can be more than socially apathetic and interested in working for positive social change. Remember that the Washington Park residents are not, as a group, wealthy. They are the middle class Alinsky identified. They sat by for years and watched their neighborhood change, not knowing what to do, often hoping that their local government would somehow rescue them. In turn the city, tied to outdated zoning laws they could not or would not change without community support, was

unable or unwilling to proactively pursue change in Washington Park. By applying Alinsky's rules, the neighborhood was able to empower themselves individually and collectively. Affordable homes were saved, and people learned how to work together as a unified group.

My second hope would be that Alinsky would see me as more than a rhetorical radical. He was not shy about his impression of social work's approach to community organizing, saying "the difference between [social workers'] goals and ours is that they organize to get rid of four-legged rats and stop there; we organize to get rid of four-legged rats so we can move on to removing two-legged rats" (Alinsky, 1971, p. 68). By my own admission, I entered into this project as a rhetorical radical: well versed in both printed knowledge and the specialized vocabulary attached to what we call indirect practice. I emerged, I think, beyond that point. Whether that means I evolved into a realistic radical is ultimately for others to define. Maybe most importantly, I learned the difference and can now share this insight with my students, colleagues, and fellow social workers.

Implications for Social Work

The first implication is not necessarily to the discipline of social work, but to fellow social work educators wanting to be more active as educators (Stoecker, 1999). Do I believe that we lack relevance or activism? Of course not, but I do believe that we can become more engaged in our chosen fields of teaching by occasionally injecting ourselves into the practice arena. By doing this, I personally feel more confident as an instructor communicating both content and process to students learning about community social work.

The second implication is the usefulness of a case study showing the techniques of an effective community organization event. Readers may take from this a deeper understanding of how community social work can be applied in a real world setting to create positive social change. In addition, this case study shows that while Alinsky's rules were developed in the mid-20th Century, they are not outdated. In fact, I found that Alinsky's

methods were highly effective and an efficient method to facilitate real change. My hope is that we as educators continue to make an effort to find the time to remain relevant and active in our chosen areas of expertise. After having some time to step back and contemplate the process, I feel obligated to offer one simple piece of advice: you may be able to keep what you teach fresh and updated by practicing the skills you worked hard to develop.

Conclusion

From this experience I gained a deeper understanding of how community social work can still be applied in everyday society, how to communicate its value more effectively to social work students, and how at least one grassroots community action was successful. In class, I now feel more competent and confident in my knowledge about how to actively organize a community of people into people of action. Students find the local nature of the work interesting, and have stated that they find the connectedness between academe and the "real world" refreshing and motivational. Because of this work, I now have a sense of connectedness between the academic world I work in and the community I live in. I continue to work on community livability concerns with the city and the neighborhood, having been appointed to different committees and task forces. More importantly, I played a role in empowering community members who are now involved in ways they did not envision previously. In the end there is now a more active, engaged, and invested community in place of the fragmented, disconnected structure that existed before. Pride in the neighborhood is growing. People in other neighborhoods are calling and asking how they can follow our lead. A neighborhood organization aimed at addressing long-term concerns has been developed. A community is revived. Alinsky's techniques of community organization and social change appear as relevant as ever.

Postscript

After the rezoning project concluded, several neighbors and I started the Washington Park Association; not as a covenant of

exclusivity but as a social and political entity focused on addressing the needs of all residents—living in the neighborhood automatically made you a member. Volunteers canvassed the neighborhood with door hangers inviting all residents (homeowners and renters alike) to come together and discuss ways we could address problems and improve our community. I insisted that the meetings be held in a school located in what is considered the roughest part of Washington Park. I wanted invited city officials as well as neighbors to be forced to see where we needed to begin our work. I moved the power accumulated by the rezoning effort and converted it into a mechanism for long-term social change. Today, the Washington Park Neighborhood Association is growing. Members represent a broad array of backgrounds, ages, and socioeconomic statuses. Committees and sub-committees have been developed to focus on concerns and suggest improvements. The American democratic tradition Alinsky insisted we embrace is alive and well here.

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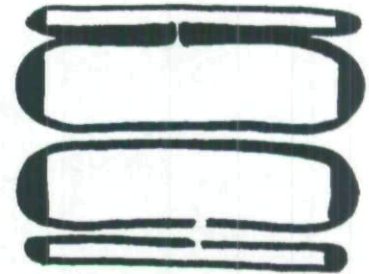
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