Hope Dies Last

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Remembering Clifford and Virginia Durr

THE DISCOVERY OF POWER

Mike Gecan

I'M AN ORGANIZER with the Industrial Areas Foundation.* In the thirties and forties, most people knew what an organizer was. There were labor organizers and citizen organizers. Saul Alinsky was making *organizer* a well-known word in America. Today, most people think it has something to do with your desk or your laptop.

I'm an old-fashioned organizer. I organize leaders and institutions, primarily in cities, to identify things they want to change and then to change them. We use it and get the inevitable reaction from people who have power.

Most of my work the last twenty-two years has been out east, with the IAF. I started in Chicago for a few years, then to Baltimore, and in 1980, my wife and I moved to New York. We're usually invited into a place like East Brooklyn. Often we're asked by local leaders and churches and congregations that are badly off. East Brooklyn is a large area that's among the poorest in the city, historically. Alfred Kazin wrote a memoir about East Brooklyn called *A Walker in the City*, way back in the late sixties. I was at Yale. I borrowed a car and drove to Brownsville. I walked the streets he described. About seven years later, I found myself working there. About twenty years later, we found ourselves rebuilding the whole place. We built a citywide organization.

I was born on Ferdinand Street in Chicago, on the West Side. My parents were what used to be called working-class people. My dad was a construction worker, bartender, plasterer, security guard, all through his career. My mother worked in a toy factory. I went to

*His recent book is *Going Public* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002).

Our Lady of the Angels school, the one that had the big fire. I was in that terrible fire. Ninety-two kids were killed and three sisters December first, 1958.

Most of my first lessons in power were as a kid in that neighborhood. We grew up in a world where power was present everywhere. If you walked across the street to another neighborhood, the Polish area, you got beat up. If they walked across the street, we fought them. My neighborhood was Croatian, Italian, and a little Irish. The Cook County Democratic Party was very powerful. If you wanted a job, you had to pay. You had no recourse because everyone was participating in that way of doing business. If you were a bartender or a tavern owner, like my father, you had to pay the mob to stay in business. If you wouldn't pay, you got punished in various ways. Your place got firebombed, you could be beaten up, you could be killed. The role of power played in every aspect of our lives.

There was the power of the Roman Catholic church in that neighborhood. It was the most powerful. It was a mixed power. Sometimes it could save your life: if you were a kid who needed to be adopted, if you were sick, if you needed a social life, if you needed education. At other times, it could ignore you and harm you, or at least put you in jeopardy. For example, part of the lesson of the school fire was a lesson of negligence, of an institution that did not attend to the needs of a school, put its children and its staff in jeopardy. We paid a terrible price for it. It was an institution that took for granted the loyalty of its members—for instance, the working-class families of the West Side and the South Side. When realtors began to block-bust and panic-peddle, the church often did very little or nothing. Literally hundreds of thousands of hardworking families lost money and equity and hope, and were driven out of neighborhoods. Hundreds of thousands of hardworking African American and Hispanic families were sold homes at more than their value. So we had an institution that could have played a tremendously important role, both in protecting the interests of its own existing members and the interests of the new black and Hispanic families, and for the most part did not.

I think I was aware as a six-year-old, seven-year-old, eight-year-old. I think I learned about power in my gut and in my heart, and in my eyes I saw it, felt it. I saw people abused, saw people hurt, saw people broken, saw people killed. Before I knew what the word was—power—I knew it existed. I grew older and went to high school, St. Ignatius on the West Side. It was the greatest place I could have gone. The scholastics and priests took us to civil rights actions and into black churches, which I'd never been in before. I began to see a whole different kind of power, constructive, and I began to think about it. The way I learned about power, I think that's how I learned about hope—first viscerally, seeing it, feeling it, observing it, and beginning to put the words on it. You can't think about hope unless you think about power.

I went to Yale on a scholarship and majored in literature. I wanted to be a novelist. Home from college, I read in the paper one Sunday morning about a group in Lawndale, an African American community, working with contract-buying home owners. I called up and asked if I could work there that summer. They were black, so they couldn't get mortgages at that time because of redlining. So they bought homes on contract. If you're on contract, you don't really own your home, you don't get equity till you make your last payment. The contract is written to enable the contract holder to take the home away from you if you're late, if you fall behind, if you get sick.

Jack Egan was working on this, along with a group of leaders in the neighborhood.* They were organizing home owners to go after the mortgage bankers and those who sold them these contracts, and to get those contracts renegotiated so that they were more equitable. Eventually they succeeded. I saw in their work a way of using and building power that was positive and constructive, and able to reverse some of the things that had damaged people. The important thing was not that it was just positive, but that it was successful. It wasn't just like a token or moral pause. This was a group of people who were savvy and canny.

My father was a great fellow, World War Two veteran, landed on Omaha Beach, nearly killed in the Battle of the Bulge, a very courageous guy. But he didn't understand why I was doing some of these things. My mother was a working person, but also a reader. She'd leave great books around the house—Dickens on the table—

*Monsignor Jack Egan was a bone-deep activist, who was a familiar figure on picket lines and rallies for peace, civil rights, and labor.

for my sister and me. You wouldn't pick her out as a university-type person, but she was a very intellectual, very broad-minded person. She was nervous about what I would do because it was dangerous, but she was always very positive. My parents were mixed about it but never discouraged me. They were never disappointed by what I did. The longer I organized, the more they seemed to support it. The negative reaction I got was from some of my friends in the neighborhood. I remember one Sunday, I was invited to a Bears game by a friend. Those were the days of Gale Sayers and Dick Butkus. My friend, who was African American, and his uncle and father drove up to our house one Sunday to pick me up. We went to the Bears game, had a great day, and came home. My parents invited them in for a drink. This was a tough, working-class, all-white neighborhood, 1966. That night a cross was burned on our lawn. I remember my mother going out in the neighborhood to try to find out who the hell did this. We didn't find out for many, many, many years, but eventually we did. Even then, my parents never said, "You shouldn't have done that." My neighbors next door never said anything. Never. No one ever said a pop, no one ever said a word. My parents were nervous, but they never said stop, and I never did.

During one of the Marquette Park marches during the civil rights period, Martin Luther King was hit by rocks and bottles. I got there late, I parked my car and started to walk toward the march through the whites who were pelting the marchers. I looked in everybody's face and they looked like me. There was blood lust in the crowd. They wanted to kill. I was afraid. As I was walking through the whites, I knew I couldn't get to the march. I was too afraid to march that day.

I had to wrestle with my own fear that day. They were me. We were the same people. They were working people, crazed by their ferocity. I don't know what the lesson is except, watch out for self-righteousness and watch out for demonizing others, because sometimes people who hate aren't so different from you. If anything, maybe it sobered me up about how difficult it was going to be to do these things.

This was a kind of formation, and much of it was accidental. People get the idea that you form yourself very deliberately politically,

but I think people get formed accidentally with a lot of help, and a lot of detours, and a lot of being late and you see something because you're late, not because you're on time. People teach you different things. A lot of people think you learn from books, but most of my political formation was from direct experience and good people.

By the time I got out of college, I wanted to try two things. I spent several years trying to be a writer. The other thing I thought I would like to do was something called organizing, but I didn't know what it was. It wasn't a career. I literally picked up the Chicago papers and looked for a job in organizing. I got one with a little group on the Northwest Side called the Northeast Austin Organization.

The organizer is a talent searcher, he's like a Hollywood producer. He's looking for not just the one star but all kinds of talent. And if you find the right talent that you can train, almost anything's possible. Talent, in a sense, is people who have relationships with other people. It's not so much the talent of speaking, although that's important; it's the talent of relating, a person who understands how to build trust. That's not necessarily a charismatic person. The people who hit the beach on Normandy were not a bunch of charismatic twenty-year-olds, right? They were people who trusted and believed in one another. The organizer sometimes has to be wary of the charismatic person.

That's my life. I'm a talent scout. If you can find the right mix, it's like putting a great play together, a great production. You find the right talent, the right crew, the right team, the right players. The second thing is that you win sometimes. Not every time, but you gotta *win*. The performance has to be great sometimes. And the reaction has to be loud. You *have* to win.

So I just went on to CAP, the Citizen Action Program, and from there to IAF. Ed Chambers was reorganizing organizing. He had a couple of insights. One was that you had to build organizing through institutions. You couldn't just organize with people around causes, because if the cause lost or won, the thing would evaporate. You had to have some kind of institutional base. His second big insight was to have a systematic training of leaders. Just as with actors and actresses, you have to keep working at that craft. It's not just you wake up one morning and you're going to sing an aria or you're

going to do *Hamlet.* You gotta work at it. You gotta get good at it. You gotta practice. Ed understood you had to have training that was top-flight.

These people deserve the *best,* 'cause they're doing the hardest kind of work that you can do, with very skimpy resources, against great odds. You've gotta equip people so they have a shot. The third thing is you had to be able to pay for this, and the institutions had to pay some dues. These were very significant themes in organizing, and they ran against a more movement style of organizing. Not that movements are bad, but they were more built around charismatic leaders. There's always a tendency to look for the most charismatic person, because that in a way solves your leadership problem—but only in the short term, not in the long term. And not to do much training. And not to worry so much about money.

I had this background that told me that if you don't have top-flight trained leaders and a strong power base and your own money, you're gonna get creamed. Because the other powers have it all. They have institutional bases, like the old Cook County Democratic machine. They have a money stream. They have their own training system, by the way, even though you might think it warped. They have a way of forming people. People are trained to operate certain ways, and they do, and they're pretty good at it. You can't counter institutional power with good intentions, or with charisma alone, or with wishful thinking. You have to build your own institutional power. And you have to hit hard. I love to fight and win. As a young person, I'd seen my people bullied, taken advantage of, abused. As a kid, I had no way to do anything other than observe it and feel it and remember. As I got older, I found work that enabled me to punch back. If you throw a punch at me or people I work with, we're going to hit back. I made a lot of mistakes, but the satisfaction was seeing what happens when people are able to defend themselves, and punch back when others come at them. It's not all nicey-nice, you know. People come *at* you, they take things from you, they take your life!

Real estate interests do it, bad school systems do it, mayors do it, governors do it, presidents do it. It doesn't make 'em all bad or evil. They have different interests. It's OK, provided you have the power to *stop* 'em, and to turn 'em around, and to teach 'em some things, and to maybe reverse it sometimes. If you have power, all those things are possible. If you don't, you gotta hit the road, or you gotta get very passive, 'cause otherwise you'll go crazy.

I vividly remember Ed Chambers driving me around the East Brooklyn area before I was hired—block after block, devastated, abandoned, burned out. It was intimidating and a little frightening. Ed said, "What an opportunity!" [*Laughs hard*] There was a little Italian pocket in one part of East New York, still, but I'd say it was ninety-five percent, ninety-eight percent African American. It was the worst of times: September 1980. Shooting everywhere. Burning everywhere. The establishment's prevailing theory was something like benign neglect, you remember that? It meant, "Don't throw good money after bad in these neighborhoods, they're dead." I'll tell you how dead it was: there weren't stop signs, there weren't any one-way signs. There weren't any more street signs at all. The place was being demapped. If you wanted to find Mr. Gonzalez's house, he'd tell you to go five blocks to the abandoned building and make a right, and then you go to the abandoned lot and you make a left, et cetera. That's OK if you're an organizer, but it's not good if you're an ambulance driver or a cop. These were places that were falling off the map of America. East Brooklyn was just one of them. There are still many places like that today. Ours was not the job of a civic group to do a few things to maintain the community or stabilize it. It was too far gone for that. Our job was to see if we could find a team that wanted to rebuild the place. That was a much bigger challenge than anything we ever attempted before.

I did what an organizer does. I did hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of individual meetings. I'd find out who the leaders were and meet them. The group already had twenty active congregations, twenty churches. I'd meet with the pastors, and they'd give me lists of names of good people, and day after day, night after night, I would just meet people.

You're in the midst of hell. You walk into a house or an apartment in a project, and there's this tremendous person. Strong, good people, solid citizens, willing to work, members of their congregations. When that happens you start to have a feeling that, hey, maybe something can happen.

Of course, it's not just an abandoned street anymore, you know

what I mean? It's not just a tenement that looks intimidating. It is intimidating, but there's a person in it, a family in it, there's a leader in it. When that happens and you start seeing it's not just five, there's fifty; there's not just fifty, there's a hundred; there's not just a hundred, there's two hundred, and they're all over the place, you begin to have the idea that you can do something politically, collectively.

I don't know if I'd say I was surprised and astonished, I'd just say I was impressed. There was a woman named Alice McCollum, a mother of ten, a single mother, black, lived in a terrible apartment. A lovely person, great sense of humor. That's a big part of life, by the way. Big thing in organizing, mostly missed. That's what the ideologues never quite get. Good people like to laugh, it's not all grim, and it's not all us and them and they're the devils and we're the angels.

So I meet Alice McCollum. She tells her story. I ask her, "Do you want to work on it? Are there other neighbors who would work on it as well?" She says, "Sure." So she pulls them together, and we do the research on what's happening with this local park and pool. We find out that the city sold a contract for over three million bucks. Ninety percent of the money's been spent, only five percent of the work's been done. So you have a person in a difficult situation who's got energy, she's angry, but she's not grim. She's got a following, she's smart, she's willing to strategize on how to address this problem, and then we go address it.

That's just one example of one person, one issue. You multiply that by twenty, thirty, fifty, a hundred, and you start to get a sense of what you're organizing, the spirit of it. You're trying to organize the spirit of action, accomplishment, experimentation, humor. These lousy food stores were another story in this area: high costs, bad meat, bad vegetables, awful abuse by the managers who sit in their pillboxes and yell at the women shopping. This came up in meetings we had in many, many houses. So we trained a hundred people to be food store inspectors. Everybody had a badge and a clipboard and an inspection sheet. We bought weights and measures so that we could see if the meat was accurately weighed. We had no status, you understand, but we assumed the role of food store inspector anyway.

On a Saturday morning, ten leaders went into ten different stores

and conducted an inspection. We knew the storekeepers would react, so we called the cops ourselves the week before, briefed them on what we were going to do, and requested that there be a cop car at every store. We had thermometers, so they'd put a thermometer in the cooler and check the temperature. We had a team that would buy all the bad food and a fifty-dollar budget per store.

When our teams went in, two things happened. Everyone else in the store wanted to participate in the inspection. "Hey, what are you doing?" We'd say, "We're just inspecting. We've heard the meat here isn't so good." The other customers would say, "Come over here, we'll show you where the really bad stuff is." And they'd pull out the green meat, or they'd show you where the rats had their holes, or they'd pull out the rusty cans, or they'd show you where the spoiled milk was, or the fuzzy grapes. This would go on for about an hour. The whole store stops. The managers come down from the pillbox and say, "Who are you?" "We're EBC [East Brooklyn Congregations]." Everyone is formally dressed, and they've got their tickets and they've got their clipboards. "I'm going to call the police." "No problem. The police are right outside. We already called them." They're midsize stores, they're not little bodegas. Seven of the ten managers signed agreements that morning to improve all the things our inspectors found wrong that day. They were so happy to get us the hell out of there. Three of the ten resisted. We threw all the inspectors at those last three stores, and they finally gave in. So we were ten for ten. We had this wonderful party for the hundred inspectors. People wanted to keep their badges because this had been a success. About half the people asked the most beautiful question you could hear in organizing: "What do we do next?" The other half went back to their lives and never forgot that experience.

The more experiences people have like that, you don't have to tell them, "Now you got power." They *know* it, they *feel* it. We got all the street signs put in, we got buildings demolished. We did scores of these local issues that were important unto themselves, but the most important thing was what was happening to the people. They were feeling effective and they were having fun, and they were beginning to see that they could do things, and they were getting wild and interesting reactions from people in power they never imagined they'd get.

Ultimately the same organization built two thousand nine hundred single-family houses. Had every park and pool and play area redone. Started two new public high schools. Essentially tackled almost every issue in the neighborhood of about a quarter of a million people. It's not like one little community, it's like a small city.

In the late seventies and early eighties, this area was like the South Bronx. Mayors would come visit it from other cities to see hell. Mayor White of Boston toured the area, and his quote was, "I have now seen the beginning of the end of civilization."

What we say is that we have a civilized rebuilt community. This is part of what I've been doing for the last twenty-two years. It was not without ups and downs. Don't get me wrong—this isn't romantic work. There are days when you think, *What the hell am I doing here?* It is grassroots, but I'd say it has large ambitions as well. I'm really an on-the-ground organizer still. I do what I call old-fashioned organizing. We're trying to see if we can apply what we learned in New York, Chicago, and other places to other cities, many in terrible shape.

My feelings today are mixed. I feel good about what I see happening in many of the places. What I worry about is whether we can get this kind of work up to scale, whether it can be replicated in other places quickly enough. As we rebuilt East Brooklyn, North and West Philadelphia were falling apart. They need to be rebuilt. Trenton needs to be rebuilt. The question is, how can you pick up the pace so that more people in more communities and more leaders go through this kind of experience? That's a big question for us, and an anxiety. Other people have to do it, too; they just can't read about it. So that's a major challenge. We gotta get more organizers.

It's easy to talk yourself into despair. Hope is physical and visceral. I don't think you can talk yourself into it. I think you have to *do* yourself into it. The more people try things, work at things, test things, push the boundaries, experiment, the less we just angst about it, the better.

Linda Stout

*She is the executive director of the Peace Development Fund, Amherst, Massachusetts. "We're like a mini think tank for people engaged in grassroots work. Our big challenge is the people's spirit of helplessness. Power corrupts, absolutely, but so does powerlessness. That's the only thing that can stop us. I feel incredibly hopeful that we can turn things around."**

I WAS BORN IN 1954, the daughter of a tenant farmer, and also thirteenth-generation Quaker on my father's side. I lived all my life in North Carolina up until about a year ago. I grew up in poverty.

My mother became disabled when I was six, so I sort of became the parent of the household, taking care of my mother and my two younger sisters. My dream was to go to college and become a teacher. No one in my family had ever gone through high school. My father had gone through the fifth grade and my mother through the sixth grade. When I started school, I began to realize that I was different than the other kids. It wasn't until third grade that I realized I was poor, because at that point I started being called names like "white trash." I never before heard that phrase. I was making straight A's through the third grade. The only complaint my teachers had about me was that I talked too much. In the fourth grade, things began to shift for me when a teacher moved me into the lower class and told me to forget about college, that I was stupid. From then on, I made C's and D's. It was like that message that I was stupid, that I didn't count, I took in. In the ninth grade, we moved and my father started working in a textile mill. I decided I wanted to make good grades, and overnight I started making A-plus grades. I did win a scholarship, but unfortunately, because of financial reasons, I never did get that chance to go to college.

I had been raised to believe in equality, being Quaker, and believing that everyone was the same. And yet once I got out of my own

*Linda Stout wrote a memoir called *Bridging the Class Divide, and Other Lessons for Grassroots Organizing*, published in 1997 by Beacon Press.