

Boggs Center to nurture community leadership

"Radical action requires hope and the knowledge of alternatives, not merely desperation." - Alfred E. Young: Beyond the American Revolution.

LIVING FOR CHANGE

August 7 is Detroit Neighborhoods Day

By Grace Lee Bogg

This Saturday, August 7, is Detroit Neighborhoods Day. Neighborhoods Day was started in Detroit by Luther Keith and Arise Detroit in 2007

- to give community residents an opportunity to showcase their pride in their neighborhood;
- to “forge relationships that can help improve the quality of life for city residents going forward.”

Visiting the Arise Detroit website www.arisedetroit.org my impression is that, up to now, Neighborhoods Day has been mainly an Events Day, a day of parades, visits to libraries and museums, appearances by celebrities and non-profit sponsors etc.

It is not yet “forging the relationships that can help improve the quality of life for city residents going forward.”

One way to forge these relationships might be for Neighborhoods Day participants to re-imagine and reconstitute themselves as members of ongoing Neighborhood Responsibility Councils or 21st century Block Clubs.

These Neighborhood Responsibility Councils or block clubs could organize ongoing activities to bring the neighbor back into the ‘hood. For example:

- Plant community gardens,
- Board up vacant houses and seek new owners or renters to rebuild the neighborhood.
- Provide school supplies for neighborhood children.
- Work with neighborhood schools to identify activities that schoolchildren can do to beautify and make the neighborhood safer and healthier,
- Organize community health festivals and farmers markets.
- Encourage young people to teach computer skills to elders in exchange for cooking, knitting, sewing instructions;
- Organize Skills Exchanges or Time Banks so community residents can exchange skills and

talents and neighborhood potlucks to share food and stories.

The possibilities are endless. Overnight our neighborhoods can become safer and healthier because we are reconnecting the generations and hope is replacing fear.

Some of these activities are already being carried on in Detroit neighborhoods.

They are based on practicing the principles of Transformative Organizing rather than Social Service/Protest organizing, two very different ways of organizing.

During the post-World War II years, Saul Alinsky (1909-1972) practiced and taught Social Service/Protest organizing, codifying his ideas in *Rules for Radicals*. According to Alinsky, the role of the community organizer (usually someone from outside the community like the young Barack Obama in Chicago) is to rub raw the sores of discontent of the have-nots or masses. This agitation arouses the masses out of their apathy to participate in protest demonstrations, which put pressure on those in power to grant reforms.

By contrast, Transformative Organizing is based on the concept that to change the world, we ourselves must become the change we seek in the world. This view of organizing was first projected years ago by Gandhi.

The 1955-56 Montgomery bus boycott launched the civil rights movement because it was based on Gandhi's principles of Transformative organizing. Before the eyes of the world a people who had been treated as less than human struggled against racism not as angry victims or rebels but as new men and women, forerunners of a new, more human society.

Every day it is becoming clearer that we cannot expect solutions to the escalating crises in our daily lives to come from Congress or the White House.

The time has come for us to create these solutions for ourselves by forming Neighborhood Responsibility Councils and 21st century block clubs. To live like human beings from day to day, we need to become active citizens in our own neighborhoods.

THINKING FOR OURSELVES
Democracy is growing in Detroit
By Shea Howell

As soon as the Detroit City Council rejected the high -pressure push to put the question of mayoral control on the ballot, the establishment chorus began shouting its scorn. Calling the council members "wimps as bad as the old council, illogical, stumbling and short -sighted," the pundits of the powerful went after the six council members who voted "No" with all the insults they could muster.

The Governor said she was "disappointed."

Mayor Bing, who had been absent from the debate, chided the six "No" voters, saying, "It's unfortunate that the council has chosen to deny voters the opportunity to decide for themselves what kind of school system and accountability best serves our children. Our schools and our kids deserve better."

Many critics tried to say that the council vote was "undemocratic" because it wouldn't let the voters

decide. Bob Berg, the spokesperson for Change for Better Schools, a group backed by \$500,000 from Compuware and \$10,000 from the Regional Chamber of Commerce, said, “It’s very distressing that on an issue so important to the future of Detroit, a majority of the council has decided the people of Detroit weren’t entitled to voice their opinion through the ballot box.”

The Detroit Free Press Editorial said that “Detroit City Council members apparently believe that democratic accountability over the public schools is so important that they couldn’t give city voters a democratic say over whether that accountability ought to run through the school board or the mayor and council.”

Labeling the refusal to be bullied as “anti democratic” reveals how little the forces behind mayoral control understand about democracy. It also shows how little they understand about the real democratic engagement emerging in the city.

To begin with, anyone who knows anything at all about recent Detroit history knows that the efforts by the State to take control of the schools have met with bitter and widespread opposition. When the question was put to the ballot in 2004, voters soundly endorsed the need for an elected board.

What people also know is that any time the business elite doesn’t like the outcome of a vote, it finds ways to bring the issue back until it gets the result it wants. A quick review of the history of voting against casino gambling is an example of this strategy. High paid ads, well-orchestrated campaigns and a lot of disinformation become the ways to manipulate, maneuver and wear down voters in the name of democracy.

But Detroiters are becoming much more sophisticated in their understanding of democracy. Many of us recognize that voting is only a small aspect of a vibrant democracy. Often it is the least reliable, most easily manipulated.

Over the last several decades, abandoned by capital development, Detroiters have been working at the neighborhood level to create new ways of living together. Faced with the real questions of what to do with vacant land and how to provide healthy food, Detroiters created the most vibrant urban agricultural movement in the country.

This is not just about growing food. The urban ag movement is infused with democratic decision making at the neighborhood level. It is an example of what is going on in hundreds of neighborhoods across Detroit as citizens come together to talk about how to keep parks open, how to provide for elderly neighbors, how to take care of abandoned buildings. This process of engaging one another in problem-solving is the emerging democratic strength of the city. It is part of why the USSF came to Detroit and was so impressed by what it saw. It is how we navigate the difference between a bullying ballot effort and serious discussions and decision-making about the future of our city.

This fight over the schools is an opportunity for us to take what we have been learning about democracy to create neighborhood councils that will begin to meet and make collective decisions about our common future.

Democracy is growing in Detroit.