

## **BridgeBuilder Award Acceptance Speech**

**By Gail Schechter, Executive Director, Interfaith Housing Center of the Northern Suburbs**  
*Delivered April 30, 2005, at the BridgeBuilder Award Dinner presented by the Justice & Peace Commission of the Chicago Province of the Society of the Divine Word, at 2001 Waukegan Road at Techny, in Northbrook, Illinois*

While Father Daniel Berrigan was in hiding from the FBI, which had already incarcerated his brother Philip for leading nonviolent protests against the Vietnam War, the priest recorded conversations with the writer Robert Coles. He said, “My brother and I feel that there’s an important chapter of history to be written in our own time, and we would like to help write it. It is a chapter of history which, we hope, will see the center of the Church’s concerns located at the edge of society – where human lives are involved in a tragic struggle for survival and human dignity.”

Father Berrigan’s image resonates with me — the image of locating the center of our concerns at the edge of society.

In my life as a community organizer, I’ve worked with so many different people in Brooklyn, NY, Hayward, CA, Chicago, and the northern suburbs: white, African-American, Latina, Asian, and Native American mothers trying to make ends meet, retired factory workers of all nationalities, sanitation workers, people who took care of children, veterans, museum guards, refugees, clergy, seamstresses, nurses, grandparents, collectors of various things, amateur artists, horticulturalists and musicians, laundry workers, and even an Olympic gold medal ski jumper who became a house painter and lived in a motel. Each one of these individuals is a whole world and a multitude of stories.

To me, bridgebuilding starts with a belief in the intrinsic value of each being, including the one at the edge of society. Those of us who are organizers in this room know that our motivation to do what we do comes from anger — essentially, the anger we feel when we see individuals marginalized. An image that sticks with me is that of a cab driver who lived in a Morton Grove motel that the Village wanted to tear down so they could get a “tax-revenue producing big box retailer.” At a public meeting Interfaith helped to organize with dozens of tenants who sported buttons of their design that said, “I’m *Not* Blight,” this man said, “I transport blood from LifeSource to Lutheran General Hospital. I have to live here.” In other words, aren’t I important too?

When you listen to others and give them the respect they are due, it transforms you both. You have created a community. I remember a woman I worked with, Winnie, who lived in one of a number of small cabins in Hayward, CA that were built in the 1920s for farmhands. A new owner threatened to demolish the cabins and displace the tenants, despite rent controls. Winnie had been abandoned by her husband and children and lived alone among her stuffed animals, bird cages, and photos. She had always kept to herself even after going to tenant meetings I helped to organize, but after some time the group developed its own camaraderie. Eventually, we pulled together a court case, and when I asked Winnie who would be their spokesperson, she said, “We all will.” I knew then that my job as an organizer was done.

Organizing is a process. And it is labor-intensive. Marty Needelman, a legal services attorney with whom I worked on so many rent strike and eviction cases in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, said to me, “This is a war of attrition; the one who gives up first, loses.” When you’re up against an unlimited supply of money, you need practically unlimited stamina and unlimited neighbors locking arms with you. Organizing doesn’t solve social problems in and of itself. But it gives you a technique to realize your vision instead of resigning to despair.

And this is why I see housing organizing at the core. It's not because I care about bricks-and-mortar and "units." That really doesn't excite me. A house is not a home when it functions as merely a shelter or a bunker where you crash after work for "psychic survival," as Christopher Lasch phrased. It's when you invite neighbors in, trudge together to court or to a demonstration, that you turn your home into the locus of your community. You counter the forces that try to pull your family and "personal life" apart.

I am concerned that many who say they care about "affordable housing" have no concept that an individual is more than the sum of her or his jobs. For example, you hear the argument for affordable housing as one of: "we should house our local police, firefighters, etc." or the elderly. Reading between the lines, the argument means, "the Worthy." I find this distasteful, because worth and "eligibility" are not measurable by any scale. We should enhance, not diminish, others' freedom to choose where they want to make their homes, because it *fundamentally* acknowledges their freedom *to be*.

I recall the story of the Grand Inquisitor in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. The Devil, masquerading as a humanist, says that people are only too happy to trade their freedom for bread, and so the tossing of bread is masked as love. But it's really treating people like a malleable herd with meaningless lives.

That's why the best organizers and leaders like Moses, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Dorothy Day, Gandhi, and the other unsung heroes and heroines of the labor, women's, civil rights, environment and other progressive movements are so inspiring. They are leaders through their ability to locate the center of our concerns at the edge of society — and in doing so, lifting us all up. They know we want bread (that is, housing and job opportunities, an end to political oppression), but they also know that we want to be judged by the content of our character, to express ourselves, and to know that our contributions, whatever they might be, are important to the scheme of the World and the mystery of the universe.

What matters is that you believe, as Archbishop Tutu says, that "each of us is of infinite worth."

The Interfaith Housing Center doesn't say, "Fair and affordable housing can be justified because they are good for the economy." We say, "Every human being should have an equal ability to sit at the north suburban table — and indeed should be *invited* to do so. It's the right and just thing to do." Funny, it's those who think you should "earn" your keep here (whatever that means) who call us "zealots." I want to ask them, "What is your concept of Community?"

This is also why I'm most excited these days when I see what I call "altruistic organizing." This is when people buck the truism that we organize based on "self-interest." The ultimately successful struggle to save the 17-acre Mallinckrodt Campus in Wilmette over the last three years was precisely about a *vision* of community. Ironically, it was the "faith-based" institution, Loyola University, that put personal self-interest over public service when it decided it wanted to sell the campus to a developer who would have cut down most of the 400 trees and the historic building to put up luxury homes. It was an eclectic mix of Wilmette residents who said to Loyola, and to the Park District and Village Boards, "we have a vision." We see this land as a wilderness, a refuge, as a place where older persons and families of all incomes and abilities can live, as a locus for environmental education, a pool, a skateboard park. They didn't have a consensus on every characteristic of the future Mallinckrodt, but they did agree that this site was important to them. Lali Watt, one of the main organizers, is here tonight. She told me that on the day of the local referendum that would authorize the Park District to buy the property from Loyola and take it out of speculator hands that she and so many others, including myself, worked

so hard to pass, an elderly man had himself taken out on a stretcher to his polling place, simply to cast his “yes” vote. What was his “self-interest” here? I find this very inspiring.

In fact, I find progressive visions that are developed by the people themselves inspiring, because through the mutual respect that comes from organizing, I see creativity rewarded, not quashed. I see this in Evanston, where residents have come together to make Evanston energy efficient and pedestrian-friendly, and who want to take housing out of the speculative market through a community land trust. Political will, which tends to lag behind, needs to listen.

I find the Nathalie Salmon House inspiring. It is the vision of an elderly couple, Holocaust survivors, whose only child died when hit by a car in Chicago, who decided to create intergenerational housing in her memory. No, there was no “funding mechanism” out there to do it. Nothing but force of will. And funding sources bent to it. The Salmons and a non-profit group created a wonderful building in Rogers Park with apartments for independent seniors, families with children, students caring for elders needing additional supports, and a garden out back. Several of us who organized for affordable housing at Mallinckrodt visited the Salmon House and hoped that we could bring this vision to Wilmette but we didn’t succeed. Yet.

On the North Shore, a region of tremendous resources, an inclusive and diverse community can only come about through an appeal to our desire to share, reach out, and merge our self-interest with our community interest, not to me-firstism, of which we have plenty. This desire is, in fact, what motivated local residents and religious leaders form Interfaith in ‘72. And this is why we continue to need each one of you today to work together with us to break down barriers that keep “the unworthy” out and to say “no” to luxury gated communities, like the one next door. Together, we can build bridges between those on the edge and those in the mainstream, and in the process create a new center.

This is why I make it my business to center our concerns at the edge of society. “Without the feeling of belonging to the threatened I would be a self-surrendering fugitive from reality,” said the Jewish survivor, Jean Amery. I see it as my job as a community organizer and advocate to point out what Flannery O’Connor calls “modern life distortions,” and the “unacceptable,” and “to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural.” This may be what the work of an activist has in common with the storyteller, the musician, and the artist. It is the act of *revelation*.

So here’s my vision. That we all come together for the second anniversary of the peace pole at Techny with shovels just as we did today. But we would use the shovels for a different purpose. We would be breaking ground for a new intergenerational complex. In this complex, we’d have cab drivers, people with disabilities, piano players, needle trades workers, children and the elderly, people of all races and income levels, people who want to rent or who want to own. Families of all sizes and compositions. We’d have a space for concerts, studios for artists, a community garden, a health clinic, a restaurant, a non-denominational worship space. We’d have a place for kids to learn about the environment, a skate-board park, a pool, and easy access to public transit. I would just love to live here, wouldn’t you? Let’s do it!