

Community Voices Heard



CELEBRATION PROGRAM

THURSDAY JUNE 2ND, 2011
MUSEUM OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK

WE SPOKE. THEY HEARD.

By now the story is almost legendary: one sunny Saturday morning in May, some 15 plus years ago, a group of people, mostly women – many who were homeless, on welfare, and/or unemployed – came together so that our voices might be heard.

Frustrated, but not defeated, by increasing attacks on our livelihood and our humanity by a government less interested in lifting us up than in pushing us down, we met, we organized, and we said “enough is enough”.

At first, no one listened. Why would they? In the mid-nineties, attacks on the poor demonstrated not only a jaw-dropping lack of compassion, but an equally devastating capacity on the part of government for cruelty, neglect, and malice. We were commonly demonized by those who claimed to advocate on our behalf and were used as a wedge to instill fear in an unstable middle-class. Our legislators called for Victorian-era solutions: putting poor women in labor houses, separating children from families on welfare, and eradicating all aid to the working poor and unemployed.

We were at a crossroads. We had no choice but to get their attention and to remind them that we were people: people struggling – yet surviving – at every moment of every day. We were going to school, learning skills, feeding our families; all despite policies that punished us for any effort to gain financial traction and independence. We were downtrodden, but strong; tired, but ready for a fight; silent, but itching to make some noise.

From that first meeting of 80 people, a singular commitment emerged: we would be heard, but never at the expense of silencing a single voice among us. The seeds of Community Voices Heard were planted that day. Nurtured then, and still, by influences throughout the history of the social justice movement; we used the successes of others as our blueprint for action. And it worked.

The louder we got, the more they heard. In the early days, we led marches in New York City, Albany, and Washington D.C., we targeted then Mayor Giuliani and his cohorts at all levels of government – including knocking on the door of the architect of the Work Experience Program (WEP) and asking him, among other things, why he was attacking poor families. With razor-sharp wit and ever-increasing numbers, our actions held to the fire, and more importantly to the scrutiny of the mainstream media, these men and women whose version of welfare reform was humiliating, degrading, and offered no hope of financial, personal, or professional independence.

With megaphones, signs, and swelling confidence we took over the New York State Assembly Speaker's office; we held eviction proceedings for the state Budget Director in Albany; and we shut down the capital building.

With equal enthusiasm we lobbied for what we knew was right: our efforts to replace WEP with our own version of welfare reform not only gave us a seat at the table as a NY city-wide leader in the fight for economic justice, it also organized our ranks, developed leaders, and launched the first of many innovative research projects. With numerous allies, we forced the New York City Council to override the Mayor's veto and pass the Transitional Jobs Bill. When the Mayor continued to balk, we uncovered data

proving that WEP workers were displacing city workers and took it to the steps of Gracie Mansion.

With growing influence and sophistication we secured almost \$50 million in state funding for wage subsidy programs for welfare recipients and weeks later were swift to respond to the post-September 11th reality that New York City would never be the same. Our actions in those weeks continue to resonate today: the elimination of over 50,000 jobs in Manhattan, as well as the on-going effort to redevelop and reinvigorate the city's economy, demands that we be vigilant and creative in representing under and unemployed New Yorkers impacted by the events of that day.

On the national front we coordinated strategies with organizations across the country to hold simultaneous actions nation-wide and in Washington D.C. We met with Senator Hillary Clinton and reported on our work, with no small amount of pride, to the United States Congress. Again, when our words were ignored, our actions got their attention — at President George Bush's Texas home and at Senator Clinton's, we cheered, jeered, and yes, even delivered waffles.

As we turned up the volume on New York City Mayor Bloomberg's administration, demanding and receiving a new deputy mayor position to focus on our issues and a Commission on Economic Opportunity, so too did we look inward to assess our growth and evaluate our future. We initiated and set into motion a comprehensive strategic plan that has refined our efforts and increased our productivity. More importantly, it has articulated our transition from a single-issue, New York City-based organization to a multi-issue statewide entity invested in organizing for economic justice and electoral power in every area code that will have us.

That plan has led us to engage more directly with preserving and improving the public housing stock in New York City and to increasing the power of tenants in the public housing infrastructure. We have swiftly wielded our expanded power to great success: we were instrumental in securing more than \$250 million in new resources for public housing; we helped reassess the formulas used to fund housing projects; and we released three research-intensive reports on urban housing.

Here at home — and by home, we mean Harlem — we continue to work to ensure that low-income residents have affordable places to live, access to good jobs and training, and supportive services they need to take care of their families. By contacting more than 2,000 people in the neighborhood we have successfully encouraged a powerful base of men, women, and families of East, Central, and West Harlem to act as a collective and unified voice on low-income issues.

We have realized that our voices can be expressed in many ways, not the least of which is through the ballot box. As a result we initiated and executed the Voter Power Project with an astonishing level of success: we've made multiple contacts with more than 18,000 voters around the state; cemented stronger ties with other New York vote-growing organizations; and, just recently, launched an affiliated 501c4 organization — CVH Power Inc. With CVH Power, we will partner with like-minded organizations

to deepen our lobbying efforts and take on more hard-hitting, issue-based civic engagement work.

A decade and-a-half later, we have new friends, allies, and brothers and sisters in places we never thought possible. We opened a Community Voices Heard chapter in Yonkers and mobilized voters around a critical State Senate campaign; built a membership of over 3,000 residents; and demanded and won an accountability session with the City Council. Our Newburgh Chapter organized an action with more than 300 Newburgh residents; won the inclusion of low-income residents on Housing Boards; and persuaded Mayor Nick Valentine to hire 100% local labor for all waterfront development projects. And last, but not least, our chapter in Poughkeepsie has quickly grown to nearly 1,300 members, with many participating in actions with the County Department of Social Services; we trained and connected local leaders with our statewide welfare and workforce campaign; and we hired a full-time organizer and most recently held a 70-person meeting with the Mayor.

Despite, or rather, because of all this growth, our commitment to our core issue is stronger than ever before: justice welfare recipients is, and always will be, one of our paramount missions. Just this past month, Richard Trumka, president of the AFL-CIO, stood side-by-side with our members and spoke passionately about the exploitation of unpaid workfare workers and other excluded worker sectors. Both his participation in this action and his words speak volumes about the success of our efforts to be included in the ongoing narrative of labor justice. We have a seat at the table, and we have just started eating.

We're still speaking. They're still hearing.

Tonight, we raise our voices in celebration. The roar of our rage is not only decibels louder than it was 15 years ago, it's more strategic, more organized, and, as a result, gets a lot more attention. Our passion, our compassion, has always trumped their indifference, ambivalence, or worse, malice. Just look around you. The proof is in the leaders we've nurtured, the veterans we've lost, and the allies we've enlisted to our cause; the proof, as if you needed any, is in the victories, the losses, and the promise to keep on organizing for as long as it takes. And then for a little longer.

Tonight, we take a moment to listen to that sound in the distance, growing louder and louder, rolling over the horizon like a gathering storm.

What is that sound?

It's the voices of our community.

We began as a single-issue, single location campaign and have since expanded to be a multi-issue and multi-chapter organization.

Our vision of growth is to build power for low-income people throughout New York State.

