

## FOREWORD

BY RAY SUAREZ

Journalists don't like to admit it, but they often head out into the world with a pretty good idea of what they intend to find. The story is already writing itself when they should still be wondering, searching, curious. We go to bad places to live to report the news. We write little morality plays. We talk to local people armed with our pads and pencils and our own expectations that they are as anxious to get out of there as we would be. We emissaries from the middle class dropping by to pass our judgment on them. It's not that we're insensitive creeps, exploiters, or worse. It is more often the rushed nature of our business. We parachute into people's lives, cast them in our dramas, and move on. We are also prisoners of the conventions of journalistic narratives: local heroes, self-sacrificing neighbor, tragic victims, bright promise ending in sorrow. We get few opportunities to know, or to show, the struggles of our neighbors. Their problems are presented formulaically, not as dispatches from the other side of town, but from what might as well be the other side of the world. Every night, in cities large and small, we commit the verbal equivalents of drive-by shootings.

Once in St. Louis, I talked to a young single mother in a rundown part of that once thriving city. We met by the school where she was a volunteer. She introduced me to other members of her neighborhood crime watch. I asked her where she would go if she could get away from this corner of north St. Louis, and she immediately set me straight. She loved her neighborhood. She had struggled for years to make it a better place. Why would she leave now that she could see some of her efforts finally bearing fruit?

She shut me up. (Well, for a minute, anyway.)

And she gave me plenty to think about. As a reporter and interviewer, I've heard thousands of stories from people struggling to control their own fates and the destinies of their neighborhoods. In places as different as the people themselves, they've worked to take back their streets, improve schools, build houses, fight drugs, reclaim shattered lives, and exert local control over their economic destinies. Whether you live in one of these places, or live the kind of life in which you may never see one of them firsthand, you should thank your lucky stars that so many, in so many ways, come forward to work.

There is a common thread running like a vein of ore through these stories. It's the surge of confidence, in themselves and in their neighbors, that comes to people when they take those first, tentative steps toward acting instead of being acted upon. For millions of Americans, this kind of control is expected, a normal part of everyday life. As you move down the wage ladder, from high-income neighborhoods to the homes of the struggling classes, this potency and power gradually morphs to a kind of resignation. What sets these places apart, physically and socially, is often the widespread feeling that the people with the say-so will write the story of the places they live, not the people who live there.

We may not always recognize it, but one thing I've learned in decades of reporting from urban ground zero, the one thing the Indivisible project (of which this book is one result) illustrates so clearly, is the tremendous gulf between being poor, and being poor and powerless. The shame so many Americans immediately attach to poverty may come not from the state of poverty itself, but from the passivity and powerlessness that so often accompany it. That powerlessness can even creep into middle-class life. The "muscles" of civic engagement grow slack. People with a stake in the system grow disconnected from it. Community organizing has been a powerful antidote to the despair that comes from the inability to comprehend your own circumstances and rise above them.

In many of the most successful organizing projects I've seen close up, the people or the places they affect so powerfully don't end up looking very different. The houses are still old. The city services may still fall short. But the places and the people who call them home are altered in ways that register with even a casual observer: people who need to deal with officialdom lift up their heads instead of staring at their feet; young women who need prenatal care don't hide in the shadows without getting what they must have; voting doesn't seem like a counterintuitive act. The people who are organized deal with the rest of their world with a sense of entitlement – not entitlement in the sense of someone who confidently demands something for nothing, but the entitlement that comes from a wakening sense of citizenship, a connection to the whole of society. The potential had been there all along. It was finally unlocked by the demand that an individual step forward and join the wider enterprise of living in society. The tremendous isolation of so many American lives can make their manifest difficulties so much worse. The inability to see your own role in shaping your own future is an epidemic. The work profiled in *Local Heroes Changing America* is an antidote.

We've come through several decades of depopulation, deindustrialization, disinvestment, and decline in much of urban America. There was a time when the big, powerful voices in the culture were aggressively throwing their weight around in the toughest neighborhoods: closing plants, creating programs, clearing "slums." The fate of the community was not in the hands of the people who went to work there, the people who swept the walks, and paid the bills. The people who had been good enough to make steel, and shoes, and cardboard boxes were not going to be able to make decisions about their own future. This condescension, this steady lecture from city hall, the state house, and the federal government finally brought a backlash. Lowell, and east L.A., and north Milwaukee, and east Cleveland, finally started to say no.

From the figurative sons and daughters of legendary community organizer Saul Alinsky, to parish priests ready to incite their flocks to march, and from people who had left the old neighborhood and come back with the training and skills their people needed, came a thousand new organizations. After banks and factories and the federal government had left these places to their fate, the people left behind had to find a way to make it on their own. This book is a collection of those stories, gathered with the conviction that people are experts about their own lives.

This isn't about revolution.

This isn't about getting rich.

It is about nothing more revolutionary than harnessing the energy and common sense of common people. You'll find, as I have found, listening to their stories, and watching their hard work, that people are rarely more heroic, rarely more beautiful, rarely more fully alive, than when they find fulfillment in each other and in community.

The causes and the methods aren't always "right." Successes like the ones you find within these pages often come after failures. Maybe the last time the community didn't fully understand what it was up against. Maybe the time before a strong idea was there, but the foot soldiers needed to make it work couldn't commit to the end. No matter. Each attempt teaches lessons. Each is another step in the making of a citizen.

Perhaps you'll admire their self-realization. Maybe you'll find comfort in their strength. But will you wonder about yourself? In the stories and powerful first-person narratives of people engaged in the difficult work of wresting hope out of despair will you wonder, "If I had grown up here, would I have been crushed by it?" "If my neighbors called out in their suffering, would I step in to help, even at personal and material cost?" "What makes someone who could go elsewhere and make a pretty decent buck, throw in her lot with these people?" Even if you were ready to put yourself in a harness in a time of crisis, could you keep it up long enough to see it through?

I'm not sure how to adequately express what it is that sets apart those who come forward when so many others can't be bothered. I am reluctant to celebrate them in a way that gushes too much, that sentimentalizes the serious obstacles these neighbors face every day. To make them into selfless Mother Teresas would only make them unreachable, comforting in their remoteness from everyday experience. But to make them too ordinary would understate the real risk and sacrifice often faced in making a challenge your own. Long before the pats on the back and the thanks of the grateful comes suspicion of motives and resentment of prying. "It's always been this way. Who do you think you are?"

All right. This particular road to redemption is not for everybody. But if you look at the deeply distressed communities across the country, from the south Bronx to Brownsville, Texas, to Chicago's West Side to East Palo Alto, what will you find about the people and places that are going to make it, and the ones that aren't? The places with the most active citizens' sector are the ones with a chance. They may be even poorer than other neighborhoods nearby in all the conventional measures: years of education, household income, single heads of households. But people looking out for each other have a tool for forging a better life more potent than a few extra bucks.

They are more able to extend their control – what sociologists call the "social control of normative behavior" – from their front doors to the corners and alleyways where drug dealers

and gang-bangers lurk. Citizen power informs the political process and sends impulses up the political ladder from the streets to the councils of government and grant-making institutions. In what writer Malcolm Gladwell calls the “tipping point,” a new ambience created by citizen action can make other problems appear more soluble. The free-floating anxiety many Americans, rich and poor, feel about the places they live disappears once they are engaged. You can see the real threat and real potential for what they are.

The attention you couldn't get as one person on the phone is suddenly paid to organized neighbors, by schools and police, by banks and hospitals. With each individual battle a little more is learned about what doors need to be knocked on and what powerful people need to be consulted. Each battle, won or lost, leaves its residue. That residue eventually becomes part of the memory banks of neighborhood groups that one day makes them powerful – even one day, God help us, makes them the Establishment.

The authentic and necessary leaders who rise up from the grass roots have become mayors and city council members and state representatives. They have perfected community models that have been exported and met needs around the country. Perhaps most important, they have served as a constant reminder to the rest of the society that the “problem people” are not passively sitting packed away in declining neighborhoods, in ghettos and public housing, waiting for the rest of us to help.

Local heroes also do something subtle and necessary: they remove the oppression of low expectations from the arsenals of the arrogant. People rising to help themselves cannot as easily be dismissed, forgotten, or marginalized. Each successful project is a claim on the goods of the wider society that would have been snubbed or ignored before. These stories act as a wake-up call to those who hold the power and the resources and before could very easily turn away.

The needs are innumerable: in housing, public health, employment, crime, education, safety, environmental protection, and sustainable hunting and fishing. A domestic Marshall Plan is not just around the corner. But the potent and infectious example of the street workers, organizers, volunteers, trainers, and the trained light the way all over the country.

It would be ludicrous to imagine that all the unmet needs across America are just waiting for a plucky band of organized neighbors to come to the rescue. Some problems are too old, too deep, too serious to be overcome simply through community organization. However, when help does arrive from some far-off somewhere, the well-organized neighborhood will be able to absorb that help far better than the one in which alienation from neighbor and local government leaves people scattered and suspicious, bitter and pessimistic. Connection to these local institutions turns a floating free agent into a citizen. Suddenly, a neighbor can see his or her self-interest tied to who is mayor in a way never possible before. A government that had only shown itself as hostile, or at best neglectful, seems reformable. This should come as no surprise, since these same citizen volunteers have already made a journey in which unlikely events became possible. Gang-bangers, welfare mothers, dropouts, and street people suddenly

melt away; in their place are citizens.

Citizens see themselves as actors. They are no longer waiting for someone to save them. They are now ready to transact: to have expectations and to meet the demands of others. This is not a small thing. It is everything.

*In Local Heroes*, testimony is strong. People talk into being the complex relationships they have with their causes. The people you'll meet have been transformed themselves by the transformative work they do for others. They are keenly aware of their own selves, the assumptions and suspicions they brought to the work of change. Now they are stronger, affirmed, clear, and coherent. They can see what they've done and take satisfaction from it. I know these people too, from the forgotten places in the American landscape that only make the late news when there's bad news.

By definition, half of all Americans earn a below-average income. Half of all families are not excitedly logging on to the NASDAQ Web site to see how their high-tech shares are performing. They aren't getting in on the ground floor of a hot new IPO or feeling burdened by the "wealth effect" that Alan Greenspan believes is fueling an overheated marketplace.

To watch and read our news in this country it is hard to remember how many tens of millions of Americans are not powering up their Palm Pilots or chatting into a cell phone while strolling down an airport concourse to their next flight. That world of pleasurable consumption is too much with us, and the real lives of the other half are not shown enough. In *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* America, the heroes of this book are investing lives with dignity, telling their own histories, coming to America with clean hands and Martin Luther King's check, marked "insufficient funds."

If you take the subway in New York City to Grand Central Station and reach the sidewalk from underground at 42nd Street, walk toward the Daily News Building. Above the impressive front doors is a bas-relief, in fabulous art deco style. Spanning the urban street scene in the panel, the to and fro of men and women, is the legend "He Made So Many of Them." Some 140 years ago, a man who grew up in crushing poverty, Abraham Lincoln, is popularly reported to have said that "God must have loved the common people. He made so many of them."

This sculpture is one of my favorite sights in my hometown. Down at sidewalk level, far below the stylized skyscrapers, sun rays, and clouds, are the jumbled masses of the American street. Men and women of various shapes and sizes and stations of life are the representatives of the plain folk, the demos of our democracy. I like to think that Lincoln was right about the Almighty. But I'm convinced those common folk are ready to become uncommon gifts to the world around them.