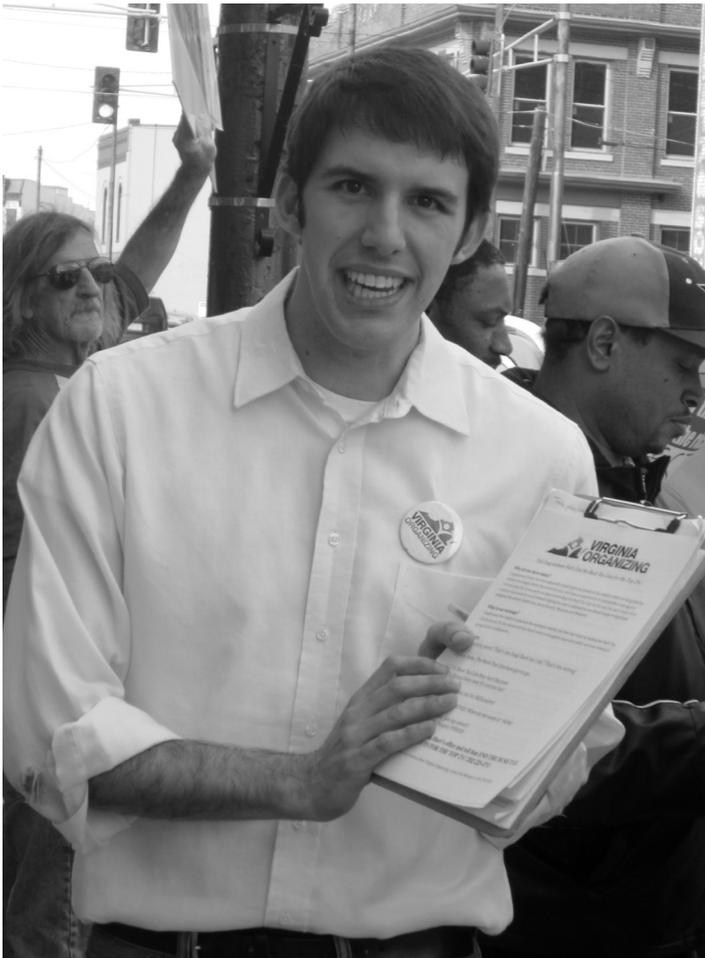


Social Policy

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Roots and Relationships
Reclaiming Community
Organizing in the
Obama Era



Left photo: Community Organizer Nik Belanger (and author of this article) holds a petition with specific demands to Congressman Robert Hurt to end the Bush tax cuts.

Right photo: A Virginia Organizing leader stood in support of the Affordable Care Act and the benefits provided for young people.

you're talking about, that's exactly why I'm here. I'm trying to learn more about the community – what people care about and want to see change.”

A blank stare. I took a deep breath and asked the question I'd tossed at almost every person I'd met since moving here.

“What do you want to see change in Danville?”

His eyes widened.

“No one's ever asked me that before.”

It has been five years since that conversation in early 2010. Since then, I've had hundreds of similar conversations. And here's one thing about which I am certain: the Danville Chapter of Virginia Organizing knows what it means to build power for change. Over the years, we have reached more than 20,000 of Danville's

43,000 residents through door-to-door canvasses, phone banks, and tabling. We have knocked on every door in

nearly every low-income neighborhood, many of them multiple times. In July 2014, the Danville Chapter successfully campaigned for the introduction and passage of a Ban the Box resolution to remove criminal history questions from the City of Danville's job applications,

overcoming opposition from city staff and reluctance from a few city councilors. We have made thousands of phone calls, trained hundreds and hundreds of community members to take action, and helped people develop their skills as leaders.

And it all grew out of that one question.

While that question – what do you want to see change? – feels second-nature to me now, I realize how foreign it may be for many young organizers today. As the organizer for the Danville Chapter of Virginia Organizing,

I am part of a new generation of organizers who joined staffs around the country after the 2008 presidential

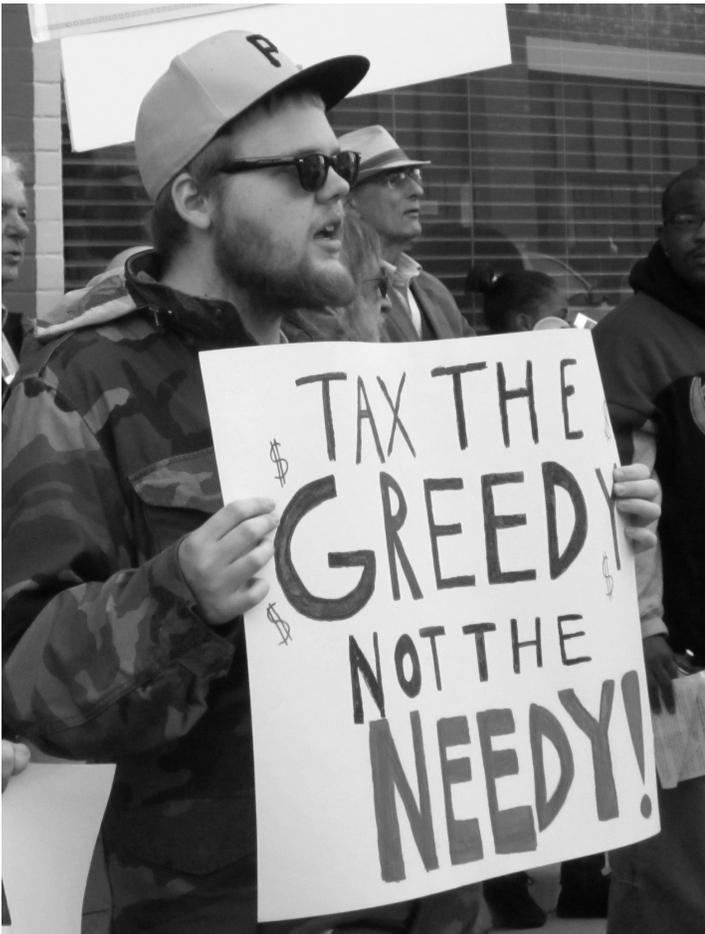
**“What do you want to see change in Danville?”
His eyes widened.
“No one's ever asked me that before.”**



Danville Chapter leaders participating in a "Broken Hearts Day" at the General Assembly.



Members of the Danville Chapter performed a role play outside of Congressman Robert Hurt's Danville office on December 4, 2012 to demonstrate the absurdity of the Bush tax cuts for the wealthiest 2 percent of Americans.



Left photo: A member of the Danville Chapter outside of Congressman Robert Hurt’s Danville office on December 4, 2012 demonstrating against the Bush tax cuts for the wealthiest 2 percent of Americans.

Right photo: A Danville leader held an oversized check symbolizing the tax breaks given to millionaires while local families saw cuts to important programs.

election. As a former community organizer, the Democratic nominee not only brought the profession to the attention of the general public, but also applied many of its techniques to the campaign itself, and thousands of campaign workers and volunteers learned the power of face-to-face organizing.

Along with community organizing’s newfound visibility and popularity, however, came a pressure to avoid the grassroots work required to build democratic community organizations. In the years after Barack Obama’s first presidential campaign, both intentionally and uncontrollably, the practice of organizing changed in significant ways.

To understand the success of the Danville Chapter of Virginia Organizing today requires an appreciation of its brief history – organized by a young community organizer in the Obama era

of mobilization organizing – and the commitment to authentic grassroots organizing that made it possible. What we did in Danville wasn’t anything new, but it is increasingly rare in the post-2008 world.

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Reaffirming Grassroots Organizing in the Obama Era

When I came to Danville in 2010, Southside Virginia was a hotspot on the political map. The Obama campaign had run a successful ground operation to turn out local voters in 2008, but Tom Perriello, the freshman congressman from the president’s party, now faced Tea Party backlash and an electoral challenge from a conservative state senator. National groups were pouring resources into the area to influence the election. An environmental issue organizer working on federal

carbon tax legislation came to town around the same time I did, while other organizers with various labor, party, and national policy affiliations buzzed in and out of the area.

Following the 2008 election and the legislative possibilities it opened to progressive causes, many advocacy organizations exploited President Obama's short history as a community organizer – and the derisive responses it received from some conservatives – to attract young people to what national legislative advocates called community organizing.

Unfortunately, the issue organizing models in which many of these young adults found themselves looked very different from the grassroots community organizing Barack Obama experienced in 1980s Chicago, where he spent three years organizing residents in one neighborhood. The national issue campaigns parachuted recent college graduates like me into unorganized territory with a script and a demanding list of deliverables in hand. They valued the number of media hits generated, phone banking calls made, doors knocked, and voters registered more than relationships, shared experiences, and leadership development. They looked to mobilize, not organize. In the interest of going fast rather than deep, they engaged people's passion but built little trust

and offered no long-term commitment to people.

At a breakneck pace, the environmental organizer in Danville scheduled a community kick-off meeting, set dates for letter-writing parties, organized speakers for campaign events, and got people to take immediate action on the carbon tax issue – with letters, phone calls, and visits to legislators. As best I could tell, the other organizers had similar workloads with even wider territories.

Virginia Organizing had a different approach. As the parachuted-in organizers rushed from one corner of Southside back to Richmond or Roanoke, my workplan was to ask people what they wanted to see change in their local communities, really listen to their answers, and bring them together to build a local Chapter. My schedule filled with one-to-one conversations, canvassing in communities of color, and small neighborhood meetings. I brought no pre-set agenda and asked no leading questions; in short, I built public relationships, rooted in a shared vision of working together for a better community, with individuals who wanted to see things change.

After Congressman Perriello lost his seat in the 2010 mid-term elections, national groups found themselves



Members of the Danville and Martinsville/Henry County Chapters held regular demonstrations in support of tax fairness and a more just federal budget (2012).



Southside Chapter leaders organized to fight for repeal of the Bush tax cuts.



Volunteers from the College of William and Mary helped the Danville Chapter canvass new neighborhoods (2013)

without a progressive Representative or a clear agenda to support and largely left Southside Virginia. Four years later, few of the community members who lobbied for carbon cap-and-trade policies remain active in climate change issues. Six months of organizing did not develop lifelong activists or community leaders. Virginia Organizing, on the other hand, still meets on the fourth Tuesday of every month in church basements and fellowship halls, and I'm still asking people what they want to see change in their local communities – and successfully working with them to realize their hopes and dreams.

It's a lot easier for people to connect to national issues from the bottom up once the base is established than it is to fill in the base from the top down.

Grassroots Organizing as the Foundation of National Issue Work

It's easy to imagine how grassroots organizing works to address local problems – street paving, uneven sidewalks, and even overcrowded schools – but can it really affect change on pressing national and global problems? Virginia Organizing's commitment to

grassroots organizing has not kept us from considering the “big questions” or precluded effective organizing on national issues. In fact, it has made those efforts even stronger. In my first year in Danville, our State Governing Board and member-led strategy committees, responding to the demands of different national partners and the political moment, would occasionally pass down requests for action to organizers like me. The phrase “only if it makes sense locally” followed nearly every request, as our staff leadership and board sought to keep the focus on local grassroots organizing. By rejecting the national-first approach so common in the Obama era of mobilization-first organizing and instead building authentic

relationships, Virginia Organizing has created a core of leaders capable of greater action and ownership at all levels.

Johnny Mayo first heard about Virginia Organizing through a door-to-door canvass in the spring of 2012. Renee Stone, one of our local Chapter members, and a student volunteer from the College of William and Mary were walking through Renee's neighborhood, talking to residents about a city-run weatherization

program and asking about their visions for Danville's future. After a good conversation with the canvass team, a friend of Johnny's told him about Virginia Organizing, and they decided to give me a call and set up a meeting to talk more about what they wanted to see change. I spent over an hour at their kitchen table, hearing stories of harassment and systemic racism within the City of Danville Police Department. Rarely did a month pass where Johnny or one of his friends did not have an encounter with the police, and they felt frustrated that nothing had changed.

"We're in the middle of a different local campaign right now," I explained, "but we should keep this on our list for the future." As the conversation went on, I talked about the organizing process and how one victory builds for the next victory. That approach made sense to Johnny, and he started working on the Chapter's active weatherization campaign, meeting with city councilors and learning more about the strategy. In small ways at first, Johnny was building power for change, working on a variety of local and statewide Virginia Organizing issues.

But my conversations with Johnny didn't stop there. About a month later, Virginia Organizing decided to make a coordinated push on Senator Mark Warner's office. After months of unsuccessfully jumping through hoops to schedule a meeting with Senator Warner to discuss Social Security, a news story broke that he was on a budget retreat at a posh West Virginia resort. Our State

Governing Board had had enough. Organizers started looking for members to write pointed, critical letters-to-the-editor about Senator Warner's willingness to cut Social Security benefits for future generations and his unresponsiveness to the concerns of everyday Virginians. I worked with Johnny to help him write and publish one of those letters, and for whatever reason, his letter caught the attention of Mark Warner's staff. Tell them to stop, Senator Warner's staff told us.

A few weeks later, Johnny was on the way to Washington, D.C. After writing a letter to the editor critical of Senator Warner's position on Social Security, he was invited by our State Governing Board to participate in a meeting with Senator Warner. Alongside people with dozens of years of experience, this brand new member met with a national decision-maker. Sandra A. Cook, the Board chairperson, scheduled reflection time after the meeting and talked with Johnny about his experience. From a conversation around a kitchen table about a local police department, this resident of Danville was helping to influence policy at a national level. Johnny is now on the State Governing Board himself and has represented Virginia Organizing on the board of a national partner organization.

But most importantly, with all of his new experience on statewide and national campaigns, Johnny's focus remained on building power locally. The following spring, the Danville Chapter researched discriminatory



The Southside Chapters held a voter ID law protest in Henry County to call attention to the legislative changes that would require voters to show an ID at the polls or be forced to cast a provisional ballot.



A Martinsville/Henry County resident asking Virginia Lieutenant Governor Ralph Northam a question.

policing and began working to develop local partnerships to address the issue. Johnny spoke as a panelist at a community forum, met with the chief of police, and talked with friends about the problem. Rather than redirect Johnny's energy away from this local issue to a national campaign, I made sure that he – and our whole Chapter – built a foundation locally. It's a lot easier for people to connect to national issues from the bottom up once the base is established than it is to fill in the base from the top down.

Johnny Mayo's story is not all that rare in community organizing. In my first few years organizing in Danville, I met people where they were and kept myself focused on what they wanted to see change in their communities. By learning about power in a local context – police departments, school districts, and even neighborhood associations – community members became more capable participants in national campaigns as both activists and strategists. Paradoxically, it was Virginia Organizing's commitment to the local-first approach that made us such an effective partner on these national issue campaigns.

Effective Organizing Requires More than Passion and Process; It Requires Commitment

Before I joined the staff of Virginia Organizing, I was an active member of its Williamsburg Chapter. Thanks to a local organizer and experienced leaders who spent time sharing stories and ideas with me, I had a decent grasp of the organizing process. But I didn't understand what it took to build a strong local Chapter, especially for a new organizer in a new place.

When I signed my contract to become Virginia Organizing's staff organizer in Danville, our Executive Director told me that I shouldn't bother unless I was willing to dedicate at least five years.

For a recent college graduate, five years can feel like a long time. Few of my friends have spent more than two years in one place. Peace Corps, Teach for America, consulting firms, and large non-profits cater to a "don't sit still" mentality that encourages young people to develop a wide array of experiences and neglect long-term commitment. A friend who works as a research-focused consultant in Washington, D.C., became a manager after proving her dedication to the company and gaining seniority by staying in place for an entire 12 months, after many of her coworkers left for grad school or moved to other cities.

In my first months in Danville, in addition to regular canvassing, I worked through the usual suspects for one-to-one conversations: local labor union leaders, community college instructors, social service providers, and religious leaders, among others. In one conversation, I sat down across the desk from a staff person at Danville Community College. We talked about her passion for education, the effect of state budget cuts on the community college system, and what it was like working with students. When I asked her if she'd be interested in meeting with some other community members who also care about education, she shook her head.

"If you're still here in six months, give me a call."

Our conversation was not the first time she'd sat down with a new organizer. She wasn't going to invest her time in an organization that wouldn't invest its time in her community.

A couple years later, I shared this story with Pastor Loretta Murray, one of the leaders in the Danville

Chapter, and asked her why she stuck with us over the years.

“I wasn’t sure who you were or what Virginia Organizing was all about when we first met,” she said. “But when I saw where you lived, I knew you weren’t going anywhere anytime soon. I could tell you cared.”

When I moved to Danville, I chose to live in one of the poorer communities of color – a choice, without a doubt, made possible by my privilege. I bought an old, abandoned house for under \$12,000 and spent every paycheck and every hour of free time fixing it up. For Pastor Murray, that personal choice I made conveyed an important message. Before we developed a Chapter in Danville, I was the face of Virginia Organizing, and she could tell that Virginia Organizing cared about her community. To become effective community organizers, new staff members need to commit – not just to an issue or organization, but also to a place.

The relationship is not one-sided, though. Organizations must also make commitments to their new organizers. I arrived in Danville a brand new organizer with only a couple years of experience as a local Chapter member and intern. Experienced organizers – people who had been in the fight for 30 years and had won major campaigns – invested time in my development, helping me to analyze and understand this new community. Another young staff organizer, a recent college graduate who cut his teeth on a university living wage campaign and now worked with a local Chapter over three hours away, called every day to help me through those tough first months organizing in a new place. We cannot expect new organizers to pick this up on their own. Good organizing requires good training, and it takes at least two years to understand the basics of community organizing well enough to apply them consistently. To create capable young organizers – and strong organizations for the future – trainers and supervisors need to commit to their new organizers.

In my first year on the job, not only did I receive guidance from my new colleagues, but Virginia Organizing also provided me with the opportunity to attend a Midwest Academy “Organizing for Social Change” weeklong training in Baltimore. Virginia Organizing gives staff five days of paid time and a \$500 stipend each year for self-development. Over the years, I’ve used these resources to read and learn more organizing history, visit other organizations, and attend gatherings of organizers. By devoting the time of experienced organizers and the resources for me to learn on my own, Virginia Organizing made it possible for me to commit to them.

Now five years in, I’m able to make good on the investment that Virginia Organizing made in me by taking on more responsibility within the organization. I staff a planning committee to organize our annual statewide meeting with seasoned leaders from across the state. I work with other organizers on questions of leadership development and facilitate exchanges between leaders of different Chapters to share ideas and experiences. These and other opportunities have allowed me both to think

about bigger organizational questions and to continue to learn new skills. In turn, I realized that I have a role to play in helping other organizers who are just starting out find their place in this work and commit to it for the long haul.

Without demanding this kind of dedication, the progressive movement will not build power. Organizations will face rapid turnover and burnout, and new organizers will lack the grounding to face a challenging responsibility. Young organizers must open themselves up to deep commitment, and grassroots organizations must respond by providing the support to make that possible. Organizations, organizers, leaders, and members grow stronger through commitment – when we really are all in this together.

And here’s the hard truth in the Obama era of mass mobilization organizing: short-term, issue-specific mobilizing does not provide opportunities for that kind of commitment. Strong community organizations can and should mobilize, but it must be grounded in leadership and organizational development – in other words, from the grassroots up. Members of the Danville Chapter have called legislators, organized demonstrations on national issues, and registered voters, but only when it makes strategic sense to our leaders and builds for long-term change. When national groups send new organizers into the field with a laser focus on the passage of a piece of legislation, it’s hard to see purpose beyond that specific vote. And when organizers bounce from one group to another every six months, it’s hard for the organizations to justify any real investment in their growth. To sustain organizers and build strong organizations, we need to develop longer timelines, with space for transformative relationships.

For new organizers to find purpose in this work, we need the freedom to build meaningful relationships without the constant pressure of mobilization deliverables.

In the spring of 2007, I became a member of Virginia Organizing not because the Williamsburg Chapter organizer asked me to phone bank, sign an online petition, or execute a small part of a preplanned action. I got involved because he invited me to learn about issues that mattered to me, participate in meetings with local elected officials, and develop creative tactics. He was not constrained by deliverables but was instead able to engage me in the organizing process in a more organic, meaningful way.

Deliverables – the metrics by which national networks and funders often measure an organization’s success – should reflect what matters most in community organizing. Canvassing, one-to-one conversations, house parties, and leadership trainings are more indicative of effective organizing than what many organizers today have to report, like phone banking calls, earned media, ghostwritten letters, and social media followers. To build strong community organizations capable of making long-term change, organizers and organizations should be measured by the things that will make long-term change possible – the building blocks of strong public relationships.

Deep Relationships Make a Difference

Five years in, it's not the excitement of a protest or the novelty of meeting with a politician that keeps me going; instead, it's the deep relationships that I have developed with people whose lives and opinions matter and who are directly affected by decisions made by public officials. Relationships provide not only a source of personal fulfillment but also a strong foundation for community organizing.

I first met Ernest Williams while canvassing in his neighborhood on the south side of the city. When I asked him what he wanted to see change in his community, he complained that the young men in the neighborhood played their music too loud. We talked for a few more minutes about how long he'd been in his neighborhood, the people who lived there, and what it was like growing up in Danville some 60 years ago.

Over the next two months, Ernest and I saw each other at least once a week. We talked about the civil rights movement in Danville and what Vietnam was like – he had experienced both. He would save some leftovers for me if he knew I was coming by late. When his brother passed away, I dropped off a meal for him and his wife. As we built a relationship, he started coming to our small planning meetings at the public library, participated in a Dismantling Racism Workshop, and introduced me to the families who lived in his apartment complex. I learned that loud music wasn't really his top concern but that he hadn't really thought about being able to change bigger problems before.

From this and other conversations, a group of Virginia Organizing members decided to ask the Danville City Council to endorse a federal job creation bill. This decision grew out of our desire for action and seemed like a no-brainer in a city with double-digit unemployment. We collected petition signatures, held a rally in Ernest's neighborhood, and submitted letters to the editor. Ernest published an op-ed in the local newspaper and even spoke at a City Council meeting about the need for jobs in his city. We were ready for a win. However, at their work session, City Council turned us down. One council member told us that people wouldn't work anyway now that they were all getting checks from the government. We lost. It felt like the getting the wind knocked out of us. We left there defeated.

The following week, Ernest called me late one night. "Nik, we need more white people in the group," Ernest said. "If we want to win, we need to be diverse. When City Council looks at us and sees that you're the only white face in the crowd, they just write us off. We need some of everybody if we want to win."

Over the next few months, I spent more time canvassing in low-income white communities, learning about white churches and charities, and revisiting supportive white folks I had met along the way. Ernest continued talking with his friends and neighbors – mostly people of color – and, together with several other

dedicated leaders, we built a truly diverse Chapter. The Danville Chapter still isn't a perfect reflection of our community, but Ernest helped move us a lot closer to that goal.

My relationship with Ernest not only gave me purpose but also provided insight into our organizing process when I needed it most. Had I met Ernest and immediately asked him to sign a petition or attend a rally, we would be strangers today – and the Danville Chapter would have a very different story to tell. Had Virginia Organizing dropped me in a new place with a weekly quota for phone calls or media events, I don't think I'd still be organizing today. If we believe that relationships provide the foundation for effective organizing, we must recommit ourselves to an organizing approach that places a high value on their development.

For organizations to take full advantage of new organizers' passions, they need the resources to make five-year commitments possible – regardless of election results or shifts in the national campaigns.

I moved to Danville at a particular national political moment. Health care reform was near-reality. Virginia was suddenly an important place to D.C. dealmakers, with momentum from the Obama victory and two moderate senators. In 2009, it was an easy decision to put someone in Southside Virginia – and resources flowed to make that happen. By the end of 2010, however, many national funders decided that money could be better spent in some other political hotspot. While many of the issue organizers moved to more populated parts of the state or quit organizing altogether, I was left out there by myself.

This funding shift – a decision made in Washington, D.C., and other far-away places – could have meant the end of my time in Danville as it did for other organizers. Thanks to Virginia Organizing's strong web of grassroots donations, major donors, and some supportive foundations, I never had to worry about being sent to Virginia Beach, Fairfax County, or the Richmond suburbs. Both the organization and the organizer honored their commitments – to each other and to the community.

When organizations rely too heavily on short-term grants and contracts, they forfeit the ability to make strategic decisions. In the Obama era, funding has flowed for mobilization work and issue campaigns, not for base-building and leadership development. Strategy is left to experts at the national level, and organizers become executors of plans. While this approach might work in the short term, national funders simply do not share the same commitment to a community that a grassroots organization does. The funding cuts that might accompany the retirement of a key congressman or a sudden shift in policy can force organizations to abandon communities and leave organizers out of work.

In order to protect themselves from the lure of quick cash, community organizations must raise their own money and build partnerships with like-minded funders. Supportive funders, in turn, must provide multi-year grants to organizations to make long-term commitments possible. Virginia Organizing does not

rely on funding tied to the changing winds of national campaigns and foundations. Through careful strategic planning and incremental growth, the State Governing Board has consistently valued long-term commitments in its budget. If more organizations could make the same investment that Virginia Organizing made in me, we would have a stronger pool of young organizers working in communities to build power and make change across the country.

So Where Do We Go from Here?

In 2015, we are at a crossroads, and my generation of social justice organizers will either dig in or check

out. Now is the time to reclaim community organizing as a distinct practice apart from mobilization-first issue organizing. In the Obama era of organizing, despite the pressures to move away from the grassroots, community organizing continues to represent our best hope for change.

As a new generation of organizers, we can commit ourselves to living in local communities, building relationships, training leaders, and making change. It won't get the most likes, retweets, or shares. It will be hard to explain to our friends and family. But we will have deeper relationships than we thought possible and something to be proud of.

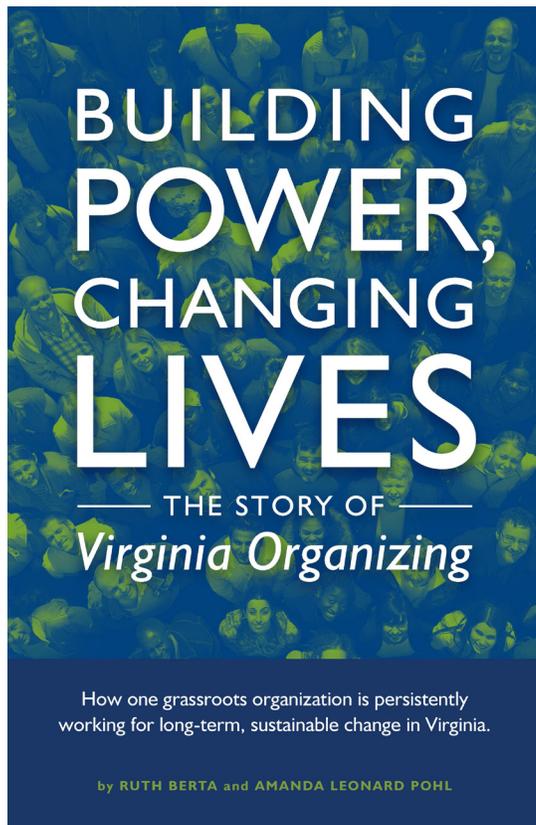
We know what we need to win: it's time to trade our parachutes and scripts for roots and relationships.

This piece is an excerpt from BUILDING POWER, CHANGING LIVE The Story of Virginia Organizing By Ruth Berta and Amanda Leonard Pohl being published by Social Policy Press and available for order and shipping October 15th, 2015 at www.socialpolicy.org or via publisher@socialpolicy.org

Nik Belanger, a native of Lafayette, Louisiana, is the Southside organizer with Virginia Organizing, a statewide grassroots organization working to create a more just Virginia. The Southside Chapters have organized unemployed workers to demand more jobs, canvassed nearly every low-income neighborhood in the city of Danville, hosted Dismantling Racism workshops, and run successful local campaigns on the issues of low-income rental weatherization, housing justice, and "Ban the Box."

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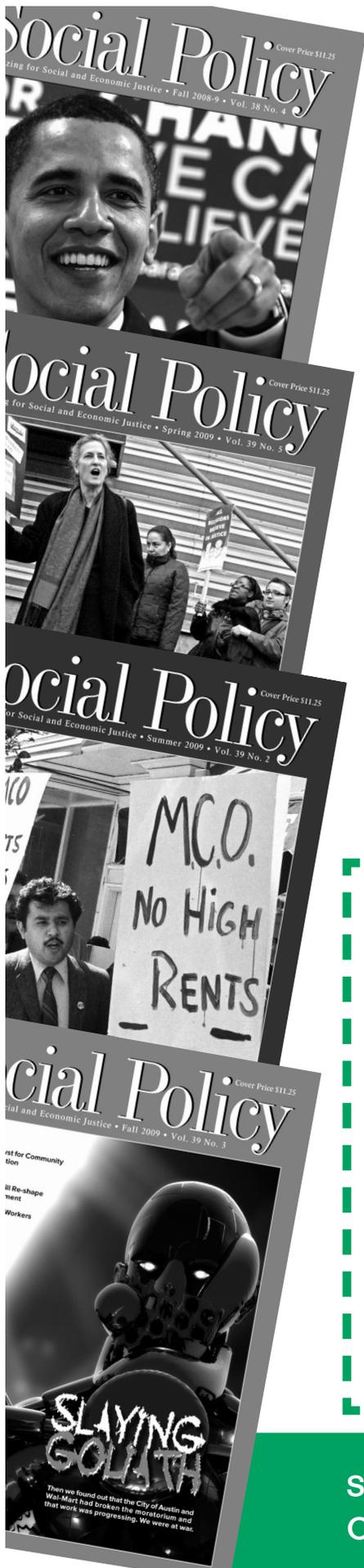


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