

Organizing Toolbox 2006 & 2007

The personal rewards of organizing

VOP's mission is, above all, to bring more and more Virginians into the world of organizing — acting strategically with other Virginians to make Virginia more fair. We hope that there will be thousands of Virginians who will know what to do when an issue comes up that matters to their community, or to the whole Commonwealth.

Obviously, that would be good for the Commonwealth. The more people there are in Virginia who know how to make democracy work effectively, the more economically fair, environmentally friendly, and more just to each of its residents Virginia will be.

But what about the individuals who learn to organize? Are we better off? Or are we just sacrificing our time and energy so that the community in general is better off? We all know that those among us who are skilled leaders get called on by our community to help solve problems. We all know the feeling of frustration when others who could help fail to step forward.

By learning to organize, by becoming a person who knows how to make strategic change, are you condemning yourself to a less happy life, to doing the right thing on behalf of others but not for yourself?

Well, let's not kid ourselves. Any time you take on a role that really matters, be it teacher or health care worker or parent, you do commit yourself to giving to other people even when it's tough. But still most of us do choose to be parents, and over the generations, people have stepped forward to take on other tough jobs. Why? Because there are benefits, and not primarily financial ones, to these jobs. So what are the personal benefits to becoming part of the world of organizing?

1. Working with wonderful people on something that matters.
2. Learning self-discipline — becoming able to speak up (or stay quiet) when it's the right thing to do, even when our emotions push us.
3. Learning how to do research — knowledge isn't power by itself, but too many people in this society know very little.
4. Having great stories and experiences — the history of organizing, including labor struggles, the civil rights movement, the women's movement, and other efforts, is part of your legacy — and we keep adding to it every day.
5. Understanding how society really works — in the fog of fake news and half-baked theories, it's a great thing to know that you know who, what, when, where and why.
6. Strengthening your self-respect — organizing is a process that gives you feedback, and that shows not only the world but yourself that you really are Somebody.

7. Strengthening your personal belief system — as you organize, you go more deeply into what moves you to act. Your values aren't just words, they are something you do.

Most of the magazines at the checkout counter in the supermarket have articles on Seven Ways to Improve Your Life. People apparently read those articles, but don't take them too seriously – since pretty much the same article will come out in the same magazine every year or so.

VOP doesn't think anyone is going to become a leader just to have a better personality or personal quality of life. But we do think that organizing is not just a way to get a more just society. It is also a path of personal development.

As life goes on, we all change and develop – but for some of us, life is pretty hard. Many of us become less happy and feel less powerful as time goes on. The environment we live in matters to us, and it is getting worse. Many of us cannot choose our jobs. For some of us, even family life includes sorrows that we cannot control.

Organizing is a positive and active approach to some of life's problems – an approach we choose, an approach that gives us strength and companionship, and an approach that can strengthen our fundamental beliefs and help us carry them out.

Organizing comes from our hearts and our values. It's not something we choose one day because Dr. Phil suggests it. It's about community values, working for the common good.

Once we realize we are all in this together, we organize because we have to — because an immediate issue moves us, or because we see a whole society that needs changing. And in doing so, we connect to forces in ourselves and in those around us that can heal and strengthen us.

Building power: labor organizing and community organizing can work together in Virginia

by Brian Johns

Social movements are about establishing and building power to support what we value — and both labor organizing and community organizing have been in the forefront of doing this. However, labor unions and community organizations approach building power differently. The occasional tension between labor and community groups, when their strategies conflict, or when they misunderstand each other, can be a problem for our overall work for social justice.

Labor and community organizing share common roots. A. Phillip Randolph, who in 1925 organized the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (representing the predominantly African-American Pullman Porter workforce), said, “The essence of trade unionism is social uplift. The labor movement has been the haven for the dispossessed, the despised, the neglected, the downtrodden, the poor.” Randolph’s words also describe community organizing. Randolph himself took a leadership role in the 1963 March on Washington, considered one of the greatest of the heroic organizing efforts of the Civil Rights Movement.

For us to best address the needs of all of Virginia’s communities and citizens, we need to understand the different self-interests and approaches of labor unions and community organizations. By understanding each other’s methods and priorities, both types of organizations have an opportunity to strengthen one another.

Labor history overview

Since as early as 1648, workers have come together to organize in what is now the United States. In the last 150 years especially, labor unions have built power and won countless improvements in the lives of working people. The establishment of a minimum wage, retirement benefits, five-day work weeks, eight-hour work days, overtime pay, health care coverage, free public education, improved safety standards, and the right to collectively bargain, as well as outlawing child labor and ending the practice of imprisoning people in debt, all came about because workers organized and fought to build power.

Generally speaking, unions are formed when workers in a specific workplace (a coal mine or hospital for example) come together and decide to organize, a process that usually requires an election. If the workers win the union election, they negotiate a contract that lays out conditions such as wages, retirement benefits and health care coverage. The union gives the workers a voice on the job. The National Labor Relations Act, enacted by Congress in 1935, governs union elections and employees’ and employers’ rights.

At their height, labor unions represented about 35 percent of all workers in the United States and had the strength to set standards for wages and benefits across the country. Thousands of Americans were, and still are, able to support their families and educate themselves and their children on union wages, and continue to receive benefits into retirement through their union-won pension plans. Many non-union companies raised their standards to match the standards that unions gained.

Not that long ago, a notable union victory was won right here in Virginia in 1989 when the United Mine Workers of America led a wildcat strike against the Pittston Coal Group. It spread to include 50,000 miners in 11 states. A bitter nine-month civil disobedience campaign, with strong support from Southwest Virginia neighbors and labor from around the nation, won a contract for miners.

Labor unions have always been under attack from employers, especially powerful corporations. In the last 50 years, these attacks have succeeded in many ways. Unions currently represent 15.4 million workers in the United States, just 12 percent of the workforce — and only 9 percent of the private non-government workforce. Factors in this decline include a multi-billion dollar union-busting industry, corporate strategies to fight unions, and government policies that have limited unions' influence such as so-called "Right-to-Work" laws, which outlaw "union shops" where all workers must belong to the union.

In Virginia, which is a "Right-to-Work" state, there are only 139,000 Virginians who are members of a union — only 4 percent of the workforce. According to the AFL-CIO, only North Carolina and South Carolina have a lower percentage of organized workers.

While the Virginia AFL-CIO (consisting of, among others, the Laborers' Union, the Communication Workers of America, the United Mine Workers of America, the International Association of Fire Fighters, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers and the United Food and Commercial Workers), and other unions such as the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers and the Service Employees International Union, are working hard to organize new members and build power for workers, progress is slowed by almost constant attacks from employers and union-busting firms aimed at decreasing their power.

Comparing labor organizing and the VOP approach

Labor Organizing

Almost universally, union organizing campaigns require certain steps. First, union organizers meet with workers, listen to their needs, and form a committee of the most involved workers to run the organizing drive, the process of recruiting other workers to sign cards in support of the union. Once a certain number of workers sign on, they file for an election

Through that election, a majority of workers at a specific workplace must publicly declare that they want a union. However, companies that do not want unions have gotten very good at countering the organizing efforts of unions. Often, in contested elections, the time leading up to the election can be very tense, with both sides attempting to sway workers with sometimes conflicting sets of data and personal appeals. The union wins the right to collectively bargain if a majority of workers votes “yes” for the union.

Because of these dynamics, most union organizing drives focus heavily on numbers. Organizers are constantly assessing how many people are for/against the union, checking in daily on the numbers to determine whether or not they will reach the “50 percent plus 1” needed to win the election. Leaders and organizers spend a lot of time talking to other workers who are themselves being told by company representatives why they should not join the union.

Once workers win a union, the struggle has just begun. Their contract bargaining campaigns set standards and work conditions with the employer. Then these contracts come up for re-negotiation, and members often have to fight to increase and/or keep their benefits. At this point, asking for help from politicians and community members, getting letters of support for their campaign, and holding rallies and meetings, can send a signal of community support. Sometimes, strikes are necessary.

Still, most unions are effective in getting improvements in wages, health care coverage, retirement benefits, and working conditions. These issues make up the core of why people come together in unions. Workers show their commitment to this voice by paying part of their wages to fund the unions, which receive every bit of their funding from member dues.

Labor unions are also major players in electoral politics, not just through fundraising and organizing non-partisan voter registration, education and get-out-the-vote work, but also through mobilizing members to work on specific political campaigns. In the 2006 Congressional elections in Pennsylvania, thousands of union members and staff from dozens of unions worked in five different districts to elect candidates supporting working people, a campaign that brought home care workers out to knock on doors and talk to their neighbors about health care issues and, most crucially, about candidates that supported them.

Through campaigns like this, the labor movement has empowered hundreds of thousands of people to get involved in elections and the political process. Unions have used the political process to successfully build power for their members and all workers.

VOP organizing

In contrast, as many of our readers know, VOP organizes based on one-to-one conversations with diverse groups and individuals in an area. Through these conversations, we learn each other’s issues and go through a process of strategically designing local campaigns, such as working for an inclusionary zoning or living wage

ordinance. Our local leaders then provide input to the VOP Statewide Governing Board about statewide campaigns such as our racial profiling and tax reform campaigns. We focus on building power by (1) building relationships with each other and with elected officials and decision makers, and (2) taking actions like writing letters to the editor, holding press conferences and holding meetings with legislators that allow people to hold those in power accountable.

This is different than labor organizing, in both scope and timing. Unions have a specific, sometimes narrow focus on workplace issues because of their structure. However, this structure also allows for the possibility of achieving big wins rather quickly, adding hundreds of members to their ranks by organizing one facility. VOP's approach takes longer, but leads to very committed and well-trained leaders.

While one-to-one relationship building and campaign strategizing can take a year or more before launching a campaign, VOP is able to address multiple issues, according to the widely varying needs of individual communities.

Labor and community organizing working together

“At no time in recent history has there been more of a need and opportunity for labor and citizen organizations to work together.” — **Organizing for Social Change**, a publication of the Midwest Academy, an organizing training center.

Labor organizing focuses on workplace issues (and on their members as workers) and then on fighting to keep the improvements they have won. After all, their resources come straight from members' paychecks. However, the recent attacks and decline in membership have made many unions realize that they must broaden their focus and look at their members' roles in their communities and not just their workplaces. Some unions have realized that they must view community outreach as more than just asking a “community representative” to support their actions. They must actively engage in those communities and become involved in their issues as well.

The Service Employees International Union, for example, has created a Community Strength Division, stating, “As union members, we fight for better wages and benefits. But we realize that winning a better future for working families doesn't stop there. It means building stronger communities and getting involved in the fight for affordable health care, immigration rights, racial equality, and equal opportunity for all.”

Community organizations must also change their ways of relating to labor unions. There has often been tension between community and labor groups because of experiences where community groups are used by unions to achieve a goal, and then are forgotten and the cooperation is not returned. In addition, since so few Virginians are union members, some people may base their opinions of all unions on anecdotes from the media or one bad experience we may have heard about.

Experience around the country has shown that unions and community organizations have a lot to gain when they work together. In Manhattan, a community-labor coalition is pushing for answers on the toxic effects of the 9/11 attack. Community-Labor United has been a voice for justice in the reconstruction of New Orleans. Other common issues that union and community groups are working on include fairness in elections in Maryland and Massachusetts.

Fighting for minimum wage increases and living wage ordinances, expanding health care coverage and access, and fairness for immigrants are just a few of the campaigns in which labor and community organizing have joined forces to build power and win in Virginia. It was labor-community cooperation that got a minimum wage increase bill farther than ever before in the 2007 General Assembly.

By understanding each others' self-interests and common values, we can continue to build a powerful coalition of workers and community members that will work for the long haul to improve the lives of all Virginians.

After interning with and working with the Virginia Organizing Project from 1999 to 2005, Brian Johns spent two years coordinating Community and Political Organizing with the Service Employees International Union District 1199P in Philadelphia, PA. He's now back as VOP's Southwestern Virginia organizer covering everything west of Pulaski and Galax over to the Kentucky line.

Meeting with your Virginia legislators — is it worthwhile?

In November 2003, VOP's Organizing Toolbox article was "Reach out and touch your state legislator." The Toolbox article was a good practical guide to working with the General Assembly. It's worth rereading. You can find it on the VOP website at www.virginia-organizing.org/articles/reach_out.php, or you can send VOP a self-addressed stamped envelope and request a copy.

But, even though the information on "how to" is available from VOP and from other sources, most Virginians don't ever meet with their legislators.

Of course, business leaders, policy experts and lobbyists talk to our legislators all the time. But that's not working out too well. Virginia's laws still unfairly benefit some wealthy and privileged people.

Still, most ordinary Virginians apparently are not convinced that meeting with legislators is worthwhile. This Toolbox article tries to answer some of the concerns that those Virginians may feel.

It's been a while since high school government class. Who the heck are our legislators anyway?

Every Virginian lives in a Senate District represented by one Senator, and a House District represented by one Delegate. Elections for these positions are held in odd-numbered years. The Senate has 40 members, and the House of Delegates has 100, and together they are known as the General Assembly.

Because the General Assembly only meets for a few months early each year, most General Assembly members have other jobs. Many of them are attorneys. Others have jobs like teacher, mortician, and small business owner, or are retired. They are, in most cases, selected by one of Virginia's two major political parties to run for their office, so they have close relationships with many politically active local people who belong to their party.

Every Virginia law, including those related to what local governments can do or not do, is decided by Virginia's state legislature, the General Assembly. All laws must pass the House and the Senate and be signed by the Governor.

If you have access to the Web, you can find out who your legislator is (and lots of information about him or her) at the website <http://legis.state.va.us/>.

If you don't have access to the Web, your local Voter Registration office, which is in the phone book and is part of your city or county government, can give you this information.

Why does VOP consider meeting with General Assembly members to be important?

You probably agree with a VOP belief “that community, economic, social and environmental policy should be developed with the greatest input from the people it is meant to serve.” That seems like common sense. It should just be the way things work in a country called a democracy.

But it doesn't work — unless ordinary people have the **power** to participate in making decisions. Without power, decisions are made for us without even seeking our input. That's not a problem for political science professors. It's a practical problem that costs each one of us tax dollars and allows unfair situations to continue.

As VOP has worked to make life more fair in Virginia, we have learned from experience that the General Assembly is the center of **decision-making power** in Virginia. Some examples:

The General Assembly can override local governments. When Arlington County passed a living wage ordinance in 2003, following the example of Alexandria, Father Leonard Tuozzolo, pastor at Our Lady Queen of Peace Catholic Church, praised the decision, saying that now like Alexandria, Arlington would “be able to point to a track record of reason and justice.” But Alexandria's “track record” didn't come easy. First, Alexandria's organized residents and their elected officials had to pass a local ordinance for a living wage. But then they had to work with other groups throughout the state, including the Virginia Organizing Project, to defeat legislation in the General Assembly that would have taken away the **power** from Alexandria to even pass a living wage ordinance.

The General Assembly can override good business practices. In 1999, American Airlines joined other corporations and made a business decision to provide benefits to the domestic partners of its employees. One employee benefiting was pilot David Charlebois, who signed up his partner for health benefits. In January 2006, Virginia Delegate David Englin reminded his colleagues in the General Assembly that Charlebois was “the copilot of American Airlines Flight 77, which crashed into the Pentagon when Al Qaeda tried to kill me and my comrades who were on duty inside the Pentagon at the time.” Showing no respect for American Airlines, let alone 9/11 victim Charlebois, the General Assembly went ahead and proposed the Marshall-Newman amendment to Virginia's voters. The amendment probably would deny American Airlines the right to offer partner benefits to employees like Charlebois. (In this case, the General Assembly has the **power** to propose the Amendment — but Virginia's voters make the final decision.)

The General Assembly can ignore common sense. Until 2003, Virginia was the one and only state that did not tax income from overseas investments. This encouraged Virginians to invest overseas instead of at home. VOP Tax Reform Committee member David North brought this loophole to the attention of his Delegate, Jim Almand, who put in a bill to fix the problem. Though the loophole had been in place for years, once this attention was focused on it, the loophole was quickly repealed, adding \$7 million to Virginia's revenues just in the first year. The General Assembly's **power** had kept a bad law in place until a citizen pointed out the problem.

Every time VOP and its chapter members, supporters and allies have a well thought out meeting with a Virginia legislator on strategic issues, we take one more step forward. We get closer to a day when ordinary Virginians will always be heard and taken seriously at Virginia's General Assembly. We build **our power** — our power to have a say in those decisions that impact our lives.

Will meeting with my legislator really accomplish anything?

When you meet with your legislator, you will ask her or him to take certain positions. Your legislator may agree, which is obviously a good thing. That's clearly a win. But what if you are turned down? Is the meeting a waste? Definitely not, if it's a VOP meeting.

Because VOP and its allies are sharing information across the state, you can help statewide campaign leaders learn where our issues have more and less support, and which points are and are not convincing to the legislator. You can help improve our strategies to make change.

Also, you will build a relationship for the future. Your legislator will know that your requests are part of a statewide process, and that many other legislators are hearing the same requests. Your legislator will see that you are working to get more people there next time.

Will my legislator even listen to us?

Every legislator is different. As with any group of people, some know more than others, and some are nicer than others. Once a legislator is elected, we can't control how that person acts. But we can control what we do, and make it more likely we will be listened to, by:

- researching the legislator's beliefs, connections and personality in advance;
- being clear about what we are asking for, how much time we want, and all other details;
- being polite and treating the legislator as we would want to be treated; and,
- anticipating his or her responses and having answers to them already prepared.

And if the legislator doesn't listen, we can hold him or her accountable in the future, because we had a roomful of witnesses.

Will the legislator know about our issue?

Sometimes we think that because an issue is important to us, our elected official should also be familiar with it. Oscar Cerrito, a young immigrant college student, found at the last General Assembly session that Delegates were making laws about immigration "without knowing what the process of immigration really is."

Sometimes, on the other hand, we find out that our legislator knows the subject very well, has already made up his or her mind, and gets impatient with long explanations.

But, again, by being strategic and prepared, you can be ready for your legislator's ignorance or knowledge. Here are some questions you should try to answer before your meeting:

- Has your legislator said anything in public about your issue? If so, that's the quickest guide to what she or he knows and thinks. Quoting what he or she has said also shows you have done your homework.
- Is your legislator serving on a committee that deals with your issue? If so, he or she certainly knows the legislative and legal background of the issue. But that may be different from understanding the issue's impact in your community.
- Is your legislator in touch with groups who care about the issue? If so, she or he knows the point of view of those groups — which may not be your point of view.
- Does your legislator have any particular educational or personal background related to the issue? (Some personal information about each legislator is available on the General Assembly website.)
- What have other groups with similar issues experienced when they met with this legislator?

What if I just plain don't like my legislator?

Meeting with your legislator is a business meeting — for the people's business. Does it matter whether you like the guy behind the counter at the local fast food restaurant, as long as he isn't rude and you get your sandwich? The same goes for your legislator.

We see a lot of ads that show the candidates smiling with their spouse, dog, kids or cutest constituents, and so we try to figure out their inner hearts.

Well, of course, every legislator is a human being, and like any one of us, has an amazing personal history. But unless you are planning to have your legislator come to your home and take care of your kids, you only need to know enough to change some of his or her policy positions.

Here are some more interesting questions to think about:

- What kind of power does the legislator have? How long has he or she been in office, and what positions does she or he hold? How has the candidate used that kind of power in the past?
- What power is the legislator seeking? Is the legislator planning for higher office, or for power within a political party?
- What movements or organizations mean the most to the legislator?
- What is the legislator's track record in working with communities and groups?
- Which promises has the legislator kept in the past?

- Perhaps most important — what power do we have to keep her or him focused on meeting our needs?

And the big question — won't it be boring or scary?

It can be boring to sit in an audience and listen to a speech. It can be boring to be at a public hearing where you are not allowed to talk. And maybe your high school government class was boring.

It can be scary to stand up alone to ask a question. It can be scary to be put on the spot when you feel you haven't been prepared.

But a VOP legislative meeting is a planned activity you do with other good folks like yourself. It has a purpose. It has a beginning and an end, and after it's over we evaluate what happened, and we make sure the information gets used.

And you will be wanted, needed, and welcome by us — whatever your Delegate or Senator thinks.

When VOP's Williamsburg area chapter was being formed, member Marian Ashby said, "I really think it (a chapter) would give people, especially working class and poor people, an opportunity to get information and speak in a dignified way on the issues that are at the core of our livelihood, such as taxes, wages and housing issues to name a few. In order to do this, we need to continue to bring in new people."

If you haven't been part of a VOP legislative meeting yet, you are one of those new people we need.

Your presence is really needed at a legislative meeting this fall. There's no experience necessary. There are no guarantees either — except that, if you do it as part of VOP's statewide effort, it will be worth doing. So don't even wait for us to ask you. Contact your local VOP leadership or organizer and volunteer.

Breaking Down Ignorance

“Knowledge emerges only through . . . the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry [that] human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other.” - from the book Pedagogy of the Oppressed, by Brazilian popular educator Paulo Freire

Ignorance is a powerful force to keep people down. As Thomas H. Jones wrote in his 1857 slave memoir, “the whole community was in league to keep the poor slave in ignorance . . .” But when we take action to break out of ignorance, we can change a lot more than our own lives.

Oscar Cerrito and Lidia Pereyra, Winchester area residents in their early 20s, are described this way by their friend and mentor, Katy Pitcock: “These aren’t just smart young people. They started out behind the curve, learning a new language, and with few advantages at home. To get to the point of being college-eligible, they have to be seriously dedicated academically. And they want to use their education here, in the only communities they know.”

Both Oscar and Lidia plan careers in health care, serving their own Spanish-speaking community. They have broken out of the ignorance to which low-paid Spanish-speaking immigrants are assigned, and knocked on the door of Virginia’s college system. In the process, they have rocked the ignorance of some other people.

Lidia came to the U.S. when she was 11, not speaking a word of English. Now she is 20, and has started the process of becoming a nurse practitioner. Lidia’s father was a legal, taxpaying resident, and he wanted his wife and children here. As soon as they came, they began the process of also becoming legal residents. In a Washington Post article about Lidia, this process was described as “complicated, with laws broken and laws followed, rules complied with and deadlines missed, and the children caught up in the ugly tangle of Catch-22s that follows illegal immigration.”

Oscar’s story is pretty much the same. To some people, this means they are somewhere in the long process of officially becoming contributing U.S. citizens. To others, it means that Lidia and Oscar are “illegal immigrants,” and therefore not deserving of any benefits that Virginia can confer.

Katy Pitcock has worked on educational, intercultural and other programs with all kinds of people for many years. But, she realized this year, she was still ignorant of how laws are made in Virginia.

But, she said, “I didn’t know the legislative process; in fact, I was so ignorant of it I didn’t even think of trying it. Working to start our Northern Shenandoah Valley chapter of the Virginia Organizing Project (VOP), I had started to get the idea of building relationships - relationships that you can tap into when you can’t win on an issue alone. But I hadn’t really applied that to the issues that matter to me every day.”

Then she joined a series of conference calls with immigrant leaders and other concerned Virginians that were organized by the Virginia Justice Center for Farm and Immigrant Workers, to explore who was interested in taking leadership on certain immigrant issues, including the issue of in-state tuition.

On the first call, Katy said she knew about this issue, was willing to work on it, and was in touch with young people affected by the issue, including Lidia and Oscar. She said people on the call reacted as delightedly as if “a sports agent had showed up with a seven foot basketball player.” And she in turn recognized that “the conference calls could connect me to what I didn’t even know I was missing - people who could bring Lidia’s and Oscar’s issues into the legislative process. They also were willing to do the work of connecting all of our different agendas, so that when Lidia and Oscar and I and others took action, we had support from around Virginia. Our supporters included community college presidents, teachers and counselors, and organized groups like the Virginia Coalition of Latino Organizations (VACOLAO) and VOP.”

When Katy contacted Oscar soon afterwards, he said, “I knew she was bringing me a new experience. It’s cool to have new experiences.” The new experience that Katy introduced Lidia and Oscar to was trying to influence the General Assembly of Virginia.

When Katy, Oscar and Lidia got involved with the General Assembly, they were surprised to find out that the members of the General Assembly were ignorant of a lot of things they knew. After watching a committee in action, Oscar said, “They make laws without knowing what the process of immigration really is.”

Katy had already found that out during a previous visit to the General Assembly - her first. She and another VOP member talked to Delegates and aides about many issues, including in-state tuition. “In one case,” she said, “a Delegate told me proudly about the immigration status of someone he knew - and it turned out he got every detail wrong. Some of our Virginia legislators were making decisions about a situation they didn’t really understand.” But Katy, along with members of VACOLAO and their supporters like the American Jewish Congress and VOP, kept trying to get them to understand.

At least one legislator did. Senator Emmett Hanger had introduced a bill that, like several other bills in the General Assembly, would have prevented any “illegal alien” from getting in-state tuition - including Oscar and Lidia. But he listened to the responses he got to his legislation. He also learned from the situation of his son’s fiancée, an immigrant from the Philippines. And so, astonishingly, in the middle of the General Assembly session, he amended his own legislation to include students like Oscar and Lidia. Essentially, he was admitting that when he had introduced his bill, he had not known everything he should have.

Hanger explained his new opinions with these words about the students he now wanted to make eligible for in-state tuition: “It’s not like they just showed up today . . . They’ve been in the school systems, and they’ve been good role models. They just lack appropriate documentation. This [legislation] can be an incentive to help them.”

At the General Assembly, Oscar and Lidia testified before the House Committee on Education for Senator Hanger's amended bill. Lidia had never done anything like that before, but she said, "I think I got out what I wanted to say. I had practiced, and I had it written down." But, she went on, describing the committee's actions: "What was going on wasn't very understandable. The Delegates had some information from some people, but it was still confusing." After Oscar and Lidia and others testified, and after they heard from Virginia's Attorney General with a different point of view, the Committee voted to delay its decision until next year.

Oscar's original focus was on "taking the opportunity to go to college." But, after the General Assembly experience, Oscar said, "I believe you have to fight for your rights. I am doing this not just for myself, but for the younger members of my family, and my community."

To fight for a professional education, Oscar and Lidia, as well as Katy, their friend and ally, had to educate themselves about democracy and political power. In turn, they have educated General Assembly members and other Virginians about the real lives of young immigrants in our communities. In Katy's words, "We expanded our understanding and we expanded our influence. We didn't act alone - we had wonderful allies - but we also knew that we couldn't assume someone else would do our part of the job."

Katy said, "Next year we have to do better. It's like teaching a class. You have to have an outline. You have to know what your students need. No one needs speeches that show what a good guy you are. They need the real facts, the realities that show all our relationships of responsibility to each other. We all need for Oscar and Lidia to be well-educated health professionals, and we all have our part to play in the big educational process that moves us forward on this and many other issues."