

**Keynote Speech At Commencement Ceremonies For the 22nd
Class of the Center for Neighborhood's Neighborhood Institute
December 8, 2009 Kosair Charities Building**

I want to begin by thanking the Center for Neighborhoods, and each of you graduates, for allowing me to be a part of this very special evening.

For the last quarter-century I have directed the Kentucky Resources Council, a nonprofit environmental advocacy organization providing legal and strategic assistance to low-income individuals, community groups, and local governments on air, water, waste, land use, energy and utility policy matters. People come to KRC because they are in crisis - those things they value most – home, family, health, have been put at risk through someone's indifference.

There is a typical cycle to community crises, whether it be a limestone quarry in Battletown, a strip mine in Harlan County, mall sprawl in Okolona or a hazardous waste incinerator in Kosmosdale – people come together, usually led by one or two individuals who bear the brunt of the work necessary to educate the community and to learn the serpentine processes of government regulation and permits, licenses and approvals, and people learn and share skills. Those who are involved are transformed in the process – their initial bewilderment and sense of being overwhelmed gives way to anger and dismay over the failure of the processes to adequately protect their interests, and then to voices raised demanding accountability.

And then it is over. The crisis is resolved, for good or for ill, and everyone goes back to the day-to-day struggle to feed, clothe, educate, heal, and generally tend to their family and themselves.

And all of that knowledge, the skills, all of that communal power and talent, is lost, and must be recreated again when the next crisis arises. Reaction rather than action is the rule, and the work is at a “retail” level, rather than at the wholesale level, focusing on the transformation of the processes and institutions that allowed the crisis to occur in the first instance.

It is remarkable that each of you has devoted twelve weeks to becoming better advocates for community-building and community reclamation. You

each have different stories and different challenges that brought you to this place, but you share some things in common.

You understand and value the importance of each person.

You understand that what diminishes one diminishes us all.

You understand that, in answer to Cain's question, we ARE our brothers and sisters' keepers, each ultimately accountable to each other and to our children and parents for what we contribute to the common good – towards building and sustaining community.

You understand that the day belongs to those who show up, and that by showing up, by speaking truth to power on behalf of your own and your classmates' neighborhoods, you can balance the scales that are now tipped so heavily towards monied interests that relentlessly push the edge of planning, zoning, development envelopes to maximize private profit and to socialize the costs related to the private development.

Now, you move forward to the next stage of your civic vocation.

It is customary at commencement exercises that the speaker attempt to convey generally useless advice to the captive graduates, and tonight is no exception. I have distilled unwanted advice from 37 years of advocacy, and will share it with you now.

Don't ever despair that you don't have the ability to effect change. Change occurs incrementally, sometimes in dramatic but more often in subtle ways, as Mother Teresa said, "one soul at a time."

You will face apathy, criticism (sometimes harsh and personal), and barriers built of indifference or the insular agendas of some in power. Remember what Frederick Douglass wrote in his treatise on West India Emancipation:

"If there is not struggle there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation are men who want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters. This struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, or it may be both moral and

physical, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without demand. It never did and it never will.”

Anthropologist Margaret Mead was right when she observed:

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it’s the only thing that ever does.” Our recent history is replete with examples of how people of good will can become so much more than the sum of the individuals when working together as co-conspirators for positive change.

You ARE a group of thoughtful committed citizens, and through the efforts of organizations like the Center for Neighborhoods, you enter into a group of alumni that includes others who came here before you to learn how to improve their community.

Use the full array of tools that you have – as a voter, a citizen, a mentor, a student, a consumer, a neighbor, a parent, a child.

Move beyond merely reacting to crises and look to transforming the institutions and politics that allow neighborhoods and families to be put at risk. Become more focused on the institutions, on the economic policies, on the politics that create such a disconnect between what we profess to value and believe, and the policies and priorities of our elected and appointed officials and institutions.

You’ve already taken the first step – you’ve gotten a full immersion Baptism into civic activism.

What else can you do?

* Build and expand your network. Retail (issue or crisis-centered) organizing campaigns are exhausting and unsustaining. Durable (wholesale) change comes through the creation and recreation of institutions to meet community needs and to sustain and uplift communities. Work with other neighborhoods, progressive church, civic and volunteer groups, to create a broad base of community support for change.

* Connect the dots and work for reform in governance. When offices go to the highest bidder and the wealthiest candidate, decisions reflecting the broader public interest over the insular interests of those investing in the candidates are rare. When we aspire to mediocrity in governance, when democracy isn't working, the poor, children, the environment, the public's interest suffer.

* Get your hands dirty. Roll up your sleeves and run for office.

* Work with other neighborhood associations to create forums for candidates, and quiz them on their platforms related to investment in community. Go door to door for those who share your values. Educate or replace those candidates who don't.

* Hold your elected officials accountable. Justice in all of its many facets – racial, economic, environmental, generational, should be **the** defining issues for your votes in the upcoming election cycle and beyond.

* Mentor. Margaret Mead was right when she said “Our humanity rests upon a series of learned behaviors, woven together into patterns that are infinitely fragile and never directly inherited.” Think about the behaviors you pattern, and sit at the feet of those who came before you, just as you mentor those who follow. Learn from the past in order to make sense of the present and to inform the future.

* Be creatively intolerant of mediocrity. Just as accommodating injustice never made an unjust person more just, tolerating mediocrity in governance never made an indifferent politician more caring. Remember, as Margaret Mead said, “it may be necessary to accept a lesser evil, but one must never label a necessary evil as good!”

* Approach problem-solving with an open mind, since it is in dialogue, in engagement, in the crucible of diverse ideas and perspectives that we arrive at just solutions.

* The alumni of the Neighborhood Institute here tonight are a powerful resource. Use them, learn from them.

Marian Wright Edelman penned this prayer

Lord, help me not to be a taker but a tender,
Help me not to be a whiner but a worker,
Help me not to be a getter but a giver,
Help me not to be a hindrance but a help,
Help me not to be a critic but a catalyst for good.

YOU are catalysts for good, and this community and your neighborhoods will be all the better for your efforts at building a more just, a more liveable, and a healthier community.

Neighborhood Institute Graduating Class of 2009, congratulations. Let us go forward together and face our challenges with hope and humility, and continue together in struggle and in fellowship to improve the quality of life in our neighborhoods and the legacy we will leave to our children's children.