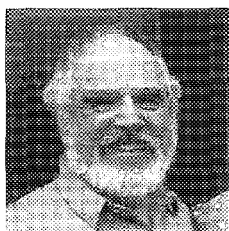


Mentors

Mike Miller



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I welcome this opportunity to reflect on my almost 45-year path as an organizer and think it is fitting that *Social Policy* is the forum in which many are engaging in similar reflection. As might be expected for an organizer, whose commitment is to the large-scale democratic involvement of people in determining their own destinies, my mentors have been many. They are grouped, however, in the three major influences on my working life.

Berkeley in the 1950s

The Berkeley student movement, despite myths of immaculate conception in 1960, never was fully silenced by the McCarthy era. By 1954, when I arrived there, a small, mostly graduate-student left held forth in the many coffee houses surrounding the campus and worked in a variety of ways in and out of student government on a range of civil liberties, civil rights, and anti-Cold War activities. Another center of student action was "Stiles Hall"—the University YMCA. There, Bill Davis, Cecil Thomas, and Pierre deLatre, the "Y's" full-time adult staffers, helped shape an emerging generation of student leaders. I was among them.

In 1957, our group exploded on the campus with a slate of candidates for student government. We called ourselves SLATE, but it wasn't an acronym until we later created "Student League Accused of Trying to Exist" (because of UC president Clark Kerr's various efforts to kill the organization). None of us got elected, but we doubled the electorate—a sign to us that we were on to something important. That winter, we formalized a

campus political party of liberal-to-radical students whose core idea was to create both a forum for discussion and a group that could act on defined issues so we could achieve a "lowest significant common denominator" to appeal to a majority of the student body and keep us intact as a united group. Our task then was to make radical and liberal politics legitimate, to break out of the stultifying campus climate that still remained from Joe McCarthy.

Three people were central in our thinking in the 1957-62 student movement period. All of them were graduate students who were eight to 12 years older than our mostly undergraduate SLATE group. Wilson C. ("Carey") McWilliams was a master rhetorician, whose agitational speeches literally stopped people in their tracks as he held forth at the campus' famous Sather Gate. He was also at the liberal end of our political spectrum—already playing a role in Democratic Party politics and mentoring a group of young leaders, one of whom is now the California Attorney General. Herb Mills was our master strategist, and largely responsible for maintaining the unity that kept liberals, CPers, Trotskyists, social democrats, democratic socialists and independent radicals under the same political tent. As time went on, the Berkeley student movement became as interested in breaking open wider debate in American society as it was in contesting student government office. The relationships forged in the pre-1960 period were what made possible the large demonstrations against the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), creation of the Student Committee for Agricultural Labor, formation of a strong

alliance between the Berkeley student movement and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and development of a powerful, mostly white, direct action civil-rights movement in the Bay Area. Our third mentor of the period was a self-identified utopian socialist who taught us the importance of being a political party—having to develop a multi-issue platform that could appeal to a large number of students. It was from Fritjof Thygeson that I first learned about de-centralist thinking—a continuing influence in my life.

"Snick"

In 1962, I joined the full-time staff of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. SNCC was a failed attempt to build a "beloved community" that embodied in its internal operation the principles of democracy, equality, freedom, and community that it struggled for in the society at large. It is hard today to imagine the intensity of the movement in the South in which SNCC was a principal player. While we made history "out there" in the world (I don't think any period of change has been more significant in my lifetime than that of the Deep South movement), we were unable to weave together in a single community the multiple strands of thinking that comprised the organization—especially when defeat of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) led to a search for ideology that would explain defeat and guide the organization in the future.

From Lulubelle Johnson, Fanny Lou Hamer, and other older, native Mississippians, I learned and was inspired by the power of religious faith directed toward the struggle for jus-

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tice. (Later, from Marilyn Stranske and Robert Linthicum, I saw that same power among white evangelical Christians committed to social and economic justice and building community—but that is too long a story for here.) From

SNCC's Bob Moses, Jim Forman, Kwame Ture (Stokely Carmichael), Ivanhoe Donaldson, Martha Prescod, Frank Smith, Casey Hayden, Jean Wiley, Charlie Cobb, and other brilliant stars in the SNCC galaxy, I gained knowledge of politics and the meaning of racism in America. From Wazir (Willie) Peacock, Sam Block, and many others, I learned the meaning of quiet courage, the patience required to be a real organizer, and the care necessary to develop a real organizing plan. These SNCC sisters and brothers still remain a major inspiration in my life.

Alinsky's Industrial Areas Foundation

By 1966, SNCC was declining as a major force in the African-American community in the Deep South. It was also the time for white "field secretaries" to move on. As fortune would have it, in October 1966, Saul Alinsky asked me to come to work for him in Kansas City, Missouri. Alinsky's Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) was working with a local Black community organization called the Council for United Action (CUA). The organizing got off to a bad start, and the organization's lead organizer was burning out after

some excellent IAF work he had done in Chicago.

I first met Alinsky in 1960, having returned to the Bay Area after being fired by the Henry Street Settlement House for being too militant as a tenant organizer on New York's Lower East Side;

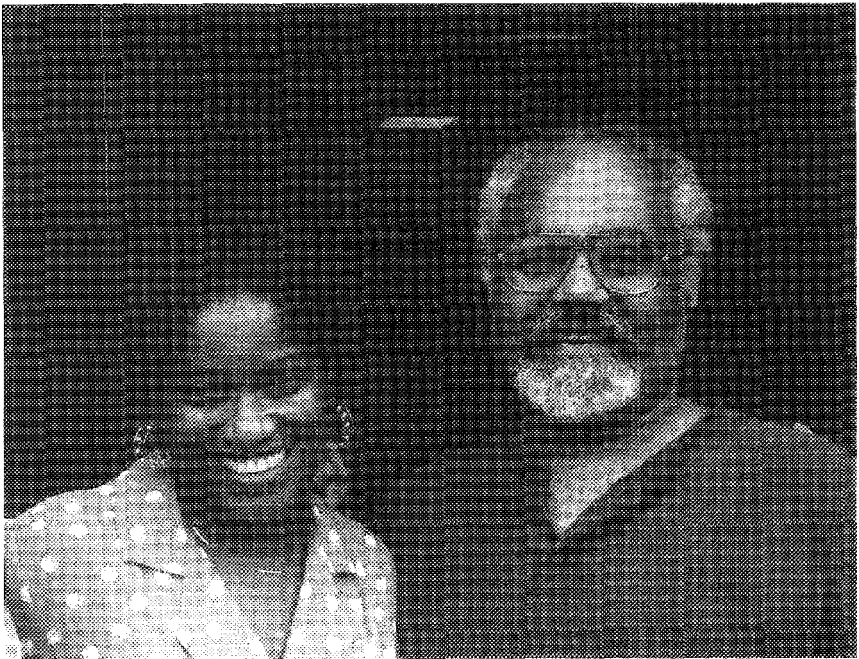
at the time, I was also characterized as a "little Alinsky." I didn't know the big one, so the opportunity to meet him at his summer home in Carmel, California, was welcome. We talked at length about New York City and Saul's abortive organizing work in the Chelsea neighborhood where the local settlement house had become the center of opposition to Alinsky's presence. Saul's then-wife Jean lived in Carmel, and I became a regular at their house or at airport meetings in San Francisco, where Alinsky would lay over for the brief commuter flight to Monterey. In Saul, I found a combination of democratic faith and vision with a tough-minded understanding of power and the strategy and tactics for building "people's organizations."

Through Saul, I met his associate Fred Ross—called by Cesar Chavez "my secret weapon." Ross developed direct-membership organizing to a finely tuned art. While Saul had put together an "organization of organizations" in Chicago's Back of the Yards and then applied the same principles in other working-class and poor communities in the mid-west and North, Ross was forced to take a different approach. Hostility from the hierarchy of the Catholic Church made it impossi-

ble to reach low-income Mexican Americans through the institution of the Church, but friendly priests and nuns, as well as others, became Ross's sponsors as he went house to house, individual to individual, and house meeting to house meeting, building first the powerful statewide Community Service Organization (CSO) and then moving on with Chavez to organize the first enduring farm workers union in American history.

My IAF supervisor in Kansas City was Ed Chambers. When Nick von Hoffman dropped

out as an IAF organizer, Chambers filled the role of Alinsky's principal associate and became the operational director of IAF. The day-to-day work in Kansas City was my graduate school, and Chambers was my professor. Finally, Arnie Graf, a younger organizer in IAF, talked at length with other OTC organizers and me about the developmental work that he and Ernesto Cortes had developed in San Antonio. Until that point, organizers believed that the "good life span" of a community organization was about five years. After that, it either



MARTHA PRESCOD AND BOB MOSES

became co-opted or disappeared. Cortes and Graf laid that idea to rest with their developmental work within churches that were members of COPS, one of the pre-eminent community organizations in the country. We borrowed a lot from that experience.

It was my hope to bring Alinsky and SNCC together. I thought they needed and could benefit each other. But it wasn't to be.

SNCC had been my community, but that ended as whites left the organization and as SNCC went into its relentless decline. Saul Alinsky called the IAF a "family," but that also was never to be—at least for me. In those days, the care and feeding of organizers wasn't given much attention.

In 1968, I returned to San Francisco, my home, where, in 1972, I started the ORGANIZE Training Center (OTC), something that never could have happened without a special woman in my life: Naomi Lauter. My board president for a number of years, my non-blood sister, Naomi, now a national organizing consultant for the America-Israel Public Affairs Committee, models forgiveness and humility and the ability to bring diverse groups of people together.

My own work since founding OTC has been an effort to wed my Berkeley, SNCC and Alinsky experiences. When I think back, I realize what a treasure my life has been and what a gift each of these mentors has been.---