

# THE NEXT FORM OF DEMOCRACY

How Expert Rule Is Giving Way  
to Shared Governance . . .  
and Why Politics Will Never Be the Same

Matt Leighninger

Foreword by U.S. Senator Bill Bradley

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## 6

# The Strange Career of Chuck Ridley

## Drug Abuse, Community Organizing, and “Government by Nonprofits”

Chuck Ridley’s grandmother lived in Delray Beach when the only thing black folks could do there was harvest sugar cane. Every day, every black man and woman, fathers and mothers and uncles and cousins, went into those sugar cane fields to work all day under the hot sun. And every day, every one of those parents and grandparents brought their children into the fields with them, to play while the adults worked. There were snakes and rats and dogs and all kinds of flying, swooping, biting bugs in those fields, and sometimes the children got bit or stung or scared, but that is where the children played.

One day Chuck Ridley’s grandmother saw a young child get bit by a snake. She saw the snake coming, and she yelled as loud as she could, but it didn’t matter.

That day Chuck Ridley’s grandmother told everybody else, all the mothers and fathers and aunts and uncles, that she was staying home and not going into the fields. She told all those parents and grandparents to leave their children with her, and she would look after them at home.

Every day after that, all the black folks in Delray Beach left their children with Chuck Ridley’s grandmother. Every day they brought her food from their kitchens, and firewood and old clothes, and sometimes money, for her to take care of their children. And Chuck Ridley’s grandmother raised a neighborhood.<sup>1</sup>

The southwest side of Delray Beach, Florida, might seem like an odd place to observe some of the latest developments in the continuing evolution of democracy. It is a pocket of poverty in the affluent Gold Coast, a neighborhood where most of the adults do not have a high school diploma and over half the children live in single-parent homes. The residents, primarily African Americans and recent Haitian and Mexican immigrants, represent over 80% of the people of color in the city as a whole.<sup>2</sup> But the

sheer desperation of this community has in fact propelled its political innovations: since the traditional political process has served Southwest Delray so poorly, leaders and residents there have had even greater cause to work together in new ways.

One of their innovations is part of a larger shift that is helping to reshape the relationship between citizens and government: the change in tactics by traditional community organizers. Since the time of Saul Alinsky, who first began mobilizing residents in 1940s Chicago, the practice of community organizing has diversified into a broad spectrum of strategies, including “faith-based organizing,” “consensus organizing,” and other variations.<sup>3</sup> This dissemination was driven by the experimentation of local organizers, who reacted to changing conditions by modifying various aspects of their approach. The organizers themselves have also diversified, partly because people who were trained in the Alinsky tradition have gone on to serve as public officials, nonprofit directors, program officers at foundations, and in other roles. These leaders have adapted the skills and philosophies of traditional community organizing to fit the perspectives and needs of their new positions.

Some of these organizers have reached an important threshold: rather than pressuring public officials to give citizens what they want, they have created arenas where citizens, decision-makers, and other stakeholders can sit down and make policy together. In some places, they have taken this a step further, establishing nonprofit organizations that oversee neighborhood decision-making and manage the delivery of most public services. Instead of always mobilizing citizens to *affect* the political process, these organizers are finding new ways to *incorporate* the process.

These entities are practically governments in themselves; they are probably more autonomous and comprehensive than the structures for shared governance now emerging in schools (see Chapter 7) and neighborhood councils (Chapter 8). But, they also call out a long list of difficult new questions about accountability, power, and the purpose of community organizing.

In Southwest Delray, a skilled, veteran community organizer named Chuck Ridley has been at the center of all of these changes. He is the heir to a family tradition of local leadership: his grandmother organized the first day care center in that part of the city, and his father was a prominent local pastor. He is an eloquent speaker and a tireless fundraiser, and the warmth of his personality allows him to connect with all kinds of people.

Ridley also draws on his own hard-won experience as a cocaine addict in that same neighborhood. “For a while there, I was snorting half of

south Florida,” he admits. “I give thanks to God, and to my wife—who has kicked down the doors of more crackhouses in my neighborhood than anybody—and to the sheriff, who was looking for someone to help him deal with the crack epidemic in Delray Beach. When I started to straighten out, he got me to start helping others.”<sup>4</sup>

It is fitting that the leader of this transformation in Delray Beach was a former addict, because the scourge of drug abuse in urban neighborhoods is a dramatic illustration of how the state of democracy affects our lives. Most addicts do not belong to cohesive communities that validate their positive qualities, that help them deal with their problems, and that put their skills to use. Some live in neighborhoods where the social norms encourage crime rather than condemning it—where dealers are role models, where drug abuse is considered normal, and where people are afraid to make eye contact on the street. Finally, many addicts have come to the disheartening conclusion that our political and economic systems are stacked against them. The decision to abuse drugs, which insulates the body and mind from the natural stimulation of friends, family, and community, is an extreme expression of alienation from society.

At first, Chuck Ridley made progress on his own drug problem, and that of his neighborhood, by fighting dealers and finding treatment. Then he transformed himself and his neighborhood by building institutions that foster citizenship, strengthen community, and allow citizens and government to share the powers and responsibilities of governance. “All along I needed something to belong to, a neighborhood that could solve its problems and shape its future,” he says. “Finally I realized that other people need that too.”

## MAD DADS with a Plan

In 1993, Ridley and one of his neighbors founded the local branch of MAD DADS, which stands for “Men Against Destruction, Defending Against Drugs and Social disorder.” Most of the initial members had played on the same high school football team. At first, it was an informal volunteer group that conducted daily patrols in an attempt to discourage the thriving drug trade in Southwest Delray. Then they began branching out, creating youth programs and fostering neighborhood associations.

In 1999, MAD DADS entered a new stage in its development. Ridley and his allies had proven they could raise money and “rally the troops” to fight drug dealers and other local problems, but they weren’t tapping the full citizen potential of their neighborhood. They wanted residents to analyze

problems for themselves, considering all the various options. They wanted to forge productive relationships between citizens and the public employees who did the actual work of policing the streets, educating children, and running the city. They wanted residents to contribute their ideas and efforts, not just their voices and votes, to solving local problems. They wanted to include public officials in the process of building consensus among citizens, instead of forcing them to react to the demands of the neighborhood. “We wanted to create a political environment that would bring out the best in everybody, that would allow people to claim power for themselves and responsibility to others,” Ridley says.

Two other longtime activists were instrumental in this transition. Chuck’s wife, Cynthia Ridley, was always at the center of the organizing work, quietly recruiting residents, making sure their questions were answered, and dealing with the logistics. The Reverend Sharon Hogarth, a faith leader who says her “ministry is the community,” helped MAD DADS access ideas and resources from outside the neighborhood while ensuring that the ideas and resources *inside* the neighborhood always took center stage.

The most logical first step, it seemed to Hogarth and the Ridleys, was to make a plan for the neighborhood. In the past, MAD DADS had been a typical grassroots organization: whenever someone had a good idea, that person would rally a few neighbors and try to implement it. MAD DADS had never involved the residents of Southwest Delray Beach in a more deliberate, comprehensive planning process—there had never seemed to be enough time. But the three activists decided that, if they wanted citizens to help implement the plan, they had to give those residents a chance to help create it. To lay the groundwork, they assembled a representative set of citizens, including young people, members of all the different ethnic groups in the neighborhood, and public employees who had a professional connection with the neighborhood.<sup>5</sup>

As they began their planning, the core group of twenty residents and outside stakeholders wanted to involve more of their neighbors before trying to implement any particular project. But there was one overarching idea that the residents consistently and emphatically supported: a new school. Thirty years before, there had been a high school in Southwest Delray Beach, but it had been shut down as part of the desegregation efforts of the 1970s. Carver High School had been a center of the community in that part of Delray, and residents still talk fondly of the teachers who worked there and the state championship football team that took the field every Friday, representing the pride of the neighborhood. By 1999, the children of the neighborhood were being bused to seventeen different public schools in

other parts of the county. The students of Southwest Delray scored much lower than their peers on standardized tests, had much higher suspension and dropout rates, and exhibited many other signs of failure in the mainstream educational system.<sup>6</sup> The residents in the core group were adamant about the need to take charge of their children's education; for the moment, they put aside their plans to involve more citizens in order to focus on this idea.

The residents also wanted a very unusual kind of school. Through long planning sessions and a great deal of research, they came up with an innovative format for what they began to call "the Village Academy." This school would operate on a year-round schedule and remain open twelve hours a day, six days a week. It would be a "total system," incorporating social, educational, civic, and vocational opportunities. It would have extensive health and medical services, and social workers on staff. There would be one teacher for every fifteen kindergarteners, and one for every 20–25 teenagers.<sup>7</sup> Parents would work directly with teachers, staff members, and the principal to make decisions about priorities such as the curriculum, teaching practices, and school safety. They would also volunteer their time to help implement ideas and improve the school. Students would attend this school from the time they were toddlers until they went off to college. And the residents were more resolute about this point than any other: those kids had to get to college.

Having envisioned the Village Academy, which at times must have seemed like an impossible dream, the MAD DADS core group set out to make it a reality. Through the local United Way, Chuck Ridley met Arthur Kobacker, a local philanthropist with a desire to help "break the cycle of poverty" for children in Delray Beach. Kobacker's interest was piqued by the Village Academy plan; he and Ridley even went on research trips to several innovative schools in other parts of the country. Kobacker joined with the Annenberg Foundation to provide the additional funds the school would need to maintain its expanded schedule and services. A scant five months after the core group had made it a priority, the new school had been approved by the Palm Beach County School Board. Construction got underway in the spring of 2000, and the following August, the Village Academy opened its doors.

## Co-opting the Decision-Makers

One aspect of the MAD DADS planning process shows how some community organizers have changed their approach: Ridley and his allies were able to involve public officials and other decision-makers from the very

beginning of the effort. This was a key reason for the success of the Village Academy plan.

The idea that citizens and decision-makers should be kept apart from one another was one of the original precepts of community organizing. Alinsky worried that if outsiders were part of the initial discussions with residents, they would dominate, manipulate, or co-opt the process. Instead, organizers tried to build a separate base of power by interviewing citizens, identifying their common interests, and then recruiting them for “house meetings” and other events that would solidify their commitment to a shared cause. They sometimes also recruited other allies, outside the neighborhood or community, who were already receptive to that cause. Once the people had turned out and the group was formed, the organizers and participants could begin to broadcast their priorities in the corridors of power. From that point, community organizers might confront the decision-makers (“us” vs. “them”) or they might work together with public officials (“us” working with “them”), but they still assumed that citizens and decision-makers were two very distinct sets of people.<sup>8</sup> Residents had to hold officials accountable to the interests of the community.

Some community organizers now use a broader definition of “us.” This is partly because organizers are much more likely to negotiate and partner with public officials than in the more confrontational days of the ’60s and ’70s. More recently, in places like Southwest Delray, organizers began to realize that if they structured the sessions well, and offered additional leadership training opportunities for residents, they could change the dynamic between citizens and decision-makers and include both sets of people in the discussions.<sup>9</sup>

In Ridley’s eyes, the “us” included not only the people who lived in his neighborhood, but the people who worked there, provided services to its residents, or had some other stake in its success. Bringing some of these people together was a difficult challenge: in fact, the very first meeting of the “core group” was unproductive because the neighborhood residents didn’t speak up as much as the outsiders. The three organizers put the planning on hold; in the interim, they gave the residents some leadership training and more opportunities to “gel” as a group. Then they brought the residents and outside stakeholders back together. There still had been no decisions made by that point: before any priority had been established, before any cause had been embraced, citizens and decision-makers sat down together, talked about their backgrounds and personal experiences, and shared their hopes and concerns for the neighborhood. By bonding in this way, the participants created a unifying glue that helped them deal with conflicting inter-

ests or opinions without having anyone storm out of the room. They built trust and confidence first; by the time the idea of the Village Academy had taken shape, it was a vision they all shared.

This allowed MAD DADS to practice a very facilitative kind of leadership in pushing the plan forward. Once the Village Academy plan was down on paper, they began sharing it with decision-makers who hadn't been involved in the planning sessions, and seeking support for it outside the neighborhood. The power in their approach came from two sources: 1) both neighborhood residents and outside stakeholders felt some ownership of the vision, and 2) because the "core group" represented all the various sets of people within the neighborhood, public officials and potential funders could expect that the Southwest Delray residents would do their utmost to back the new school. Whereas community organizers have traditionally been concerned about decision-makers co-opting citizens, it may be fair to say that MAD DADS helped citizens co-opt the decision-makers.

After the school had opened, the residents of Southwest Delray made good on their promises. They supported the school and the students who attend it, volunteering in many ways to develop the facility and help it function. The students quickly benefited from their new environment: when the school opened in 2000, only 18% were reading at grade level, but by 2004 that number had risen to 52%.<sup>10</sup>

## Broadening the Base

As the work to build the school went forward, the Southwest Delray core group began assembling a larger critical mass of neighborhood residents. "If you want to build trust, empowerment, and support across an entire community, you have to reach a large number of people," says Cynthia Ridley. "We needed to bring in the people who are most at risk," Hogarth adds. "The drug dealers are out there all day, harvesting lives, so you have to be just as persistent if you want to save lives."<sup>11</sup> In a calculated move, they gave their ambitious project a friendly, unthreatening, downright unassuming title: "Community Chat."

Because of their experience with traditional community organizing, Ridley and his allies knew the value of personal recruiting, the power of sharing experiences in small-group meetings, and the galvanizing effect of larger forums. But like many other organizers in recent years, they added some important adaptations, such as impartial facilitators, ground rules set by the group, and a guide that introduced a range of viewpoints.

They also wanted to increase their capacity to attract and retain people

who weren't normally considered "pillars of the community." Ridley and Hogarth hoped that by starting with personal experience, by ensuring civility, and by valuing participants for their potential contributions rather than their prior offenses, they could create a welcoming environment for people who hadn't felt welcomed before. "People who abuse drugs are acting out the pain of their communities," says Hogarth, "and we wanted to strengthen the community web so that it caught them and supported them." Keeping current and potential addicts in the room required that the groups get beyond stereotypes and begin to value the unique contributions of each member. As Hogarth puts it, "Many people at risk are already the scapegoats of their families and the community. The process has to help them—and the other participants—see their own potential."

In the summer of 2000, as the paint was drying on the walls of the Village Academy, well over 100 residents of Southwest Delray Beach were taking part in small-group discussions about the challenges facing their community. Many of the concerns and priorities mentioned by the participants were things MAD DADS had been working on for years: crime and drug activity in the neighborhood; misunderstanding and mistrust between African American, Haitian American, and Hispanic residents; the need for more job training and job opportunities; the need for more youth activities and programs; tensions between residents and police officers; and the threat of gentrification from the South Florida housing boom.

There were also some conclusions that surprised Hogarth and the Ridleys. For example, some young people were upset about the Village Academy, because the best set of basketball courts in the neighborhood had been appropriated as the site of the new building. Because MAD DADS shares office space with a community policing substation, some of the young people also assumed that MAD DADS was an arm of the police force. The organizers found that there was more tension than they had thought between different generations of people living in Southwest Delray Beach.

Many residents who were recent immigrants from Haiti felt that the police and social welfare workers were undermining parental authority. They described a common scenario where unhappy Haitian teenagers (who themselves go through a difficult cultural transition in relocating to the U. S.) call the police to accuse their parents of child abuse. Acting partly on misconceptions about traditional Haitian culture, representatives of the courts and social service agencies seemed more likely to place the children under state custody. Many recent immigrants also expressed great fear of deportation. The Community Chat discussions uncovered a total lack of

communication between public employees and residents who were recent immigrants.

Another surprise for the Community Chat organizers was that the residents of Southwest Delray didn't want to wait for the action forum to take action. After talking about the challenges faced by single parents in the community, participants in one Community Chat group formed a parent support group that has been meeting regularly. When the young people in another group complained about the lack of recreational opportunities, the participants organized a youth basketball team that has since qualified for a state tournament (MAD DADS has also built a new set of basketball courts to replace the ones displaced by the Village Academy).

Some of the participants also began attending—and making themselves heard—at public meetings of the local Community Development Corporation and the Delray Beach City Council. Recognizing the surge of interest on the Southwest side, the planners working on the city's Vision 2010 initiative held a special forum in that part of the city. The forum got a large turnout, and the planners were impressed by what they heard. "It was the most successful visioning meeting we've had," said Lula Butler, the city's Director of Community Improvement, "because the people came in so prepared—and because they weren't just concerned about fixing potholes."<sup>12</sup>

In its early days, MAD DADS regularly organized prayer vigils in front of houses where drug activity was going on. One of the Community Chat groups decided to revive this practice, and they organized a vigil where groups of residents pounded on the doors of known drug houses. After the first vigil nearly led to violence, the police department began assigning officers to attend; over 150 people, including several police officers, attended the second vigil. "When people connect, there's power in that," Cynthia Ridley says. "They take the initiative to do things they wouldn't ordinarily do." The small-group discussions reconfirmed residents' commitment, and emboldened them to recapture their streets. For Chuck Ridley, "It felt good to see other people take the same kinds of risks for their neighborhood that Cynthia and I took when MAD DADS first began. And this time, we didn't have to lead the charge."

Residents also recognized some of the neighborhood's existing assets, and built on them. One example is the "Delray Divas," a step group and drill team for young women that has been expanded dramatically. There are now over 100 girls and young women, ages 6 to 18, involved in this music program, which also gives them access to tutoring and counseling opportunities at the Village Academy. The Divas have become a source of intense neighborhood pride and a very useful organizing tool—people turn

out for neighborhood meetings and events when they know the Divas are going to perform.

One group focused on the impact of gentrification on senior citizens. As rising rents and property taxes put a strain on their finances, many seniors find themselves unable to meet the maintenance costs on their homes. The participants who discussed this problem included a roofer, a house painter, and a man who runs a landscaping service; they decided to devote some of their time to help rehabilitate houses lived in by seniors. Other members of the dialogue group also had roles to play in the rehab plan: they began raising money from local churches and businesses to offset the cost of supplies, and scheduled meetings with public officials to enlist their support. A local Home Depot store agreed to donate building materials, and the city provided some funding. The group has since completed rehab work on twelve homes.<sup>13</sup>

“One of the most exciting things is that the people getting involved aren’t just the same faces who’ve been on the front lines before,” Hogarth says. In fact, the Community Chat leaders began to feel more like followers. They did their best to keep up with the participants, helping them organize youth summits and set up dialogues to help Haitian-American parents work with social service providers. But other projects raced ahead without them: several participants who had been active in neighborhood associations created the Westside Neighborhood Presidents Council to further develop new leadership and give the area a more unified voice. Others helped defeat a developer’s plan to turn an historic African American hotel into a halfway house. “The residents of that neighborhood have become a powerful political force in a very short period of time,” says Delray Beach City Councilwoman Alberta McCarthy.<sup>14</sup>

## From Community Organizing to Organizing Communities

As the Delray Beach experience shows, it is difficult to define a field as diverse and fluid as community organizing. Most good organizers are driven primarily by practical considerations, rather than philosophical ones, and so labels like “faith-based” or “consensus-based” don’t fit very well anymore. “Most community organizations are complex and multifaceted and cannot easily be placed into neatly defined boxes,” says Kristina Smock, a consultant who has worked extensively with community organizers.<sup>15</sup>

In order to define their work and find their place within the field, community organizers are beginning to reconsider a number of important questions:

1. Who are the people being “organized”? Alinsky focused his original efforts on urban neighborhoods where the injustices were clear and the residents were obviously disempowered. The “faith-based” organizing that gained steam in the 1960s and 1970s began to expand the sense of who should be at the table. By appealing to core religious values, organizers were able to bring together people of different congregations and cultural backgrounds.<sup>16</sup> Organizers like Chuck Ridley have taken this inclusiveness one step further, recruiting public employees and public officials to take part in their projects. To make these more inclusive conversations work, some organizers have created environments where participants can examine many different sides of an issue, weighing all the major policy options. In so doing, they are raising the second major question:
  
2. What constitutes an “issue?” In Alinsky’s world, “issue” was roughly synonymous with “objective”—organizers would conduct scores of one-on-one interviews, asking people about their concerns for the neighborhood, and how those concerns could be addressed. One example of an “issue” that might emerge from this process is “building more affordable housing.” The list of “issues” compiled from the interviews would often be narrowed down on the basis of whether they were “winnable.” Brenda Easley Webb, a longtime community organizer in Buffalo, changed her approach after taking part in house meetings where she “felt railroaded by organizers to pick an actionable issue.”<sup>17</sup> Instead, many organizers today are bringing people together before the solutions have been determined. The Kansas City Church/Community Organization, for example, now involves residents and decision-makers in examining the larger problem rather than moving quickly to specific goals or demands (see Chapter 2).<sup>18</sup> These organizers are taking a more deliberative, problem-solving type of approach, in which an “issue” is a broadly stated topic with a range of possible solutions.
  
3. Who is responsible for taking action? In Alinsky’s parlance, “action” referred to a demonstration where large numbers of people showed their support for a particular cause or policy change. But even then, community organizers were helping citizens act in more tangible ways, from street cleanups and crime patrols to lending circles and land trusts. Today, it is clearer than ever that action is occurring at a number of levels, and that it is being accomplished by residents, not just decision-makers.<sup>19</sup> Much of the work in Southwest Delray, for example, was carried out by citizens themselves. By ensuring that action and advocacy efforts are associated with the participants rather than the project itself, organizers can also maintain their stance as conveners, rather than being seen as activists for particular causes.

A closely related development is the increasing willingness of community organizers to build long-term relationships between citizens and public employees like teachers, police officers, social workers, and city planners. Many of the action efforts that emerged from Community Chat were propelled by the fact that the small groups contained these kinds of practitioners, whose expertise helped the group brainstorm ideas and then figure out how to implement them. The traditional approach of building a separate power base and then communicating with government was more likely to create collaboration at the top—between organizers and public officials—than at the rank-and-file, rubber-hits-the-road level of social workers and Haitian parents, police officers and prayer vigil organizers, teachers and volunteer hall monitors at the Village Academy.<sup>20</sup>

4. How should organizers think about power? Alinsky assumed that there were basic conflicts of interest between decision-makers and citizens, between the rulers and the ruled. This outlook influenced the rhetoric used by organizers: their language often pinned the blame for problems on government, overlooked or devalued neighborhood assets, and suggested to residents that the system was stacked against them. “Who has the power to redress our grievance?” is a question that has long been used by community organizers.<sup>21</sup> In this view, power is something to be seized and used by citizens.

The strategies and rhetoric being used by community organizers today seem to suggest a less limited definition of power. Organizers like Warren Adams-Leavitt, director of the Kansas City Church/Community Organization, are more concerned with building power than taking it from others. “We are more co-creative with local government,” he says. “Some of that is the result of our own growing sophistication as an organization. Some of that is the growing respect that we have earned in town, i.e., people see their interest in partnering with us because we get things done.”<sup>22</sup>

This language about power seems to suggest that, while there may be some important differences between citizens and decision-makers, their roles can be complementary and they have many goals in common. Rather than a “togetherness against the system,” this mindset is open to the possibility of a “togetherness that *is* the system.”

There is more variety in the way community organizers answer these four questions than at any time in the last fifty years. There is a lively debate inside and between national organizing networks like the Industrial Areas Foundation, the Pacific Institute for Community Organizing, and the Gamaliel Foundation.<sup>23</sup> The diverse assumptions of local organizers reflect

the fact that they have tried so many different strategies in order to be effective. In some places, they have achieved breakthroughs by going beyond Alinsky's desire to influence power and establishing new democratic arenas where power can be exercised by a wider range of actors. It is no coincidence, then, that community organizers are more likely to recruit all kinds of people, welcome all kinds of views, value all kinds of action, and understand all kinds of power, since those seem to be important preconditions for democratic governance. In situations where organizers cross this threshold, and incorporate political processes rather than affecting them, it may be that the title of "community organizer" no longer fits. In those cases, we should probably call them "democratic organizers" instead.

This doesn't mean that traditional community organizing has somehow outlived its usefulness. There are certainly situations where organizers can make more headway by trying to affect policy decisions from the outside, using a separate power base to confront or negotiate with decision-makers. Some of the most dramatic changes occur when different kinds of strategies are used at the same time—it may be that strong "outside" advocacy efforts help convince decision-makers that they ought to participate in new "inside" arenas for policy-making.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, some of the techniques first developed by Alinsky, and refined by other organizers over the years, should perhaps be used more widely: employing intensive one-on-one interviews, publicizing outcomes heavily, coaching and mentoring new leaders, and providing stable jobs for professional organizers.

The fact that community organizing has become a much larger tent, with mayors and police chiefs as well as neighborhood activists, makes some veteran organizers nervous. "Some of them still adhere to a more traditional model and don't see anything else as legitimate organizing," says Kristina Smock.<sup>25</sup> But when people cross the threshold into democratic governance, that doesn't mean they are ignoring questions of power or abandoning muscular radicalism for a softer, more conciliatory, and ultimately more co-opted approach. It is simply a different approach, embodying different ideas about how to ensure accountability and justice, with different implications for the future of politics. "Organizing chauvinism and the myth of pure or 'real' organizing has not served our movement well," says one researcher. "Not every organizer will be or needs to be another Saul Alinsky. Organizing has to be seen less as a sacred priesthood and more as a set of skills that can be learned and practiced by all kinds of people, in a variety of organizational settings."<sup>26</sup>

If we concentrate too much on the differences among community organizers, we may also miss the real point of interest: how the strategic inno-

vations of community organizers have paralleled the discoveries made by other kinds of local leaders. Practitioners and public officials in fields like race, education, and law enforcement have developed similar approaches, because they are dealing with similar breakdowns in local politics. This can help communities create new kinds of public institutions, as we will see in Southwest Delray. It also sets the stage for new forms of democracy.

## From Defying Governments to Designing Them

By 2001, it was clear that MAD DADS had utterly transformed its role and had actually taken over many of the traditional functions of local government. At the same time, they had run out of money for Community Chat, Ridley was consumed with overseeing the Village Academy, and they were unable to respond to all the requests for advice and support from neighborhood associations, public agencies, and potential organizers all over South Florida. Delray Beach even won a coveted All-America City Award, given by the National Civic League, partly because the city's nomination highlighted the work of MAD DADS.<sup>27</sup> The organization was having an enormous impact on several major policy issues, on the professional lives of scores of practitioners, and on the quality of life of thousands of citizens—and it was operating out of several rooms in an old police substation where the septic system flooded like clockwork every two weeks.

To meet these challenges, the leaders of MAD DADS decided to transform the structure of their organization. They changed the name to the “Village Foundation,” feeling that it was a more holistic and accurate title. It would raise money and coordinate the work of the school, Community Chat, the youth activities, and the crime prevention efforts. It would also serve as the hub of a new “Village Alliance” of nonprofits that work on other issues in the neighborhood, such as housing, hunger, and parenting. They intended the Village Foundation to act as a convener for all kinds of public dialogue and problem-solving efforts. Chuck Ridley became the director of the organization and the unofficial mayor of the neighborhood.

The Village Foundation represents a new type of quasi-public institution, a kind of “government by nonprofit.” This transformation was not the result of any master plan; MAD DADS stumbled into it, led by the successes and ideas generated by their organizing work. They started out, years ago, by appropriating law enforcement roles for themselves, holding prayer vigils, and closing down drug houses. When they built the Village Academy, they created not only the first educational institution in Southwest Delray in thirty years, but a relatively autonomous entity—a school

district for the neighborhood. By working more intensively with neighborhood associations, they set up a network of block-level organizations that any local government should envy. The residents who stepped forward through Community Chat have made a major impact on planning, economic development, and housing, not only by providing input to decision-makers but by carrying out much of the work themselves.

Ridley's desire to build a stronger institutional base is in keeping with the Alinsky tradition. Traditional community organizers have always created "permanent power organizations" to articulate neighborhood interests in city politics. These tended to focus on lobbying and advocacy, but over the years, some of the most successful groups added programs and services for neighborhood residents. Some of these organizations have become established political actors in their communities, while others are more like the Village Foundation in their focus on services instead of politics, and still others combine the two roles.<sup>28</sup>

The Village Foundation also mirrors a much larger trend that is apparent in communities all over the country: creating holistic new structures that address a range of policy issues in a specific neighborhood. Some "community development corporations" (CDCs) now fit this description. Many CDCs were spun out of community organizing efforts in the 1960s and 1970s, and some received their initial funding from the federal Office of Economic Opportunity. Most started out with a broad social agenda, but with the federal housing cutbacks of the 1980s, they began to focus more on the construction of low-income housing. This work intensified, to the point where CDCs have now built hundreds of thousands of housing units. In the last fifteen years, some CDCs swung back to a broader focus, spurred by the realization that, while housing was critical, they couldn't adequately support residents if they didn't also address social issues like child care and crime prevention. Many have branched out, as seen in Chapter 2, taking on roles that go far beyond housing construction.<sup>29</sup>

"Comprehensive community initiatives" (CCIs) take this idea a step further, trying to revitalize neighborhoods by addressing all the major factors that influence persistent urban poverty, including housing, child care and education, crime, transportation, job training, and economic development. Major funders like the Local Initiatives Support Corporation, the Neighborhood Reinvestment Corporation, and the Rockefeller, Surdna, and Annie E. Casey Foundations have devoted hundreds of millions of dollars to these multipronged initiatives.<sup>30</sup> The Clinton Administration brought the federal government into the mix by introducing the Empowerment Zone/Enterprise Community program. Over \$1.5 billion over a ten-year period

was allotted to 137 EZ/EC neighborhoods.<sup>31</sup> All of these efforts focus on distinct neighborhoods and try to account for every obstacle that might keep residents from pulling themselves out of poverty. By 2000, there was a CCI operating in at least one neighborhood of every major American city.<sup>32</sup>

The comprehensive approach to fighting urban poverty has a long tradition, beginning with the settlement houses of the late nineteenth century and continuing through the War on Poverty in the 1960s. In the late 1980s, it was reinforced by academic research showing that social services, housing and economic development, and political and cultural activities were increasingly carried out in isolation from each other, and that this segregation limited their overall effectiveness. During the same time period, governments have been cutting back on their anti-poverty work: George W. Bush added force to the trend by proposing that “faith-based organizations”—a label that fits many nonprofit social service groups—take a larger role in providing services to the poor.

CCIs arose to confront these challenges. These multipronged, neighborhood-focused nonprofit initiatives are based on three main assumptions: that poverty tends to be concentrated in city neighborhoods, that the network of groups and personal relationships in a neighborhood is critical, and that residents need a range of assets and services close by in order to improve their lives.<sup>33</sup>

Comprehensive anti-poverty work has also drawn inspiration from a less likely source: drug dealers. Dealers are a daily presence in urban neighborhoods, interacting with residents, enforcing their own codes for behavior, and occupying a central role in the economy of that area. The Reverend Eugene Rivers, who helped found “the Ten-Point Coalition” to revitalize low-income neighborhoods in Boston, conceived of the plan after talking with a drug dealer named Selvin Brown. When Rivers asked Brown why the church was unable to counteract the lure of drugs, Brown explained that “when Johnny goes past my corner on the way to school, I’m there, you’re not. When he comes home from school, I’m there, you’re not. When he goes to the corner store . . . I’m there, you’re not. When he goes back home, I’m there, you’re not. I win, you lose.” Rivers realized that the church groups and social services available to children and teenagers in Boston were simply too distant from their lives and too disconnected from one another. The Ten-Point Coalition, like other comprehensive community initiatives, offers an array of programs and services in a way that is coordinated, highly visible, and reinforces the network of responsible adults and institutions in that neighborhood.<sup>34</sup>

To strengthen community networks and to compete with drug dealers, neighborhood leaders have joined forces with foundations and public officials to create institutions like the Village Foundation. What makes this work so difficult and intriguing is that by combining and coordinating the major public services and functions, they are essentially recreating local government, one neighborhood at a time. Many of the people now leading, funding, and planning these institutions started out as traditional community organizers. The shift in organizing tactics has changed their relationship with governments: rather than defying them, these longtime activists now find themselves designing new ones.

### Ridley Resigns: Lessons in Democracy and Accountability

What happened next in Southwest Delray raised some interesting concerns about the model of government by nonprofits. In 2003, Chuck Ridley decided to hire an assistant director and raise his own salary, based on the expectation of a large grant from a national foundation. The grant was delayed, a budget shortfall loomed, and the Village Foundation board members were furious that Ridley hadn't cleared the decision with them (Ridley claimed he had done so informally). The board suspended Ridley, and in the furor, he resigned. Two presidents of neighborhood associations in Southwest Delray claimed that the board was disregarding the wishes of neighborhood residents.<sup>35</sup>

Regardless of what the truth might have been in this whole affair, the fiasco does suggest some difficult questions about the accountability of nonprofit governments. Though the Village Foundation might have been just as important to the quality of life in Southwest Delray as the City of Delray Beach, neighborhood residents couldn't vote for the director as they would for the mayor or city council. Ridley and his successors were accountable only to the Village Foundation board members, most of whom did not live in Southwest Delray. In important decisions like the one about Ridley's conduct, the neighborhood did not have a say.

Questions about the lines of accountability have arisen in other comprehensive community initiatives as well. Some directors don't answer to the residents because they make no distinction between their organization and the neighborhood itself. "As long as a community-building organization sees itself as the community, it cannot work effectively to improve its representation of the community," says William Traynor, who directs a CCI in Lawrence, Massachusetts.<sup>36</sup> Some of these projects have resident advisory

boards or committees, and have residents serving on their boards of directors, but in many of those cases it is open to question whether those citizens possess any real authority. Even when foundations urge the organization to “ask the community” rather than looking to program officers for approval of major decisions, the culture in these nonprofits has been very difficult to change: perhaps understandably, the organization directors want to appease their funding sources.<sup>37</sup>

The Village Foundation then faced other difficulties, challenges that may also pertain to nonprofit governments in other places. Though it was coordinating and providing public services, the organization did not receive tax dollars directly, and so was greatly dependent on foundations. The United Way pulled back other grants it had made to the Village Foundation, citing sloppy management and bad bookkeeping. Finally, in the summer of 2004, the Village Foundation closed its doors.<sup>38</sup>

Even if the Village Foundation had been a model of good management, its fate suggests that nonprofit governments are by nature going to be on tenuous financial footing. If local governments had to rely on foundations and charitable contributions to meet their operating expenses, they would probably go bankrupt just as quickly.

The Village Foundation’s greatest weakness may have been that it wasn’t designed in a way that reflected the democratic, participatory organizing that created it. It lacked processes and procedures that would involve residents in dialogue, decision-making, and action to govern the organization and improve the neighborhood. “[Ridley] didn’t have anyone else involved in the decision, and he bore the responsibility himself,” said the co-chair of the Village Foundation board.<sup>39</sup> One has to wonder: would Ridley have stumbled had he been involving large numbers of residents in key decisions like how to prioritize the organization’s budget?

Other CCIs have the same shortcomings when it comes to mobilizing citizens. Some of these efforts experience the same kind of dynamic that plagues many neighborhood associations and parent-teacher organizations: a small group of citizens manages to gain a powerful role within the organization and then begins to shut out other residents. When citizens have worked hard to gain a place at the table, they don’t always see the need to then make room for their neighbors. As one resident in an Empowerment Zone put it, “It was like trying to take a lollipop from a child who has been waiting for it for weeks.”<sup>40</sup>

Many CCIs characterize their work as “resident-driven” but fail to involve large, diverse numbers of people in their planning, decision-making, and implementation work. Some EZ/EC sites were able to mobilize citi-

zens in order to apply for the funding, but weren't able to sustain that involvement once they were past the planning stages.<sup>41</sup> Kathy Bailey trains CDC and CCI employees in her work for NeighborWorks America; she says that "when I get more specific with our training institute participants about what it means to do 'resident-driven' neighborhood revitalization, they realize that their programs really don't fit that definition. They are still giving far too much control to planners and other outside practitioners, at the expense of the residents and stakeholders inside the neighborhood."<sup>42</sup> It may be that the challenge of constantly bringing in new people, reaching out to different sectors of the neighborhood, and involving those residents in regular, routine, ongoing ways is turning out to be more difficult than CCI founders had anticipated.<sup>43</sup>

The experience of the Village Foundation, as well as CCIs in other places, suggests that issues of governance are bound to arise even when the official government is not in the picture. If anything, shifting from public agencies to faith-based organizations or other nonprofits will make these questions more critical and more obvious. Just like local elected officials, the directors in charge of these initiatives struggle to inform residents, gather meaningful input, and tap the potential of citizens and their organizations to help implement policy. No matter whose side you take in the classic debate between liberals and conservatives about big government versus small government, you still have to deal with questions of democracy, accountability, and power.

## The Strange Career of Chuck Ridley

The fields where Chuck Ridley's grandmother and her neighbors used to cut sugarcane are no longer crawling with snakes. The South Florida development boom ran over them, obliterating the tall grass and turning their habitat into parking lots and subdivisions.

But there are still snakes in the streets of Southwest Delray. These new serpents roam through that neighborhood, tempting children and adults with a fruit that promises escape, oblivion, a way to opt out of a life that is stacked against them. While Chuck Ridley and others try to build up their community, the drug dealers—who are themselves products of isolation and hopelessness—offer a venom that, by further isolating one person from another, threatens to tear it down.

We used to treat our nation's drug problem as if it were either a war (fighting drug suppliers at home and abroad) or a disease (treating individual addicts to decrease the demand for drugs). Over the last twenty years,

we have begun to realize that drug abuse also represents an institutional failure: where drugs are rampant, it means that the parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles do not have control of the schools, street corners, police departments, and public services that demarcate their neighborhoods. Comprehensive initiatives like the Village Foundation will probably continue to proliferate, because they bring multifaceted resources to bear on multifaceted problems, and because they can connect those external resources to the internal assets of neighborhood leadership and activism. They may not succeed in the long run, however, unless they can reach out beyond those initial sets of leaders and involve all kinds of residents in meaningful, on-going ways.

Intertwined in this development is the continuing evolution of community organizing. Projects like Community Chat will probably continue to proliferate because they are often effective for meeting one of the original goals of Saul Alinsky: giving people a chance to wield power in their neighborhoods, their communities, and their lives. Some organizers will continue to take the political system in their communities as a given; they will try valiantly to make citizens—and low-income people in particular—a force in that realm. Others will continue trying to create parallel political arenas where the range of players is much more diverse, including “powerbrokers” and poor people alike. In some places, they will be able to give citizens the opportunity to take part in governing, rather than simply influence those who govern.

The strange career of Chuck Ridley may represent a twisting, tortuous road, but that path promises to become increasingly well-trodden as people try to solve the challenges of democratic governance in low-income neighborhoods. Ridley himself will be glad of the company; though he resigned as director of the Village Foundation, he says he “did not resign as its founder.” He continues to play an important role in the revitalization of Southwest Delray, serving on the board of the city’s Community Re-development Agency and in other capacities. His neighborhood’s greatest achievement, the Village Academy, seems to be thriving: test scores are rising, and the school’s social service programs have been sustained under the management of other nonprofits.<sup>44</sup> In some ways, the school has taken over the kind of holistic role that the Village Foundation was designed to fulfill.

When Ridley thinks about how to help the young people of his neighborhood avoid drug abuse and find ways to contribute to their community, he reflects on the lessons he learned from his own experiences. “When I was on drugs, one of the things that finally got to me was that the adults I

had looked up to as a kid were now afraid to come out of their houses. And I was one of the main reasons! The leaders and role models the neighborhood needed—that I still needed—were barricaded indoors because they feared me. That got me thinking about what I was doing with my life.”

In the midst of Ridley’s addiction, it took people like his wife and the sheriff to recognize his talents and true qualities, and that helped him change his course. What has kept him on his current path is the chance to build institutions that he could belong to and lead. In that sense, his work is not so different from that of his grandmother: he is trying to raise a neighborhood.