

SHORT INTERVIEWS WITH THE FIRESTARTERS

MASTER CLASSES

At NOA Gathering V, we've asked 11 veteran organizers to offer master classes. They are: Heather Booth, Anne Braden, Mandy Carter, Gary Delgado, Don Elmer, Dolores Huerta, Maria Jimenez, José Matus, Tim Sampson, Jerome Scott and Leah Wise.

The session will be hosted and facilitated by Bineshi Albert, Mimi Ho and Alice Sunshine.

Poet Ethelbert Miller and spoken word performers Brutha Los and Rashidi Omari (who together form Company of Prophets) will also offer master classes.

In preparation for the session, we asked our participants to answer several questions:

- How long have you been organizing?
- Why did you decide to get into the work?
- Organizations you've worked with, issues you've worked on, etc.?
- What is the most important question organizers today should be asking themselves?
- Who was your most important teacher or mentor, and what was the single most important thing he or she taught you?

We also asked them to briefly describe what they wanted to talk about in their master classes.

Here's what they told us.

Heather Booth

It's hard to say when I began organizing. Perhaps the first organized activity I was in was with CORE in support of demonstrations against Woolworth's, as they didn't allow African Americans to sit at the counter in the South.

I believe strong family values (fairness, justice and democracy) are the reasons I became involved in organizing. There was the belief that people should be treated with dignity.

I worked with the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Women's Radical Action Project (WRAP), JANE (started the first abortion counseling organizations before Roe vs. Wade), SDS, Chicago Women's Liberation Union (founder 1966-1972), Midwest Academy (founding director and now president), Citizen Labor Energy Coalition (founding director 1977-1980), Citizen Action (founder, then president), Democratic National Committee (National Training Director/National Field Director and other positions) as well as working with the successful campaigns of Senator Carol Moseley (1992) and Harold Washington (the second campaign). I have been the NAACP National Voter Fund director since 2000.

My parents have influenced my work. They taught me the power of love and to have passion for justice. My children have taught me how important children are in life and my husband teaches me to have confidence in myself. Fannie Lou Hamer taught me to keep on keeping on among other lessons.

Organizers should be asking themselves, Where are the openings in which we can make a difference for the greatest change for the greatest number of people. How do you 1) build a better society, 2) build power, 3) involve (and join with) people in the struggle to do one and two?

I will talk about Electoral Politics and Movement Building. This is the one area in which we can contest for power—especially if we combine it with building our organizations for political accountability between elections.

Anne Braden

I started organizing in 1948, about a year after I moved to Louisville, Kentucky. Only I didn't call it organizing. I saw it as becoming a revolutionary. The Cold War was in full swing, we thought we were on the verge of WW III and possibly fascism at home.

Within that somewhat grandiose picture, however, the things we did were pretty mundane—as so much of the work to change the world is, really. The first thing that drew me into activity was a mailing party for Henry Wallace's 1948 presidential campaign. I stuffed envelopes and listened to the conversation and got active. In the years following, I spent lots of time circulating petitions, going door-to-door, and trying to register voters. So I guess I did become an organizer.

I started organizing because I grew up white in a racist society, and privileged in a classist society. I just happened to run into people at the right time in my life who asked the right questions. As a newspaper reporter in my early 20s in Birmingham, Alabama in the mid-1940s, I covered the courthouse for two daily papers. I had long known deep in my heart how wrong segregation was, but now I saw firsthand what it did—the death, destruction and dehumanization. And I soon realized it was dehumanizing to whites as well as African Americans; it was dehumanizing me.

In the late 40s and early 50s, I worked with local committees in Louisville that worked to open all-white hospitals to African-Americans, or to repeal our state school segregation law. In 1957-74 I was a field traveler, writer and later co-director of the Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF), a Southwide interracial organization whose mission was to reach out and bring whites into activity alongside African Americans in the struggles against segregation. Worked to abolish the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC); in various organizations against the war in Vietnam; worked closely with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and other civil rights groups. From 1975-Present: Southern Organizing Committee for Economic & Social Justice (SOC), the successor organization to SCEF. In the 90s, it became deeply involved in the new grassroots movement against environmental racism. I have worked intensively with the Kentucky Alliance Against Racist & Political Repression; our job is fighting white supremacy, although we also play a key role in supporting the local movement for lesbian and gay rights.

I want to name two organizing mentors, one African American and one white.

William L. Patterson was an African American activist, organizer from the 1930s until his death, I believe about 10 years ago. He was also a lawyer and national leader to free the nine defendants in the Scottsboro Case in Alabama in the 30s. He was also a Communist. And in the 50s he headed the Civil Rights Congress. He taught me I should be going not to Black churches, but to white churches and telling people there why they should be involved in this struggle. That advice changed my life—and pretty much that's what I've been doing ever since.

My other key mentor was Jim Dombrowski, a white Southerner who became a part of the revolutionary movement in the South in the 30s. By the time I met him in the early 1950s he was director of SCEF and continued in that role the first nine years my husband and I worked on its staff. He was a quiet man who rarely spoke at meetings, but was like a rock. From him, I learned how to take the long view, and, even more important, patience. Jim believed you never give up on anyone. The person who shuns you today may be on the front lines with you tomorrow. That lesson is something I have striven to remember.

The most important question organizers should be asking themselves—and I'll answer this as I think it pertains to white organizers—is, how do we find ways to reach out to new white people—those who do not see themselves as anti-racist and indeed may think they oppose us. We have to consciously look for the "open sesame" situations around in which we can convince more people that their very lives may depend on dealing with the evil of white supremacy.

My session will be, Doing the Impossible: Creating Multi-Ethnic Organizations in a Racist Society. My approach is that the impossible just takes a little longer. But I don't have magic answers, and I don't think anyone else does—or we'd have a different society already. But I think together we can find some answers.

Mandy Carter

I began organizing in 1968 through participation in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's (SCLC) Poor People's Campaign in Washington, DC. I was arrested outside HEW (then the Department of Housing, Education and Welfare). I've

worked with the War Resisters League, National Black Lesbian and Gay Forum, Southerners on New Ground (SONG), the Human Rights Campaign, the International Federation of Black Pride and the Democratic National Committee (Gay/Lesbian Vote 96 and Gay & Lesbian Caucus). I've also worked with the Gay and Lesbian Task Force, OutFund, American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), NOW (National and North Carolina) and the Congressional Black Caucus. Through an AFSC representative speaking at my high school about non-violent activism I was led to a summer work camp and then I attended the Institute for the Study of Nonviolence. At my second civil disobedience action in Oakland I met a woman from the War Resisters League which led to my first movement job. I then realized that my life's work would be about being an organizer.

An important question for organizers today might be, what is the philosophical underpinning of why I am an organizer? What principles and values sustain me for the long haul? Ira Sandperl (Institute for the Study of Nonviolence) was my mentor. His style, content and teachings are with me to this day and without his teachings which embrace Gandhian Nonviolence, I doubt I would have sustained organizing this long.

I will talk about, Are We About Justice or Just Us? Our LGBT Movement at the Crossroads. Who are the faces and voices of our lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community and movement? Do they accurately reflect the diversity of who we are and the issues we're working on? Are we just about being gay and only wanting to concentrate on gay issues? An open discussion about multiracial and multi-issue coalition building as lesbian/gay/trans organizers.

Gary Delgado

I've done social change work for about 30 years. In that time, I've done organizing, training and research. I was a student civil rights and anti-war activist. I began my organizing work with the National Welfare Rights Organization. I've worked for NY welfare rights, United WREP Workers, ACORN, CTWO, and ARC. The issues I've worked have included the following: welfare rights, civil rights, immigrant rights, gay rights and Palestinian rights. I've run racial access and equity campaigns in the areas of education and housing.

I became an organizer because I wanted an opportunity to make change.

The key question for organizers today is, what are you willing to sacrifice to achieve your goals personally and politically?

Don Elmer

When I was in seminary in Chicago, Saul Alinsky used to come by looking for organizers, and turned me on to the idea of organizing. He was electrifying! After that, I kept running into people who had worked with Alinsky. I did my fieldwork with Rev. Shel Trapp at a north side church; a year later he quit the church and was working for Tom Gaudette, an Alinsky organizer, on the west side. I did my intern year with another pastor, James Reed, who was a leader in an Alinsky group on the southwest side of Chicago. He got thrown out of church for his role in the organization. So, I decided to work with an Alinsky group for one year and then go on home to North Dakota and be a pastor. I never made it back home—I was having too much fun!

I've worked with Southwest Community Congress, Northwest Community Organization, Metropolitan Area Housing Alliance, Washington Inner City Self Help, Metropolitan Organization for People and Center for Community Change.

Shel Trapp was my mentor. He got me to trust my instincts and see that a combination of instincts and guts wins most every time. Secondly, he taught me that one could easily trust the people in an organizing setting to do the right thing. Accountability to them would bring results and keep us from making total asses of ourselves, most of the time anyway.

The important question for organizers is, who am I and what is my own self interest? We spend most of our time trying to figure out everyone else's self interest and forget our own. It is really in our interest to have no life but our work? Is it really in our interest to know so little about ourselves that we can't understand anyone else with any depth?"

My master class will be, Using Trauma and Screw Ups to Reconnect to Your Own Power. It is not helpful for an organization to have an organizer who is disconnected from his or her own sense of power. If we don't model power,

what are people really learning from us? What are ways that we can develop an inner life that taps the power and strength we all have? I'd like to share my own take and what has worked for me.

Dolores Huerta

Dolores C. Huerta is the co-founder and Secretary-Treasurer of the United Farm Workers of America, AFL-CIO. The mother of 11 children, 14 grandchildren and four great grandchildren, Dolores has played a major role in the American Civil Rights movement.

Dolores Huerta was born on April 10, 1900 in northern New Mexico. Her mother taught her to be generous and caring for others. Because of her mother's community activism, Dolores learned to be outspoken. After high school, Dolores attended University of the Pacific Delta Community College and received a teaching degree. After teaching grammar school, Dolores left her job because, "I couldn't stand seeing kids come to class hungry and needing shoes. I thought I could do more by organizing farm workers than by trying to teach their hungry children."

In 1955 she was the founding member of the Stockton chapter of the Community Service Organization (CSO), a grassroots organization started by Fred Ross, Sr. The CSO battled segregation and police brutality, led voter registration drives, pushed for improved public services and fought to enact new legislation. While working for the CSO and recognizing the needs of farm workers, she organized and founded the Agricultural Workers Association in 1960. She became a tireless lobbyist in Sacramento and in 1961 succeeded in obtaining the citizenship requirement removed from pension and public assistance programs. She was also instrumental in the passage of legislation granting voters the right to vote in Spanish. She also fought for the right of individuals to take their drivers license exam in their native language. In 1962, she lobbied for an end to the "captive labor" Bracero Program.

Through her work at the CSO she met Cesar Chavez. They both realized the need to organize farm workers. In 1962, after the CSO turned down Cesar's request to organize farm workers, Cesar and Dolores resigned from CSO. Dolores, single with seven children, joined Cesar and his family in Delano, California. There, they formed the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA), the predecessor of the UFW.

By 1965, they had recruited farm workers and their family throughout San Joaquin Valley. On September 8th, Filipino workers of the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC) demanded higher wages and struck Delano area grape growers. Dolores and Cesar had planned to organize farm workers to confront the corporate grape industry in several years, but they couldn't ignore the request of their Filipino brothers.

On September 16, 1965, the NFWA voted to join the Delano Grape Strike, which resulted in over 5000 grape workers walking off their jobs. This led to the merging of the two organizations in 1966 to form the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee (UFWOC). The strike would last for five years.

Dolores negotiated the first UFWOC contract with the Schenley Wine Company. This was the first time in U.S. history that a committee comprised of farm workers negotiated a collective bargaining agreement with an agricultural corporation. Dolores continued her work by speaking out early and often about toxic pesticides prompting growers to stop using dangerous pesticides such as DDT and parathion. Dolores directed UFW's national grape boycott, which took the plight of the farmworkers to the consumer. As a result, the entire California grape industry signed a three-year, collective bargaining agreement with the United Farm Workers.

José Matus

I was recruited by the Yaqui Ceremonial Elders in 1973 to help them address Yaqui cultural and community concerns, community fundraising campaigns and law enforcement abuse of authority. I have 28 years as an advocate for indigenous rights, social, economic and racial justice.

I have worked with the South Tucson Yaqui Community Council of Elders, the Center for Employment Training, Yaqui Bilingual Education Committee, Pima County Adult Education Committee, United Way Minority Leadership (Tucson), Tohono O'odhan Nation Education Department, Native American Fair Employment Rights Committee, Southwest Network

for Environmental and Economic Justice, Alianza Indigena Sin Fronteras, Coalición de Derechos Humanos and Pascua Yaqui Tribe Employment Rights Commission.

My most important organizing teacher and mentor was the late Anselmo Valencia, spiritual leader and elder of the Pascua Yaqui Tribe. And the single most important thing he taught me was tolerance. Perseverance and visionary movement building.

The most important question organizers should be asking themselves at this historical moment is, what am I, an activist or an organizer?

My master class will be, "The Vision Quest of Building a Movement." Why should I do this—for my benefit or whose benefit? Am I a romantic organizer and what changes do I dream about making? Am I a revolutionary during a non-revolutionary time or only during a revolution?

Tim Sampson

I began organizing in 1962 in South Central Los Angeles. Mad as hell about the injustices inflicted on people, I wanted people to get together and change the world vs. coping with it. In the 1950's, I worked with the SRP student movement at the University of Chicago. In California, I've worked with Avalon-Carter Community Center (Los Angeles) and with the grape pickers in solidarity. After my work with NFWA and CCCD, I've worked with SEIU 535 and the California Faculty Association. I've worked with CTWO, ARC, PUEBLO and Californians for Justice. While teaching at San Francisco State University's School of Social Work. I also work with the California Labor Federation and the Congress of California Seniors. I am the new Statewide Energy Campaign Coordinator.

I have been mentored by many. Cesar Chavez taught me the beauty of organizing one person at a time. Johnnie Tillmon and George Wiley for proving that poor women of color can be organized. Nancy Sampson demonstrated that love is more powerful than anger as a force for social change. Saul Alinsky taught me about power while Gary Delgado taught me about power but showed me the significance of community.

I am interested in new strategies which will nourish and sustain a mass movement for social change, and in being an agent for growth in the organizing. I will share observations and lessons about welfare rights organizing.

Jerome Scott

I started organizing in 1968 as part of the leadership of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers in the auto plants in Detroit, where I was born and grew up. During this time, I was also secretary-treasurer of UAW Local 47.

The "why" is because there were all kinds of issues for black workers in the plants: health and safety, and representation in the union and throughout the auto industry. After being fired in 1973 for leadership in a wildcat strike at the Chrysler Detroit Forge plant, I was hired as a bartender across the street from the plant and continued to organize from there.

My next organizing effort, beginning in 1974, was as a "volunteer" in a Marxist Leninist formation that many of the black workers in the League joined. We realized that even after we had won a lot of our demands, life in the plants remained oppressive and exploitative, with health and safety issues in the forefront. I continue to do this as a part of community-based organizing.

In 1979, I moved South—to my ancestral home in Georgia. I began organizing throughout the South with the Equal Rights Congress until 1986, around the many cases of civil rights and voting rights violations, as well as police brutality.

In 1986, upon realizing that the history of the South and the role that it played in the strategy of movement building was being lost, we founded Project South, Institute for the Elimination of Poverty and Genocide. It evolved into a movement-building organization using popular education and action research to develop indigenous leaders for the developing movement. Since 1986, this has been my primary organizing work.

Nelson Perry was my most important organizing teacher. The single most important thing he taught me was the importance of theory and philosophy in becoming an analytical thinker...a must for organizers.

At this historical moment the most important question for organizers is, how do we develop a consciousness among activists that will mobilize a critical mass of people who share the same vision, so we can formulate a strategy to achieve our vision and the victory we want?

My master class will be Popular Education as a Tool for Movement Building. It will look at how we can ensure that movement building and popular education are at the center of our discussion. We will consider where the movement is today, and how we can use popular education to get to the consciousness, vision and strategy we need for developing our leadership and building our movement.

Leah Wise

Leah is the co-founder and Coordinator of the Southeast Regional Economic Justice Network (REJN). An African American woman native to California, she connected social change activities in the South for more than twenty years. She was the primary initiator of North Carolinians Against Racist and Religious Violence [NCARRV] (1983), a statewide citizens' group seeking to assist victims and help communities respond to bigoted violence; and, the Hamlet Response Coalition for Workplace Reform (1991), a statewide coalition that won precedent-setting legislative reforms following the Imperial Foods Fire that killed 25 workers in North Carolina.

Leah also was a founding member of: the African American Dance Ensemble (1983); the Inter-religious Economic Crisis Organizing Network (1982); the Federation for Industrial Retention and Renewal (1988); the Center for Democratic Renewal, formerly known as the National Anti-Klan Network (1979), and continues to serve as Treasurer of the Board; the National Council of Churches Economic and Environmental Justice Working Group (1991); and the reorganized US Urban Rural Mission/World Council of Churches (1987), on which she headed as Contact Person from 1991-96 and represented to the WCC global unit. She served as the Executive Director of Southerners for Economic Justice, and has been an organizer and activist in the struggles for economic/social/racial justice, community empowerment and peace in the South for more than 30 years. A mother, who raised her daughter as a single parent, she is a disabled steelfitter, an oral historian, and a cultural worker.

Leah has been on the ground floor of the development of several institutions and organizations. She helped build the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Non-Violent Social Change's archival collection of the Civil Rights Movement (1968-70). She was a founding editor of the award winning *Southern Exposure* magazine, a regional journal of culture and politics that has reported for a dozen years (1982-94). There, her work focused mainly on exposing the conditions of low wage workers, organizing marginalized women workers and youth, public policy initiatives that benefit low wage workers, bringing a global perspective of economic restructuring to local economic justice organizing, and international solidarity.

Leah has served on the boards of the Sister Fund and the Muskiwinni Foundation, on grant-making committees of the Funding Exchange and the Phoebe Fund, and on the strategic planning committee of the 21st Century Foundation, on numerous boards of directors of social change organizations. Currently, she serves on the board of Youth for Social Change and on advisory boards of the Open Society Institute and the Conservation Fund. She also has extensive international experience.

CULTURAL MASTER CLASSES

E. Ethelbert Miller

I've been a literary activist since the early 1970's and have served on the boards of the following organizations: Institute for Policy Studies, PEN/American Center. PEN/Faulkner Foundation and the American Writers Program (AMP).

A key mentor was Dr. Stephen Henderson, a literary scholar and editor of *Understanding the New Black Poetry*, published in the late sixties.

I think it's important for organizers to find time for poetry and other creative arts. Poetry is capable of restoring beauty to the world, and should remind all organizers about what struggle is about.

Company of Prophets, Brutha Los and Rashidi Omari

Brutha Los

I first started organizing in high school. I was part of the anti Coca-Cola campaign, and we were looking for divestment by major American companies. We lucked up and succeeded in having all of the Coke machines and products removed from our high school. Of course, they put them back when the last members of the coalition graduated.

Over the last two years, our group, Company of Prophets, has worked with Let's Get Free (formerly 3rd Eye 510), Art and Revolution, the San Francisco Mime Troupe, the Arab Anti-defamation League, Global Exchange and sundry others. Most recently, my organizing efforts have evolved around Underground Railroad and the Collective Soul Series at La Peña Cultural Center in Berkeley (co-sponsored by Blu Magazine).

Polly McLean and Ward Churchill, a couple of professors at University of Colorado at Boulder, were my mentors and taught me to play the role of "spook who sat by the door." Their teachings were based on the Alinsky model and reinforced the need to adjust your tactics to the situation at hand.

The question organizers should be asking themselves is, where will you stand when the state takes up arms en masse?

Our master class will be about working with urban oratory arts, the spoken-word and rap and music in the burgeoning youth movement.

Rashidi Omari

One could say I've been organizing all my life...just recently I've become aware of it. I am one half of the revolutionary hip-hop group Company of Prophets, and in the lyrics I write I like to talk about (or show) the alternative to things as they are...to the way things are going. As I looked more closely at the system, I began to put a little more political content into my pieces.

Since I've been working with Brotha Los, we've been honored to work with many youth-based groups in the Bay Area such as Let's Get Free, Youth Force Coalition and SOUL (School of Unity and Liberation). Currently we are a part of an organization of artists and cultural workers called Underground Railroad. It's a woman-based organization working for social change, responsible for cultural events in support of current political issues with an eye on social change.

Life has been my teacher. It has taught me that one can learn from anyone and any situation. We simply have to be willing. I've also been taught that harmony can exist.

As I look at the world, I am reminded that everything happening in the world is connected. It is important to ask ourselves, "where does the connection lie?" I also know that it's important to choose your starting place...to start in the right place. I also know that wherever we start we have a lot of work ahead of us and that some places are better than others.

Our workshop will examine the uses of the spoken word in the movement.

FACILITATORS

Bineshi Albert

I came from a family of activists and organizers, so the line is pretty fuzzy. I would say that it was when I was about 18 years old. Why? Well, in my family it was what you were supposed to do. But mostly, it happened because of the encouragement from my aunt. She told me that there was a point when I had to decide what was important enough for me to want to work on. I knew enough about the issues that it was time to contribute. Anyway, I decided on environmental justice work. I started working on a national campaign, helping with research for small isolated native communities.

In 1988-93, I worked in Oklahoma with a group of folks who later became the Coalition for the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. We mostly worked on bringing attention to the views of Native people regarding the centennial celebration in Oklahoma. Almost by accident, I attended the first Protecting Mother Earth Conference in 1990. The conference later created the Indigenous Environmental Network of which I am a founding member. I still work with that organization even after eleven years. I later worked with the Native Lands Toxics Campaign of Greenpeace, and was there for about 2 ½ years. Then I took some time off to have a family, move to New Mexico and go to school.

In 1996 I started working at YouthAction, first as the Administrative Coordinator then as the Coordinator for Organizational Development. This year, I started working as an organizer with the SAGE Council—also formerly know as the Petroglyph Monument Protection Coalition. And finally, through all of this I have worked in many people-of-color coalitions, youth organizations and native groups.

I tried very hard but I couldn't name just one mentor or teacher. It just so happens that the most influential organizing teachers have all been women: Irene "Tso-da-nah" Brown, my grandmother. Even though she may have never known the concept of organizing, she knew the concept of struggle. She taught me that Native people were always in a state of struggle, and that it was inherent for them to work to make their lives, communities and nations better. Jackie Warledo, my aunt. Jackie taught me that everyone in a family and community has a responsibility, like taking care of the children, chopping wood, providing for the family and working for the community. Organizing is one of those responsibilities. Not everyone can do it, so if you can do it then you better do it. Laurie Weahkee, my friend. When I met Laurie, she was very small and looked very young (she still does), but all these people were intently listening to her. At 18, I said I want to be like her. People intently listened to her because she knew what she was talking about. That took lots of homework on her part. So, from her I learned, "Always do your homework. They'll take you apart if you don't." Nilak Butler, my adopted aunt. For many of us organizing is a way of life. From Nilak, I learned that in order for you to last, you have to have humor, love, family and friends. Without them, you don't have balance. Never sacrifice them; they are needed to keep you going.

The most important question organizers should be asking themselves at this particular historical moment? If you are trying to create something better, whom are you trying to create it with?

Mimi Ho

As a bossy older sister, I started organizing my little brother's birthday parties when I was about six years old. More formal organizing began when I went through the Center for Third World Organizing's Minority Activist Apprenticeship Program (MAAP).

Why? I was pissed off and needed a constructive way to channel that anger. In college, I couldn't stand most of my racist professors, the twits that ran the school paper, the myopic monoracial student organizations that wouldn't organize across race to build more powerful people-of-color blocs, etc. Did some campus organizing, but learned the hard way that individual anger and activism alone were not so useful for genuine organizing. Knew I had join with other pissed-off people to build collective power and win stuff. (Or at least pool our money to go to a shrink.)

The biggest turning points for my political consciousness were the LA Uprising, the Gulf War, and MAAP. Going through MAAP was a big shift for me, and I learned that there was an art and science to organizing. I also met a whole lot of other pissed-off people who'd learned to have fun!

I've worked with Applied Research Center, 1994-95; Californians for Justice 1995-2000; NOW. Back at the Applied Research Center, Western States Center and Asian Pacific Islanders for Reproductive Health

Francis Calpotura was my most important organizing teacher or mentor, he taught me to "Walk the walk, work from the heart, build piece by piece, use a hammer when you need to, have fun, call people names."

The most important question for organizers at this historical moment is, how do we transform people's long-term consciousness and instill vision and hope, so that people will be willing to fight for the long haul, particularly in these non-revolutionary times?

Alice Sunshine

During the 1970s, I ran out of money and steam for college and found myself working in a strawberry packing shed in Massachusetts. Union organizers from Puerto Rico passed through the area, found me in the process, merged their union with the UFW, and a year later I was working on the UFW boycott in New England.

I never decided to be an organizer; I was going to be a writer. I'm still trying to do that. I especially like combining the two. (In the end, we cannot worry about being organizers or writers or anything else. We can simply organize and write. The being is always becoming something else. That's okay.)

The most important question for organizers to be asking themselves is, am I doing this to help people become powerful so that as a group, community or society will have the ability to influence the quality of their own lives? Or, am I doing this to make myself feel powerful?

Many people over the years have served as mentors. Miss Nickerson and Mr. Dowd, my high school history teachers were big. They taught us to ask hard questions and to seek the truth rather than make up the answers. Miss Nickerson taught me that girls could do things, there were things worth doing, and not to give in to naysayers.

The hundreds of colleagues in the UFW boycott and field organizing staff who, as a whole, mentored me and each other. The structured training, the national network, and the well-defined purpose combined to create a huge, mutual mentoring experience .

I've worked with the Coalition for Economic Survival on tenant rights; Aircraft factory, organizing without a union; Communications Workers Of America, publications support for organizing; United Electrical Workers Union, factory organizing; California Nurses Association, field organizing & newspaper editing; National Writers Union, writers rights field organizing; California Faculty Association, communications and editor, California Faculty magazine; and others I forget. I also worked for various newspapers and publications, mostly out of business now (but it's not my fault).
