

Democracy Defenders Organizing Session One "Your Voice, Your Story"

There are many different ways that groups of people come together to solve problems that are generically described as organizing. Under the heading of organizing, you will find many different methods. At Democracy Defenders of America, we focus on community and relational based organizing. The core part of this approach is understanding first your own story related to Democracy, then the story of how a group comes together, then the story of the strategy and tactics you use to achieve the results you want to achieve. And it all starts with your story.

Throughout history, in every culture and country across the globe, there have been people who pulled together to solve problems. What did they have in common? Yes, they shared a concern about a problem, but often they shared more than just that concern. They shared common experiences. Shared knowledge, values and ethics, often religious practices. They found what they had in common by understanding their own story and looking for what they have in common with every other person's story.

To begin this process, first you have to reflect upon your life. What have been life experiences that made you step forward to take an action you never had on your bucket list? Think of a time when you wanted to make a change. What was the change? Why did you want to make that change? What worked and helped you be heard and have an impact? What do you wish you had done differently?

Every one of us has more than one story of self, but with a focus on defending democracy and democratic principles, what motivated you to sign up for this course? What is the problem you want to help solve?

Cesar Chavez was the child of migrant workers in California. Born in Arizona, every year they moved up and down the west coast harvesting fruits and vegetables. As a young man he became a community organizer with the CSO, and worked as a part of a team to understand community needs and to find solutions in the late 1950s. When he saw the unfairness in wages paid to farm workers, he wanted to organize farm workers. This had been tried and failed in California several times, but it had not been tried using the methods that Mr. Chavez had learned as a CSO organizer.

He had a common story with the migrant workers - after all, he started working in the fields with his parents, brothers and sisters who all worked the fields as well. In 1962 he left the CSO to begin the process of organizing farm workers with eleven other people who shared common ground in their

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own story. Not all were Latinos, but many were, and most were Roman Catholic.

We'll be learning more about Chavez and other people who used these organizing methods later, but for right now, we want to focus on you.

Think about your life, your upbringing and family expectations, your interests. What were some formative experiences that led you here? What makes you talk back to the TV? Is there an injustice that moves you? Tell the story of your experiences and your voice. There are exercises at the end of this lesson to help you.

Our CEO at Democracy Defenders, Julie Stauch, tells her story something like this.

"I was raised Southern Baptist and brought up in the culture of "listening for your call" or your life purpose. I love to read, especially biographies, and by the end of the second grade I had read every biography in my public school library. The school bully was my next door neighbor, who beat me up at least four times (four black eyes) and I caught him holding a knife on my youngest sister. When I was in the 6th grade, northern schools were integrated for the first time and there were two new girls in our class, both Black. Several of the other girls were mean to them and I would play with Priscilla and Gail so they could jump rope. (One mean girl wouldn't let them jump with the rest of us.) My family moved several times, from the NE to the Midwest to the SE. When I was in high school I participated in the Presidential Classroom for Young Americans and went to Washington, DC. This was during the Watergate hearings. **My story of self is about fairness, respect, knowing how to push back against bullies, listening for my call, and standing up to injustice. When it comes to democracy I actively defend fairness, speak out against injustice and make sure that all people are treated with respect.** That's my call. That's my story. It is a story that changes and grows with my life and the many experiences I've had."

This week you'll start working with an organizing coach. That person will work with you through this course and into your start up time after your certification is complete. Each week you'll have at least one half hour session where the two of you will discuss the topic of the week, what it means to you, and the various exercises that we expect you to do as a part of this course. The exercises are meant to be useful and, hopefully, fun. We believe

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that finding the joy in the moment, in the growth that each of us feel as we go through this process is important. After all, you have answered the call to be a Democracy Defender. Welcome, friend! Now we need you to get to know yourself better so you can help us get to know you.

Exercises

NOTE: In every case where you are asked to do work, there are three ways you can share your work with your coach - written, recorded, or video. We use the language "write" in the exercise description for efficiency not as the only method. Please know that any method is acceptable as long as it can be shared with your coach.

Finding your story requires you to give some thought to your life; your interests; what has moved you to take action, and what hasn't moved you; your beliefs, values, and ethics; anything that you are passionate about. For some people it requires writing about everything in their life. There is no wrong way to do this. Here are the steps you need to complete.

- Think about your experiences and how those are integrated into the fabric of who you are. Take notes and find the common themes.
- Write your story of self that will be up to 5 minutes in length when spoken and under 500 words when written.
- Refine your story to a 1 minute piece (approximately 250 words).
- Refine further to one or two sentences.
- Give an example from your life that exemplifies YOUR personal story.