

NEWS Community organizers make a differenceBy **SUSAN FOTHERGILL**

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I wonder if the politicians and pundits who have lately taken to belittling community organizing really know much about this work, which has been at the center of some of the most important achievements of my life.

I first started as a community organizer in 1994, when I was in college working on my associate's degree. For less than \$20,000 a year, I walked through the communities of Baltimore every night to educate people about state and federal decisions that were being made that affected the quality of the water in their communities. I asked people to write letters to their elected representatives and went back to pick them up later, through the freezing winter rain, blazing summer sun and some of the most beautiful fall and spring days I've ever witnessed. Those voices, collected by community organizers like me, helped to keep Chapman's forest – a refuge for bald eagles and box turtles on the banks of the Potomac River in Charles County – from becoming Chapman's Landing, a 4,600-home subdivision, and ensured the passage of the Pfiesteria legislation to reduce poultry waste on the Eastern Shore.

I then went on to work as a community organizer for Save Our Streams. The work that was done through that group was monumental; hundreds of thousands of people in Maryland were united by organizers supporting their efforts to clean, monitor, restore and protect Maryland's more than 3,000 miles of streams and rivers.

Most recently, working as an education advocate for the American Civil Liberties Union of Maryland, I had the privilege to help to protect Maryland's funding and accountability commitment to public schools, the Bridge to Excellence in Public Schools Act. As an organizer, I attended PTA/PTO and community meetings, local fairs and back-to-school nights, all to help ensure that our government knew that the people of Maryland deeply support full funding of public schools. The culminating event in 2003 was a rally attended by more than 10,000 people in Annapolis, demanding that Maryland keep its commitment to public school students.

I mention all of this to explain that when I heard Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin say, "I guess a small-town mayor is sort of like a 'community organizer,' except that you have actual responsibilities," it was truly a gut-wrenching moment. Each organizing experience I have had required a tremendous amount of responsibility, most important to the volunteers who relied on me to give them the support they needed to accomplish the mission we had set out to do together.

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