



Keynote Address from Gihan Perera



Gihan Perera

After a rousing video, and humorous introductory remarks, Gihan Perera inspired us with his keynote address about the role and value of community organizing. The following are excerpts.

The collective purpose of community organizing is to: address systemic inequities; build the power needed to change the premise of institutional inequities; and to do that through agency within organizing. It's not just how we build a house or get a job, or move a policy—it is the process of getting rights, which has to be led by those people most directly impacted by those inequities.

Community organizers concentrate on communities that are hardest hit by foreclosures – the communities that have experienced historic disenfranchisement—structural relationships of inequities—those are our members and our leaders.

Community organizers believe that results and policy and solutions that do not come from a process that involves the

community are inherently flawed. People who are going to benefit from changed policies must have ownership of the solutions. Central is the leadership of community organization members. Community members must be at the table.

HOW DO WE BUILD POWER?

There are many strategies- here are three: (1) we build organizations with accountability; (2) we build coalitions between our organization and other stakeholders in the community; (3) with our members and our coalitions, we shift public opinion toward policies that matter.

Community organizations were the “canary in the coal mine” for the economic downturn felt now by the community at large.

In 2005, Hurricane Wilma swept through South Florida two weeks after Hurricane Katrina. Similar to the destruction left by Katrina, Wilma destroyed vulnerable housing in low-income communities. The government was slow to

respond, there was no preparation for recovery, just a place of chaos and stagnation. Our organizers went into the community to find out for themselves the extent of damage and what was happening.

The Miami Workers Center opened when electricity was restored and became an unofficial hurricane shelter. FEMA, the Red Cross, and our congressman came to us to find out what happened in the community. Sushma Sheth, MWC Director of Programs, organized a press conference; assembled a coalition; which brought together residents of storm-ravaged apartment buildings, members, leaders, social service-, advocacy- and religious organizations; and drew up a set of 10-12 policy recommendations to decrease hazard risk of South Florida’s most vulnerable communities. This happened 2 days after the storm, when government couldn’t even figure out how to distribute ice. We camped out at FEMA and the Red Cross, and on the sixth day of Miami Herald coverage, the paper announced Sushma Sheth as mayor of South Florida.



Sushma Sheth

For the third anniversary of Katrina, those same buildings are in even worse condition. Organizers agree that we have not done our job. What exists now is severe triangulation. The community-side identifies needs, changes policy and wins public will, and that policy becomes a government program which is then alienated in terms of its original intent. Developers then try to make money off of those contracts at the expense of the benefit of the community. If we want to break through to the other side, we have to make it our mission to show developers that it is about developing communities, not just buildings.

We have to build your capacity to get us aligned so that our purpose matches your purpose – brick-and-mortar to match the policy of people as well as sustainability to address inequity. That is our challenge.

Earlier I spoke about the science of organizing. The other part is the art of organizing. Recognizing moments and combining those opportunities into action, to create new partnerships that reflect something bigger.

We are working toward a partnership of economic organizing toward a new vision of governance in this period that is

community-grounded and actually gets government back to doing its job.

Will we take this moment to charter a new course? As community organizers, how do we act strategically for wealth, assets and building communities? As developers, how do we look past structures and deals to partner with communities? In government, how do we begin to be an agent of change as an institution?

Mr. Gihan closed with the poem “*To be of Use,*” by Marge Piercy.

*The people I love the best
jump into work head first
without dallying in the shallows
and swim off with sure strokes almost out of sight.
They seem to become natives of that element,
the black sleek heads of seals
bouncing like half-submerged balls.*

*I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart,
who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience,
who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward,
who do what has to be done, again and again.*

*I want to be with people who submerge
in the task, who go into the fields to harvest
and work in a row and pass the bags along,
who are not parlor generals and field deserters
but move in a common rhythm
when the food must come in or the fire be put out.*

*The work of the world is common as mud.
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.
But the thing worth doing well done
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.
Greek amphoras for wine or oil,
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums
but you know they were made to be used.
The pitcher cries for water to carry
and a person for work that is real.*

