*An approach to solving the problems of community poverty.*

# An Experiment In Democracy

*By James T. Riley, CPA*

### Introduction

Lately there has been a great deal of attention focused on the subject of welfare reform. We are likely to hear a lot more about it in the coming months from a new Republican-controlled Congress and a President who has committed himself to bringing an end to the existing welfare system. All this has led me to revisit a poverty fighting effort in which I was intimately involved for ten years. It resulted in the creation of a network of community based, self-help organizations in southside Virginia and eastern North Carolina. It is a privately funded, fairly quiet experiment which has produced some dramatic results, and which, I believe, is the solution to what continues to be a persistent problem in our society.

### Democracy

Former Senator Edward Brooke said that "Democracy is a system which provides an outlet for grievances and frustration because it provides the possibility of peaceful change. It must be made to work equally for the have-nots in America as it has for the haves."[1]

The American experiment in democracy is an ongoing process. It has taken on a particular form which sometimes works well in response to the problems at hand. In other cases, some further refinement may be in order.

The dictionary defines a democracy as "a form of government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them or their elected agents under a free electoral system."[2] In order for a democracy to flourish, certain conditions must exist. One of the most important is a citizenry educated in a way which allows it to make informed and critical choices. This education, however, does not have to come from any formal training. Often, as we shall see, it arises as a result of the direct involvement of people seeking solutions to their problems.

Another important condition of democracy is citizen participation at all levels. If people become too passive or apathetic, then their government will appear to be remote and unresponsive to their needs. It will become something apart from the citizens, a perception which seems to be on the rise lately.

In a democracy, decisions are made to bring about solutions to the problems of society. Those who are affected by the decisions ideally should have some say in influencing the decisions. And in the process, the rights of minorities must be protected. This, of course, has not always been the case and we do not have to go very far back in Virginia's history, for example, to find instances of systematic, government mandated efforts to restrict the rights of minority citizens.

Some have argued that democracies are really unworkable in very large societies and that ordinary citizens do not have the ability to make informed decisions about the affairs of government. These skeptics say that, no matter what the appearance, the government is run by a minority of insiders and that our world has become so complex that only career professionals are capable of tending to the public good. This is a premise to which we do not subscribe. Thomas Jefferson said:

"I know of no safe repository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves: and if we think them not enlightened to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform them of their discretion."[3]

### Poverty in America

Poverty in America has not been dealt with very effectively over the years. This problem has persisted throughout our history and many would argue that poverty will always be with us. Perhaps so, but to what extent will it continue, and have we really put forth an effective effort to deal with this condition?

In recent times, the extent of poverty in America has been measured by the federal government based on income thresholds defined by the Bureau of the Census. In 1960, according to official government statistics, between 22% and 23% of the population was living below the poverty level. Between 1960 and 1973, the poverty rate decreased by half from 22% to 11%. It then began to creep back up and by 1983, the rate was about 16%. Lately, the rate has hovered between 12% and 13%. The current definition of poverty by the Bureau of Census for a family of four is an annual income of $14,764.

Several months ago, *Time* magazine featured an article titled *The Poorest Place in America.*[4] It was about a town in Louisiana called Lake Providence. The article described a town with a median annual household income for a family of four of $6,536. It described a town with high unemployment, poor housing, no recreational facilities for young people and no opportunities for economic gain for most of its citizens. Over 70% of the children younger than 18 are living in poverty there. There are high rates of infant mortality, teenage pregnancy and drug use. And there is very little prospect for improvement.

Some version of Lake Providence exists in most communities in America. Poverty continues to exist despite all of our technological advances, tremendous resources, and many efforts to fight it.

### Two Approaches to Attacking the Problem of Poverty

Before describing the approach to fighting poverty in which I was involved, I wish to briefly consider two other attempts to deal with the problem of poverty: one private and the other public. These are the efforts of Saul Alinsky and LBJ's "War on Poverty."

#### • Saul Alinsky - Organizing for Change

In the New York Times obituary for Saul Alinsky in June of 1972, the paper stated that "for nearly 40 years he studied, taught and wrote about the practical art of stirring

the have-nots into action to demand that the Establishment improve their lot."[5] Alinsky was a self-styled radical and agitator for change. He made a great impact on most of the communities in which he worked.

Saul Alinsky was born in a slum tenement in Chicago in 1909. Both of his parents were Orthodox Jews who immigrated from Russia. He majored in archeology at the University of Chicago and did graduate work in criminology (his unfinished PhD project was a study of the Al Capone gang from the inside). He also worked in the Illinois prison system for several years where he observed a large discrepancy between the causes and treatments of crime and delinquency.

In 1938, Alinsky moved into Back of the Yards, a predominately Irish-American slum behind the stockyards in Chicago. Working with parish priests and labor leaders, he organized neighborhood councils and attacked problems in the Back of the Yards neighborhood through the use of tactics such as picketing, rent strikes and boycotts. Soon after, he established the Industrial Areas Foundation in Chicago to teach others how to build community organizations. During his career, he assisted in organizing sharecroppers in the South, Mexican-Americans in California and many black and white resident of slums throughout the U.S.

In 1960, he organized The Woodlawn Organization in a predominantly black Chicago neighborhood. This was a very successful organization which managed to save the neighborhood from destruction by the University of Chicago's urban renewal efforts. Later in the 1960's, he organized blacks in Rochester N.Y. Before his death in 1972, he initiated a project to train members of the white middle-class to organize for change in urban and suburban neighborhoods.

Alinsky relied on a very aggressive style of dealing with problems. One of his principles was to go directly to the person in charge and "make him hurt until he gives in." For example, The Woodlawn Organization in Chicago was attempting to force the Marshall Field department store to hire more black employees. Alinsky announced that he was hiring a fleet of buses to bring 2,000 poor, inner city residents to the store for a day of "shopping." The shopping would consist of buying little but spending a lot of time picking over merchandise and complaining about the quality of the goods. The day after the buses were chartered, the store manager called Alinsky and gave in.

Alinsky was obviously someone who did not believe in charity. He believed in the power of grass roots organizing and the ability of numbers to achieve results. He understood that most people are motivated by self-interest and not by altruism. His approach was to prove to the community that results are achievable, to establish an organization to work on the problems and then move on. He was a classic outsider and was not comfortable with too much acceptance from the establishment. Later in his life, during a period of generally positive publicity about his work, he was quoted as telling his staff: "Don't worry, we'll weather this storm of approval and come out as hated as ever."[6]

Alinsky was a unique individual. I first became interested in his work when I met him in the late sixties. He was making the rounds of many colleges, preaching his gospel of grass roots organizing for change during a period when our society was in a lot of turmoil. He seemed to fit into that period very well. One of the most succinct comments about Saul Alinsky was written in the *Economist* in 1967: "It requires little imagination to discover why he is so disliked by his opponents: He cannot be bought; he cannot be intimidated; and he breaks all the rules."[7]

### • The War on Poverty

During the time Alinsky was privately organizing for change, a massive government-sponsored effort to eliminate poverty was launched by the Johnson administration. A separate government agency called the Office of Economic Opportunity was established along with a myriad of programs such as the Job Corps, the Neighborhood Youth Corps, Legal Services for the Poor and the Head Start project. Enormous amounts of attention and resources were focused on these federal anti-poverty efforts.

An integral part of the war on poverty was the concept of community action. This resulted in the establishment of community action agencies which were designed to be made up of representatives of the poor who would then make decisions about how to fight poverty in their community. Federal funds would then be granted directly to the community action agencies for use in implementing the programs. The concept of community action was an acknowledgment of the idea that poverty could be fought mainly from within the poor communities themselves. However, as with many federally-funded programs, there was often a gap between the theory behind the legislation and actual practice.

The main weakness of the community action approach was the lack of a real ability to reach into the poor communities. Although representatives of the poor were involved in the programs, there was no systematic way to identify who those representatives were or to hold them accountable to the wider community. Consequently, the poverty programs tended to serve people who were the easiest to reach. And all too often, money was thrown at the problem without significant input from the affected communities.

In addition, because these were federally funded programs, the usual problems of bureaucracy and political pressure were present. The solution to many problems in the poor community often involved some confrontation with the existing government or business community. So a sense of real independence in proposing solutions was often not available.

As an example, The Woodlawn Organization, originally organized by Saul Alinsky, was the recipient of a special community action grant in 1967 for a job training program. In attempting to identify legitimate leadership elements of the community, the OEO bureaucrats granted some of the funds to two neighborhood gangs who were battling each other over turf in the community. It was felt that these gangs, the Blackstone Rangers and the East Side Disciples, could reach out to teenagers in the community and involve them in the job training programs. In the process, the energy of the gang members would be channelled to more positive behaviors and everyone would live happily ever after. As you might expect, things didn't turn out so well. When two gang members were arrested on murder charges, the political heat was turned up, and soon thereafter President Johnson pulled the plug on the grant.

Alinsky himself was no fan of the poverty program. He called it a "huge political pork barrel" and "welfare colonialism."[8] He saw the war on poverty as a typical city hall/social work type of approach and felt something radically

different was needed. He was also convinced that antipoverty funds would be used to buy off and silence the militant leaders of the poor. He saw the program as "providing absurdly high salaries to social workers and token benefits to the well-behaved poor."[9]

Certainly the war on poverty was successful in many areas as it provided needed benefits to many communities. Some of the programs started at that time, such as Head Start, still endure. However, when the funding for the community action agencies disappeared, so did the organizations. The entire premise was that programs identified and funded by the government would somehow induce self-help activity in the low income communities and to a certain extent they did. But there was no real enduring structure of organization in place to carry on the war.

**The Assemblies - An Experiment in Democracy**

During the late 1950's and the 1960's, a different approach to solving the problem of poverty was being developed. It centered on the establishment of a network of community organizations called Assemblies in areas throughout the South. The Assemblies were conceived by a man named Don Anderson in 1958 in Tallahassee, Florida in reaction to the concerns of leaders involved in the bus boycotts in that city. The idea behind the Assemblies was to create a more permanent vehicle to fight for civil rights.

Don Anderson, a graduate of the University of Michigan Law School and the London School of Economics, worked in Washington for Adam Clayton Powell as Education Counsel for the U.S. House of Representatives' Committee on Education and Labor and assisted in the drafting of the OEO legislation in 1964. He later served as General Counsel for the Ad Hoc Sub-Committee on the War on Poverty. During this time he was refining his idea of the Assemblies and in 1968, he began a full time effort with the financial support of a businessman from Northern Virginia.

The concept of the Assembly is based on the notion that the way to solve problems and affect real change in low income communities is to create a systematic, community-based decision making body which accurately reflects the concerns and needs of the low income community. So instead of identifying problems or setting up programs initially, the Assembly approach concentrates on setting up an organization that reaches down into the entire community and gives that organization the decision making tools to set priorities and carry out programs.

I worked with the Assembly movement for approximately ten years, off and on from 1969 to 1981. The non-profit organization which creates and supports Assemblies was originally called the Virginia Community Development Organization and later called the National Association for the Southern Poor. In various staff positions and eventually as Director, I saw first-hand the remarkable results that were possible when a community created an organization which allowed it to deal effectively with its problems. The creation of this organizational structure was the broad purpose of an Assembly. Our one sentence definition of an Assembly described it as "an organization which brings people of an entire community into a systematic relationship with each other for the purpose of solving individual and community problems."

The communities targeted for Assemblies are counties and cities throughout the south where slavery had been concentrated--sometimes called the "Black Belt." The first Assemblies were organized in Tidewater Virginia in 1968 and 1969--counties such as Southampton, Surry, Isle of Wight and Prince George. Later, more Assemblies were established in Virginia and also in eastern North Carolina. By 1980 there were about thirty functioning Assemblies in the two states, including Assemblies in the cities of Norfolk and Portsmouth, Virginia. By this time, the Assembly movement had produced some dramatic results and had attracted financial support from a wide array of private foundations, religious organizations and individuals.

At the heart of each Assembly is a system of organizing the community into "Committees" of fifty people. Committees are set up in every district and neighborhood of the county or city. The target population includes all of the low income residents of an area. In large, urban areas, Committees may be comprised of fifty households, rather than fifty people.

Each Committee meets from time to time to deal with neighborhood and individual problems. It might also identify county or city wide problems which it wants the entire Assembly to address. Each Committee elects one person to represent it at the monthly Assembly meeting. This person is called the "Representative." So the Assembly is officially comprised of a number of Representatives who, in turn, each represent fifty people. In this way an organization is created which has the potential of systematically and thoroughly representing the community.

The leadership group of the Assembly is called the "Executive Council." The Executive Council is comprised of Representatives each of whom has a particular issue area on which to concentrate. For instance, there would be Executive Council members working in areas of housing, education, legal affairs and others. The Executive Council is generally made up of from ten to twelve people including a President and Deputy President. The duties of the Executive Council members are to collect information in their particular issue area, solve individual problems and develop community wide programs. The Executive Council meets prior to each monthly Assembly meeting to create an agenda for the Assembly meeting. The agenda mainly consists of motions proposing action to solve community wide problems.

The Assembly, organized the way it is, resembles a legislature. In areas where Assemblies were strong, the organization solved many problems which had been neglected by the county or city government. Assemblies were also successful in many instances in working with the county or city government in creating solutions to problems.

Some examples of programs which were either created directly by Assemblies or which were created as a result of Assembly initiative include:

- a job training program in Portsmouth, Virginia
- a day care center in Amelia County, Virginia
- a community center and medical facility in Gates County, N.C.
- a feeder pig cooperative in Buckingham County, Virginia
- a new high school medical center and recreation center in Surry County, Virginia
- solutions to thousands of individual problems in all Assembly areas.

Individual problems are identified with

the use of a simple form called a "Problem Sheet." Problem Sheets are available at all Assembly functions and represent the commitment by the Assembly to assist anyone who requests aid. On the Problem Sheet, an individual would identify his or her problem and list the steps taken to try to solve the problem. The Problem Sheet could then be sent to the Assembly for attention.

Putting an Assembly together took a lot of effort and usually took a fair amount of time. Our goal, which was difficult to meet in all cases, was to complete the organization of the Assembly within one year. We did not ever set up an Assembly in a community unless we were invited to do so. In addition, the existing leadership among the low-income community had to be unanimous in wanting an Assembly organized. If the leadership was divided, then we would not proceed in that area. In almost all instances, once we were invited to make a presentation about the Assembly, the community would vote to begin organizing right away. People instinctively knew that something like an Assembly was needed in order for any real change to occur. It was truly amazing to watch the transformation in areas where Assemblies were organized. I was present at organizing meetings where the despair and hopelessness of individuals was expressed in many ways. These same people were able to focus their energy on organizing an Assembly and the difference over the next year or two was dramatic.

Over the years, we developed a very refined method of organizing Assemblies. Space does not permit me to go into this in detail. In general, an entire organizing structure was created in addition to the Conferences and the Assembly. Each Assembly had an officer called a Vice General Secretary who was responsible for organizing the Assembly. This meant involving people in each district or neighborhood to assist in establishing Conferences of fifty people. Our central office provided staff assistance for this organizing effort.

The role of our staff was very well defined. This role was to assist the local community in establishing the Assembly. We were a resource but were not to be seen as "leaders." Staff members were trained not to involve themselves in the issues or decisions being considered by the Assembly. Staff had no vote in the Assembly or in Conferences. Staff in the field did not involve themselves in solving problems and were instructed not even to venture an opinion about a problem being worked on by the Assembly--even if they were asked directly by an Assembly member. Our purpose was to create independent organizations, and we viewed our role in organizing the Assembly as a temporary one.

Another area on which I can only touch is the parliamentary procedure used at Assembly meetings. The procedure and structure of the meeting were based on the House of Commons in England. Each Assembly had a Speaker and during a meeting, Assembly members had to stand and address the Speaker. A formal agenda was drawn up in advance by the Executive Committee. The agenda was called the "Order Paper" and it consisted of two parts, "Question Time" and "Motions." Question Time was a time in which Assembly members could address questions to Executive Council members. Motions were created to propose action on problems facing the community.

In addition to the individual county or city-wide Assemblies, there was an organization of all Assembly Presidents called the Council for the Assemblies. This was a regional group which would meet once or twice a year to address problems of concern to all Assemblies. The rules of the meeting of the Council for the Assemblies were the same as for the individual Assemblies. An Order Paper would be created in advance and the British parliamentary rules would be followed. One of my jobs was to act as Parliamentarian for the Council meetings--a job which led me to learn more about this procedure and appreciate its efficiency and fairness.

### Conclusion

Before I left, I put together a comprehensive 250 page manual for staff. So, as you might suspect, I could go on and on. You can also see that what I have been describing about this method of fighting poverty is not just a theory. It was put into practice and has produced dramatic results. Assemblies were eventually organized in other states and many exist today, as does the National Association for the Southern Poor.

The Assembly movement is important because it has shown that low income people, without much formal education or training, can effectively deal with their individual and community problems simply by being brought together in a formal structure of organization. The often dramatic results were accomplished through a privately funded effort and without a lot of publicity. The goal of this movement from the beginning was to establish permanent institutions, not to organize around a particular issue or to accomplish some short-term objective. And, the result in most areas was that democracy was created where it did not exist before.

[1]National Association for the Southern Poor, *Progress Report*, 1980.
[2]*The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, 1966.
[3]Letter to William Charles Jarvis, September 29, 1820.
[4]Jack E. White, "The Poorest Place in America," *Time*, August 15, 1994, pp.35 & 36.
[5]Farnsworth Fowle, "Saul Alinsky, 63, Poverty Fighter And Social Organizer, Is Dead," *New York Times*, June 13, 1972.
[6]"Taps for a Radical," *Newsweek*, June 26, 1972, p.43.
[7]*Economist*, May 13, 1967.
[8]Fowle, *New York Times*, June 13, 1972, p.46.
[9]"Taps for a Radical," *Newsweek*, June 26, 1972, p.43.

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## Biography

James Riley was born and raised in

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# 1996 Paxton Lectureship Award

The Paxton Award, created in honor and remembrance of W. Norris Paxton, past president of the International Association of Torch Clubs and editor emeritus of *The Torch* magazine, is given to the author of an outstanding paper presented by a Torch member at a Torch club meeting during the 1995 calendar year. The winning author will receive an appropriate plaque, $200, and paid registration fees at the 1996 annual IATC convention in Albany, NY. The Paxton Award winner will be introduced at the 1996 convention banquet where he or she (or a designated representative) delivers the paper, on June 28, 1996.

## Eligibility

The author must be a member of a Torch club and the paper must have been delivered at a Torch club meeting or a regional meeting between January 1, 1995 and December 31, 1995. (Note: Current officers and directors of the IATC are ineligible for this award during their terms of office.)

## Procedure

Entries are to be typed and double-or triple-spaced. Include a cover sheet with the author's name, address, daytime telephone number and the date and place of the presentation of the paper. All identification, including identifying references within the paper, will be masked wherever possible prior to submission to the panel of judges. Entries may be submitted at any time but the deadline for receipt is March 1, 1996. Send to Paxton Award, International Association of Torch Clubs, Inc., 749 Boush Street, Norfolk, Virginia 23510-1517.

## Judging

The reading and judging panel is composed of five people: a member of the Editorial Advisory Committee, a member of the board of directors of the IATC, one of the last five winners of the Paxton Lecturer Award, and two Torch club members selected by the IATC board of directors. Judging is based on the principles set forth in the IATC brochure "The Torch Paper." The winner of the Paxton Award and the authors of all other entries will be notified no later than May 1, 1995.

## Additional Information

There is no limit to the number of papers submitted by any one Torch club for this award.

A paper may be submitted by the author, by a Torch club colleague or by an officer of the Torch club. It is preferred that, however the paper is submitted, it receive the endorsement of the club as a Paxton Lecture Award submission through its officers, secretary, or the executive or program committee.

The winning paper is to be presented at the 1996 annual convention by the author or an author-designated representative from the author's local Torch club.

The Paxton Lecture Award paper will be published in the Fall 1996 issue of *The Torch* magazine. Other entries will be forwarded to the Editorial Advisory Committee for review for possible publication in the magazine.

**"Creation" from page 25**

graduate of the Munich Interpreters' College with a Diploma in English Language. Music and language are the twin threads woven through her life. She taught piano in her private music studio and sang in community choral groups. She worked as German-English translator.

She is the author of numerous philosophical essays, talks for Unitarian church services, travel reports and fantasy stories. Her book of stories *Seven Stars of Christmas* was published in 1991. She also wrote numerous children's plays and produced puppet shows. The Winchester, VA Cable TV station has broadcasted her Christmas puppet play *Star Carol* for several Christmas seasons.

As a writer of stories, she likes to research myths and fairy tales from all over the world. This led to the writing of the essay on Creation Myths.

Claudia Martin emigrated to the United States in 1953 with her husband, Hubert Martin. They live in Strasburg, VA and have three children and four grandchildren. Both are members of the Winchester, VA Torch Club.

This paper was presented before the Torch Club of Winchester, Virginia, January 5, 1994.

*Martin*

**"Democracy" from page 12**

Winchester, VA. He graduated from Duke University in 1969, Civil Engineering. He is a licensed Certified Public Accountant and established a tax and accounting business in 1981. He holds membership in the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants, and the Virginia Society of Certified Public Accountants. He is treasurer of the Winchester Torch Club to which he presented this paper in December 1994.

*Riley*