



INDEPENDENT SECTOR
A vital voice for us all

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Speech Accepting the
American Express Building Leadership Award
Independent Sector
November 10, 2008

Thank you Janet, for your kind words, but most of all for your heroic and courageous leadership to stand up to anti-immigrant hate and the leadership you and NCLR have shown in fighting for an inclusive, generous vision of America.

On behalf of the board, staff and grassroots partners of the Center for Community Change, thank you from the bottom of my heart for the American Express Building Leadership Award.

I want to thank Independent Sector and its dynamic leader Diana Aviv for this recognition, and American Express for sponsoring this award. I also want to congratulate Bob Greenstein for winning the John Gardner award tonight –his commitment to low-income Americans has been unyielding, even in the most difficult times.

This is a fascinating and humbling time to receive such an award. Our country has just elected its first African-American President, who had his formative experience as a community organizer on the south side of Chicago. His campaign took many of the principles of community organizing to an unprecedented scale –nurturing volunteer leadership, repeated in person, face to face conversations, and active listening. Let us hope that his victory, because of who he is and how he won it, will make community organizing fashionable in America again. Make no mistake, change we can believe in will require the continued and constant engagement of millions of Americans in our democratic life.

Community organizers are the anti-celebrities of American life. We believe that change comes about when thousands of people get involved and take action, that our democracy depends on large scale, collective action –not simply on charismatic leaders. We believe in developing the skills of other people to speak in their own voice, rather than speaking for them. I am deeply proud of the work of the Center over 40 years to invest in that leadership at the grassroots level, with a clear commitment to low-income communities and communities of color where such great ideas and talent and inspiration most need to be harnessed and supported. This award is really for the incredible staff of the Center for

Community Change, and though all of them could not be here tonight, I would be remiss if I didn't tell you something about what they do everyday to earn this honor.

Whether it's new immigrants going to a democracy school to learn how our country's political system works and how they can be part of it, or young people of color recruited and placed by our Generation Change program to be interns and fellows in community organizations, or staff and leaders at grassroots groups who are trained and supported in their efforts to impact public policy –our definition of leadership has to do with developing and nurturing the leadership of others.

This focus on developing others is counter-cultural in our celebrity-obsessed culture that obsesses about individual achievement and failure. We are trying not just to develop leaders, but to develop new kinds of leaders who embrace the idea of community values – the idea that we all rise or fall together as one people, that everyone belongs, that no one can do well while others are suffering, that every voice needs to be heard.

In that spirit, let me close by thanking the literally thousands of organizers around the country who are doing the very real work, with very real responsibilities, of renewing our democracy. And thank you for this tremendous acknowledgement of this work.