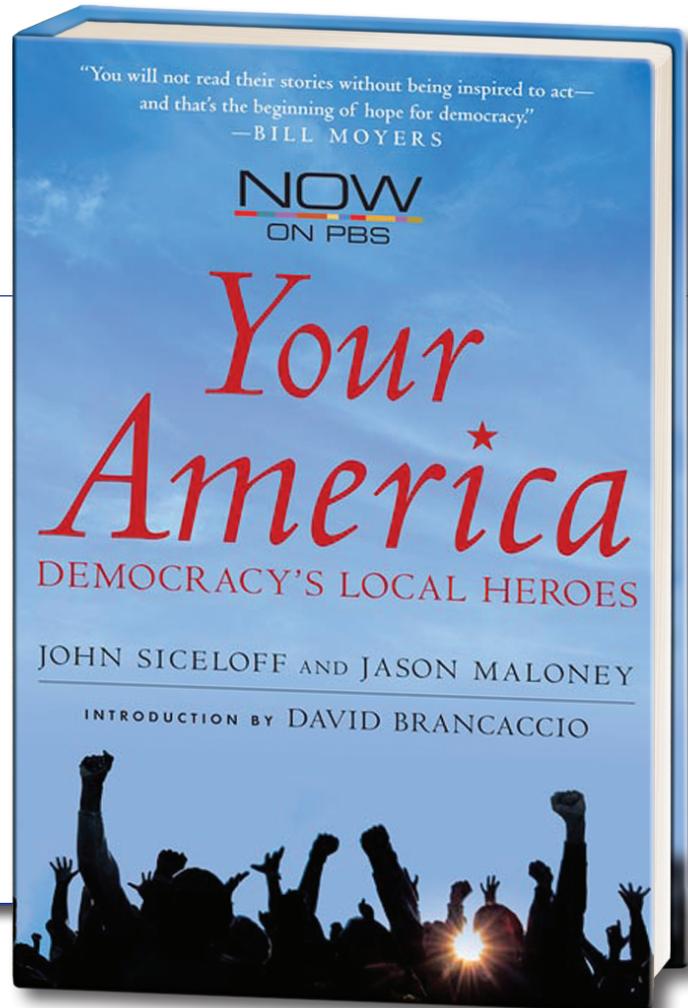


# Your America<sup>★</sup>

DEMOCRACY'S LOCAL HEROES

## USER'S GUIDE

**YOUR AMERICA**  
*Democracy's Local Heroes*  
John Sicheloff and Jason Maloney  
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### USER'S GUIDE

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world.  
Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

— Margaret Mead

So you'd like to make some changes. Congratulations. You're taking on the greatest role that any citizen in a democracy can assume: You're participating.

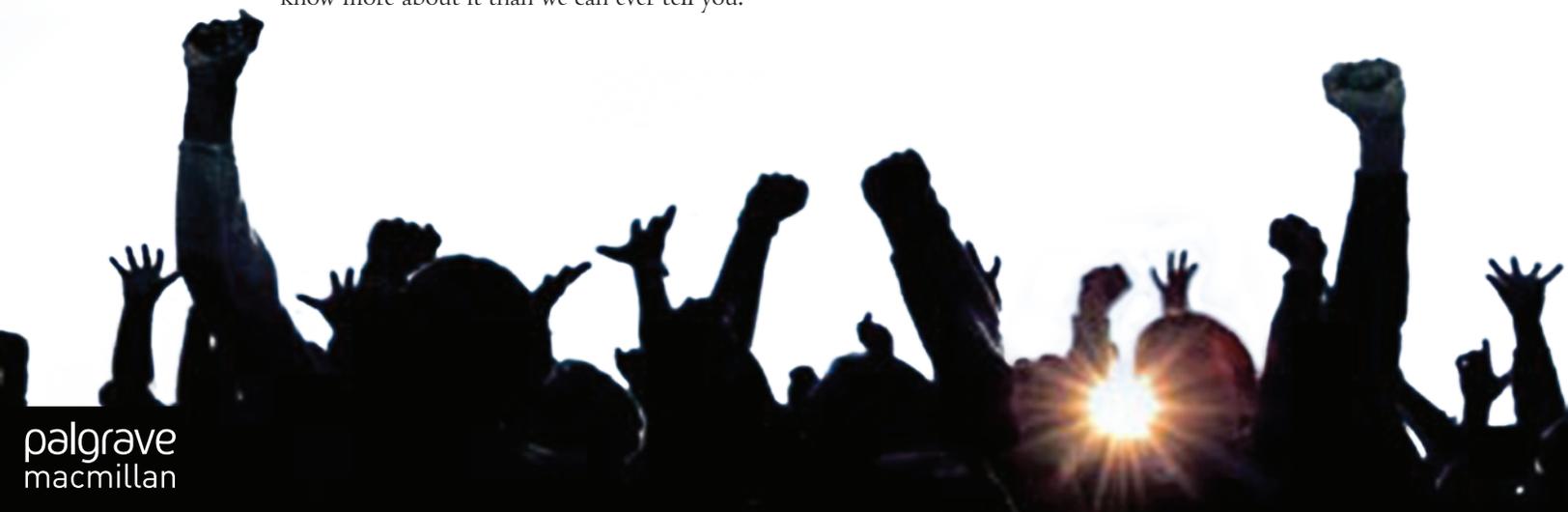
Many of us think that voting is the primary responsibility of a citizen. While voting is important, it is by no means the only thing we can do to participate in our community or country. Writing letters, organizing communities and staging public protests are all valuable ways of participating. And citizen participation is at the very heart of our democracy. America was founded by people who were unhappy with the way things were and decided to do something about it. You can make changes too.

Of course, you don't have to be revolutionary. Working to save a park, to organize a reading program, or to make government more accountable are all ways you can make the world—your world—a better place.

Activism is patriotic. You're helping to improve your town or your country. Some believe that activism is a duty. The writer Gunter Grass said, “The job of a citizen is to keep his mouth open.”

Activism is not necessarily political. In the 1960s activism was associated with the political left. Activists protested against the Vietnam War, or for women's rights. By the 1980s it was activist conservatives who had come to the fore, working to lower taxes and shrink government. But activist acts like bringing the internet to your town or improving conditions for foster children are neither left nor right. They are simply making things better. And that, at heart, is what activism is all about.

So again, congratulations on your desire to be an activist, to participate. This handbook will give you a framework on how to get started. But it's just a start. We hope that within a few months of beginning your career as an activist you'll know more about it than we can ever tell you.



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#### How to Be an Activist

Being an activist isn't rocket science. It takes a great deal of dedication and hard work, but it doesn't take special knowledge or training to get started. You'll learn as you go and you'll find that many of the skills you need are skills you already have. And many of these skills are based in common sense rather than any specific technical know-how.

But there are specific steps you can take to get started as a change-maker. We'll discuss these steps here. Keep in mind as you read, that every situation is different. You'll need to choose your tactics and tailor them to your specific circumstances. We'll look at some case histories and see how these tactics were used in the real world. And we'll look at the lessons to be learned from successful activists.

#### Find Your Issue

The first step in becoming an activist is easy: Find an issue that is important to you. This is easy because there is so much that needs changing, and because more often than not the issue will find you. Perhaps something is happening at your child's school that really bothers you. Maybe a developer wants to build a skyscraper in your favorite park. Or maybe you've realized that global climate change is about to cause your beach house to be flooded by an ever-rising sea. It's time to do something about it.

Whatever the issue, it has to be something you care about deeply. Making change happen isn't easy. It could take years. You'll need stamina and dedication that comes when an issue is close to your heart. You don't have to want to change the whole world; It makes more sense to start changing something close to home, in your town or community.

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#### Learn About It

Learn everything you can about your issue: Who are the interested parties? Who are the key personalities? What is the history? What laws or regulations pertain to it? What are the finances behind your issue?

Learn in every way possible: use the internet, talk to neighbors, contact elected officials, etc. Chances are that you are not the first person to address your issue. You may be able to find other people who are willing to share both specific information and their valuable experience.

The bottom line: become an expert. You'll be challenged and you need to be able to answer questions accurately.

#### Corporate Cruelty: Katie Redford

While studying law, Katie Redford traveled to Burma (Myanmar) and was shocked by the human rights abuses she saw there. Inspired to make a change, she came up with an innovative way to make corporations accountable for their involvement in atrocities outside American borders by reviving an arcane law. Katie Redford took on U.S. oil giant Unocal scoring a huge victory for Burmese villagers. Redford and her nonprofit Earth Rights International continue to take up battles to hold corporations accountable for crimes committed overseas.



- The target of your activism is not your enemy. Ms. Redford says that she supports the international scope of American corporations. She is not anti-corporation. She just wants them to do business the right way.
- Believe in yourself and your goals. Redford's legal strategy was based on an arcane law, an approach her law school professor told her would never succeed. It did.



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#### Become Empowered

This is at once both the simplest and the most difficult step in becoming an activist. Becoming empowered simply means realizing that you can make change happen. You don't need to be rich, educated or powerful. You may have to do things you've never done before, talk to people you've never dreamed of talking to, and perhaps even rearrange major parts of your life. You'll need willpower, dedication and a good deal of energy. But you can affect change. Once you've realized that, you've taken the biggest step. You're empowered. You're on your way.

#### Have Justice, Will Travel: Wynona Ward

Wynona Ward was a truck driver based in Vermont. When she was forced to face the domestic abuse she had experienced as a child it was like lightning struck. She knew she had to help others who were still the victims of abuse. She went to law school and then founded an organization called Have Justice Will Travel—part law firm, part counseling service, part taxi fleet. She's helped thousands of hard to reach women in Vermont break the cycle of domestic abuse. And her organization just keeps growing.



- You don't need to be rich, powerful or politically connected to make change.
- Finding an issue from your own life experience is the most powerful motivator.
- Who do you help? Civic activism, as we use the term, is not about altruism, but rather about acting to help those in your own community. Community can have many definitions: it can be a physical community; it can also be people who are all affected by the same conditions.

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#### Find Allies and Alliances

You can't do this alone. Begin by enlisting the help of like-minded neighbors, friends and community groups. You may start your own organization dedicated to your cause. Ask people for small bits of their time and build a core group. Then, spread your net. Look for other organizations, businesses and elected representatives who share your interest.

Again, the internet can help. [Activismnetwork.org](http://Activismnetwork.org) will give you tips on how to start a campaign for change and how to build a network. It will allow you to share contacts, event information, and tactics. [Idealist.org](http://Idealist.org) helps you find people with similar interests who might want to collaborate with you. There are many other useful sites on the web.

A key point about alliances: Be willing to look anywhere for support. You may be surprised at who your allies are. For example, Environmentalists and Evangelical Christians, who have been at odds on many issues, have recently found common ground over environmental issues.

#### A River Runs Through It: Lynn and Devonna Owens

Lynn and Devonna Owens have been cattle ranchers in beautiful Madison Valley, Montana for four decades. But as part-time wealthy residents moved in, including some of Hollywood's brightest stars, development boomed and the sweeping vistas and open spaces of the valleys were threatened. The Owens feared that traditional ranching would become a thing of the past given Montana's permissive laws on land use and development. So they banded together with fellow ranchers and teamed up with their former enemies—environmentalists—to create a world-class community alliance.



- The Owens, like so many activists, found their cause in their own back yard.
- The ranchers grew their movement by appealing to unlikely allies. The Owens reached out to their traditional enemy. Both groups cared about open space, and found new ways to work together.

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#### Strategize

Decide exactly what it is that you're trying to achieve. Do you want to save a single park in your neighborhood from development or do you want to restrict all development anywhere in your town? Is your goal to get a local company to clean up a specific hazardous waste site, or to change federal regulations that would apply to any manufacturing process that produces that waste? Know your goal, and know what success would look like.

Then, determine the best way to achieve your desired outcome. An extreme action like a hunger strike may not be the best way to ask your local Department of Public Works to put a new "Stop" sign on your corner. A small letter writing campaign may not have much effect in getting a multi-national corporation to clean up a hazardous waste site in your town. Your job is to learn about the many tactics available to you and to find those that are most appropriate.

#### Helping the Children: John Walsh

John Walsh knew first-hand the overwhelming problems facing the foster care system in Florida. As a lawyer for the Department of Children and Families, he saw how the state was doing a poor job of intervening when children were at risk. And its system of placing kids into foster care was a mess. As a result children were suffering—some even dying—and it broke his heart. Walsh wanted to get kids out of foster care and into a better place—the quicker the better. From inside the belly of the beast Walsh came up with a way to cut case time in half. His approach has salvaged many young lives and is now being adopted by counties across Florida and across the nation.



- Our image of activists is that of the outsider forcing change. But John Walsh shows that civic activists can accomplish great change from within an institution.
  - Know your subject. Walsh could not have created change without knowing the intricacies of a very complex system and knowing how and where to apply pressure.
  - Choose your tactics wisely: You don't always need to be confrontational.

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#### Publicize

Publicize your cause, your organization and your events. Hand out fliers in your neighborhood. Curry favor with local reporters. Get your picture in the paper and your story on local radio. Contact national media outlets—they are looking for stories. Do what ever you need to do to get the word out. This will serve two purposes. It will bring attention to your cause (helping to bring in more support) and it will bring pressure on the subject of your action

#### A Loud Whistle: Bunny Greenhouse

Bunnatine “Bunny” Greenhouse was a top civilian procurement officer for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers supervising billions of dollars in work assignments when she discovered something was seriously amiss. She believed that Halliburton and its subsidiaries were able to get preferential treatment, including billion dollar contracts, for rebuilding projects in Iraq. She could not keep quiet, no matter what the consequences. Greenhouse helped bring accountability and transparency to a giant government organization. Her reward for whistleblowing? A demotion from her job. But this woman has absolutely no regrets.



- Change can stir up powerful opposition. Know that there may be a cost for your efforts.
- The press, and Congress, can be powerful allies.
- Greenhouse is an example of creating change from within. She relied on the rules of the institution itself to promote reform.



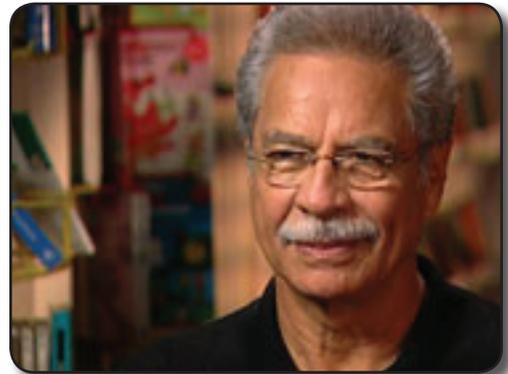
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#### Take Action

This, of course is the heart of the matter. For it is only by your actions, and the actions of those whose help you've enlisted, that the situation you wish to change will change. An "action" can be almost anything as long as it moves you closer to achieving your goal. It can be a public protest, handing out leaflets to educate the public, or a letter writing campaign. It can be entering into a negotiation. It can be lobbying politicians in your hometown or in Washington, D.C. There is no single action that is appropriate for every scenario. Find the ones that are appropriate and execute them. Repeat if necessary.

#### A Literary Movement: Rueben Martinez

As a child, Rueben Martinez loved to read. As an adult, he used his barbershop in California to advocate literacy to his clients. Martinez filled his barbershop with classics by heavyweights like Tolstoy and Hemmingway. As he cut hair, he shared his love for literature with his clients. Many of them didn't read English and despite a large Hispanic population it was hard to find books in Spanish. So Martinez made book runs to Mexico to pick up Spanish language titles. Demand was overwhelming, so Martinez transformed his small barbershop into a major bookshop and community center. Along the way, he has put over two million Spanish-language books into the hands of schoolchildren and adults.



- Civic activism has no age limit. Martinez didn't embark on his career in civic activism until he was in his mid-fifties.
- Tough it out. Rueben believed so much in his bookstore that he was willing to lose everything to keep it going.
- Change happens in many ways. Martinez supports more resources for schools. But he chose to go in a different direction in his effort to create change.
- Change does not always involve opposition. When you point your life in the right direction, good things can happen.

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#### Persist

Persistence is key, because real change rarely happens quickly. It may take years for you to achieve your goal. Keep at it, and make the journey worthwhile. Dr. Martin Luther King said, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

#### Tomatoes of Wrath: Lucas Benitez

Lucas Benitez worked picking tomatoes in Southern Florida for wages that were barely enough to live on. Conditions were deplorable and workers faced a climate of intimidation, fear and violence right here in the United States. Lucas Benitez rose up to create an alliance of workers and consumers that forced fast food giants McDonalds and Taco Bell to change their ways. He was able to transform the lives of some of the worst paid people in America by bringing concrete change to their working conditions.



- Growing the movement requires reaching out and building a coalition—not a partisan group, but people who share interests.
- Making change requires the long view. Benitez and his group of workers have been working for over a decade to raise wages for farmworkers. They have had great success, but progress is measured in years.
- Even the largest most powerful organizations in the country can be swayed by the right tactics.

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#### The Real World

These steps toward activism may seem abstract or idealistic. In these and the following case studies, you'll meet some remarkable people who used these tools to bring about change. In each case they found, by trial and error, just the right combination of tactics to be effective. None of their paths are identical, and you'll have to chart your own course. But in their stories you'll find valuable real-world lessons, and draw inspiration to get out there and do it yourself.

#### Greening the Gulf: Diane Wilson

Diane Wilson, a fourth-generation fishing boat captain, took on a giant chemical company and forced it to stop dumping chemicals along her beloved Gulf Coast. But change did not come easily. Wilson held hearings and protests, tried to mobilize her town's residents, and urged her elected officials to help. None of that worked. So this mother of five went on a hunger strike, her first of many acts of civil disobedience. Wilson's actions led to death threats, the loss of her job, as well as fights with family and friends. But in the end her determination did more than curtail a corporate polluter in her community: it pointed the entire environmental movement in a new direction.



- The power of one. Government failed the residents of Calhoun County, Texas. Elected representatives were in cahoots with the companies doing the polluting. Local residents cared more about jobs than the environment.
- Diane started out thinking of the companies that were polluting the water as the enemy. But she came to appreciate their need for branding and public relations in order to expand. Her new approach helped convince Formosa Plastics to adopt a "zero-discharge" system.
- Wilson shows the new face of environmentalism. Many groups use email and direct mail to solicit donations and then they hire lobbyists to work in Washington. In contrast, the Diane Wilson model is to grow a movement on the ground of people who are passionate and active.

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#### Demanding the Future — Now: Bill Graham

Bill Graham wanted to bring high speed Internet to his small Indiana town in a bid to save it from economic doom. The telecommunications companies weren't interested so Graham, the town's mayor, developed plans to wire the town on his own. Just as he was on the verge of success, the telecommunications companies cried foul. They reached out to their political allies to strangle Graham's service. Although the odds were stacked against him, Graham spearheaded a technology revolution that has helped his town blossom into the 21st Century.



- Being an activist may be part of your job. Graham became an activist while he was mayor of a small town in Indiana. He's still the mayor—and still getting things done. Empowerment moves you forward from where you are.
- Activists are not all anti-corporate left-wingers. Graham is a Republican. He takes the view of business—that support of local communities and creating more jobs helps everyone, including companies both big and small.

#### Tell Me the Truth!: Peggy Buryj

Peggy Buryj's son, Army Pfc. Jesse Buryj was killed in 2004 while serving in Iraq. She was first told that he was killed when a truck hit his vehicle. Later it was "friendly fire" by foreign troops, and then a soldier told her yet another version. She needed the truth. Thanks to her efforts, the Army is doing a better job of investigating and reporting military deaths.



- The target of change is not the enemy. Peggy Buryj made sure that the Army knew she respected what their soldiers were doing; in fact, she supported the war in Iraq.
- The combination of authenticity and empowerment is a lever that can create enormous results. A handful of women changing Army procedures? Not remotely possible—until and unless you factor in that all these women had lost sons in the fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan.
  - Buryj learned how to work her way through a complex military bureaucracy and to file Freedom of Information requests. She even got a message to the President in her effort to find out what happened to her son. It paid off.

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#### Power to the People: Jackie Thrasher

As a school teacher for more than two decades, Jackie Thrasher knew that there were problems with Arizona's education system. But when she found out that her state came in last in the country in public education funding per student, she began asking questions and following the money. She found out that the plight of Arizona's schools was the responsibility of the state legislature. But what could Jackie Thrasher, the music teacher, do to change the situation? The surprising answer: run for office. Thrasher became part of a new movement called "clean elections" that allows ordinary citizens to run for political office. Today, she is fighting for better schools and more pay for teachers as a member of Arizona's House of Representatives.



- The clean election movement is a great example of the intersection of civic activism and electoral politics. National efforts to get money of politics have taken hold in Arizona, Maine and other localities. That has enabled schoolteachers and other people who aren't well-connected or rich to run successfully for state office.
- Thrasher is another example of choosing tactics wisely. She could have held demonstrations and tried to force change from the outside. But she achieved success by becoming an insider.

#### Agitate! Agitate! Agitate!: Robert Moses

Robert Moses, a former civil rights activist, knew that children from poor and minority backgrounds didn't always receive the quality education they deserved. He developed The Algebra Project, a program that helps disadvantaged children in math. His initiative didn't just make math fun. It's had positive ripple effects throughout communities across America with former students leading the way.



- The people who you want to help must be empowered.
  - Leading doesn't mean telling people what to do. Moses' approach was to develop methods of empowerment and techniques of algebra instruction, and lift up the work of parents, teachers and administrators and above all students to make a plan and make change happen.

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### Using This Guide

You can print this out and record your own thoughts and goals on what you would like to undertake as an activist. Or you can use it electronically. Whatever method serves you best will stand you in good stead as you seek to enact change.

### Just remember:

- Find Your Issue
- Learn About It
- Become Empowered
- Find Allies and Alliances
- Strategize
- Publicize
- Take Action
- Persist

