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Grass Roots Organizing Alive and Well

BY TOM TUGEND

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The venue was Wilshire Boulevard Temple, but the atmosphere was a mix of revival meeting and political rally as about 800 adherents of One LA cheered each speaker to the rafters at a recent Sunday assembly.

"Are you ready to get to work?" demanded co-chair Diane Vanette of Temple Emanuel in Beverly Hills. The revved-up crowd, grouped behind placards with the names of their churches, synagogues and schools, thundered back, "YES!"

One LA's mission is to organize neighborhoods to determine their needs, then hold the feet of politicians and city officials to the fire so that the priorities of the grass roots are heard, and, in an ideal world, met.

One question dominated the agenda: How will the Los Angeles municipality and unified school district use the incoming federal stimulus money, which runs into the hundreds of millions of dollars, to meet the real needs of the citizenry?

One LA proposed a three-point action agenda:

- Job training and upgrading of work skills. Some \$86 million in federal money is available for local programs, but according to executive director Philip Starr of the Hollywood WorkSource Center, only 4 percent is going to actual "workforce investment," and the other 96 percent for costly infrastructure projects.
- Stem housing foreclosures. Some 19,000 homes are currently in some stage of foreclosure in South Los Angeles alone, and the number is rising daily. Residents told horror stories of being bucked from one mortgage company and bank to another in search of answers and relief.
- Improve education, specifically through the national Algebra Project, which aims to upgrade not only math literacy, but also to improve teaching and learning in other subjects.

The meeting, scheduled for two hours, was a model of disciplined organization. With an invocation by Rabbi Stephen Julius Stein of the host synagogue, roll call of participating institutions, some 20 speakers and testimonies, ritualized Q-and-As with four city council members, the school superintendent and incoming controller, and continuous applause and cheers, the chair issued a final call to action after an elapsed time of only 90 minutes.

The logo of One LA includes the letters IAF, which links the organization directly to the founder of the Industrial Areas Foundation, Saul David Alinsky, who laid down the techniques and goals of community organizing.

Today, Jewish activists and synagogues play important roles in the work of One LA — which receives no public funds — but, unlike some other interfaith and interethnic civic endeavors, they are not the dominating force.

The synagogue contingents made up about 20 percent of the delegates at the Wilshire Boulevard Temple event, while of the 80 component religious, school and labor institutions of One LA, about 50 are church-affiliated.

Vanette, who serves as Temple Emanuel's social justice chair, attended the founding meeting of the reconstructed One LA in 2004, and her Beverly Hills synagogue now backs the organization with some 10 core activists and 50 to 60 supporters.

Temple Judea in Tarzana and Temple Emanuel were the first to join up, with Temple Isaiah, Temple Israel of Hollywood and Wilshire Boulevard Temple coming aboard later. Also involved are participants from Temple Beth Am and Beth Chayim Chadashim.

Vanette, a marriage and family therapist, first sharpened her organizing skills as a union representative in Tennessee. Like many others, she became involved with One LA to promote a specific concern — a state grading system for California nursing homes — and then branched out into other causes.

"Our philosophy is to empower neighborhoods and communities to make changes in their own lives," she said, and pointed to one successful example in preventing the expansion of the Bradley Landfill in Sun Valley and its encroachment on a nearby school.

Vanette occasionally is confronted with the argument that Jews have enough of their own problems and should focus solely on those, and, in any case, why should Bel Air and Encino residents worry about conditions in South Central Los

Angeles or Pacoima?

"That's really a short-sighted attitude," she responds. "If we are all created in the image of the Divine, then we are all connected, and we have to take responsibility for each other."

Similarly, two young rabbis, Susan Leider of Temple Beth Am and Dara Frimmer of Temple Isaiah, who brought along sizeable contingents from their synagogues, saw their involvement as putting into practice the biblical injunction, "Justice, justice, shalt thou pursue."

Elan Babchuck, a rabbinical student at American Jewish University, has gone one step further and is now an organizer for One LA, while attorney Honey Amado volunteers as the organization's energetic press liaison.

Sister Maribeth Larkin is one of two full-time lead organizers for One LA and represents one aspect of the organization's refreshing diversity, in fact, not merely in aspiration.

She is a member of the Sisters of Social Service, a Los Angeles-based Catholic order whose nuns work as social workers and community organizers.

Larkin and her colleague Tom Holler have overall responsibility for three districts, South Los Angeles, San Fernando and San Gabriel valleys, and the Central District. The latter was the one gathered at the Sunday meeting and includes the Westside, Wilshire area and northeastern Los Angeles.

In addition to the issues raised at the meeting, Larkin pointed to the harassment of immigrants and threat to decent wages by the "informal" or underground economy as two upcoming priorities.

Larkin acknowledged that it isn't always easy to get large numbers to participate in the work of One LA, but added, "Overall, the Jewish community is certainly pulling its weight."

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