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By Claire Miller

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OF NUCLEAR INTEREST: Organizing works

When I was about 10 years old, I woke up in the middle of the night to the sound of the faint fog horn from the Gurnet; I thought it was the siren for nuclear meltdown and proceeded to wake up my entire family convinced we had to evacuate.

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.” – Margaret Mead

I had an idyllic childhood in on the South Shore, in Duxbury. My family spent our summers on the beach, in the garden or road-tripping to hike the White Mountains. However, when I was about 10 years old, I woke up in the middle of the night to the sound of the faint fog horn from the Gurnet; I thought it was the siren for nuclear meltdown and proceeded to wake up my entire family convinced we had to evacuate.

Perhaps that is in part why I have been driven to make organizing my life's work. But that only explains half of it. I could have become a lawyer, an entrepreneur, an environmental educator, or a journalist – there are so many ways one can make a difference in our world, but I wanted to be an organizer.

This is my favorite definition of organizing: “When we organize, we challenge people to act on behalf of their common interests. We identify, recruit and develop leadership, build community among that leadership, and then build power out of that community.”

I believe in organizing because even when we lose, we have still become stronger for the next push. Every campaign that I have worked on, I met, connected with and developed relationships with incredible people – and win or lose, that web of relationships is getting stronger. The small victories, even when they feel very small, are moving us forward. I try to remind myself that there were no less than four versions of the Civil Rights Bill. Change is slow.

And that's why I love working at Toxics Action Center. Since 1987, we've connected with more than 750 different communities groups and more than 10,000 people. One major lesson we have learned is that when it comes to protecting public health and preserving the environment, the process of creating change at the local level is a political one. Government agencies who, in name, should protect health and the environment and advocate for clean solutions don't – we see this all the time in communities across the state. And polluters go to great lengths to avoid responsibility for their messes.

But the good news and the most important thing we've learned over the years is that even in the face of big environmental problems, powerful special interests and polluters, and corrupted politicians, we've learned that when residents like yourselves come together, form a group, get your voices heard, organize, set goals and make a plan, you can win.

So thank you, to all of you who work together and organize for a healthy, sustainable planet. I know it is slow, but you are always winning even when you lose.

Claire Miller is the Toxics Action Center Massachusetts state director with degrees in Environmental Studies/Politics. She is working with communities focused on cleaning up hazardous waste sites, shutting down dirty and dangerous waste facilities and power plants, reducing pesticide use, and promoting clean water, safe energy and zero waste. She is originally from Duxbury – about 10 miles from Pilgrim Nuclear Power Station.

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