

Transcript

Peter Sobota [00:00:01] And you say you want a real solution? Well, you know, we'd all love to see the plant from John Lennon and the University of Buffalo School of Social Work. Welcome to the Social Work Podcast. I'm Peter Szabo. Too good to have you along. There's really no good way we can do justice to the story and work of today's guest, Arnie Graf in one podcast. Right off the bat, I would like to recommend that those listeners who want to learn more about art and his work dig out the Google machine and look up irony. Graf Saul Alinsky, the Industrial Areas Foundation and Project Build in Baltimore. Just for starters. Frequently referred to as the organizers, organizer Arnie Graf has spent the last 50 years working with people to build movements that collectively bring about change for the common good. It's also the way he does it. Our guest describes the aha moment that drew him to social change efforts. There's a buffalo connection and his unexpected journey that led him to a lifetime of organizing. The late journalist Mark Shields stated irony Grass belongs in the Social Justice Hall of Fame. He's a walking encyclopedia of social change and organization. Join us as we benefit from his stories from a lifetime of organizing. It's likely you'll find them quite practical, as well as inspiring. Artie Graff is a lifelong organizer and trainer with the Industrial Areas Foundation from 1971 to 1978 and again from 1980 to 2016. He served as its co-executive director from 2010 to 2012. He continues to write and mentor organizers and leaders, and his latest book is Lessons Learned Stories from a Lifetime of Organizing. Mr. Arnie Graf, with genuine respect and a welcome in social work. Good to have you aboard. Thank you. Now, I actually want to go back to like how you came to do this work. I know that you have been at this for probably at least 50 years, if not more than that. How did you come? To do the work that you have done for many years and you continue to do that. It's I'm always curious how people end up doing what we do.

Arnie Graf [00:02:39] That's a question. Well, to try to be concise, what I did most of my life was work with people in various communities to help them figure out how to build organizations that enabled them to have enough power to be able to have the kind of life in their community that they that they hoped for and wanted. And I guess that kind of sums it up. It meant a lot of development of leadership so that people in the communities that I worked in led instead of being led from the outside, it was led from the inside.

Peter Sobota [00:03:20] Yeah. And you've already touched on things that I'm going to ask you more out there, and that's why I left it that way. I mean, I hope we're going to talk a lot more about power, and I know we're going to talk a lot more about leadership. So I know that you have referred to yourself and the and, of course, the organizations that you worked for as an organizer. So just to kind of get us going, what is organizing and what's an organizer?

Arnie Graf [00:03:51] Well, in in the context of what I did for my life, an organizer is a person who develops leadership in in communities so that they have enough, you know, enough power, enough a capacity to act on the things they want to see or the things they want to stop. The organizer is the person who gets to know people in the community and develops the leadership to build the kind of organization that has enough power to be able to both identify, but to gain what it is they want or to stop what it is they want.

Peter Sobota [00:04:36] Now, you have such a long career that I'm actually going to fast forward through a lot of things because I kind of want some people to walk away with some key ideas about your work and you. And then I want to ask you about eventually what I want to get to our your your universal principles, because I think those are obviously they've stood the test of time. And so but before that, now we're fast forward skipping a lot in your career. I know that that you came to be the not only a trainee of, but then the co-director of the Industrial Areas Foundation or the IAF. And for those who aren't familiar with that organization, which still exists, by the way, could you describe what IAF does?

Arnie Graf [00:05:30] So as you said, the Industrial Areas Foundation was founded by Saul Alinsky in 1940. I passed in 1972. Linda There was a man named Chambers when he retired. There were four people. I was one of the four that became the co-executive directors of the Industrial Areas Foundation. Purpose is to build local, self-determining community organizations. So the Industrial Areas Foundation itself has one thing it does, which is to train organizers and go into communities and build self-determining organizations. So it's not that no one's there. You know, they may retain the idea for help and consultation, but not part of the citizenry.

Peter Sobota [00:06:22] So you don't go in and fix people and, you know, be the hero. And exactly.

Arnie Graf [00:06:31] That's job. That's what we got. That's what we resent. People who think they can go into a community and be the hero. The heroes are in the community and the heroines, you know, they they're there. They just haven't had an opportunity. And or they don't. You know, they were so busy doing what they're, you know, trying to stay alive. Like, my friend's parents are working all those jobs that, you know, they can't see how to build something that could be strong, long lasting. Deep roots. I would say as an organizer, I don't want to build something that's grassroots. That is those are not deep roots. You can pull up grass very easily. I want to you know, I would hope the organization would have deep roots instead of, you know, like a strong tree that you can't get up. And that's our role and that's our job.

Peter Sobota [00:07:34] You know, the word for religiousness that, you know, part of your work with the IAF involved getting out to Baltimore and working with the build organization. And so I encourage our listeners, if you want to learn more about our efforts specifically in that area, that you that you check that out as well. But I want to get a little more practical. I want to draw on your wisdom here. And I know that you believe that there is a right way to build power. And you just alluded to this, but I know you believe that there's a right way to build power and a wrong way. Could you talk a little bit about what you mean by that?

Arnie Graf [00:08:21] I mean, a wrong way would be coming into a community and somehow. Planting yourself there and building something which is around you or around somebody that you found in the community. But it's really you and that person. That would be, to me, the wrong way to go about it. You might even you might even accomplish some things, right? You might win some things, some issues that people care about, but it wouldn't be long lasting. And it it we don't build movement. So movements are built around charismatic leaders. There's nothing wrong with them. I mean, we need movements and we have movements that are civil rights movement, you know, the anti-war movements or whatever that have done so much. But they're for a different they're there for something else and they can be very good

and very helpful. But they're not what we do because they build around two or three people in that person usually, or persons or, you know, he or she pretty charismatic and and that's fine. I mean, I don't mean in a native way. I mean, I came out of this movement to me and people in the Industrial Areas Foundation. Building power means building a collective. That in the people who live in the community. And it's a collective power. So if you have it's built around 20, 25 people. Anyone how big you're building it all around 30 people. And it's there's some fluidity because if the people can be added to it, people say to me sometimes, well, you're the executive committee, you know, that you build, you know, supporting people. And how do you make any decisions in general? I wish there were 60, you know, I mean, they can figure it out, you know. I mean, God, we wonderful. We had a you know, and by leader. I mean, a person who has a following that they can deliver. So you can be. I found many very quiet people. You wouldn't think of that. They are a leader and they don't think that they're a leader. It might go into the community. Everybody's giving me their name to talk to. And when I meet the person, they're not necessarily flamboyant or they're great.

Peter Sobota [00:10:54] But this is a complicated, by the way, irony. But, you know, you're that person, right?

Arnie Graf [00:11:01] Thank you. And I guess now that I thank you, I mean, and so by leader in person who can deliver people, it doesn't mean the person always delivers people or is leading people in a good direction because you also want somebody who has some values and someone who doesn't want. All the power for themselves. And so you find and develop leaders in the community. I know you do a lot of training. A lot of leadership development training in our work. And some people, or many people, if you're successful, become leaders. They get it. You know, they never thought they could or they never thought because. If we're going to an action, you know, we're going to be doing something. They can bring two people that's a leader to the small. You know, it's a small base. There are people who can bring 50. Well, that's obviously a person who has a larger base. But the person who brings to Cannes can learn the ring. Ten can and learn to you know and learn to how to negotiate and learn how to you know, learn how to do all of the things that are necessary to build, you know, the organization and to win the things that people want.

Peter Sobota [00:12:35] All these people are drawn from the community and they're and then they remain in the community. And that's where the smarts and the power stays. So.

Arnie Graf [00:12:46] Exactly. And they're they're willing to share with other people. It should be looking for himself.

Peter Sobota [00:12:55] Listening to you talk, too, reminds me of, you know, I know that Lewinsky was not a big fan of social workers, and this is part of what drove him crazy about his interactions with social workers is that, you know, I can't remember what it is, one of his great quotes. But he accused social workers, for example, of. You know, working with people who were disenfranchised and disempowered and then, you know, going into communities and teaching people how to basically acquiesce to their what. And then they would the social workers would all go. And so they to to live in hell, in a way, I think is what Alinsky we used to criticize our profession about. But what I want to ask you now is I know your guiding framework and and the IAF is is really kind of reflected in what you call the universal principle. And I think if there's anything I want our listeners to walk away with after listening to today is, you know, a pretty decent understanding of what those are and how they're used. Could you

talk about those, why you believe they're crucial? And if you can, could you give me some examples of how you, you know, bring those to bear? I know. That's a lot. They're so sorry.

Arnie Graf [00:14:19] Why don't I put out your five? Because we lost 1820, so. And I. A universal. Nothing. No one concedes anything without pressure or to start afresh. And in order to have that pressure, you must have power. And by the word power. I mean, it's a loaded word, but in just breaking it down, it comes from the Spanish word and from there to be able. And so power is the ability to act. And most. People. Middle income, working income, lower income. Don't have the ability to act in the public arena. They have the ability to act in, you know, their own family and things like that. But in the public arena or in their employment, they don't have the ability to act. Bye. So. Questions, you know, how how do you get power? Well, there, there there are four wings in the secular world. I've been corrected by ministers.

Peter Sobota [00:15:30] I'm going to set you up for this one. I know how you get power. People who already have it. I don't think you have to laugh right away.

Arnie Graf [00:15:43] Yeah, right, right.

Peter Sobota [00:15:44] Well.

Arnie Graf [00:15:46] At least you blew up the capacity to do that. He was sarcastic, you know? Well, nobody can seize power without as I said, without pressure, the threat of pressure. And you get that pressure by having power. And most people in the communities we work in and, you know, don't have that kind of power. And so there's four ways that I know you can get it. You can be born very wealthy and you have a lot of money, and you use that money for the things that you want to get. You know, not just your private life, but in your public life.

Peter Sobota [00:16:22] I'll check that one off my list. Okay. No, no. Okay. All right. Go on. Wow.

Arnie Graf [00:16:29] Another way you can get it is if you have a certain status. So you are the mayor. Well, that gives you a certain ability to act in the city that you're mayor. You're the governor. You're the CEO of a major company. And and you have lots of resources. And so by your status, you're invited here and you're invited there, and you can get a meeting with the governor quickly while if the mayor are you in the community trying to get a meeting with the guy, you forget?

Peter Sobota [00:17:00] Okay.

Arnie Graf [00:17:04] Well, you run this crisis some status.

Peter Sobota [00:17:06] That's right. All right. I'm going to go back there.

Arnie Graf [00:17:09] Go ahead. So most people don't have either one. They don't have individual, you know, status. You operate in the public arena in any kind of way that. We'd give them influence or or you're rich and you decide to use that wealth. So the only two ways to get it is you can organize people, then you can deliver with a focus consistently and persistently. I and consistently and persistently because you can't just do it once. It's like the

story I told you about the guy that was, you know, running the employment for any university, for, you know, hiring. We had to go back and back. And you you have to go. It has to be persistent and consistent and it has to be focused. It can't be all over the place. That would give you power. That gives you the ability to act. And the fourth way is if you can organize money. With a focus that you can deliver. And so we, the times and organizations have been able to raise as much as \$10 million that leverages the government money that's enabled us, like in Brooklyn, New York, to build is as many as 5000 affordable homes. Home ownership for working people. Working people in low income people because they don't have money in a lot of their life is spent trying to make money. Don't think of organized money. Just a quick example in Baltimore and way, way back over 50 years ago when I was there. 40 years ago. Like in a lot of cities, African-American community was redlined. And there was like a it wasn't an imaginary line. They're actually on maps, red lines growing around neighborhoods that were predominantly African-American and Latino that they would not loan money to. And most people, you know, a lot of people in the community couldn't. They knew it. They're angry about it, but. Right. What were they going to do about it? And so they would wind up blending from other places with, you know, exorbitant interest rates and terrible, you know, results would happen down to the person down the line. But people didn't think they had money or the time before we built up the organization, 250 organization of organizations 50. There were about 20. And we did a. In their churches, we did an anonymous survey as to how much money did people have in their bank, you know, to put their name down. They just passed it. And that was their offering for the day. So they put the amount of money and where they had it in the basket as it went around. Well, the people's shocked. They had over \$15 million in the banks. If you took the church's budget, the money that the church had itself, if you took the daycare centers that the churches ran, the afterschool programs, they ran the individuals themselves and added up to over \$15 million. So when we went in to negotiate Providence Savings Bank. We went in as a \$15 million. Well, we didn't have we had 5 million of the 15 was in that bank. We went in as a five and three way of framing that that not only emboldened people who were negotiating our team, but it also said not that 5 million was going to break a bank, but it was a lot of money and it could start a cascade. And who wants that to happen? And so we negotiated that, you know, a certain amount of money percentage that they gave out in loans was now going to go in to the black community because a lot of people had met the criteria for the loan and they just went. So you each.

Peter Sobota [00:21:07] I'm sorry for interrupting. So your argument here is that folks had this much capital. That meant they should have that amount, an equal amount of opportunity within the bank for loans and for housing. Is that what you're saying? You're leveraging the two.

Arnie Graf [00:21:26] Right. And and and that gave us the power, the organized money they wouldn't meet with or before. You know where we now, a \$5 Million customer. That's a different. Yeah, it's a different story. You know who you know, you don't want people lining up and taking all their money out of the bank. You know, and so that's what I mean by organized money that you can deliver. Those are the ways you can get an.

Peter Sobota [00:21:55] Implied threat that those folks might take that money out, which you don't have to say when you walk in with \$5 million. Right. I actually want to ask you about another one of the universal principles, because when I was reading them, I was also thinking about Alinsky's Perspectives on Social Action, where there's some overlap, obviously, and a

little bit of differences. But could you talk a little bit about the notion of breaking problems into issues? Because I think that's a fascinating idea.

Arnie Graf [00:22:31] So. Right. So another tenant or, you know, universal is understanding the difference between problem and issue. So a problem is something that's big and hard to get at people not you know, people not being able to have to get loans is a big problem. But you've got to break it down into an issue. And an issue means to go forth. So I assure you, some papers are means to go for a problem. Kind of you get stuck in it. We know in social work. Those of us who do, those are people sort of to do counseling. People come in with problems until they can break it down and then they get it out of the amorphous. This problem, I just feel lousy will be okay. But what is going on? So you got to break it down and make it.

Peter Sobota [00:23:26] Manageable, too, because it's too overwhelming sometimes, depending how you frame the problem. Sure.

Arnie Graf [00:23:32] Yeah. No, exactly. So that's why one of the one of the I would say the content of issue is that it's manageable. It is specific. It's not everything that's going on in the bank. It's not. There are many problems around discriminatory practices by banks aimed at, you know, people of color and poor people. But you can't get at the whole thing. So, you know, it's just your will if you can get it to be specific. Is it winnable? It measure your power you're going up against or you're not just, you know, Don Quixote, you know, swing and swinging to win. Yeah, they're going to frustrate people, you know. So is it specific? Is it winnable? Can you polarize around this issue? When you're going into action, you're going in to take on the bank or the mayor or whoever or whatever. It's got to be us against them. Now. You know, in reality, that's not true. Nothing is like that. Totally. We're totally right and they're totally wrong. Well, you know, that said. That's not true. I mean.

Peter Sobota [00:24:53] But if. If you're not. Here comes the key.

Arnie Graf [00:24:59] That's right. But if you're not thinking that way and you get. Well, yeah, but this in rhythm. With that, you paralyze everybody they can. Can you personalize it? You can't or you can't negotiate with the bank. It's a building. Who in that bank has the authority to make the decision around war?

Peter Sobota [00:25:25] And what's amazing I'm sorry for interrupting, but what I've learned is that you don't need to meet with the board of directors. If you can identify one key person, sometimes that's all you need.

Arnie Graf [00:25:39] Well, that's the personal I do you do your power analysis that you understand over the 12 that are on the board is really one that swings influence. And who is that person? And that's the person that you go. The person you go to action with or, you know, go to negotiate with. So can you personalize it? And then you've got to be able to depersonalize and depolarize. Don't stay that way. There's many other things we want to deal with with a bank and we don't want to stay, you know, polarized. And I think too too often there are groups that, you know, you know, they go against somebody, CEO or somebody like that or a politician, and they just stay mad at that person all the time. Well, you got to deal with that person.

Peter Sobota [00:26:33] There's a tomorrow.

Arnie Graf [00:26:37] That's right. Exactly. Got to gauge.

Peter Sobota [00:26:40] When you cross the bridge, you got to get back over.

Arnie Graf [00:26:44] I know that. Well, that's that's absolutely right. So you've got to be able to and that's hard for people to do when you've been going against somebody and they've been giving you a hard time for six months, eight months, 12 months a year. And then you finally shake hands on a deal. People want to stay. You know, people are angry and they still think, okay, we got to deal. But he's still in this will be maybe so. But you got to you got to let you've got to shake that man's hand. And that woman's hand. And you got to let it go, because like you said, this tomorrow will the next thing into the bank.

Peter Sobota [00:27:24] In the bank at some point. So.

Arnie Graf [00:27:28] Right. And yeah. And sometimes the people that in my experience, we've gone against an organization and become an employee on something else.

Peter Sobota [00:27:41] Okay. Now, I actually want to go back to like how you came to do this work. I know that you have been at this for probably at least 50 years, if not more than that. And I actually happen to know that we have a university at Buffalo Connection. And I'll leave that up to you if you'd like to talk about that. But how did you come? To do the work that you have done for many years and you continue to do that. It's I'm always curious how people end up doing what we do.

Arnie Graf [00:28:18] Well, it was sort of by accident that first I didn't grow up in a politically oriented family. I mean, they voted, but they weren't involved in anything in politics. And we rarely talked about politics. You know, when I was growing up. So when I win college, which is at the University of Buffalo, I lived in in dormitories that were they were the tower dormitories. And I don't know what it is now. On the floor I lived on. We had a basketball team, you know, recreational. And we every floor had a team. And on our team, there were two African-American students on our on our floor, but very few African-American students at the time. When I went, there were two people on our floor and one played on the team. And I didn't know him all that well. At the end of the season. We won the league and we all decided to go out to celebrate for a drink at some bar. I don't remember where it was. It was even still there. And it was crowded and a good campus bar kind of scene. Loud music, laughing and a lot of beer. And there were ten of us, and no one was serving us. I, I just figured it was, you know, because the place was so busy, but guys, that we were the waiters kept walking by us. And so I decided to get up and just get the beer myself from, you know, get a couple of pitches from bartender. And he just kept walking by me as I tried to get his attention. And finally I leaned over the bar and held my hand out so he couldn't miss me. And he said, What do you want? And I said to beer. And he said, Well, get rid of that. Use the N-word and then we'll serve you. And I was really stunned. I was naive, but I knew that was in that naive and I was just confused. And so I thought, well, he probably didn't see that. Or he probably said at the time that the way to call people of color was Negro. You must have said Negro. But why would you say Negro? I would have to do with a pitcher of beer. I it was just is. So I got back up and I kept ignoring me and I literally put my chest and leaned over the bar. And he said, Look, get rid of the n, the guy using the N word and I'll serve you otherwise, you know. Get

out of here, all of you. I don't know what got into me. I didn't know. Like, people I didn't know. It just seemed crazy to me. It wasn't political, just nutty and terrible and wrong. And so I lost my temper, which I sometimes I'm better now and I wish I had as a younger person. And I started cussing at the guy and yelling everything I could think of matter and got quiet, you know, in the bar and me screaming at this guy. And he must have had a buzzer behind the bar. He hit it. And all of a sudden you just got very to me, very loud, a small guy, about five, six and maybe on a £35. So we went and seen where these two guys came out of nowhere. They're the bouncers, I guess, and they threw me out of the bar. I mean, physically. I landed on the sidewalk. Which in Buffalo in February is very cold. Lots of snow. And I didn't have a jacket because they were male. And every time I tried to get into the bar to get my jacket, they threw me out. So I didn't have a car. I had driven me there and no one came out. None of the teammates came out. I was just standing there cold as it all got out. Just confused. Confused what had happened. Angry at my teammates for not coming out or, you know, as cold as that, or at least throw my jacket out there. And so I found my way to my stops. And eventually I got back to the dorm room and hot shower, all that. So. And that. And for the rest of this semester, no one would know I was. I mean, they say hello, but no one would. My roommate did. But outside of that, no interest. Nor did the African-American guy. So I just. Decided that, you know, I needed to. I was just going to join a fraternity and meet with, you know, hopefully a bunch of guys that, you know, would friends and that would be that. So I did. I became part of Sammy Sue Malcolm. You understand? Let's turn off the campus. Sorry to hear that. Uh, you know, I just went about my business pledges and friends, and that was that. And the last around the last week of the semester was finals. I went down to the cafeteria after, you know. Foolishly not studying and then staying up all night to try to cram everything into my head. And it went down for breakfast. And sitting alone was the African-American guy. And so I decided, well, I'll probably never see him again. You know, school is big. And what's the odds of running into him? And I was going to be living off campus. And so I went up to him and sat down and said, Can I talk to you? And he said, John, look, I'll probably never see you again. Why would you even acknowledge my existence? You know, since that incident in the bar, you. I've got a disease or something. You know, you. You have nothing to do with me. You don't to say hello. Mm hmm. And he said. Okay. Do you really want to know? And I said, Yeah, of course I am. And he said, Look, I'm from a small town called Tuckahoe. Up and above New York as a predominantly African-American suburb. And in Westchester County. And. He said, I have a sister who's in college. She's a junior. I forget the school. And so in order for the two of us to go to school. My father was three jobs, so he's always tired and he's worn out doing these three jobs every day. And my mother does the same thing, three jobs every day. So really, in a lot of ways, my sister raised me and I make a long story short, she said. I just try to imagine. If I had done what you did in the bar. After all, I was the guy that was called the name, not, you know, some white guys. I'm the guy, you know, you're not the N-word. I am. So what do you think would have happened to me? Was it really I guess you would have been thrown out of the bar? No, that's why you're. You're naive and that's why I. To stay away from the. What would have happened to me is they would have called the police and I would have been arrested for disorderly conduct. And then I would have been thrown out of the. And then I would have broken my parents heart at best.

Peter Sobota [00:36:14] And yeah, yeah.

Arnie Graf [00:36:16] I couldn't do that. So I have to eat that stuff. I just have to take it and eat it. You think that's the first time I've been called that word? You. Don't be naive. And that just. Just shook me. You know, I couldn't be, you know, I just couldn't. You know, what's it like

to have to live like that? Being afraid. What persons will say or at least say whatever they want to to you and you have to eat it, you know? And you know, this is just awful. Well, and right into my junior year, I was at a I was at a dance in the I don't know, it's it was a student union then. I don't know. Maybe it is now. I don't know. So I was there, I heard music. I was, you know, well, saw some friends were dancing and band was good and were having fun. And then the band took a break and three people came on and said they were from Kosovo, which I had no idea what that was. That was the main that's the coordinating committee between SNICK, which was a southern civil rights group, and more, which was more in the north, but all over.

Peter Sobota [00:37:36] Congress on racial equity.

Arnie Graf [00:37:39] Equity Congress of Racial Equality.

Peter Sobota [00:37:41] Equality is founded.

Arnie Graf [00:37:42] By a man named James Farmer. And. Cynic was younger people in the South like Stokely Carmichael and Robert Moses, people like that, John Lewis. I didn't know any of it. I was a victory kid. I knew parties that sort of I didn't know anything. They said they were sent here by corps and snake to. Coordinate the ice work in Buffalo because, you know, Buffalo, even though it's in the north, is quite a racist place. And, you know, some of the kids started, you know, we want the band, you know, bring back the. But obviously with the group of friends and my friends were sort of astonished as it only in Mississippi and stuff like that. I'm talking around 1964, 63. But I knew because of that incident in the bar that. There was truth to what they were saying. And so I went to the first. Meaning that they had. To try to put something together on the campus. But there are very few people from the campus there, I think myself, if I was. And then there were people, African-American people from the community. And. You know, he challenged the students, the fellow at the head of Corps from Buffalo. And he said, Did you know that in the whole maintenance staff of the university? There's only one African-American out of I forget the number 260 turned 75 or something. Now, if a person can't get a job. Cleaning or mowing the lawn or shoveling the snow. I mean, what do you got to do to get a job? You know, the second biggest employer outside the steel mills are still growing. A lot of people still is. And and so that was the number one employment base for the number one employer in the city. And so they said, how many of you from the from the universe, from university? Nearly six of us will join us to talk to the guy who was the head of maintenance to find out. What's going on? So I thought, hey, I'll join them. You know what? My father was not a, you know, college educated person. He never finished high school. He started in a factory and worked his way up. It was a sweeper. You know, we call it a sweeper as a janitor. And I thought, well, yeah, I mean, if you can't if you can't get to start somewhere, I mean, and, you know, we're free to go. And I kept thinking of the conversation I had with the fellows from my freshman year. And so about the three jobs his parents had and all that. So I went and we went and we met with a man. I don't remember the man's name. And I was just quiet. I didn't. I was just there as a body. There were only about ten people. But it was the people who the head of corps that were the spokespeople. And this guy was just nasty. You know, he he'll hire who he wants to hire. And, you know, people don't even go to the university. You know, the guy that was a spokesperson from the right from the community. And you know. You have no business telling me how to run my business. I just sit there, just kind of boiling up again, like I did with the bartender, thinking, what the hell is going on here? You know, I mean. Well, how can this be? You know, if you can't get it, you can't get it. You

can't get a job as a janitor, then I mean, what what in the world? You know what I mean? Then I thought of my own father and. But you know, we left. I mean, it wasn't for me to speak. And then we huddled outside. We got nothing. And I was just. I was so confused and angry, you know, angry and confused and, you know, learning how the world was instead of, you know, being in fraternity nowhere, you know. And so they said, well, we're going to have a planning meeting to figure out what to do. I came to the planning meeting. They were going to go back there with the demands and say that if he if he didn't meet any of the demands, a certain amount of hiring, you know, hire X amount of people every year based on the population of Baltimore, of of Buffalo. I think I think the city's black population time was about 38%. 30 to 40% something.

Peter Sobota [00:42:40] Yeah, it's the majority currently, by the way.

Arnie Graf [00:42:46] Oh, is it? Wow. Slightly. Huh. And. And, you know, sounded like it made sense to me. And so you need a lot of training to be a janitor or whatever, you know. And I thought I remembered when I lived in the dorms and I thought about it, the women who did the cleaning were mostly European. Some were immigrants. They should talk to him. My grandparents were immigrants from Europe. And so any rate. So I remember that we went. So we decided that was going to be the demand. I didn't think he'd meet with us again, but he did, because I guess he liked sticking his, you know, thumb in our face. And he just was more nasty. You know, you can't tell me how mean to hire you can't. You know, I'll hire whoever I hire, you know, and all of that. It was just terrible. He didn't use the N word, but I mean, he was. He was nasty to people.

Peter Sobota [00:43:51] He was just more a polite way of nasty town.

Arnie Graf [00:43:54] Yeah, that's right. And I thought, how can a university hire a guy like this? I mean. This is a university, you know. What's going on here? And so he wouldn't so we started to we did what we said we would do. We started a picket. Put a picket outside and had. Newspapers and everybody there. I mean, people from Corps knew how to do all of that. I was just, okay. I'm on a picket line now. I remember walking on a picket line to take What am I doing? You know, my parents are going to kill me when I send you to school or get troubles. But he still didn't do anything. And really, to make a long story short, eventually we forced him to agree to a two hour demand of hiring up to 38% African-American. And that was just I don't know, it was a tremendous feeling. And people in the community. I gotten to know some people in the community, the area around the fruit belt. I don't know. And I got to know some people that I would never have met or known prior to, you know, working with Corps. And it was just. And then we we went ahead and we we integrated a lot of things in the city. It was a big department store. I forget the name of Ann Richards or I can't remember the name of the store, but it was a major department store and it was downtown. And they had. No African-American.

Peter Sobota [00:45:37] Except I think I know who you're talking about.

Arnie Graf [00:45:41] Stock room. And and we try to go, you know, again, try to negotiate with the you know, we want to. African-American salespeople and cashiers, you know, people with the cash registers and all that, which they wouldn't do. And so what we did was. About this time we got about 40 of us and we went into the store and we tried on all the clothes and put them back in all the wrong racks. And bench pins are in the women's there. And

eventually so the guy said, okay, let's let's negotiate. We didn't do anything illegal. You couldn't you couldn't arrest us for, you know, putting it in the wrong rack. And you have 40 people doing that and all the dressing rooms, and then the whole store's a mess. So we negotiated. So for, you know, hiring and we did a number of things like that. And that's what set me off on my.

Peter Sobota [00:46:45] Knowing a little bit about you. I understand that you just answered. Not only not only my question about how you came to the work, but how this all set the stage for what you did for many, many years, including your nifty little tactic there in the department store. And some of the things that I know that your group did in Baltimore in lining people up, at least to me, I'll just speak for myself that cultural and political polarization seems to me to be even more extreme than it was in the sixties and seventies. You might not see it that way, but similar to the work that you were engaged with, you know, 30 and 40 years ago, we seem to find ourselves in a place again where organized labor is under attack. Red lining and voter suppression are alive and well. White supremacy appears to be on the rise. To just name a few. So as somebody who can kind of look back, you know, after many years on the front lines of these issues, you know, I'm curious about your take on how we move forward. How optimistic are you? For change. That real practical change and power sharing and democracy and all those things that you have spent your your professional life fighting for. Stand a chance. Well.

Arnie Graf [00:48:19] You know, depends upon the day that someone would ask me that question.

Peter Sobota [00:48:24] How about Friday? How about Friday? Yeah.

Arnie Graf [00:48:28] Well. This may be too narrow, but. Well, democracy is under attack, and not just here, but in many, many places in the whole world. Almost. Exactly. The peoples of the world are on the rise. Not not not in not in decline. And we'll see this Sunday if what happens in France with the kid. I mean, that would be very, very disruptive. You know, to Europe and Le Pen and the right wing wins an election. I still feel optimistic. Maybe it's Pollyannish, but I do have been. I think what's in it? In my way of thinking. They're just not there. Not enough people out talking with enough people. Before I retired for I retired, I got cancer. And so I wrote. I was older and I retired. I didn't have the energy, but I, I was moving around rural white areas. I believe that's where the I in many not totally but in many cases should be going into exurban areas. They I found that people are people you know, I mean, I was in the graduate school of social work at West Virginia University. And it was a block placement system. I don't know if they do that anymore where you're in school or months and then you're in a placement for four months.

Peter Sobota [00:50:04] We kind of combine them now. Yeah.

Arnie Graf [00:50:06] Okay. Well, one of the one of the four months or was five months I spent was with welfare rights organization in Harlan County, Kentucky. Unbelievably poor police. I mean, really poor, mostly poor. White was in a black community, was a mining community, but there was no mining going on anymore. Coal was gone. And that was all it was there. And so now you just had people there with no work, you know, for years, generation after generation. These are poor white people. Who if you listen to them and you're in conversation with them, you can hear the N-word a number of times, even though

there are no black people in 20, you know, we're near them. However. When I was working for rights and and organizing with them, which was all for white. There was there was a change in attitudes about who was the enemy and who wasn't the enemy. You know, who was the target? I mean, who was holding up a free lunch program for your kids? Certainly not some African-American. That's. And why was the sheriff? Chasing you all the time. What was going on here? What were they afraid of? What was. And I think they did know because many of them had been in the union mine workers union, which way back when was very powerful and was great, you know, when John Lucas was an. And so I just think we're not organizing enough. And I had a big. Yeah.

Peter Sobota [00:52:09] Yeah. All right. Yeah. Yeah, that's. We could get another podcast out of that last one really quick to kind of bring this all together. What would be your message as we kind of wave goodbye here to to social workers and really change agents of all stripes? You know, as you look back on the lessons you've learned and as you look forward, what would you say your message is to folks who are interested in social change and just.

Arnie Graf [00:52:38] Believe in people? Hmm. Don't stereotype. Trust their instincts. Believe that people can change, just like you can change. Think about yourself. I think about myself and how my life has changed. In such drastic ways. Most of the good. I mean I could never pictured. Oh, my life turned out. And for my fellow. Brothers and sisters in social work, which I got my master's degree in. Think about organizing as a career.

Peter Sobota [00:53:22] Here's some encouraging news. Arnie, it's getting better.

Arnie Graf [00:53:25] Well, that's what it is.

Peter Sobota [00:53:26] Yeah, we have more people coming in the door who are interested in large scale change in macro level and practice intervention. So I think there's some hope right there.

Arnie Graf [00:53:37] I'm really happy to hear that. Because we need a lot more people who are willing to devote their life to that in order for the country, in our country, a, to remain a democracy and be to remain a country that's decent.

Peter Sobota [00:53:57] And you've given us and your entire career has given us, you know, kind of like a guidebook on how to bring about that change. I think that's what people often ask, how do I do it? And your work is, I think, a testament to that. I want to thank you sincerely for joining us and taking that taking the time to give us your experience and to talk with us about how to move forward. Thanks again, Mr. Grant.

Arnie Graf [00:54:22] Oh, you're welcome. Pleasure.

Peter Sobota [00:54:24] The ENSO short podcast is organized by our coordinator and media wizard, Steve Sturman, our graduate production assistant. Nick Desmet say hi. Hello listeners. And I'm Peter Szabo. We have a full library of podcasts waiting for you at In Social Work Doors and hit us up on Twitter and Facebook and wherever you get your podcasts. See you next time, everybody.