

Community Organizing Never Looked So Good

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Sally Ryan for The New York Times

Quinn Rallins, whose father grew up in Altgeld Gardens, a public housing development in Chicago where Barack Obama was a community organizer. Mr. Rallins wants to do similar work in Brockton, Mass.

QUINN RALLINS, 23, graduated magna cum laude last year from Morehouse College with a dual major in international studies and Spanish. This spring, Mr. Rallins is finishing his master's degree in comparative social policy at Oxford. He has analyzed research for the Rand Corporation in England, led workshops in Malaysia for Amnesty International and founded an organization to help orphans in the Dominican Republic.

His next step? Top financial and technology companies and nonprofit groups have expressed interest in hiring him. Even in this economy, he has options.

But Mr. Rallins wants to be a community organizer — just like the world's most famous one, Barack Obama.

Mr. Rallins says he hopes to win a job with PICO, a national faith-based organization. He is applying for a position in Brockton, Mass., an industrial city battered by the state's highest foreclosure rate, the loss of most of its major manufacturing jobs and dwindling state resources. Starting annual salary is about \$35,000.

“My mentor at Morehouse says that at the end of the day, it's not about how much money you make, it's about the lives you've impacted and the stories you have,” Mr. Rallins said.

He is not alone.

A job that has not been all that alluring to college graduates is in resurgence, according to leading community organizers and educators. Once thought of as a destination for lefty radicals committed to living lives of low pay, frustration and bitter burnout, community organizing is now seen by many young people an exciting career.

With their jobs, students envision helping communities address urgent issues — economics or the environment, education or social justice — while developing leadership skills. And these jobs, students say, can actually lead to ... well, you know.

“Community organizing has become cool,” said Marshall Ganz, who dropped out of Harvard in 1964 to join the civil rights movement in Mississippi and spent 16 years with Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers. Of course, a tough economy helps attract people to professions they might not have otherwise considered, as does a crusading time when Wall Street has become a symbol of greed, arrogance and irresponsibility.

But the turnabout in popularity is still quite remarkable. Last fall, 200 people, the overwhelming majority of them in their 20s, applied for a single community organizing job at a PICO affiliate in San Diego County, said Stephanie Gut, a PICO director. The salary would be about \$35,000 to \$40,000, plus health benefits.

In the past, there might have been 25 to 30 applicants for a job that involves developing grass-roots leaders in church congregations to work on a variety of social issues, Ms. Gut said. Although a sagging economy may have had something to do with the number, it couldn't account for all the interest.

Two years ago, 250 applied for 26 paid summer community organizing internships at the **Center for Community Change** in Washington. Last summer, there were 1,200 applicants for 65 paid internships and fellowships.

Colleges are also seeing more interest in courses along those lines. Peter Dreier, a politics professor at Occidental College, says he usually has 20 to 25 students in his community organizing class. So far, 42 students have registered for next fall.

“I haven't become any more popular as a professor,” said Mr. Dreier, who directs the Urban and Environmental Policy Program at Occidental. “So the increased enrollment must have something to do with the political climate, student interest in organizing and the impact of Obama.”

Dr. Ganz, the veteran organizer, trained thousands of Obama campaign volunteers to organize communities and voters.

He sees the effect today. Three years ago, Dr. Ganz, who earned a doctorate in sociology and is now a lecturer at Harvard, taught 40 students in his community organizing class at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. This year, 60 students are enrolled, with more wanting to get in. Three years ago, the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, began using Dr. Ganz's curriculum. It is now taught at the College of the Holy Cross,

Providence College and Wellesley. And more institutions, like M.I.T. and Northwestern, are calling him.

Certainly, there is an Obama effect. Through his presidential campaign and in his memoir, “Dreams From My Father,” Mr. Obama managed to glamorize and, more important, explain community organizing. He wrote about meeting with people in their homes and churches, listening to their stories, the failures and small victories.

“Before, you’d talk to young people about community organizing and they wouldn’t have a clue what you were talking about,” said **Susan Chinn**, a longtime community organizer who started the internship program at the **Center for Community Change**.

“Community-based organizations have not done a very good job of marketing this work to a broad swath of people across the country.”

But they now have had a presidential campaign full of free advertising, and they want to capitalize. “We tell them, ‘Obviously there’s a lot you can do with it,’ ” said Robert Fisher, who teaches community organizing at the graduate school of social work at the University of Connecticut, Hartford. “And now we have the punch line: ‘Now you can be president.’ ”

Mr. Rallins of Morehouse College grew up on Chicago’s South Side, where his father came of age in the Altgeld Gardens, the same housing project where Mr. Obama once worked as an organizer. And Mr. Rallins, who wrote about his ambition to persevere, achieve, serve and see the world in his essay, “The Audacity of Hunger,” seems well aware of the parallel and the potential.

Mr. Obama “said it was the best education he ever had,” Mr. Rallins said. “Young people, they’re looking for certain intangible skills. They see the experience Obama got from community organizing — his concern, the way he relates with everyday people.”

Mr. Rallins said he became committed to the job while working with other Morehouse students in New Orleans in the demolished Ninth Ward after Hurricane Katrina.

“That’s where my heart is right now,” Mr. Rallins said.

Indeed, many idealistic students were drawn to organizing well before Mr. Obama began his presidential campaign.

Andrew Golis was 19 and had just finished his freshman year at Harvard when he joined Howard Dean’s 2004 presidential campaign in New Hampshire. “The Dean campaign, because of the war, and a lot of feelings of disillusionment, was attracting tons of young people,” said Mr. Golis, now 25 and the deputy publisher of the Talking Points Memo, an online news site. “Dean would run around saying, ‘You have the power, reclaim the country.’ ”

Karen Hicks, the campaign director for New Hampshire, was trying to figure out what to do with all the college students she had working for her, Mr. Golis said. She brought in Dr. Ganz. “Marshall taught us how to be organizers over a long weekend at some insanely hot yurt at a retreat center,” Mr. Golis said. “It was so cool. I was a 19-year-old idealistic kid — and he was coming with his history, his ability to talk about the inspirational side of politics.”

“Marshall doesn’t fit the baby boomer cliché — the ‘back when I was fighting the man, when I had long hair, when I was smoking pot,’ ” Mr. Golis said. “He’s telling a series of stories about himself, about the work that he’s doing.”

And unlike the 1960s, many of these students don’t seem motivated by partisanship. Drea Chicas, 21, the daughter of Salvadoran immigrants, is a graduating senior at Occidental, where she has taken Professor Dreier’s course and worked with teenage girls.

But politics? “That to me is just a distraction,” she said. “When I’m with my girls, that’s the last thing they have on their minds. They’ve seen their boys shot in their faces, violence against women. Democratic, Republican — that’s not even relevant.”

In fact, talking to many of these young adults, the drive to become an organizer is part of their faith. Josh Daneshforooz, a 24-year-old graduate student at Harvard Divinity School, is taking Dr. Ganz’s course on organizing at the Kennedy School, “because I saw those principles in action in the hugely successful Obama campaign,” he wrote in an e-mail message.

He wants to apply those principles, he said, to his group that he founded, the All Nations Education, a Christian group, organizing college students in the United States to help young people in the third world go to college.

Even as Dr. Ganz and others stir enthusiasm, the question becomes what will they do with all these newly interested organizers. Even as they emphasize that organizing can be a career, financing has always been tight and is not likely to improve as the recession drags on. For instance, PICO does not plan anytime soon to fill its job in San Diego that attracted 200 résumés.

Rylan Truman, 27, will graduate this spring with a master’s degree in social work, with a concentration in community organizing, from the school of social work in Hartford. “I would like to be able to organize parents in low-income jobs around their children’s schools,” she said.

But she doesn’t have a job.

“My graduating now is poor timing because of the economic situation,” she said. “A lot of community organizing jobs are the first to get cut.”

Even if these young adults became paid organizers, there is no guarantee that they will stick with it. They, like Mr. Obama, might eventually become frustrated about the lack of progress. After all, Mr. Obama himself left with few victories in his pocket, deciding that prospects for real change lay elsewhere.

At PICO, Quinn Rallins is being recruited by Lew Finfer, a community organizer in Boston who years ago tried to persuade Mr. Obama, then a Harvard law student, to return to organizing. They talked over coffee in Harvard Square. Mr. Obama said no; he wanted to return to Chicago and get into politics.

“I’m glad he had a plan,” Mr. Finfer said. “And I’m glad I wasn’t successful.”

He hopes he has better luck with Quinn Rallins. That final interview is Monday night in Brockton.