

Love for People and for Education

An Interview with Klare Allen

by Cynthia Peters

Klare Allen is a mother of four children and a long-time welfare and environmental justice activist in Boston. When welfare moved her and her family into a hotel after she became homeless, she started organizing the other mothers. Later she went through some education and training, and got a job as an organizer with Alternatives for Community and the Environment. She is dyslexic and employs her own strategies for reading when she has to. In a day when so many organizers depend on written communication, particularly email, she relies on her strength as a speaker, her creative thinking, and her love of people. Cynthia Peters spoke with Klare Allen at her home in Roxbury, Massachusetts on April 25, 2004.

Homeless in a Hotel

When I first started organizing, I didn't realize I was doing it. I was living in a hotel in Watertown [an upscale suburb of Boston], and I didn't know what to do or where to go. I started walking around the neighborhood. I found a service provider nearby. But they said they only provided services to people who lived in Watertown, and we didn't count since we were just staying in the hotel. They mentioned that some other people from the hotel had been by. So I started exploring the hotel and finding out that there were all these other mothers there — all of us from inner-city neighborhoods like Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan. We started having meetings. We organized protests and rallies—just of ourselves. After a while, some organizations—like Mass. Coalition for the Homeless—started noticing us, and they came and asked me to speak about the conditions. So I did, and the media started to pay attention. They started to tell my story. I kept

talking with the mothers—not just in Watertown, but in Chelsea and all over the place. I helped them figure out how to get food stamps, where to catch the bus, how to find schools.

I was barely around for my own children. My old man raised them because every night I was off talking to these mothers.

When I visited with the mothers, I would just hug them. I made packets for them full of information about everything that they needed to know. I told them they had to be professional about their situations. They had to have a strategy. I said, "You get a notebook, and you write down the names and numbers of everyone you talk to. When you speak to someone, you've got to know who you're talking to. Never talk to the middle-man. Go straight to the Man. Start at the top."

The Man is the decision-maker. He (or she) can be anybody who makes decisions about your life and has control over what happens to you.

Taking a Class

Edna Bynoe, who was the supervisor of the homeless unit, took me aside once and told me I was smart. She said I should get some skills through welfare's education and training program. I noticed a class on environmental science. About 25-30 of us tried to take this class, but we couldn't understand the material. The class dwindled to about five. We were studying chemistry, biology, computers, and all sorts of environmental terminology. It's not that we didn't have the mentality for this work, it's just the way they were teaching us, we couldn't understand. There was many an evening we'd be sitting up

crying with frustration, trying to understand what we were studying. Just to read one sentence, we had to check the dictionary, get definitions to all these words, and then bring it back and try to make it all make sense. They said not to worry, that we would be graded on a sliding scale.

“Well, what does that mean? That even if we’re all failing, some of us will still get As?”

This didn’t make any sense. It seemed like they were just shuffling us through their system, as usual — another program that some funders came up with that really wasn’t much use to us. I decided to find out who the funders were so that I could figure out what this was all about. Sure enough, it’s the Man again. He wants to shuffle some folks—even better if they’re Black folks—through the program so he can justify his spending and justify his job and get some more money.

Working as an Organizer

Eventually, the few of us that were left graduated. Someone from Alternatives for Community and the Environment (ACE), which was new at the time, came over and told me to apply for the community organizer job.

When I went for the job interview, I didn’t even know what a community organizer was,

and I had no clue what environmental justice was. All I knew was that it probably wouldn’t be a good idea to smoke.

Finally, they turned to me and asked me about environmental justice. And I said, “Environmental justice means my community doesn’t have to look like garbage. The only reason it does look so bad is because of the way resources are distributed.” I had lived in Roslindale, where they’ve got shrubs and fountains—not old tires and broken glass like they do in Roxbury. It’s not like word was handed down from God, “Roslindale will get shrubs and fountains, and Roxbury will get old tires and broken glass.” It’s a choice that gets made about who gets what.

They asked me, “If you could do anything, what would you do?”

I said, “One: I’d clean up those vacant lots that are full of old tires and broken glass; and two: I’d tell people that our kids are not criminals.”

I got the job. I couldn’t type. Office skills were somewhat of an obstacle. When I was doing the homeless organizing, I was creating stuff out of my mind. I didn’t have a calendar. I remembered what I needed to know. I didn’t do none of this filing and paperwork.

But suddenly I was in this job and I was

Look at What You Already Know *by Klare Allen*

A lot of times, it’s the people who are told they don’t know anything who know the most. If people realized what they do all day, they would know how much they know: a lot. Don’t listen to the voices that tell you that you can’t.

Try this: Break down what you do in a month. When the bill collector comes and tells you he’s cutting off your electricity, I bet you get a plan together pretty quick. I bet you’re thinking; coming up with a strategy. When the welfare office tells you that you don’t qualify for this or that because of this reason or that reason, you don’t stop there. You get yourself through the hoop. That’s called getting over. We know a lot about surviving and about getting over. We just don’t use the words for it that educated people do, but we’ve got our own Master’s degree in survival.

Women Making a Difference

agreeing to do so many things, and I wasn't keeping up. One night, I was leaving the office. My co-workers got up and stood between me and the door. "Where are you going?" they asked.

"Home," I said.

"Well, don't you remember you said you'd do this thing and that thing, and that you promised to have such and such finished by now?"

I said, "Sure, I remember. I'll get to that on Monday."

"Oh no you don't," they said. "You've got to do it now."

So I stayed at work until I was finished, and I didn't get home until really late that night, and that's how I learned to be accountable to other folks and to do what I said.

Cynthia Peters, co-editor of this issue of The Change Agent, teaches in the Worker Education Program of SEIU Local 2020. She works with Klare Allen in the fight to stop the construction of a biolevel 4 lab in the City of Boston.

Klare's Reading Tips



I think reading and writing are important skills to have, but they're not a necessity. I'm dyslexic and I really hate reading. As much as I try to avoid it, sometimes I have to do it. But if you're thirsty for it, you'll do it. I never read for pleasure. When I read, it's because I'm doing it for someone else—because I'm teaching about something going on in the neighborhood and I need some information in order to pass it on.

To people who are struggling with reading and writing, I would say that literacy is not

an obstacle. Where you lack, there is always a strength. Usually, people like me who have problems with reading are creative. I don't believe in "I can't do it." If you need to read, you can. You have to sit down and figure out what you need to do. My strengths are speaking and my love for people and for education. I don't mean reading and writing necessarily, but in learning what you need to know to be the kind of person you need to be and to have the kind of community you want to have.

When I read, I read with a highlighter in my hand. Here's what I do:

1. I read and highlight people's names in pink and facts in green.
2. Then I read it again, and now I have the colors there to help me see it more visually. I find I can remember it better and understand it better with the colors there.
3. I write down some of the information on a different piece of paper and then I try to think of how I would need the information to be presented to me so that I could understand it. I redesign it in my head to make it something I can really express to others.