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by working together

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By Margarita Ashton

How do children understand a presidential election?

How can I, a Head Start teacher, help them understand?

One Monday this fall, I asked my preschoolers to express their ideas of what a President's job is. Mario (not his real name) thinks the President mainly fixes things, "pretty much anything....he could fix my brother's bike." Another child says, "Actually, he saves the day," and she adds, "He's a hero, just like Martin" (Luther King). Other children have more everyday images of Obama: "He goes to parties," "He dances with Michelle," and "He wears a tie." I have a daunting task ahead of me.



Children learn to vote: yellow for Obama, red for McCain.

Tuesday, I started by bringing to class a map of the world, pictures of other presidents, flags, and pictures of Obama working at his office. The next day, I asked the group: What would you like President Obama to do to help people? "Give us presents" is by far the most popular answer, with one inventive child adding, "He could give us cupcakes from 8:00 to 6:00." Upon deeper reflection, Erica adds, "He gives MONEY to everybody!" This is the magical, "teachable moment" all educators are constantly hunting for. I said, "Well, he makes sure that your parents have jobs that pay them enough money to buy you the food you need. Sometimes even treats, such as cupcakes!"

For Thursday, I brought pictures of Barack Obama in schools, construction sites, hospitals, police stations, and unemployment lines. I asked the group a new question: Do you know where the President lives?

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A Community Willing to Care

a message from
Executive Director
Kimberly Smith-Cofield



"In the twenty-first century, Somerville's population has steadily increased and many of the new residents come from all walks of life, ethnic backgrounds, and religious beliefs. With the continued contributions being made by various immigrant groups to the well-being of the city of Somerville, we might think of it as a thriving nexus of cultures...with the community willing to care for one another."

("Images of Somerville" by Anthony Mitchell Sammarco)

Coming

in new, I entered the City of Somerville, walked up and down the streets, drove around the diverse neighborhoods, spoke to many residents and visitors, enjoyed the grand assortment of aromas in the air, tried countless cuisine options, met with several community agencies, and had the pleasure of spending a great deal of time with dedicated Community Action Agency of Somerville (CAAS) staff and board members who were exceptionally committed to helping the underserved who live within the city. I discovered that both the city and CAAS are *special* places.

Friends, after about a month and a half now being at CAAS, I have been impressed. CAAS has a sturdy history to rely on, in spite of the economic battle going on in our country that we are all concerned about.

Familiarizing myself with the critical and most time-sensitive issues in the community, I have a sense of urgency in my heart. I want to work with all CAAS stakeholders in innovative ways to keep our services available and accessible to children and families. In earnest, those families have few other choices, especially through this particularly meager time. We need to be able to respond when we get a call from a mother that she and her children have no alternative but to sleep in her car when it is 25 degrees out, a storm on the way, and everything she owns has been set out in the street around her vehicle after being evicted.

At the moment, we do not have an abundance of options to lend a hand in these sort of horrific situations. I am hoping that you will be so moved to keep that *special-ness* that is so powerful in this city and join me in strengthening our programs at a time when the government is being forced to make cutbacks every day. There is no city quite like Somerville. I am proud that you have welcomed me in as you have. I am honored, and I look forward to meeting you if I have not already done so and seeing you again if I have. Please call me with your thoughts and ideas or if you would like to visit a program, anytime. I would welcome such a visit.

What is Community Organizing?

By Rachel Bedick

Due

to the election of Barack Obama, community organizing has gained some popularity, but the profession is still widely misunderstood. In September, CAAS hired me to be a community organizer working with the tenants at the Clarendon Hill Public Housing Development, also known as the North Street Projects. What is community organizing?

In November, a Spanish-speaking tenant, "Emilio," asked me for help. He told me that his oven had been...

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What is Community Organizing?

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CAAS is helping tenants at the Clarendon Hill Development to make their own voices heard.

broken for over a year. He had called maintenance repeatedly, but no one had responded to his calls.

With Thanksgiving just around the corner, and feeling powerless, he asked me to accompany him to the manager's office and interpret for him.

When we asked the manager why nobody had responded to Emilio's call, he asked if the tenant had the work order number. Emilio did not, because he never knew that he was supposed to ask for it. Even if he had known, it would have been difficult to get the work order number since the person who answers the

maintenance line speaks only English. In a less than courteous tone, the manager explained that without a work order number, there was no proof anyone had called and therefore no way to track the request. We asked if the manager would put in a new call to report the oven. We wrote down the date and the work order number. A week later, Emilio received a brand-new oven in time to cook a turkey for Thanksgiving.

This story is an example of successful advocacy--but not of organizing. In this case, I spoke on behalf of an individual tenant and was able to help him assert his right to a working oven. However, what will happen to the next person who calls maintenance about a broken oven? What if they do not speak English well? Will the next tenant who calls get the services that he/she is entitled to within a reasonable amount of time?

In the past five months, I have met many people with problems in their apartments. While I could try and advocate for these tenants individually, large-scale change happens when a group of people advocate for themselves. So, the goal of my community organizing work at Clarendon Hill Development is to build an inclusive, powerful, and self-sustaining tenants' association. When the tenants speak as a group, they will be heard!

Preparing for the 2024 Elections

(Continued from page 1)

Most children know that he lives in the White House, but are somewhat confused about its whereabouts. During our neighborhood walk, Jason sees a whitish house near Union Square displaying a flag. Bursting with excitement, he exclaims: "The White House!"

I wonder: am I getting anywhere with my civic education for four-year-olds?

Friday's big question came from thoughtful Dana, who wants to know HOW Barack Obama became President. Her peers theorize on this. Maybe he studied a lot. His mom told him to do it. Somebody else exclaims, "He looks like a President" (true!). That's the exact moment I explained to the children about "voting," and we embarked upon our very own voting marathon. Plastic cubes became ballots, the yellow ones representing Obama and the red ones McCain. Which bowl has more cubes: the one with the...



There have been other Presidents before Obama!

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Community Action Agency
of Somerville, Inc.

66-70 Union Square
Somerville, MA 02143
Phone: 617.623.7370

For more information
email: dfischman@caasomerville.org



*People Achieving More
By Working Together*

Preparing for the 2024 Elections

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Student tries on Lincoln hat and beard.

red ones or the one with the yellow ones? Yellow ones win-- Obama gets the job.

A series of voting sessions ensue:

- 1). Which of the teachers will cook breakfast? (Thankfully I did not win!)
- 2) Shall the sand table be open today?
- 3) Shall we bake muffins or oatmeal cookies?

Incredibly, in the course of five school days, from a tenuous start trying to understand what the president does, we have arrived at an understanding of voting and an idea of making, passing, and amending laws. Many of these children will be voters in 2024. I think they will be ready!

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