If you want to know how ordinary Americans accomplish extraordinary things—build affordable homes, create effective schools, win living wages—then the story and the strategy reside in this remarkable book. Going Public is at once pragmatic and profound.

—Samuel G. Freedman

MICHAEL GECAN
CHAPTER 2

The World as It Is

Of course, you don't build relationships in a vacuum. The world outside the door of the church always influences your actions, options, and possibilities. Thugs still control some corners. Gangsters still shake down your construction site. Local politicians with little power and less ability divert and distract you. The market rewards some and punishes many. The unskilled wander through a half-work-life while a celebrity culture creates expensive new needs. Institutions shift and drift, responsible at times, damaging at times. And we shift and drift, responsible at times, not at times. King George wants you dead. The South has seceded and engaged in a war of numbing destruction. Community "activists" shout outrageous comments at the media and claim to speak for "the people." Terrorists strike—the terrorist in the housing project elevator late at night, the terrorists in the jets that dive out of the morning sky. The world, on a good day, is like the inside of City Hall at the height of the Koch years—crowded, loud, raucous, confusing, and even dangerous.

So, you are building relationships in a tough and noisy world,
and you must find the time to talk with the people you meet individually about the very nature of that world and the need for a new public identity. And you must do it on the ground, literally where people live, in the limited time that they can carve out of their already-packed schedules, in the precious hours they pry from work, family, and congregation. You must add the habit of training and reflection to the habit of individual meetings. And you must do this, not in the quiet confines of the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton but in the basements and classrooms of neighborhoods and cities that often feel under siege.

Let me take you to one of those sessions on a typical night in East Brooklyn. Just before seven, the leaders file in—twenty-two people, mostly African American, mostly in their forties and fifties, mostly coming straight from the subway or bus stop after long days on their jobs. They have signed up for six hours of training—two hours a night for three straight nights—on the topics of power, leadership, and action.

I start with the rounds, by asking people who they are, where they are from, and what their expectations are for the training tonight. About half of the group is from Pastor Youngblood's St. Paul Community Baptist—the church that makes the best and fullest use of every aspect of our organizing. What Pastor Youngblood's people know is that he will invest in their growth and development by sending them to almost any workshop that will improve their leadership skills, their educational level, their nutritional habits, and their spiritual life. He is not afraid that they will learn more. He is concerned that they will not be exposed to enough opportunity. He is not worried that they will outgrow him. No, in many ways, every day, he communicates to them that he believes that it is his duty as pastor and their duty as members to grow and develop as quickly and as fully as possible. And they love him for it. They describe how they want to be more effective as leaders in their church, running their societies, finding new members, and identifying and training others. Two other leaders, from a small, struggling Lutheran church, want to learn how they can help save and then expand their congregation. Another seven people come from homeowners associations and parents groups looking for additional skills and tools to improve their groups.

After the rounds, I begin by writing “the world as it is” on the left side of the board—blue marker on white surface—and “the world as it should be” on the right. I draw a dotted line between the two phrases and write the word “tension” below it. The entire session is going to focus on the challenge of operating effectively in the world as it is, where power is the prime moving force, and trying to keep that world and that power in tension with the loftier values of the world as it should be.

Even here, next to the elevated trains of the Broadway Junction station, on a freezing night in Brooklyn, in an old factory that is now a new school, even among people who have spent their entire lives in some of the roughest corners of the world as it is, among men and women who carry the scars of their lives on their faces, there is a profound puzzlement.

Teachers should teach, they say. Politicians should represent their communities, they insist. Mayors should do the right things for the right reasons, they claim. Cops should treat them with respect, and banks should give them the same terms and the same access as they offer others. Should . . . should . . . should—there's frustration in the voices now.

I tell them what all my experience has taught me, what Ed Chambers, Arnie Graf, Christine Stephens, and Stephen Roberson have found as well: you can't get near what should be, not even close, unless you build and use power, unless you manipulate that power so that you can slog through the mud of the world as it is, unless you are willing to push and tug the teachers and mayors and
pols and cops and yourself and your own institutions in the direction of what ought to be.

There’s that word—“power”—in large letters. I write it directly under the heading of the world as it is. Without power, there’s no real recognition. They don’t even see you. They never learn your name. Without recognition, there’s no reciprocity; there’s not even a “you” to respond to. And without reciprocity, there’s no real relationship of respect. Without power, you can only be a supplicant, a serf, a victim, or a wishful thinker who soon begins to whine. Power in the new millennium is the same as power when Thucydides was writing about the Melians and the Athenians. It is still the ability to act. And it still comes in two basic forms—organized people and organized money. And you still need it to function in the public arena.

A vocal man on my left—fifty-five, aggressive, bright—is agitated and argues hard. “Then what do we pay them for?” “Who?” I ask. “The teachers and police, the politician and others. What do we pay them for?”

“You pay them to do what they are hired to do,” I say, “but you still have to have the power to make them do it if they won’t.”

“I don’t agree with this. This is not right.”

“It’s not a question of right or wrong. It’s a question of what is, what reality is, and what happens to you when you meet this reality.”

Others in the room are debating, some taking my side, some taking his.

A woman who hasn’t said a word all night chimes in, “It should not be this way.”

“Of course not,” I say. “But if you just keep saying that, and you just keep waiting for it to change, without any power, you become sour and detached. Most people do the right thing, if they do it, for the wrong reason, or for mixed reasons. That’s the way it is—not just for those ‘out there’ beyond these walls—but even for those of us who think our motives are fine and our hearts are pure. We’re like ‘them.’ We need people in our lives who have the power to hold us accountable, to pressure us at times, to check us at times, and to stop us at times. Just like ‘they’ need organized people like us.”

How do you think new and better schools will be built? Because they are desperately needed? Because it’s a good idea? Because the honchos at the Board of Education wake up in the morning and decide to do the right thing? Because the city is appalled by the chronic overcrowding? No, new and better schools will be built when you have the power to force them to build them.

How do you think the new Nehemiah homes—your new Nehemiah homes—were built? Automatically? Because you all are wonderful and hardworking people who deserve the same opportunities as other racial and ethnic groups? Because it’s the right thing? No, same answer. The right kind of housing will rise here when you have enough power to insist that it be built. Not before then. You’re going to have to have enough organized people and enough organized money, enough discipline and enough luck, to make it happen. That’s the way it works in the world as it is.

Even though I have had my own experiences in the world, have seen disaster and death, have lived in a tough and violent place, I have fought for my life many times in my youth, I recognize the irony of my standing before these twenty-two leaders, all now living a much harsher life than mine, and agitating them to come to grips with the nature of the world as it is.

I end the evening by trying to teach an unusual lesson in identity. You can build new relationships with talented people. And you can shake up their views of the world as it is. You can posit the reality and necessity of power. But, then, people can rush right out the door and get creamed again—unless they understand who they are and where they are.
In the world as it should be, I say, we are each individuals, with our individual views and interests, our individual talents and limitations, respected and equal. The rich and the powerful, products of the best of society’s institutions and beneficiaries of many overlapping institutional supports, often believe this myth, believe that others listen to them and respond to them because of the brilliance of their wit or the force of their will—not the wealth in their wallets. People without wealth and power, the vast majority of people, can’t operate in the public arena if they regard themselves as detached individuals or if they just search for the right words, clothes, or degrees to help them get by.

I say that there is no “Mike Gecan, individual” in the public arena. That person doesn’t exist. I don’t think of myself that way. I don’t believe that journalists, corporate leaders, or political figures relate and respond to the singular, wonderful me. No, they relate to me, to the extent that they do, often grudgingly, because they understand the “corporate me”—the “me” that has relationships with leaders like Reverend Johnny Ray Youngblood and Betty Turner, Irving Domenech and Maria Nieves. And that’s how I think of myself, whether I’m at City Hall, the Times editorial board, or the Chamber of Commerce.

Now, most of the time, this is relatively easy, even obvious, because I am almost always with others in all of these settings. But even when I’m not, even when I am alone in the public arena, I am not an individual. To forget this would be to become, quite literally, in the Greek sense, an idiot. Robert Penn Warren once wrote of the “murderous innocence of the American people.” Trying to operate in the world as it is as a worthy but powerless individual is suicidal innocence.

I learned this lesson in a most unusual place, in a most unusual way—in Gracie Mansion, in the middle of Ed Koch’s troubled third term. Our Queens affiliate, the Queens Citizens Organization, had proposed to build thousands of Nehemiah homes in the Rockaways, and the same mayor who sometimes refers to himself as one of the earliest supporters of the Brooklyn Nehemiah effort had fought us every step of the way.

One morning, the administrator in the Brooklyn office, Lucille Clark, took a call from the mayor’s appointments director. The mayor was inviting my wife and me to dinner at Gracie Mansion in three weeks. When Lucille reached me, I asked her to call the number back and see if this was some kind of hoax. I have several warped friends who think this kind of thing might be funny. No, the number was in fact picked up by someone at City Hall. The appointments person answered. Lucille asked her what the agenda for the night was. The appointments person said, “Dinner.” Lucille asked who else has been invited. The appointments person said, “We don’t give out that information.”

Every fiber in my system screamed, “Don’t Go.” The only hesitation centered on the slim chance that the mayor may have wanted, in his own way, to suggest a compromise solution to the Rockaways battle, perhaps a portion of the site for us and a larger portion for market builders, perhaps an alternative site in another part of Queens. I remembered who I was—politically—and asked the strategy teams of our three New York efforts to consider whether we should accept this invitation. I went so far as to ask each team to vote on it. They all thought it was worth a shot. Then I called Bishop Mugavero and asked for his advice and blessing. He didn’t know what to make of it either, but he said, wisely, “If you don’t go, he’ll have one on you, on us, so just for that reason, you probably should go.”

I sat down with my supervisor, Ed Chambers, and talked it over. He had even less faith in this than I did but finally advised me to accept the invitation. I’ll never forget the last piece of instruction he gave me as I left his office. “Just remember, Mike, the door swings both ways. You can always leave.”

Then I talked it over with my wife, a fourth-generation New
Yorker, who said, "As much as I would love to see the inside of Gracie Mansion, I’m not going. This will be all business, at best. I’ll keep a hamburger on the side for you just in case."

All this consultation took place over a few days—all made possible by years of working relationships and deep reservoirs of mutual respect and trust among those involved.

On the appointed night, I—not the singular me, but the organizational person who was accountable and connected to three teams of leaders, a Roman Catholic Bishop, the IAF director, and scores of thousands of members of our local groups—parked my car a few blocks from Gracie Mansion and walked over. Koch was running late to his own dinner party, so I found myself sitting in a plush chair, in a lovely room, with an interesting group—a Holocaust scholar, a founder of a residence for runaway teens, a manufacturer of firearms and longtime Koch confidant, a director of a social service program, and a journalist. After a few minutes, Koch rushed in with the last two guests—the Marriotts, the hotel people, fresh off a plane from Salt Lake City.

Koch settled in and asked everyone to introduce themselves. Around we went, with everyone saying who they were and what they did and Koch asking good leading questions. When the introductions got to me—and I was last, sitting next to the mayor—I began. Koch interrupted me immediately. "No, no, no, let me introduce you." He said a few sentences about the agitator Saul Alinsky and then asked me, "Now, tell us, how far to the left of Chairman Mao is the Alinsky group?" He was trying to be funny, but no one was laughing. Then Koch launched into a long story about his first encounter with our Queens organization—comparing the assembly of one thousand leaders to the Moscow show trials and a Nuremberg rally. Midway into his recitation, all given with verve, I interrupted him. "I’m going to need to say something about this when you finish."

"Oh, don't worry, you'll have time for rebuttal," he said, and then talked on. My fellow guests, to their credit, looked pained, or shocked, or uncomfortable, particularly Mrs. Marriott. What could she have been thinking? That I was these things Koch was implying, in which case what was she doing here? Or that I wasn’t—and Koch was cruel and a little crazy.

When he stopped, I could barely speak. I said to the rest of the group, "The only problem with the mayor's story is that there is not a fact in it." Then I tried to describe the moderates who make up our best organizations. The gun maker, who had sat through scores of dinners and seen this routine many times before, tried to be solicitous, asked a few good questions, and praised our work.

But it was too late. I knew that I couldn't eat this mayor's food after what he had done. But I also knew that I had to try to teach him a lesson. So I waited a few minutes, until the mayor banged the arm of his chair and urged all of us toward the dining room. As everyone filed in, I stayed back and asked for a word with him. He and I stared at one another, face to face, alone.

"I won't be eating dinner with you tonight," I said.

"Oh," he said, "I've offended you. I see that you're upset. I apologize."

"You apologize?"

"Yes, sincerely, I didn't mean to offend you . . ."

"You offended me and everyone I work with. You compared us to Communists and Nazis in the same breath. You smeared us in front of perfect strangers . . ."

"I really do apologize," he began, nervous now, sweating a bit. The doorways to the room filled with the maids and waiters who worked at Gracie Mansion—all minority, all curious, all intent on the drama playing out in the sitting room.

"I'm leaving. Where's my coat?" I said—and it struck me then how awkward it would be for the mayor to go into his dining room.
and sit at the head of his table and explain why I wouldn't be filling the empty seat reserved there for me. I kept repeating Ed Chambers's last lines to myself.

The mayor took the lapels of my suit and held them. He pulled me closer to him and said, "You can't do this. You can't do this to me."

"My coat . . ."
"You can't . . ."
"The hell with it. You can keep my coat," I said, and broke away from him and headed for the door.

"No," he cried. "I'll get your coat!" Which he did. I didn't stop to put it on. Just went for the door and gave it a good slam. I walked for thirty minutes up and down the streets of the Upper East Side—angry, fuming, wondering if I had done the right thing. When I had settled down enough, I went home to my family and a hamburger.

The next morning, the mayor began calling my office long before I arrived. I didn't take the call. By noon, a two-page letter of apology had arrived, inviting me to return another time, with my spouse. I never responded, knowing that he would wonder whom I would tell the story to and whether it would someday appear in print.

The leaders in the training session enjoy hearing the story, almost as much as I enjoy telling it.

So it is, I say, that the more public relationships you have with leaders and potential leaders, the more you see yourself as part of a larger relational whole, the more you will be able to project your voice and promote your interests when you step into the public arena, and the more clearly will you be able to judge when to sit and sip your drink and when to get up and go.

Two hours fly by. At nine, on the dot, the session ends, as advertised. The leaders are still buzzing as they walk out of the room. People seem less tired that when the training began.

Some people understand the need to have a corporate identity in the public arena. They know that it is critical to operate with others, to create an organization in this world of organizations and institutions. Yet they remain unclear about how to use that identity with strength. The corporate ego is there but not muscular enough to create the kind of impression or impact that matters.

This becomes apparent in a training session I do with a group of forty-five senior citizen leaders in New York. These leaders are a delight—diverse in every way but age and completely full of vinegar. It's one of the few organizations where poor, working class, middle class, Christians and Jews, women and men of all races find themselves with the same challenges, the same limitations, and the same concerns. They all want lower-cost prescription drugs and more access to housing that they can afford and less lip service from national and local candidates.

The animating spirit of this group belongs to Shirley Genn—a Jewish woman with a long history as a politically active educator in the New York Public Schools system. She was progressive in the fifties and sixties, when that word meant so much more than it does today, and she considered herself an organizer when the role carried with it more weight and much risk.

Mrs. Genn has asked me to work with her leaders to prepare them for their yearly trip to Albany. These visits have grown increasingly predictable and frustrating—a long bus ride to a grim capital city, for a few short meetings with the junior aides of eccentric and pompous legislators, and then a tired ride home.

The very youthful aides, in training for careers in political arrogance, often keep the seniors waiting. When the delayed meetings do begin, the aides often take phone calls or leave the room for hushed discussions with still-more-junior staffers. The culture of contempt for active citizenry is nearly universal—taught, learned, practiced, and perfected by everyone in the legislative establishment from the governor to the newest receptionist.
I take the time to describe the world as it really is in Albany. Most of the legislators need not even be there, except for a few ratification votes. Three men—the governor, Senate leader, and Assembly speaker—make every major decision and dictate to the followers in their respective parties how to vote. The more irrelevant the rest of the legislative apparatus is, the more it tries to prove to the world that it is important, the harder it is to approach, the more grudging it is with its time and attention, and the thicker and more numerous are the veils it drapes between itself and the public.

I describe this reality and then work with the seniors on how to “talk” to the three men who really count and how to avoid those you don’t. I tell story after story, most of them funny, about this world, which I have learned about directly and through those who were a part of it or who have learned to navigate it. The seniors in the room are both entertained and dismayed. They often disagree and assert that this is not the way it ought to be, not the way it should be, not what they were told or taught.

One very elderly woman, exasperated, fuming, slowly stands. The other seniors notice her and grow silent. She points a finger at me and nearly yells, “Where were you ten years ago? You could have saved us so much time!”

At the end of the tumultuous session, which feels more like a scrimmage with these vocal and argumentative seniors, I write in large letters on the board, “Things to avoid.”

First, I write, “Avoid most low-level staff.” All that they can do is take notes, which their mid-level staff will never read and their legislative bosses will never see. It’s better to meet with no one, better to go to lunch, shop, or head to the art museum, than to meet with a scribe whose self-importance is affirmed when good citizens travel hundreds of miles for a few precious minutes of his or her time.

Second, I write, “Avoid asking for no-cost commitments.” In every legislature, there are issues that politicians can commit to. But the commitment is meaningless because the legislator knows that the bill will never pass, usually because of the majority opposition of the other party. So, when a group asks for support of a bill that will never have a prayer of passing, the legislator can readily agree, appear responsive, and never lift a finger. When the group asks for another form of support that may involve work or a real trade-off, he can always say that he supported the group on the earlier issue, that the group should be appreciative, and that he can’t support the seniors on every matter. His commitment has cost him nothing, in fact has created a rationale for him to resist requests that would cost him time or energy or political capital on other matters.

Third, I print in large letters, “Avoid pats on the head.” Elected officials often compete with one another to look as if they are champions of the needs of elderly. They recognize the latent power, the potentially punishing power, of seniors as a group. But often, when these elected officials attend meetings or luncheons organized by the seniors, they refer to them as “my seniors.” They hug and kiss and call the seniors by their first names. They call the chairperson Mamie or Tony, even though they have never met Mrs. Orlando or Mr. Ramirez before and will not give them the time of day two months later in Albany.

“My seniors”—I say it with contempt. The seniors shift in their chairs. The room grows quiet and tense. I tell them it’s like saying “my pets,” “my puppets,” or “my begonias.” Don’t put up with these meaningless gestures and insulting comments. Demand the respect that you’ve earned and deserve. Be bigger. Think bigger. Act bigger.

Some of the seniors laugh nervously, but others are uneasy, agitated, or quietly reflective. There’s no agreement, much less consensus, just a roomful of citizens talking among themselves.
about the basic questions and tactical tips that we've discussed. And that's where most of our best training ends—leaving people stirred up, examining their habits in the public arena, imagining themselves operating in a different way, and fitter for the vital democratic duties that lie before them.

One of those democratic duties we prepare people for is direct public action.