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Fired Up and Ready to Grow

Youth group's Obama link raises its profile nationwide

By [Suzanne Perry](#)



Paul Schmitz (wearing suit) says of Public Allies, the charity he runs: "There are so many talented people who just don't have knowledge of a path or access to a path to take their passions and skills and turn them into a viable career. That's what we're about, trying to build the pipeline."

When Vanessa Kirsch was working in the early 1990s to create a new organization to train young people for public service, she recalls, people kept telling her: "There's this guy in Chicago; you've got to meet with him."

That "guy" was a civil-rights lawyer and community organizer named Barack Obama — the future U.S. senator and Democratic presidential contender, who ended up playing a critical role in the group that Ms. Kirsch co-founded, Public Allies.

Mr. Obama attended a conference that laid the groundwork for Public Allies, and he joined the group's founding board. When Public Allies, which started operating in Washington, decided to open an office in Chicago, Ms. Kirsch says, Mr. Obama suggested the group interview his wife, Michelle.

Ms. Obama, a Harvard-educated lawyer who was then assistant commissioner of planning and development for the city of Chicago, agreed to become the first executive director of Public Allies Chicago in spring 1993 — and Ms. Kirsch says that was a turning point for the fledgling organization.

"It was a big deal we got her," Ms. Kirsch says. "The organization went from sort of 'This could be here today, gone tomorrow, very precarious, very startup' to 'This is serious, we're going to be around for the long haul.'"

Indeed, 15 years later, Public Allies now operates in 15 cities or regions, with a goal of training the "next generation of nonprofit leaders."

More than 2,200 young people ages 18 to 30 have graduated from its program, which provides leadership training and 10-month apprenticeships at charities — and more than 80 percent of them have continued working in nonprofit or government jobs, the group says.

Candidates' Charity Ties

Today, Public Allies is playing a role in influencing the policy ideas advanced by Senator Obama.

Michelle Obama told *The Chronicle* that her work with Public Allies was a major influence in her husband's decision to champion national service as part of his presidential run.

And the organization is getting newfound attention as the news media looks at the charitable work done by all three spouses of the main contenders for the White House.

Former president Bill Clinton's charitable activities, especially the William J. Clinton Foundation, have garnered reams of publicity — both before and after his wife, Hillary, took to the campaign trail to fight for the Democratic nomination.

Sen. John McCain, the Republican contender, has been a prominent politician for many years. Profiles of his wife, Cindy McCain, highlight her volunteer work for the Halo Trust, a charity that helps clear land mines, and her board positions with Operation Smile, a group that fixes facial deformities in children, and CARE USA, the humanitarian-aid group.

Now Senator Obama's emergence on the national stage has sent so many reporters to Public Allies that it posted on its Web site a "Fact Sheet on Public Allies' History with Senator Barack and Michelle Obama."

Paul Schmitz, the organization's chief executive, says Public Allies is proud of its connection with the Obamas but is sensitive about appearing partisan. "We're being very careful about the fact that we have a unique historical relationship with them," he says.

"But at the same time," he adds, "we were an organization that was supported well by the Clintons and well supported by the Bush administration as well."

Building a 'Pipeline'

Public Allies seeks to put nonprofit work on the radar screen of young people from a variety of ethnic and economic backgrounds who often know little about it, says Mr. Schmitz.

"There are so many talented people who just don't have knowledge of a path or access to a path to take their passions and skills and turn them into a viable career, he says. "That's what we're about, trying to build the pipeline."

One of the group's success stories, for example, is Paul Griffin, who started City at Peace — a nonprofit organization that brings teenagers together to write and perform musicals about their lives — while he was a member of the Public Allies class of 1994 in Washington.

City at Peace now operates in six U.S. cities, Israel, and South Africa, and Mr. Griffin, now 44, is president of the national organization in New York.

He recalls signing up for Public Allies because he wanted to start something like City at Peace but needed to learn more about leadership: "How do you do it effectively? Who are your stakeholders? How do you develop a group of people to achieve these goals?"

Public Allies is now in the midst of a growth spurt, following a decision to overhaul its structure a few years ago.

In an effort to cut costs and give its local efforts more support, it now sets up programs under the auspices of local charities or universities rather than as separate branches.

The cost savings have helped the group add five new sites in the past two years — and in December, it started an \$8.5-million capital campaign to help it expand to 32 sites by 2012 and train 1,000 participants a year (compared with 345 this year).

Public Allies closed its program in Washington in 2004, however, because it could not find a local charity or university to operate it and "we were losing our shirts," Mr. Schmitz explains. He says the group hopes to reopen it eventually.

In the Spotlight

Public Allies has also raised its visibility in recent years. It co-founded, in 2006, the Nonprofit Workforce Coalition, which unites groups that work to cultivate diverse nonprofit workers and leaders, and Mr. Schmitz serves as its board chair.

The group was also among 45 winners of the 2008 Social Capitalist Awards — given by *Fast Company* magazine and Monitor Group, a consulting firm — to "social entrepreneurs who are changing the world."

The charity makes it a priority to pick leaders from a variety of backgrounds. It says 67 percent of its participants are black, Latino, or Asian, 60 percent are women, and 15 percent are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender people. About half have college degrees.

Mr. Griffin, who is white, says the diverse racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds of participants in his Public Allies class helped prepare him for his work at City at Peace. One of the main biases he learned to overcome, he says, is that "education equals intelligence."

Public Allies participants work four days a week at a local charity and spend a fifth day together in a training session. In addition to learning about career skills like fund raising and time management, they participate in more-personal exercises that force them to confront their cultural and class differences.

Nelly Nieblas, 29, who was a member of the 2005 Public Allies class in Los Angeles, says at first she disliked that approach and thought about leaving the program.

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"It was too touchy-feely," she says. "It's a lot of talk about race, a lot of talk about sexism, a lot of talk about homophobia, talk about -isms and phobias."

Ms. Nieblas — whose mother and father immigrated from Mexico and El Salvador respectively — has cerebral palsy and says she is the first person in her extended family to graduate from high school.

She recalls changing her mind about Public Allies after participating in an exercise that was designed to show that some people face life with built-in advantages while others are less privileged.

Participants were asked to take one step backward for each disadvantage they had experienced if, for example, their refrigerator had ever been empty while they were growing up.

"By the end of the whole exercise I was hitting the wall," she says. "I broke down crying."

Ms. Nieblas says the exercise forced her to recognize that her identity was something deeper than her résumé — which included a college degree and a yearlong political fellowship in Washington. "It sucks to be poor, it sucks to be the first to do everything, it sucks to be discriminated against because you have a disability," she says.

Ms. Nieblas, who helped a nonprofit group evaluate bus transportation in Los Angeles's Pico Union neighborhood while at Public Allies, went on to earn a master's degree in public administration from Harvard University. She now works as an assistant legislative deputy for Gloria Molina, a Los Angeles County supervisor, but plans to go to law school and work as an advocate for children and women with disabilities, possibly by starting a nonprofit group.

'Called to Purpose'

When Ms. Kirsch started Public Allies with her co-founder, Katrina Browne, she was barely out of college and itching to challenge the common notion that her generation was apathetic. She says she discovered while conducting interviews for Peter D. Hart Research Associates, the polling firm, that young people were dying to be "called to purpose," but "there was no mechanism saying, We need you."

With money from grant makers, including the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, in Chicago, and the Surdna Foundation, in New York, she and Ms. Browne started a program that graduated 14 "allies" in Washington in 1992.

From the start, Public Allies was backed by the federal government. It won money its first year from the Commission on National and Community Service, when President George H.W. Bush was president. In 1994, it was among the first recipients of grants from AmeriCorps, the national-service program created by President Bill Clinton — and it continues to receive more than \$4-million a year from the program.

(Public Allies participants receive average stipends of \$1,500 a month — about two thirds provided by the charities that sponsor the apprentices — and an AmeriCorps educational grant of \$4,725 if they complete the program.)

The Corporation for National and Community Service, AmeriCorps's parent agency, has also paid about \$1-million over the past three years for services from Public Allies' training and consulting arm, which it operates with the Asset-Based Community Development Institute at Northwestern University.

Public Allies trains other organizations that receive national-service grants on how to collaborate with groups in their regions to tackle social problems.

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AmeriCorps provides about 40 percent of the revenue for local programs and 10 percent for the national office, Mr. Schmitz says.

Public Allies has over the years also received major grants from donors including Atlantic Philanthropies, in New York; the Kellogg Foundation, in Battle Creek, Mich.; and its board chair, Bill Graustein, a philanthropist in Hamden, Conn.

The group, which moved its headquarters from Washington to Milwaukee in 2000 when Mr. Schmitz became chief executive (he preferred not to move), has a budget of almost \$13-million this year.

Ms. Kirsch, who headed Public Allies until 1995, is now founding president of New Profit Inc., which provides grants to help nonprofit groups expand innovative social programs. Her co-founder, Ms. Browne, went on to become a documentary filmmaker.

Focus on 'Assets'

One of the newest Public Allies sites is Miami, started up last fall by the Human Services Coalition, a social-services charity. Parmer Heacox, the charity's civic-life director and head of the Public Allies program, said the group was attracted by Public Allies' motto of "changing the face and practice of leadership."

He says the program complements his group's Civic Life Academy, which seeks to get a wider variety of people involved in fighting for social change. "There's a fairly high level of apathy here, a fairly low level of voter turnout."

The Human Services Coalition agreed not only to operate Public Allies but also to take on an apprentice itself.

Maisah Williams, 21, helps operate an institute that trains parents to advocate for policies that will help their children — a program she also attends as a parent of two children, ages nine months and 2. She also helps coordinate "summits" that bring neighborhood residents together to talk about local problems.

Ms. Williams says she interrupted a college career after finishing two years of a pre-med program to participate in Public Allies, prompted by a local leader who told her she would be "a perfect candidate."

Attracted partly by the stipend, she says she had done lots of volunteer work but wanted to perfect skills such as public speaking.

One of the main things she has learned at Public Allies, she says, is how to identify the "assets" she can use as a leader to motivate people — a skill she plans to use when she becomes a doctor. "I won't just be doing my job as a physician" but also motivating patients to take care of their health, she says.

Selection Process

Miami and other Public Allies programs across the country are now in the process of selecting participants for the class of 2009. Mr. Schmitz says the programs generally receive three or four applicants for every available slot, so they are selective. They are also careful about the charities that they match with the young people.

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Fahd Vahidy, executive director of Public Allies Connecticut, says his group examines prospects much as a donor would, for example ensuring they are financially healthy. It also looks for supervisors who "exhibit the qualities of a mentor-coach," he says.

Despite the careful vetting, about 20 percent of the Allies drop out before completing the program, says Mr. Schmitz.

While "some amount of attrition is expected because we do take risks in our selection," he says, the group hopes to move the rate closer to 10 percent.

Toccaro Olinger, 25, is giving the Public Allies program in Milwaukee a second shot this year, after dropping out of the class of 2003. "I guess I thought I could come into Public Allies and breeze through and not have any focus or care about what I was doing," she says.

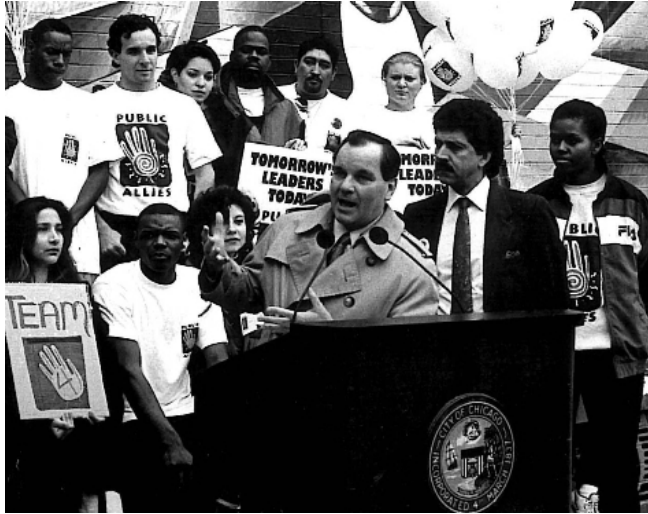
She decided to try again, she says, because she feels more mature and she considers Public Allies a rite of passage, "like getting a driver's license." Ms. Olinger, who hopes to use her AmeriCorps educational grant to study sociology, is an apprentice at the Social Development Commission, an antipoverty group.

She says she wants to fight to solve some of Milwaukee's severe problems, such as a "horrible" public school system. She says Public Allies has taught her that leadership is something that is earned. "The community organizer in me realizes I have to organize my community first to get them to understand there is a problem before I can step up on a podium and declare myself their leader."

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Presidential Hopefuls Have Links to Charity That Urges Public Service

By Suzanne Perry



Michelle Obama (far right) in 1993 ran one of the first chapters of Public Allies, an organization that trains young people of different backgrounds to be leaders.



Senator Clinton encouraged Public Allies to expand its operations as First Lady, and in 1993 honored the group at a Rose Garden reception (Founding CEO Vanessa Kirsch is at podium).

Sen. Barack Obama has promised to significantly expand the country's national-service programs if he is elected president — a plan his wife, Michelle, says was influenced greatly by her work with Public Allies, a charity that works across the country to train young people for nonprofit or public-service jobs.

"He saw me work in that environment," she said in an interview. "Of all the jobs I've had, if I were to do anything again at the drop of a heartbeat it would be to work on this kind of program. I was really passionate and engaged; this was like a family, there was drama, everyone knew everyone."

Ms. Obama, the founding executive director of Public Allies' Chicago program from 1993 to 1996, said her husband also learned about the "ups and downs" of getting money from AmeriCorps, the national-service program that helps finance Public Allies.

Throughout his political career, she added, Mr. Obama has been impressed by graduates of Public Allies and other AmeriCorps programs. "They're the ones who are most likely to run for office, to work on a campaign, to lead an organization or run a foundation," she said. "What he knows is that you can harness this energy in a phenomenal way."

AmeriCorps Plan

Senator Obama has vowed that as president he would triple the number of AmeriCorps volunteers, double the number of Peace Corps volunteers, and create a Classroom Corps, a Health Corps, a Clean Energy Corps, and other new programs.

Ms. Obama said stipends for national-service work, like those offered by Public Allies, are essential so the programs aren't limited to "the kids of wealthy folks" — and can help nonprofit groups attract leaders and board members from a variety of racial, economic, and geographic backgrounds.

When Public Allies leaders approached Ms. Obama about setting up the Chicago program (at the suggestion of her husband, who served on Public Allies' founding board), she was working as assistant commissioner of planning and development for the city of Chicago and not looking for another job. However, she said, the idea of channeling young people into nonprofit work appealed to her.

As a Harvard Law School graduate, Ms. Obama said, she had struggled to get off a path that was leading her toward becoming a partner at a corporate-law firm.

"I figured if I didn't know about it, what about all the other young people in the world who would be fabulous program directors at nonprofits, or who would go into foundations, or be great working with kids in a youth program, but they don't even know those jobs exist?" she said.

Recruiting Strategies

In looking for potential leaders, Public Allies still uses techniques that Ms. Obama pioneered in Chicago. Paul Schmitz, the group's chief executive — who worked with Ms. Obama after he started a Public Allies program in Milwaukee in 1994 — recalled that she looked for leaders in unconventional places, like in the city's poorest neighborhoods.

"In her first class, she had a Harvard graduate, she had a Northwestern [University] graduate," he said. "But she also had people who'd been incarcerated, she had women on welfare, people who'd been homeless, who'd been in gangs."

Public Allies still holds that people from all backgrounds can show leadership, even without traditional credentials, Mr. Schmitz said. "A white college student from a private college goes into a poor neighborhood and volunteers four hours a week, and that's considered exemplary," he said. "A poor kid who lives in that community and takes care of all the kids in that neighborhood four hours every *day* is not seen as a volunteer."

Ms. Obama, who served on the Public Allies board from 1997 to 2001, is on leave from a job as vice president for community and external affairs at the University of Chicago Medical Center. She maintained ties with Public Allies after leaving the board, bringing apprentices to work with her and hiring Public Allies alumni.

While the Obama influence on Public Allies is strong, the group also made an early connection with Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, Senator Obama's challenger for the Democratic presidential nomination. Vanessa Kirsch, co-founder of Public Allies, recalled that Mrs. Clinton attended a Public Allies event in Washington during her husband's 1992 presidential campaign and promised to invite the group to the White House if he won.

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Ms. Clinton kept her word, inviting Public Allies to a reception in the Rose Garden in 1993.

In fact, the Clintons, who made national service a centerpiece of the campaign, urged Public Allies to expand quickly, Ms. Kirsch said.

All three major presidential candidates, including Sen. John McCain, the Republican contender, have expressed strong support for AmeriCorps and other national-service programs.

And while Senators Obama and Clinton are engaged in a sometimes bitter race, Michelle Obama praised the former president Bill Clinton for creating AmeriCorps in 1993.

"In my opinion it's one of the best things that came out of the Clinton administration, and it should be continued," she said.