

## COMING TO THE CONVICTION THAT EVERYONE LEADS

### Peter Hoeffel

Peter Hoeffel was working at a downtown Milwaukee deli, putting his philosophy degree from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee to work making sandwiches. One day, an energetic and friendly young African American woman walked into the shop and asked if she could hang a poster in the window to recruit young adults for Milwaukee's Public Allies program. Peter struck up a conversation and learned that she was looking for young people who were passionate about making a difference and who wanted to turn that passion into a career.

Peter, who was twenty-seven years old at the time, heard his calling. "I wanted to make the world a better place," he says. "I didn't feel like too many places were looking to hire someone with a philosophy degree and a minor in Africology. I wanted to stop just talking about the social change that my friends and I would discuss, and Public Allies seemed like a great place for me to learn how to do just that."<sup>1</sup>

He applied to Public Allies, was accepted, and participated in weekly leadership training at Public Allies while serving full-time at Legal Action Wisconsin. He discovered that he had a passion for people with disabilities, and over the next decade he grew his impact, helping lead a coalition of disability rights groups and eventually leading the Milwaukee chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness. There he turned around a financially struggling agency and, through collaborations, expanded its services to the underserved African American and Latino communities that had previously been neglected.

## **Bizunesh Talbot-Scott**

When Bizunesh Talbot-Scott applied to Public Allies, she was an eighteen-year-old single mom with a two-year-old son and was studying at Milwaukee Area Technical College. As an Ally, she worked for the Youth Leadership Academy, providing academic support and life skills to young African American boys.

Biz was young and immature, but she was also vivacious, ambitious, and smart. She gained focus through the program: "I was a smart girl who had no idea of my potential before Public Allies."<sup>2</sup>

After her term was finished, she enrolled at Marquette University, where she excelled, and then at the University of Michigan Law School, where she was elected to the law review. After graduating, Biz moved to Washington, D.C., where she clerked for a federal judge and worked at the prestigious Skadden Arps and Patton Boggs law firms.

One day, a representative from Skadden Arps called Public Allies to make a donation on behalf of one of its associates. That associate was Biz, who was being honored because of her volunteer work in her community, especially at the Legal Aid Society in D.C. Later, during the transition to the Obama administration, Biz was appointed by the National Bar Association to chair the initiative to increase the number of African American attorneys serving in government, and she led a similar project for the National Congress of Black Women. She is now one of the staff leading presidential personnel at the White House.

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## **Frank Alvarez**

Frank Alvarez is busy. He directs a YouthBuild Program in Los Angeles that creates opportunities for youth who have left school without a diploma, have been incarcerated, or are otherwise disconnected from education and work. YouthBuild participants learn job and leadership skills while building affordable housing in their communities. Frank has also maintained a 3.7 grade-point average at Los Angeles Trade and Technical College, majoring in community planning and economic development while raising his daughter.

Frank describes his own path to this place: "In my family, education was never emphasized. My male relatives graduated from

juvenile hall to county jail and then on to state prison. I was following the same path.”<sup>3</sup>

Frank had been involved in a gang and had served time in county jail. But he took a positive turn after getting out. He participated in YouthBuild, where he earned his GED, and then moved on to Public Allies, where he served at LA Works, a community-development organization, while further developing his leadership and a career path.

“I was able to attend classes at LA Trade Tech through Public Allies, which sparked my interest in education,” he says. “Here I was, a twenty-three-year old without a high school diploma, and I had fellow Allies with degrees from UCLA, USC, and other schools. I learned from them and gained confidence that I could do this, too. I am proud to be creating opportunities for young people like me to get on the path to leadership and success in our community. I’m able to make amends for damages I caused as a gang member.”

Most people don’t look at the guy behind the sandwich counter, the single mom attending community college, or the former gang member and see future leaders. We do. Public Allies has developed more than 3,800 leaders like Peter, Bizunesh, and Frank over the past nineteen years. To us, it is tragic that communities and the organizations that serve them miss so much needed talent. Yet this is where most of the talent we need to solve problems resides.

When we look at many great American leaders, entrepreneurs, and organizers of social movements, we often find young people, women, and people from humble or unpromising origins. But many today who are concerned about social problems don’t look in communities for leaders. Instead they look outside for heroic leaders who offer impressive, silver-bullet solutions. The press often features fawning articles about celebrities, young Ivy League graduates, or prominent business leaders who have exciting new ideas or projects that will solve our problems. For example, pundits like David Gergen and David Brooks have written glowingly about the number of young Ivy League

graduates with “résumé bling” who want to start organizations to address such social challenges as education, health, poverty, and the environment.<sup>4</sup> Such people are admirable and needed, but the media’s emphasis on elite and celebrity leaders ignores the vast number of social entrepreneurs who for years have been building innovative nonprofit organizations and community solutions all across the country. A few leaders are celebrated because of their résumés, their media savvy, or their access to wealthy and politically powerful networks, and the many who have been innovating in communities for years are ignored. This kind of attention to celebrities and other elite leaders can actually discourage grassroots leaders, who don’t have “résumé bling,” from stepping up.

The irony of focusing on young people from elite backgrounds is that when we study the history of social movements, or even the history of *Fortune* 500 companies, we rarely see founders and leaders who came from elite backgrounds. In fact, Northwestern Mutual Life researched five thousand entrepreneurs and created a questionnaire to determine a respondent’s EQ, or entrepreneurship quotient. A respondent’s EQ was significantly discounted if he or she had been an academic achiever, participated in group activities at school, or followed the opinions of authority figures. The questionnaire found that those who excelled more as entrepreneurs and leaders had developed street smarts, persuasiveness, humor, and creativity.<sup>5</sup>

Public Allies believes that everyone can lead. In saying this, we mean that everyone can step up and take responsibility for influencing and working with others for common goals that benefit our communities or the larger society. Leadership is not exclusively the domain of CEOs, elected officials, charismatic organizers, or celebrities. It is the domain of *citizens*. Our democracy is predicated on all of us stepping up to lead where we see public problems or needs.

By the term *citizen* I mean a member of a community, not a legal status. My use of the term *citizen* throughout the book is inclusive. It refers to any person who is committed to participating in making our communities better, regardless of that person's legal status—and there are many people who are not citizens in the legal sense but who do fit this picture of civic participation. One of my favorite definitions of the term *citizen* comes from Peter Block, who writes that a citizen is “one who is willing to be accountable to the well-being of the whole.”<sup>6</sup>

At Public Allies, we see the development of leaders as intertwined with the development of communities. If we want to strengthen our communities and solve problems, we need more leaders to come from our communities and be partners with our communities. In our increasingly diverse society, leaders must also look more like America and be connected to the communities they serve. To create lasting solutions to our most pressing problems, leaders can't just create isolated services. They must build community capacity, think systemically, and collaborate with others. We define the term *community capacity* as a combination of three elements:

1. The leadership and engagement of residents
2. The services and support that neighbors provide to neighbors
3. Coordination and collaboration toward common goals among the citizens, associations, nonprofits, schools, houses of worship, and businesses in a neighborhood

Leaders who can build community capacity often enact the five core practices that form the heart of this book. They recognize and mobilize all of a community's assets, they connect across cultures, they facilitate collaborative action, they continuously

learn and improve, and they are accountable to those they work with and those they serve. These are the values that animate Public Allies' definition of leadership and influence how we carry out our mission. They are values that everyone can put into practice.

### **Our Mission: Changing the Face and Practice of Leadership**

The mission of Public Allies is to advance new leadership to strengthen communities, nonprofits, and civic participation. We aim to change both the face and the practice of leadership by bringing new people to the proverbial tables of influence, and by changing the tables themselves. When we change who is sitting at the table, we also change the conversation, the process, and the results. This is how inclusion and collaboration work—it is about all of us working together as co-creators, not inviting others to help us do our work. We believe that, as a key element of solving community problems, leaders in today's communities need the ability to build community capacity. That is why we work on two fronts: we develop a new generation of diverse leaders (that is, we change the face of leadership), and we help them develop the practices they need to build community capacity and solve public problems effectively and sustainably (that is, we change the practice of leadership).

### **Changing the Face of Leadership**

There is tremendous untapped potential for change in our communities. But most policy makers, nonprofit leaders, and community leaders fail to harness the energy, talents, and ideas of our diverse communities, especially among the people who live closest to the challenges.

Although many nonprofit organizations exist to engage citizens in solving problems, such organizations often aren't great

at engaging new leadership in communities or within the organizations themselves. Research shows that nonprofit organizations do a poor job of recruiting and retaining diverse talent and often have very limited resources to invest in their people. Moreover, research at New York University and elsewhere has found a corresponding challenge in that very few young people know about careers in nonprofit and public service.<sup>7</sup> It is stunning that organizations that exist to bring Americans together to solve public problems struggle with diversity at the leadership level. Several studies have found that between 80 percent and 90 percent of nonprofit organizations are led by Caucasians, and one study reported that younger CEOs are no more diverse than their older colleagues.<sup>8</sup> And there is a glass ceiling in the nonprofit sector—women, who dominate the sector's workforce, are rare among CEOs of the largest nonprofit organizations and are paid less at all levels than their male colleagues.<sup>9</sup> The groups that should be ameliorating these widespread disparities and engaging citizens of all backgrounds are instead exacerbating them! If nonprofits did a better job of building leadership in our increasingly diverse society, they could address the diversity gap in their own ranks.

In the so-called Millennials, we have a new generation whose members have a strong interest in community service (research shows that they have volunteered more than previous generations), embrace diversity (this is the most diverse generation to date), and prefer to work in teams.<sup>10</sup> Those who seek to engage this generation by looking only at people with the best educational credentials miss a huge number of potential leaders. For example, the fact that only about 30 percent of adults are college graduates means that the practice of looking for new leaders on college campuses excludes a great number of young people.<sup>11</sup> (And, naturally, the practice of looking for young leaders only on the campuses of elite schools excludes an even greater number of potential leaders and leaves us with a pool made up of less than 5 percent of young people, limiting the kinds of

talent, creativity, experience, and skills that leaders have.) In our urban communities, only about half of the young people complete high school. Other challenges, such as teen pregnancy, criminal records, foster care, and substance abuse, create daunting barriers to potential leaders. A recent report estimated that approximately 10 percent of youth, or about four million young adults, are disconnected from education and work.<sup>12</sup> Many community groups fail to see the potential leadership in these populations, yet many of these young people know their communities well and can be huge assets to them. Groups like YouthBuild, the Corps Network, Year Up, and our own Public Allies demonstrate the overlooked leadership potential in these populations.

### **Changing the Practice of Leadership**

To solve community problems in a sustainable way requires community capacity. Communities can raise a child, provide security, sustain our health, secure our income, and care for vulnerable people.<sup>13</sup> Nonprofit and public institutions play an important role in all these activities, but they can't create sustainable solutions that really move the needle on these issues without community building and systemic collaboration as core elements of their solutions. Most services focus on linear causality—the idea that one can isolate and treat one need of a person, and that one intervention will “fix” him or her. The reality is much more complex, however, and sustained change requires a variety of interventions and opportunities reinforced by a supportive community. Effective services and outcomes are important, but effective community engagement is also important to sustained success.

For example, public health research finds that the five greatest variables in producing health are personal behavior, social relations, the environment, economic well-being, and access to health care services. In that regard, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have come to emphasize community-building



strategies as a far richer and more promising way of knowing and acting for long-term health than mobilizing service delivery alone. Better health care services or outcomes won't produce health; healthier communities produce health.<sup>14</sup> Our alumnus Peter Hoeffel echoed this idea in an op-ed about the failures of a local county-funded mental health institution, saying that one in every four individuals will experience a mental illness at least once in his or her lifetime, and that supporting people with mental illness is everyone's responsibility.<sup>15</sup> I've heard a similar case made for recent drops in crime being attributable both to more statistically driven policing efforts and to community policing efforts. This is what Robert Putnam popularized as "social capital" more than a decade ago.<sup>16</sup> Putnam's research showed that the more relationships and group memberships people have in their communities, the more likely they are to have beneficial health, safety, educational, and economic outcomes. Nevertheless, nonprofit and public agencies and programs continue to see community building and the development of social capital as a luxury rather than as a solution.

Over the past decade in Cincinnati, Ohio, there has been a dramatic increase in the high school graduation rate, from 50 percent to 80 percent. One promising phenomenon that groups inside and outside the city point to for this success is the Strive Partnership. As Jeff Edmondson, president of Strive, explains, "The Cincinnati schools were making progress, and we brought together a wide range of leaders to help coordinate existing assets and sustain and improve those results. Rather than launching new programs, we focused on coordination and collaboration. We set the table with a mix of leaders that led to many conflicts, but we set a common goal so our conflicts were constructive toward achieving better results for all the children in our schools. The success here has been because of community building and collaboration, and I don't think you can achieve sustained results without that."<sup>17</sup>

Efforts to build community capacity as a way of solving problems rest on the following elements, which coincide in many respects with Public Allies' five core principles:

- Recognizing individual and community assets
- Building relationships and social capital among community residents and leaders
- Connecting residents with local groups where they can be actively engaged as participants and leaders
- Collaborating across boundaries to unite local businesses, organizations, agencies, schools, and houses of worship in coordinating and collaborating toward common goals
- Engaging those on the margins of the community who are labeled for their conditions and choices (people who are homeless or have mental illness as well as those who are ex-felons, high school dropouts, recipients of public assistance, and so on)
- Making sure that the efforts are accountable to the people who have to live with the results—the needs and interests of the community, as community members understand them, supersede what funders and others outside the community define as the community's needs and interests

Leaders must see that community residents are the most important element of any proposed solution. Building more effective programs, services, and institutions is necessary to but not sufficient for solving problems; community engagement is a critical part of any sustainable solution. Leaders must build community at least to the same extent that they build services, programs, and organizations.

To summarize, new leadership pipelines and new leadership approaches are needed to solve our most pressing problems. Public Allies builds leaders from all backgrounds who practice the values that will make them the effective community builders we so badly need. It is our goal to change both the face and the practice of

leadership, thus unleashing the energy of thousands of leaders who have the skills not just to build programs or organizations but also to build community capacity and sustainable solutions. These new leaders can increase the civic participation of people from all backgrounds, building bridges between diverse sets of people and organizations so that work can go forward on achieving common goals and on creating more effective and more responsive nonprofits. That is our mission, and we believe that this approach to leadership will make existing efforts to address community problems far more likely to succeed and to be sustainable.

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## Our Definition of Leadership

The Public Allies' definition of leadership has evolved from our beliefs and experience. It is also grounded in history, relevant to current trends, and informed by the latest theory (see Chapter Three). Our definition has three components:

1. *Leadership is an action many can take, not a position few can hold.* U.S. history, from the Revolutionary War through social movements, has demonstrated that change always comes from the courageous and extraordinary acts of many ordinary people, not just the inspiration or direction of a few.
  2. *Leadership is about taking responsibility—personal and social—to work with others for common goals.* Leaders step up, assume personal responsibility, and accept social responsibility to work on common goals that make positive changes for themselves and others.
  3. *Leadership is about the practice of values that engage community members and groups to work effectively together toward common goals.* The five values that we at Public Allies believe are needed to lead our communities toward lasting and effective change in the twenty-first century are recognizing and mobilizing community assets, connecting across cultures, facilitating collaborative action, continuously learning and improving, and being accountable to those we work with and those we serve.
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## The Story of Public Allies

Our mission and our definition of leadership have evolved from practice, through the development of our leadership program and the many lessons we've learned partnering with organizations to develop leaders in twenty-one cities over nineteen years. There were no guarantees that Public Allies would succeed when it was started by a resourceful community of diverse, idealistic young people. There were challenges and disappointments—and moments when failure seemed more imminent than success. But a set of values and strong beliefs formed and held by the group took the vision of two young women and turned it into a diverse community of thousands, a community that has continued for almost two decades, with the president of the United States and the first lady among those who helped shape it. Here is the story of how Public Allies came to be, and of how we implement our vision, our mission, and our definition of leadership.

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### In the Beginning

While Vanessa Kirsch was growing up, she struggled with school because of dyslexia. From an early age, she was often pulled out of classes for tutoring. When she applied to Tufts University, she made the case that she should be given a chance at admission despite her low SAT scores. Tufts agreed, and Vanessa's hard work and tenacity indeed made her a great success. In 1991, at the age of twenty-six, she was working for the pollster Peter Hart and had demonstrated her entrepreneurial skills by founding the Women's Information Network, a group supporting young women leaders in Washington, D.C. Vanessa had also recently completed a survey of young people, titled *Democracy's Next Generation*, for the organization People for the American Way. One of her primary findings was that young people wanted to get involved in working for change but did not know how. With Peter Hart's full support, Vanessa decided to leave her job and start an organization to mobilize young people.\*

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\* Peter Hart was a founding board member of Public Allies.

Another young woman who had discovered that organizations were struggling to identify, support, and develop young leaders was Katrina Browne. Katrina, a twenty-three-year-old Princeton graduate from the Philadelphia area, had been working at the Advocacy Institute through Princeton Project 55, a program sponsored by Princeton's graduating class of 1955 that sponsored other Princeton graduates who wanted to pursue public service for a summer or a year. Katrina worked on a study of how nonprofit and public interest organizations were recruiting and developing their next generation of leaders. She discovered that these organizations were having an especially difficult time finding young leaders of color and young leaders from disadvantaged communities in general (the communities that these organizations served).<sup>\*</sup> Katrina's understanding of and passion for history gave the organization not only grounding in past social movements but also inspiration that changing this dynamic in communities would take a new kind of movement led by young people themselves.

Vanessa Kirsch and Katrina Browne met at one of Vanessa's Women's Information Network gatherings. They compared notes and came up with the idea of creating a vehicle to connect young leaders, especially those who were underrepresented in the leadership ranks, with local nonprofit organizations that could make good use of their energy, idealism, and skills in these organizations' mission to make a greater difference. As Katrina explains, "I realized that, because of my background and the school I attended, I had access to my internship, mentors, and other support, and I thought that everybody who wanted to make a difference, especially those coming from the communities served, should have that opportunity."<sup>18</sup> Vanessa and Katrina exemplified a kind of servant leadership that has been core to Public Allies ever since. They understood their privilege and used it cleverly for the benefit of a larger, more inclusive community.

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<sup>\*</sup>For more about Katrina Browne's story, see Chapter Six.

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In the early 1990s, when the first Public Allies program was launched, young people—known as Generation X—were primarily viewed in a negative way and were often seen as slackers and gangsters. The crack epidemic and gang violence were at their height. Ecstasy-fueled raves were the rage, AIDS was still

on the rise (NBA star Magic Johnson had just announced his diagnosis), and “safe sex” was a new mantra. Music was defined by the grunge of Pearl Jam and Nirvana, the pop-country of Garth Brooks and Billy Ray Cyrus, and hip-hop that ranged from the violent rap of NWA, the dance pop of MC Hammer, the positive rap of Arrested Development, and the political rap of Public Enemy. *Slacker*, *Malcolm X*, *Reservoir Dogs*, *Boyz in the Hood*, and *Thelma and Louise* were the films capturing young people’s attention. Vice President Dan Quayle and conservative pundits were scandalized by the title character of the TV series *Murphy Brown* because of her choice to have a child out of wedlock. *The Cosby Show* came to a close. MTV still mostly showed music videos. *Seinfeld*, the “show about nothing,” was on the rise, and *In Living Color* launched the careers of the Wayans brothers, Jim Carrey, and Jamie Foxx.

On the political scene, a presidential election pitted the later-named Greatest Generation (represented by President George H. W. Bush) against the baby-boom generation (represented by Bill Clinton, then governor of Arkansas), and Rock the Vote was launched to mobilize Generation X. Gays and lesbians were still mostly absent from popular and political culture but were a rising force because of the fight for AIDS-related legislation (such as the Ryan White Care Act) and the battle over whether gays and lesbians could serve openly in the military (a battle that resulted in the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy). Other milestones at or around this time were the first Persian Gulf War, an economic recession, and the riots that took place in Los Angeles and led to Rodney King’s famous question “Can we all get along?” In this milieu, there was a need to bring Generation X to a new place. According to Vanessa, “There were so many negative stereotypes of our generation as apathetic, uncaring, cynical, selfish, and even violent. We wanted nothing less than to redefine a generation in all its diversity as a positive force for change—as allies for our communities.”<sup>19</sup>

Through Princeton Project 55, Katrina Browne met Charlie Bray, president of the Johnson Foundation in Racine, Wisconsin. Katrina and Vanessa, during a fundraising tour, had stopped there in hopes of approaching him for funding, but they discovered that the foundation, instead of giving traditional grants, sponsored small conferences at its large, beautiful Frank Lloyd Wright–designed prairie home, called Wingspread. The Wingspread Conferences, as they were known, were designed to help leaders develop big ideas. (National Public Radio and the National Endowment for the Arts are two examples of organizations whose leaders have participated in the conferences.) Vanessa and Katrina asked Charlie if they could organize a conference to explore their ideas about new leadership, and he agreed. Among the intergenerational group of forty leaders who came to that Wingspread Conference were John “Jody” Kretzmann of the Asset-Based Community Development Institute; Barack Obama, who was then an organizer with Project Vote in Chicago; Jackie Kendall, executive director of the Midwest Academy; and David Cohen, co-director of the Advocacy Institute. One of Vanessa’s and Katrina’s great strengths as organizers was engaging accomplished mentors while also seeking out younger, diverse talent and entrusting them with positions of leadership. The Wingspread meeting was a chance for these young leaders to engage with well-known academics, organizers, and civic leaders as peers and to brainstorm and debate with them about how to bring Public Allies into reality. Their brainstorming created the initial concept for what today is Public Allies. They also built into the DNA of our leadership model a blend of community organizing, community building, civic engagement, and inclusion, a blend that has remained at our core.\*

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\* At first our organization was named the National Center for Careers in Public Life, but a conversation about stereotypes of young people as “public enemies,” which took place in a van among people leaving the conference, led to the new name—Public Allies.

The formation of Public Allies was influenced by two other service groups, Teach for America and VISTA. Wendy Kopp had recently founded Teach for America, recruiting graduates of top colleges to teach in schools in low-income communities. Public Allies liked the Teach for America model but believed that a more diverse, indigenous approach to recruitment was needed to support community organizations. At Wingspread, many of the older leaders attending the conference had been shocked that the younger leaders did not know about VISTA, the Great Society program to create a domestic Peace Corps. VISTA had been gutted by both the Reagan and Bush administrations, and the VISTA stipend was so low that it mostly enrolled poor people (who could maintain public benefits while receiving a VISTA stipend) and those with means. VISTA also provided minimal training and support and was not focused on long-term leadership and service. Public Allies wondered whether it should help promote VISTA and provide added training for its participants. But the older leaders, some of whom were VISTA alumni, thought Public Allies should exist on its own to bring more creativity, nimbleness, focus, and generational energy to the problem of how to identify and engage a new generation of leaders to support organizations in disadvantaged communities. Most important, the experienced leaders pushed the Public Allies founders to make sure they were not replicating the existing models but creating something new that would be impactful, transformative, and true to their belief in inclusive, collaborative leadership.

Vanessa, Katrina, and their growing roster of volunteers, many of whom had met Vanessa while working on the 1988 presidential campaign of Michael Dukakis, began doing outreach by walking through urban neighborhoods to identify and talk to young people. This group of young volunteers, which increased by the week, met every Tuesday night for months to debate both the philosophy and the practicalities (such as budgets and the mission) of building an organization from scratch to engage their



peers in transforming communities. They worked out of the office of a mentor, Karen Mulhauser, who became Public Allies' first board chair. This grassroots approach led to many meetings on basketball courts, in housing projects, at youth centers, and on campuses. The volunteers found that many young people were indeed passionate about social issues in their community but felt powerless in addressing them. This experience led Vanessa and Katrina to an even firmer conviction that if a pipeline to public service could be built, there would be many talented and diverse young people ready to work for change.

Vanessa's natural fundraising abilities, along with her unique ability to convey this inspiring vision, led to major grants from the Echoing Green Foundation,\* the MacArthur Foundation, Atlantic Philanthropies (which was anonymous at the time), the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the Surdna Foundation, and others. Her connections from the political world also got her idea into the hands of both the Bush administration and the Clinton for President campaign. These resources helped Vanessa and Katrina hire a dynamic and diverse group of half a dozen young people, who then quickly set out to build a program from their vision. They were a ragtag bunch in many ways, and they reflected courage on the part of the founders to expand their circle to include other strong leaders with different skills, experience, and views. Vanessa took on the role of CEO and, with it, responsibility for shaping this unruly and passionate bunch into an effective team.

The first Public Allies program was launched in September 1992 in Washington, D.C., with a bold vision for transforming communities through the idealism and energy of diverse young leaders. The diverse young staff who built the program believed that if young leaders had the skills to recognize assets, bridge

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\*The Echoing Green Foundation helps social entrepreneurs with transformative ideas start new nonprofits for social change in America and around the world. Thousands apply each year for grants and support that ultimately go to twenty-four groups.

differences, and facilitate community members and groups, they could be a catalyst for reviving communities from the bottom up. Public Allies believed that a full-time work experience in the community—integrated with intensive training, the building of community with a diverse cohort, team service projects for young leaders to set and accomplish goals together, and coaching—could develop leaders who would succeed at this work. Fundamental to everything was the vision that most of the Allies would come from the same communities and neighborhoods they served, and that they would be people who had a passion for changing their communities over the long term, not just doing a year or two of giving back.

Vanessa attracted an extraordinary group of young leaders to help her and Katrina build the program during the first few years: Marketa Bartel, Richard Blount, Craig Bowman, Paul Caccamo, Michael Canul, Liz Cutler, Julius Davis, Magda Escobar, Ian Fisk, Erin Flannery, David Gaffin, Mark Gillman, Chris Hero, Jay Kim, Kaushik Mukurjee, Monica Palacio, Julian Posada, Allessandra Puvak, Jason Scott, Trabian Shorters, Alma Soonghi-Beck, and Tim Webb. They were African American, Asian American, Latino, Latina, gay, lesbian, straight, and from all parts of the country. Each person brought unique skills and contributed to the new definition of leadership that Public Allies was constructing. Their diverse backgrounds led to struggles over philosophy, roles, hierarchies, and outcomes, and these struggles laid the groundwork for our model. Most of the original participants have gone on to successful public service careers. Their exhaustive conversations and debates, steep learning curves, rookie mistakes, and transformational discoveries, often fueled by caffeine and late-night pizzas, turned an inspiring idea into a real program and a rapidly growing organization. It was a battle to balance their idealism and principles with the practical demands of raising money and executing a program that was trying to redefine the nature of community leadership. Doing all this with a team of young people who had limited experience, an aversion to hierarchy, and a passion for change created challenges. Survival was never

certain, much less success. But Vanessa and Katrina balanced their extraordinary skills and passion with those of others to take risks, find great mentors, and shape a common vision and an innovative program model.

### **The Public Allies Program**

The core of the original program model that was built then remains today. We select the program's participants, or Allies, from diverse backgrounds in our communities. They are young people who have a passion for making a difference.

Allies are placed in paid, full-time apprenticeships with non-profit organizations, where they create, improve, or expand services to meet local needs. They run after-school programs, help ex-felons reenter society and obtain jobs, help people become more culturally competent and collaborative, educate young mothers about child nutrition and health, form neighborhood watches, assist foster children with their transition to independence, clean up rivers, establish community gardens, and much more.

Placements for Allies are selected according to the outcomes of our partner organizations' projects and the commitment the partner organizations have to the apprenticeship experience. Allies are not sent randomly to their placements. We use a two-way matching process in which Ally and partner "finalists" interview and rank each other. We then select the best matches so that there is full buy-in for all the apprenticeships.

One day a week, Allies leave their apprenticeships for intensive leadership-development workshops and for team projects where they learn and practice leadership skills and values. Our comprehensive leadership-development curriculum is based on current adult education theory that blends highly interactive training and workshops, individual coaching, critical reflection, critical feedback, team-building activities, and team projects. Our curriculum helps Allies clarify who they are as leaders—their purposes, values, and practices—along with the skills they need for their jobs and careers.

Through our training and work with the Allies, individually and in teams, we create an environment that challenges them to take greater responsibility for their learning and growth and that supports them in dealing with the inevitable conflicts, mistakes, and obstacles that come with this level of responsibility. Our curriculum is both challenging and nurturing. On the one hand, we push Allies to confront personal difficulties, growth needs, and conflicts within the group. On the other hand, we coach Allies to clarify their purposes and values while building practices for working with others more effectively. In our program, if you talk a lot, you'll learn to listen. If you are too quiet, you'll build your confidence as a speaker. If you are always late, you'll learn to be on time. If you always think you know best, you'll learn to invite and consider others' opinions.

We use a variety of assessment tools and processes to help Allies identify where they want to grow as leaders and how they are progressing:

- *Individual Development Plans*, which establish educational, career, and community goals and the steps needed to achieve them
- *Personal Impact and Service Documentation*, which tracks Allies' progress on service goals and outcomes
- *360-Degree Reviews*, which assess how well Allies are practicing the five core Public Allies values
- *Feedback Circles*, where Allies review their practice of the core values with their teams and supervisors
- *Presentations of Learning*, where Allies defend how they have met our learning outcomes (this process is described in Chapter Eight)

A typical training day, held on Friday, begins in the morning, with Allies checking in about their lives, their work, and community issues. Then local leaders and Public Allies staff facilitate interactive workshops on topics related to our core values or to skills (such as public speaking, facilitation, conflict

resolution, and fundraising) that will help the Allies be effective in their placements. In the afternoon, Allies meet in teams of eight to ten for work on team projects that they plan and execute over the course of the year. Finally, they evaluate their training day and close out together.

Many Allies report that one of the things that really drew them to the program was the prospect of being surrounded by peers who shared their passion for service and community change, and they often find that their most powerful learning comes from each other. A married young mother of two, a recent high school graduate, an Ivy League graduate, and a thirty-year-old gay activist, all working on different issues in different neighborhoods, will find themselves working together and sharing their different perspectives, experiences, and lessons with each other. Together, these experiences are creating a new generation of leaders who know both how to build community and how to work for effective solutions.

### **The Big Breaks: From Pilot Program to National Model**

Early in the development of Public Allies, the organization's vision of diverse young people as a positive force gained a lot of attention from the media and even from the White House. Several events that occurred almost simultaneously established Public Allies with three presidential administrations, one concurrent with the founding of our first program and two still in the future.

President George H. W. Bush had already created the Commission on National and Community Service, which famously launched the Points of Light Foundation. Through Vanessa's passion and leadership and the promise represented by the first class of D.C. Allies, the commission identified the fledgling Public Allies as one of fourteen demonstration projects for a national service program and funded our second site, which opened in Chicago in 1993.

The Chicago site had been organized in much the same way as the Public Allies site in Washington, D.C. There was a committee

of diverse young people meeting on Tuesday nights and engaging mentors. It was decided that with the federal funding, we needed a more professional leader. One of our board members, Barack Obama, recommended his wife, Michelle, who then worked for Mayor Richard Daley and had previously been an attorney at the prestigious Sidley Austin firm. Vanessa Kirsch and Jason Scott, the director of site development for Public Allies, met with Mrs. Obama and initially faced some resistance. “It sounded risky and just out there,” Mrs. Obama recounts, “but for some reason it just spoke to me. This was the first time I said ‘This is what I say I care about. Right here. And I will have to run it.’”<sup>20</sup> She called a week later to accept the job, and to this day she claims it is the best job she has ever had.<sup>21</sup> Hiring Michelle Obama was a coup, not because of who she later became but because of who she was then—at twenty-eight, the oldest, most experienced, most accomplished, most coolheaded, and most professional member of our youthful staff. In an entrepreneurial start-up with an average staff age of twenty-four, she was our model professional and a leader inside the organization, and she helped strengthen the organization in many ways.\*

The spring of 1993 was also significant to us for another reason. In early 1992, Public Allies had invited two people to be keynote speakers at the launch event that would be held later that year for Public Allies D.C. The first was Senator Harris Wofford, a Democrat from Pennsylvania, who had been

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\* In a speech delivered on October 16, 2009, at the twentieth anniversary of the Points of Light Foundation, celebrated at the Presidential Forum on Community Service, George H. W. Bush Presidential Library, Texas A&M University, College Station, President Barack Obama thanked former President Bush for creating a national service program that launched his wife’s career in public service: “It’s a vision that’s changed lives across this country, including that of a young woman who went to work for an organization called Public Allies to prepare young people for public service careers—an organization initially funded by the Bush administration. And her experience there inspired her to devote her own life to serving others, and that young woman happens to be my wife, Michelle Obama.”

promoting national service for thirty years and was crafting the legislation that eventually created AmeriCorps. The second was Marian Wright Edelman, a famous civil rights activist and founder of the Children's Defense Fund. As luck would have it, on the day of the event Senator Wofford's staff called and asked if he could bring the first lady of Arkansas, who was also a friend of Mrs. Edelman. Hillary Clinton was so inspired by the diverse group of young leaders that she offered to host an event for Public Allies in the Rose Garden of the White House if her husband were to be elected president that November. Thanks to the organization's nascent success and Vanessa's diligent follow-up, First Lady Hilary Clinton fulfilled her promise the following April. Also in 1993, as President Bill Clinton was working on the creation of AmeriCorps, he often spoke of Public Allies as a model for national service, once referring to us as a "gang for good."\* The national service bill signed by President Clinton in 1993 created the Corporation for National and Community Service, an independent government agency that supports service across the country through Senior Corps (older Americans), Learn and Serve America (K-12 schools), VISTA, the National Civilian Conservation Corps (which helps with disaster relief and public lands), and AmeriCorps.

Public Allies, like national service itself, has appealed across political party lines because we are nonpartisan in our approach to solving community problems. We have strong beliefs about social justice and inclusion that are attractive to those on the Left. And our concerns about the effectiveness of large institutions and services have attracted conservatives who share our belief that local communities, including grassroots, faith-based, and private

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\* A decade later, Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton of New York had this to say at a Save AmeriCorps event held in Washington, D.C., on September 3, 2003: "I was very honored to speak at the first-ever Public Allies event back in 1992, and the next one we held in the Rose Garden. It was a really great commitment for me to be able to fulfill, to bring these wonderful young people to the White House."

organizations, often are better at solving problems and achieving results. Our values, especially diversity and inclusion, lead us to see engaging diverse perspectives as important to leadership. As this book illustrates, our approach challenges established leaders, regardless of ideology, to think differently about how to engage communities and new leadership in solving problems.

### **Public Allies and AmeriCorps**

We competed successfully to be one of the first AmeriCorps grantees in 1994, and all that attention and support helped Public Allies grow in our first three years from serving one city to serving six. The AmeriCorps program provides grants directly to national organizations and to bipartisan commissions in all fifty states so they can support local programs that employ service participants (AmeriCorps members) to meet community needs.

In 2011, there are approximately 87,000 AmeriCorps members serving across the country, addressing such issues as education, health, poverty, veterans, disaster relief, and the environment through local nonprofit organizations. Public Allies receives AmeriCorps funds nationally, and also from states, to support our Allies. Along with matching dollars that we raise in our communities, these funds enable us to pay Allies a full-time stipend, provide health care and child care for those who need it, and offer Allies a \$5,500 education award that they can use to pay their existing student loans or their future education costs.

Public Allies has grown along with AmeriCorps, supporting more than 3,800 Allies in twenty-one communities through four presidential administrations. According to David Eisner, who led national service efforts under President George W. Bush and now serves on our board, "Public Allies has always played a unique and important role in national service by bringing a new, more diverse population to service. Public Allies then brings that service to local community-based organizations who need the help most. It is a bottom-up community effort that works."<sup>22</sup>



## A Distinct Leadership-Development Model

The program model we've built is distinct from other AmeriCorps programs and other leadership programs in several key ways:

- *We build homegrown leadership.* More than 80 percent of Allies come from the communities and often the very neighborhoods they serve. Most national AmeriCorps programs recruit nationally and export talent to communities. We do accept Allies from outside our communities, but they generally come from communities without a Public Allies program, and they bring assets from their backgrounds, beliefs, or experiences that will be unique additions to our group.

- *We are both diverse and selective.* Public Allies receives, on average, six applicants per slot, and this surplus of applicants allows us to find the best potential leaders, whether they have GEDs or Ivy League degrees. On average, Allies have been 67 percent people of color, 60 percent women, 50 percent college graduates, and 15 percent self-identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. We work to be inclusive of leadership potential from all parts of our communities.

- *We seek young people who are committed to a lifetime of working for community and social change.* We seek young adults with fire in their bellies and a passion to make a difference over the long term rather than those who want to take a year off to do something altruistic or charitable. Of our 3,800 graduates, 87 percent are currently pursuing careers in nonprofit and public service.

- *We place Allies in a wide variety of nonprofits to help them create, improve, and expand services.* We believe it is important that communities and groups on the front lines define how we can help them build capacity, innovate, and serve. Over 90 percent of our partner organizations (the groups that host our Allies) report every year that Allies met or exceeded their expectations,

and 74 percent report that Allies built capacity by helping them collaborate with other organizations, practice diversity and inclusion, improve their supervision of young talent, recruit and support volunteers, engage community members, and evaluate impact. In addition, Allies benefit by learning from each other because they are working on different issues—education, health, poverty, and the environment—in different neighborhoods. Every Ally who completes the program comes to know a city’s various neighborhoods, issues, organizations, and resources as well as a diverse network of peers working in other organizations.

- *Our rigorous and comprehensive leadership curriculum is values-based.* Unlike leadership programs that focus on the management side of leadership, we focus on building the community side of leadership, which brings citizens and groups together to work on common goals. Therefore, we emphasize our five core leadership values.

- *We do service with communities, not to communities.* This is perhaps our most important principle. We believe in building solutions from the inside out. That means seeing *citizens* where others see clients, seeing *resources* where others see problems, and seeing *partners* where others see competition. We reject the notion that the best ideas or the expertise needed to solve problems can be found only outside communities. We see community residents (even those who are often labeled for their challenges) and local associations and organizations as partners we can work with to create change. In 2010, our Allies recruited 21,905 volunteers to join them in service; over half of those volunteers were from the neighborhoods or client bases served by the organizations they helped, and 74 percent of the volunteers served more than once. Our partners also reported that Allies had helped them form 4,307 new collaborations with groups these organizations had not worked with before in their communities.

## Five Leadership Stories

To date, as mentioned earlier, more than 3,800 diverse young leaders have completed our leadership program in twenty-one cities, and their stories, passions, innovation, and initiative continually demonstrate our conviction that everyone leads. They are social entrepreneurs, youth workers, public officials, teachers, community organizers, police officers, and activists. They also demonstrate how their community-building approach to leadership builds better solutions. Here are some of their stories.

### José Rico

José Rico was born in the small town of Jeruco, Mexico. When he was seven years old, José and his family immigrated to the United States, where his father became a railroad worker. José attended and graduated from the Chicago public school system, where his achievements earned him a full-ride scholarship to study engineering at the University of Illinois-Urbana. After a six-month internship at Amoco during his senior year, José realized he'd lost interest in engineering and took a job as a science teacher at Chicago's Latino Youth Alternative High School. In 1994, he joined Public Allies Chicago, and after completing the program he was hired as a staff member. While on staff, he earned his B.A. degree at Northeastern Illinois University and was encouraged by his boss, Michelle Obama, to pursue his dream of opening a school. José followed that path and became an education organizer for the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant Rights, working for programs that supported small schools. He also earned graduate degrees in curriculum instruction from the University of Illinois-Chicago and in educational administration from National Louis University. In 2001 he worked with a group of other Public Allies alumni to mobilize residents of Chicago's Little Village neighborhood, a mostly poor immigrant community, to fight for new, quality high schools for their kids. The mobilization effort culminated in a nineteen-day hunger strike that brought national attention and then funding to create four schools with neighborhood participation. José Rico became the first principal of Chicago's Multicultural Arts High School in 2005. U.S. Secretary of

Education Arne Duncan, formerly superintendent of Chicago's public schools, brought José Rico and his family to Washington, D.C., where he is now deputy director at the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics.<sup>23</sup>

## Tanisha Brown

Tanisha Brown can't recall exactly how she found out about Public Allies, but she remembers feeling desperate for the change in her life that Public Allies represented. At the time, she was an unemployed single mom with a two-year-old and a four-year-old. Her own mother had given birth to her at the age of fourteen, and for years she was unable to care for Tanisha because of drug addiction. When Tanisha came to Public Allies, she had a high school degree, she was bright, and she was determined. But she possessed few of the practical and professional skills she needed for a good job, and she had no clue about how to get those skills. She was, in her own words, "a complete angry mess. I was angry at my mom, the world, all the people who said no, at myself for being a young mom."<sup>24</sup> At Public Allies, she was challenged to understand where the anger came from, and she was humbled to find that she wasn't the only one with a sad story. Her fellow Allies gave her some tough feedback that helped her shift her attitude. She also learned computer and networking skills. She soaked up the Friday trainings like a sponge. Today, Tanisha is close to earning a bachelor's degree in behavioral science, and she has a job where she counsels emancipated foster children. She's also preparing to apply to law school. Her dream is to create a haven of support, mentoring, and skill building for young parents so that they don't lose sight of their futures the way she almost did. "Public Allies really, really saved and changed my life," she says, "so I can only give back."

## Nigel Okunubi

While Nigel Okunubi was growing up, he spent a lot of time at a youth center near his public housing project in the Adams Morgan neighborhood of Washington, D.C. When the center closed, in 2007, he knew he couldn't let the kids in his old neighborhood down. He led an effort to create the Adams Morgan Youth Leadership Academy,

which aims to cultivate the next generation of classroom, community, and workforce leaders among local teenagers in the nation's capital. No one would have pegged Nigel as a leader when he was a kid. He barely took any interest in school: "I graduated high school with a 1.2 grade point average—1.2!"<sup>25</sup>

At the academy, he wants to target kids like himself who are disconnected but have potential. "There's a whole different level of credibility and accountability," he says. "I'm serving the children of some of the folks who raised me." He built the organization on a shoestring while also raising his own ten-year-old son, and he engages the whole community in supporting the kids, approaching everyone from community residents to the owners of local businesses that offer internships and financial support, inviting everyone to get involved in all aspects of the program. "Public Allies is a godsend," he says, and he wonders where he'd be if he hadn't found Public Allies when he did. "The Public Allies thumbprint is all over the services I provide today."

## Milo Neild

Milo Neild was home-schooled and then attended a small Christian high school on the East Coast before moving to Arizona and attending public high school. Stereotyped, misunderstood, and misdiagnosed with mental illness, Milo dropped out midway through his senior year.

Recovering from a few years of social isolation and various therapies, he felt comfortable and supported enough to transition from female to male. His confidence grew enough that he began taking classes at a community college while delivering pizza to earn his way. He had also become active with a local LGBT organization, 1n10, that referred him to Public Allies Arizona.

He was nervous about being accepted into the program because he was transgendered but learned that his concerns were unfounded.

"I started out assuming that people wouldn't support me," he says, "and Public Allies taught me the opposite. I had never worked in a professional job and didn't even know what to wear, and some Allies took me shopping."<sup>26</sup>

Along with a supportive community, Public Allies gave Milo new confidence and direction.

"I realized I had a voice," he says. "I was so nervous about public speaking that I just couldn't do it, and now I speak at classrooms and on panels all the time."

Today, Milo is completing a degree in business and applied computing at Arizona State University. After graduation, he will pursue a career in nonprofit technology. He continues to be a leader in the local LGBT community.

## Giselle John

Giselle John grew up in the foster care system and was aging out in August 1999. On a path to homelessness, she discovered Public Allies New York and was selected to begin the program in September. "Public Allies was the bridge between the foster care experience and a professional path that kept me from being out on the streets," she says.<sup>27</sup> Giselle put her life experience and leadership to work by serving as a program director with Youth Communication, where she worked to empower youth in the foster care system by helping them find their voices and share their experiences and skills with the community through a youth magazine and other media. More important, she found her calling: "I decided that I wanted to devote my career to working with other kids in the foster care system." After graduating from Public Allies, Giselle continued to work with youth in the foster care and juvenile justice systems while completing her B.A. degree at John Jay College. Now she is serving as a consultant with the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Family to Family Initiative, where she provides technical assistance to reform foster care systems in Kentucky, North Carolina, and Ohio and empower the young people who are in the system. Her inspiring story has also been featured in a book with a foreword by President Jimmy Carter.<sup>28</sup> "Because of Public Allies, I do work that makes me excited to wake up every morning," Giselle says. "I'm making a huge difference for young people who are just like me."

These are only five among nearly four thousand amazing young leaders who have reinforced our conviction that everyone leads. You will meet several others elsewhere in this book. Some will be CEOs, social entrepreneurs, or elected officials. Others will make contributions to social change as volunteers, activists, and frontline workers in their communities. Change has always been the outcome of many leaders making contributions across a spectrum. We've already developed several thousand

contributors, and soon we'll be developing more than a thousand leaders every year. We train and support them to multiply their own leadership so that the number of citizens working for solutions continually expands. And it's a start—but our communities and our society need more.

Every year, our program ends with participants doing Presentations of Learning, in which Allies describe how they met the learning outcomes of our program (practice of the five core values) and how they will apply those lessons while working for change in the future. It is a great way for them to document their transformation. I attend a number of the presentations each year and walk away inspired by the transformation that is possible when individuals with passion and potential acquire the self-confidence, leadership practices, and support network to begin their leadership journeys.

I also feel a tinge of sadness when I think about how this potential might have gone unrealized if we had not selected these young leaders for our program, and I am reminded of how much untapped potential there still is in our communities—people who have a passion and a desire to make a positive difference but don't know how to start or how to advance their leadership to the next level. Solving our biggest problems will require the engagement of many more leaders. Imagine if Peter Hoeffel were still working in a deli, or if Bizunesh Talbot-Scott had not gone to college, or if Frank Alvarez were unemployed. Imagine losing the positive impact that José Rico, Tanisha Brown, Nigel Okunubi, Milo Neild, and Giselle John are having on their communities. More of us need to stand up and work with others to make a difference. How will *you* lead?

### Key Ideas and Lessons

At Public Allies, we define leadership as follows:

1. Leadership is a process in which many can engage, not a position that only a few can hold.

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2. Leadership is about taking personal and social responsibility for working with others to achieve common goals.
3. Leadership is about practicing the five core values that engage diverse community members and groups in working together effectively.

Here are the five core leadership values that we at Public Allies believe are critical today:

1. Recognizing and mobilizing community assets
2. Connecting across cultures
3. Facilitating collaborative action
4. Continuously learning and improving
5. Being accountable to those one works with and those one serves

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### Reflections

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- Consider Public Allies' three-part definition of leadership. What in this definition is new to you?
  - What are the values that you seek to practice when you work with others?
  - Who are the leaders who have had the most direct influence on you?
  - What is it about those leaders' approaches that was most effective in getting you engaged? Why did you accept those leaders' influence?
  - What is it about leaders' approaches that has most turned you off?
-