

learn to be grassroots guerrillas

activist.

Mecca has a voice that could reach to the other end of the room from the stage where he stood.

"How do we organize to lobby?" he asked, and turned to write the flow of responses on butcher paper on the wall. Several seniors had taken this course before and were among the emboldened. The room came alive with energy.

"Select a leader, form committees," they yell out. "State the problem," an Italian man pipes up. "Make a slogan," offers a Mexican man. "Have an agenda," an African American man says.

"These are all great ideas," Mecca said, as momentum built.

He took the seniors through determining their issue (broken sidewalks), the persons to be lobbied (a vote decides that it's the mayor), and who will speak for the seniors (self-nominating volunteers).

One man wanted to reverse the process. "I can't agree with you," he said. "I trust Chris Daly. He does me right. I live in his district. I'd go with him."

But it was too late.

"We've already voted," said Mecca, "and the problem is bigger than the district."

He encouraged anyone who hadn't spoken to put in their two cents. Le stepped in to call on some by name. John Michael Barquera, who lives at Dorothy Day, wanted to be assistant to the play-acting mayor Jacquie Bryson, the voluble SoMa resident who has had her problems with sidewalks. The group consented.

Someone said the mayor deals with bigger issues than this. But Mecca said no matter, we'll chance it because he's a public official, responsible to the citizenry.

Ava Handy Beckham, who lives at the Madonna Senior Residence on Golden Gate Avenue, started the dialogue as a member of the committee visiting the mayor.

"I'm handicapped," she said. She's in a wheelchair. "I represent Senior University and my complaint today is broken sidewalks. They are a hazard to older people and people in wheelchairs and to the blind and the lame. We're asking your cooperation. I know people who are falling down."

"I'd like to hear from other members of your group," "Mayor" Bryson said.

Three others spoke. One said fixing the sidewalks would be cheaper for the city than paying off lawsuits that could ensue from sidewalk accidents. Moreover, another said in a rambling discourse, uneven sidewalks scuff shoes.

"Thank you," the mayor said. "I appreciate the issue of shiny shoes."

A couple of people snicker.

"I can't avoid these conditions," said Yoko Takahashi, "and I fell flat on my face and was bleeding all over the place." She stood and rolled up her sleeve to show the mayor, sitting two seats away, the scars on her forearm from her accident. "This is a beautiful tourist city. And I am ashamed of it."

"I apologize that you hurt yourself," the mayor said.

"We agree the conditions are bad in the Tenderloin," the aide, Barquera, said. "But we have budget problems. We'll try to do our best."

The exercise that was created out of thin air had coalesced into a powerful, moving action. From it, the seniors felt a ripple of excitement that trumped the laughably disappointing responses from officialdom.

In the evaluation, the seniors liked Takahashi's scars, the tourist angle, the connection with the mayor ("he understands the problem now"), and said the amount of time the committee spent explaining the issue was good. But others disagreed and said the presentation was rambling and wordy. The work to be done needed a deadline, someone said.

But the key element was missing.

"A solution," Mecca says. "You don't go in just presenting problems. You offer solutions. You've got to have them. But the role playing was really good."

Le ran the next segment, How to Conduct an Effective Meeting, and right off the seniors agreed that where they were was about the best place imaginable.

"But you don't have a microphone," said Minnie Fry, the deaf lady. "Let's get one so everybody can hear what's going on."

Le apologized and said he had tried to get a microphone but couldn't. He spoke in a full voice. Everyone could hear him. He is well-liked and the seniors attribute the success of the sessions to him, although they've been going on since 1994 and he's been with the program less than two years.

He spoke to the Vietnamese women and got them participating while interpreting their suggestions. It satisfies Angelo, the egalitarian Italian, who for two sessions has been acutely aware of who is not saying



San Francisco-born Angelo D'Angelo (standing) was part of the vocal minority that drove the commentary.

anything and persistently asks, "Who is speaking for the Chinese and the Vietnamese people here?"

After a catered Thanksgiving lunch, about a dozen people left, missing the documentary "The Democratic Process: Saul Alinsky & His Legacy." Actor Alec Baldwin narrates the hourlong movie on the legendary community organizer of the mid-20th century. Alinsky led the movement to empower disenfranchised communities through collective action. His methods influenced the civil rights movement, the farm workers' struggle and the Vietnam War protests. They live on through the Industrial Area Foundation operating in a number of states — and through the spirit of Senior University and the other grassroots guerrilla trainings in San Francisco and elsewhere. ■

Next issue: Part II, a stunning university success and graduation

SoMa training for activists

THE South of Market Community Action Network trains community activists, too, in a four-month process during summer, and it pays participants a stipend.

The Resident Organizing and Leadership Development Program is a 10-week internship that has graduated 15 activists in the three years since it was established with a grant from San Francisco Foundation's Koshland Program. The training consists of some night classes on SRO tenant rights and community planning, among other topics, and an internship with organizations such as the Veterans Equity Center, Child Care Center, SOMCAN, Canon Kip and Oasis for Girls.

SOUTHSIDE

Five interns are paid \$1,200 each during the course, which is being revamped and will start in July, according to SOMCAN Executive Director April Veneracion. Interns are chosen from among 20 or so graduates of a prerequisite, introductory workshop on neighborhood organizing that meets for an hour or two once a week for four weeks. To apply, contact Angelica Cabande, 348-1945 or acabande@somcan.org.

"Most in the program are from SoMa but some come from out of the neighborhood," says Veneracion. "And some of the graduates have stayed permanently where they have interned." ■

—TOM CARTER



Anh Le eagerly identifies everyone and celebrates their contributions, including this Dorothy Day maintenance man who wandered in.