

## **Political Transformation Begins with Personal Transformation**

### **The First Lobbying Campaign and Media Outreach on Microcredit**

...During 1985 the 50 RESULTS chapters would watch the video on Grameen Bank and then write their members of Congress on behalf of IFAD. The next year we prepared to have legislation introduced on microenterprise development, as it was called at the time, and in 1987 the legislation was introduced.

Over a one-year period between November 1986 and November 1987 the volunteers in RESULTS generated 100 editorials on the microenterprise legislation, not letters to the editor or op-ed pieces (there were more of those), but 100 editorials written by the newspapers themselves. That same year more than 200 members of Congress cosponsored the legislation. These are impressive numbers in any context, but all the more so because it was 1987 and virtually no one outside of Bangladesh had heard of microcredit, Muhammad Yunus, or Grameen Bank.

It is difficult to describe the levels of hopelessness and cynicism that must be overcome for ordinary citizens to reach out to members of Congress who don't seem like natural allies, or to get through to editorial writers who are more prone to speak to experts and often find difficulty writing about an obscure issue that isn't in the news. This, however, is part of the work that must be done if we are to seriously address issues like global poverty and climate change.

## **Political Transformation Begins with Personal Transformation**

The following story begins to paint a picture of the process of moving from hopelessness to action. The activist I am about to introduce to you had experience with the media which was far greater than most RESULTS volunteers, but I am sharing this story because of the process his group had to go through to reach out to a conservative member of Congress. Steve Valk, a long-time RESULTS volunteer, is now a member of the staff of the Citizens Climate Lobby, a RESULTS-styled citizen lobby focused on resolving climate issues. Until recently Steve had worked for decades designing features sections at the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* newspapers. Here is how Steve described his route into RESULTS.

*...There has always been within me a deep desire for social justice, to make what was wrong in the world right. I couldn't go by a crooked picture without straightening it out and I couldn't go by a problem without wanting to fix it.*

*...In 1984 I was an angry young man who wanted to change the world but couldn't see how. I was getting more involved in music and songwriting and wasn't particularly interested in some lobbying group that my friend Sara was involved with that was trying to do something about ending hunger. I thought it was nice that she was trying to do something, but I didn't want to waste my time on a hopeless cause. I would take her to her meetings and then pick her up afterwards. It wasn't until six months later that my curiosity got the better of me and I decided to go to a RESULTS meeting.*

*Being a journalist I'm inclined to approach most things with a skeptical nature. Being a journalist, I was also not sure how deeply to get involved with political causes, but I couldn't just leave that crooked picture alone, and when I realized that nobody else was going to straighten it out, I took a deep breath and dove in. Over the years I have come to terms with this because my position at the newspaper is one where I have absolutely no influence about what goes into the paper or how it is written. I design pages for the features sections, but it's somebody else who assigns and edits the stories and it's somebody else who writes the stories and takes the pictures. As I began to get involved with RESULTS I saw myself as a link between people who had important information that could save lives and the media that could make that information available to the public.*

*....I started believing I could make a difference. I've always been the kind of person who likes to 'get involved' with causes, but until RESULTS my involvement always seemed to have a Don Quixote-like quality. I dreamed the impossible dream only to be rudely awakened at some point.*

Valk was able to generate a wire story in 1985 on the funding squabble between the U.S. and OPEC that had the potential to kill IFAD and how Sara, the woman who would eventually become his wife, was able to generate an editorial in the newspaper. He was elated with his ability to use his contacts with the newspaper to get the right information to the right people, but he considered his greatest breakthrough with RESULTS to be the conversion of Congressman Pat Swindall, a conservative Republican from Georgia.

*Within weeks of Pat being sworn into office [in January 1985], four RESULTS volunteers, myself included, met with the Congressman to request that he co-sponsor and vote for the Famine Relief in Ethiopia bill that had just been introduced in Congress. One of the volunteers who did not meet with us for a breakfast practice session before the meeting, wound up being a loose cannon of sorts, insisting that we cut military spending to feed the hungry, putting the conservative Swindall in a defensive, so to speak, posture. Swindall made it clear that he didn't think the government should be involved in humanitarian aid and it was something best left to the churches and private sector to take care of. A few weeks later Pat was one of only 15 or so Congresspersons out of more than 400, who ended up voting against the famine relief bill and he made headlines giving a big speech about it on the floor of the House.*

Valk felt shame about his Representative's vote.

*Have you ever seen the fans of a very bad sports team who sit in the stands with bags over their heads because they are ashamed to be seen rooting for such losers? If politics were a sport and we were sitting in the stands watching our Congressman playing on the field, we would be wearing those bags on our heads over the shame we felt having Pat Swindall as a representative. Our thoughts and discussions about him were very negative,*

*and we pretty much wrote him off figuring our best chance was that maybe he would be defeated in two years.*

*But at the suggestion of RESULTS staff, we began to shift our thinking on Pat. There was this prayer that Newton Hightower had written to his member of Congress [in Houston, TX], Rep. Bill Archer, someone he had similar difficulties with two years before. We adapted it to Swindall. We added Swindall's name and it went:*

*Thank you God for Pat Swindall. We know that he is a good man who wants to do right in the world. We know that he struggles with the same problems we do: closing our hearts to those who don't agree with us. There are no thoughts or feelings that he has had that we haven't had and visa versa. We pray for all of us to have compassion for people in our country and far away, for rich and poor. We pray that Pat and we will be less frightened of each other. We pray our focus will be more to love and appreciate him and less to change him. Help us to remember that sharing love with the world is the highest contribution we can make and will lead to children being fed and the planet surviving. Forgive our righteousness and anger. Open our hearts and minds to find the next expression of love for Pat that he can receive.*

Valk goes on describes his group's breakthrough with Congressman Swindall, a breakthrough that took two years. We must expand systems of support that allow citizens to be this persistent and committed to breakthroughs.

*We eventually let go of our negative attitude toward Pat. Instead, we began to see him as a human being who, just like us, did not want to see people dying in the world from hunger and disease. All he needed was a little education. We began to show up at "Chat with Pat" sessions around the district. There were other people with other issues in the Congressional district who had bones to pick with Pat (we jokingly called the sessions "Spat with Pat"), and whenever they did, they didn't get anywhere. If anything, he stiffened his resolve and defended his position. When he got around to us he was visibly relieved to see us greeting him with a handshake and a smile instead of a scowl and a sharp tongue. Then we would give him a two-minute briefing on an issue such as IFAD. And when we started talking about enabling a farmer to grow a ton of wheat for a year for the same amount of money it would cost to send a ton of wheat one time, well, he started listening a little closer. Gradually a relationship of trust and respect was built.*

*In the Spring of 1987 RESULTS launched its microenterprise legislation with the Self-Sufficiency for the Poor Act. We decided it was time for an office visit with Pat, and four of us took off time from work to go see him. It was late afternoon and we must have been a sight sitting in his waiting room with a TV and VCR to show him the Grameen Bank video. Earlier in the day, feeling*

*very confident, I told Sara that after Pat agreed to cosponsor the legislation I would ask him if we could write an op-ed piece in support of the bill to appear under his name.*

*'I don't know Stephen, I think you'd be pushing it,' Sara responded.*

*But I figured once he's committed to the bill, what did I have to lose?*

*The four of us piled into a small office and set up the TV and tape. We all took a deep breath and the Congressman joined us. Everyone spoke brilliantly in the meeting. As we were showing the video, Pat was sitting on a desk, knees drawn under his chin, staring intently at the screen. We told him about the tremendous opportunity of the Self-Sufficiency for the Poor Act and asked him to become a cosponsor.*

*'I'd be delighted to be a cosponsor,' he said.*

*Sensing we were on a roll, I began to ask about the op-ed, but before the words were even formed in my mouth the Congressman spoke.*

*'You know,' he said, 'I think it's important on an issue like this that we try to build public support in the media. I have a column that appears in the local paper and I'm thinking maybe you can write a piece about this bill, and we can run it in my column. Do you think you could do something like that?'*

*I glanced over at Sara with a smile so wide it hurt. 'Pat I'd be more than happy to do it.' I was now ghostwriting for a man who two years earlier voted against famine aid for Ethiopia.*

*That experience changed me. I now see that everyone has the potential to do the right thing if given the opportunity. It's refreshing to see people as possibilities rather than obstacles.*

Steve Valk's story was one of hundreds as more than 200 members of the House and Senate cosponsored the legislation and more than 100 editorials were generated, two-thirds of them mentioning Grameen Bank.

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