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## The Disenfranchised Tell Their Tales

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During a presidential election season dominated by talk of change — from the top down — a new book shows how the disenfranchised in America are making a difference from the ground up.

“Your America: Democracy’s Local Heroes” is a collection of stories by broadcast journalists John Siceloff and Jason Maloney.

Each chapter is focused on an ordinary person who bucked the system or used it to his advantage to improve the lives of people in his community.

The book is based on NOW, a PBS program that highlights extraordinary community achievements. Siceloff is creator and executive producer; Maloney, who has also worked on the show, is a news and documentary producer.

As the debate about how much real change Sens. John McCain (R-Ariz.) and Barack Obama (D-Ill.) would enact if elected continues, Siceloff said the people in his book prove that Americans don’t have to wait on politicians to get things done.

“There is a widespread feeling that the folks elected to solve problems aren’t doing it quickly enough,” Siceloff said in an interview. “[These activists] aren’t waiting for America’s leaders to solve problems. They’re solving problems now.”

He contrasted the activism of today with that of the 1960s. Back then, people held protests, imploring politicians to take action and to listen to their grievances and proposals. Today, Siceloff noted, there is a new way of reaching out to those in office — activists are doing the legwork themselves, then reaching out to politicians to ask them to join the conversation.

“They’re saying, ‘we are creating change. Join with us to make bigger change happen,’” Siceloff said, adding that the process is changing the relationship between local activism and national politics.

Although each of the activists’ stories have already been shown on the television program, “Your America” delves deeper into their backgrounds, giving readers a sense of where these people came from and what they actually overcame to become community leaders.

For most of them, it was a personal hardship or injustice that prompted them to enact change for themselves and others in their situations.

“We often found that they were driven to help those nearest and dearest to them,” Siceloff said. “Often it was a very personal issue that got folks started.”

One such person is Wynona Ward, a Vermont woman whose violent past prompted her to break the cycle of abuse in her own family and to do the same for women and children in rural parts of the state by earning her law degree and reaching out to those with limited access to resources or support.

The stories span the country — a Florida lawyer who uses the system to push children through foster care and into adoptive families quickly, Montana ranchers who became active in the struggle to keep land in their state open and undeveloped, and an immigrant from Mexico who rallied his co-workers to fight for fair compensation and better working conditions.

The writing in “Your America” is straightforward and has a simple, almost broadcast style that makes for a quick but thoughtful read.

In addition to providing background on the activists’ lives, Siceloff also offers a quick history of the issues surrounding their causes.

When writing about attorney Katie Redford, who took on the major oil company Unocal for human rights violations in Myanmar, Siceloff gives a summary of the dismal political situation, as well as the plight of refugees who are stuck between Myanmar and Thailand, unable to go home but not permitted to create a new life in their border country.

These descriptions give context, adding weight to the story and providing a better sense of what has been achieved to better the situations. Occasionally, however, the historical synopses stray too far from the issue, breaking the momentum and distracting from an otherwise compelling read.

With many Americans frustrated by rising food and gas prices, among myriad other grievances, Siceloff said there is a tendency to become overwhelmed by bad news and cynical about politics. His hope is that people reading this book will see that the situation is not hopeless and that they can make improvements with their own initiative.

“In this moment, there are people taking action right now,” he said. “That’s an important message.”

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