

US Social Forum

Detroit — June 22-26, 2010

by Starhawk • photos by Jim Haber

JUNE 23 — WE'RE HERE!

I flew into Detroit last night with two wonderful women from the Hunters Point Family agency, a San Francisco group which our Earth Activist Trainings partners with. Lena Miller directs the agency and Jasmine Marshall runs the Peacekeeper program.

We arrived just at the moment Detroit's Riverfest culminated in a massive fireworks display. A million people went down to the river to watch — which made reaching our motel a challenge. We finally had to abandon our taxi and walk the last block, with all our bags.

We got there to find the streets humming with people, a party in progress in the parking lot, barbecues happening on patches of grass by the sidewalks, and the sky alight with the thunder and a rain of light and color.

We got settled and headed out to find food. I have to say it was a different experience for me, walking down the street in those crowds and crowds of people, mostly young, mostly black, all of them dressed to look good. The whole city was drenched in heat haze and pheromones, and I enjoyed seeing it a bit through the eyes of much younger women who were looking pretty good themselves — and definitely attracting far more male attention than I ever do on my own these days.

Jasmine, who is twenty-three, was so excited. "I can't believe it — all

these black people out on the streets, just chillin', having a good time, and nobody shuttin' it down! Why can't we have that in the Bayview?"

And it's true — with all the economic devastation of Detroit, there are thousands of people out here enjoying themselves, wearing short shorts and gold platform shoes. A trio of trumpeters in an empty lot blast out a riff. A couple of trombone players across the street answer them — and they play back and forth, a musical conversation in the street.

Why can't we have it in the Bayview? There's a long history that goes back to the bulldozing of San Francisco's Fillmore District back in the 60s for redevelopment, destroying a thriving and lively Black community. To the closing of the naval shipyard, once the biggest employer in the Bayview, and the resulting unemployment, poverty, and

the residues of toxic wastes. And most immediately, to the intertwined gang violence and police violence. More people die violently per capita in the Bayview than in Iraq, or so I've heard. The infant mortality rate in the Bayview is on par with Haiti or Bulgaria.

As I'm writing, Jasmine and Lena are gossiping and the conversation moves to all the young men they know who are dead. Jasmine says, "My whole age group is gone. All the boys I grew up with — they're all gone." Dead, or in prison.

We spend a lazy morning, sleeping in, and finally make our way down to Cobo Hall, the big convention center that houses registration for the Social Forum, then on to the march.

The march is quite wonderful — colorful, lively, not painfully loud, but mostly what's wonderful is the incredible diversity of people. As Lena puts it, "It's not only every type of person, but every shade and variety of every type." Black, white, Latino, Asian, Native American, every race, age, style of dress, and political persuasion seems represented. There are environmentalists carrying sunflowers and a contingent of domestic workers in magic T-shirts. There are a couple of anarchists with black flags and Revolutionary workers selling newspapers and big puppets of Martin Luther King with recordings of his speeches playing. A brass band plays



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and four young people in pink T-shirts dance. Two clowns walk by on stilts, and drummers play a samba beat.

The march is a beautiful vision of what a real social movement could be. Ironically, we march through downtown Detroit, an area blasted and blighted by the city's economic losses. Vast areas are simply empty — full of weeds, with here and there a burned-out carcass of a house. Beautiful stone churches, relics of a time when there was money and jobs, loom over vacant lots. The old Detroit Free Press building, a dignified stone castle, is now boarded over with a sign offering free rents to any enterprise that would venture to locate there. Faded signs grace the tattered marquees of boarded-over department stores. London had more signs of life after the blitz.

Indeed, it's hard to imagine any enemy nation inflicting more damage on a city than has been done here by capitalism at its most irresponsible and brutal.

Through the devastation winds this lively and beautiful march, a sign of hope and resilience. If there's any hope for our poor country and our battered world, any chance we can turn our direction around toward real justice and balance, it lies in the people here, this beautiful coming together across all the divides.

JUNE 24 — A NEW WORLD FROM THE ASHES OF THE OLD

Settling into the conference. We get up late, but I manage to catch most of a morning workshop led by an environmental network of youth — so sweet to sit in a circle with all these beautiful young people, so very diverse, and hear them make connections between social justice and environmental issues.

I run into Jim Haber, an old buddy from San Francisco who does interfaith organizing around the Nevada Test Site and peace and justice issues. He's asking me if any of the folks in the Bayview are interested in making the connection between the funding cuts for social issues and the war — when

a black woman of about my age who is sitting at a table taps us and points at her button, which says "A million a day".

"That's why I can't get a job," she says. "We're spending a million a day on those wars."

We show our video of the permaculture work in the Bayview, which you can see for yourself at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=3bdKgBt6LbE

Lena talks about Hunters Point Family, the agency she started when she was only twenty-three. She created a program for girls, Girls 2000, to help be a safe haven from the violence around them, to build their skills and self-esteem, and to provide the resources that might be lacking in their homes.

Lena is an impressive speaker. She's honest and passionate and people respond to her sense of vision, the same vision that drew me in to help support their work with the gardens.

Then Jasmine talks. She has such an engaging, confident, radiant personality, telling us about coming up in the program herself and now being a Case Manager for the girls. She runs the Girls Group and she's young enough to be kind of a big sister to them.

I talk about our Earth Activist Trainings and how we came to be involved in the Bayview. One part of EAT's mission statement says, "To bring the knowledge and resources of regenerative ecological design to communities with the greatest needs and fewest resources." When a friend introduced me to Lena, and I heard her vision of the Bayview becoming the "green jewel in the crown of the Emerald City," I knew we could support that work.

We talk about what has worked well in our collaboration — a strong, shared vision is the beginning. Respecting the community — coming in with questions, listening rather than slapping down ready-made solutions, employing the permaculture principle of thoughtful and protracted observation — all that is key.

Most of all, keeping the goal firmly on capacity-building for the community,

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on transferring knowledge and skills even when sometimes that means sacrificing efficiency or immediate results.

Then we open it up to questions and discussion from the audience. Aresh, who started Homes with Gardens in the Bronx, talks about some of the legal issues in New York and their efforts to defend community gardens.

Shea Howell talks about the Detroit Summer urban gardens and offers to take us to see them. A young woman who is organizing against mountaintop removal coal mining asks some thoughtful questions. All and all — a great time!

The evening, like everything, is double-scheduled. I catch some of the plenary to hear Grace Boggs, an amazing Detroit organizer now in her nineties. She and her husband, Jimmie Boggs, who is now dead, have been the center of much of the creative and transformative work here for decades.

She and other great organizers from Detroit talk about the movement

history of the city. The point they make, over and over again, is that Detroit is a strong center of resistance and resilience. With all that's happened to the city," Grace says, "we continue to come back with something new."

When we get chased out, finally, I end up back at the plenary sitting next to Jim Haber. We decide to go out to the Anchor Bar to hear David Rovics and Anne Feeney, and walk out in the rain. The bar is crowded and noisy, but I decide to have a beer. Up front a man with a guitar is singing a country-rock version of "Solidarity Forever" and everyone is standing and singing.

Someone grabs my hand and holds it up — it's Dave, whom I met on the Gaza Freedom March. We're all singing together, the whole crowded room, crammed with old comrades I've marched with so many times and with so many people I've never met but who have nonetheless been marching together, whether we knew it or not. We're singing that old song that raises the ghosts of so many marches and strikes and struggles, and I'm happy.

"We will build a new world from the ashes of the old," we sing, "Solidarity forever."

I believe it.

JUNE 25 — AN INSPIRING DAY

Some highlights from yesterday:

- Hearing Grace Boggs and Emmanuel Wallerstein, two elders of the social change movement. Most memorable quotes:

Grace: We have to use the negative to advance the positive.

Wallerstein: We want a world that's relatively democratic and relatively equal. I say 'relatively' because nothing is ever perfect.

- Lisa Fithian's organizing workshop, with slides from her union organizing work. I want my friends from the Bayview to hear her, because we may need to start a new form of organizing to protect our community garden from being bulldozed by developers. Check out Lisa's website www.organizingforpower.org for her own notes and lots of resources. A really incredible resource!

- Meeting my old friend Marta Benevides, who does community organizing in El Salvador. Reclaiming, my extended spiritual network, has had a long-term solidarity project to help support her work, ever since she came to a gathering of ours back in the 90s. Visit www.reclaiming.org/resources/elsal/circleoflove.html

We talked with some of the young people who have been working with Marta. In El Salvador, she's started an Ecohouse and a museum. She works with communities striving to build a culture of peace amidst the growing violence.

In El Salvador, as in Mexico, as in the Bayview, the lethal combination of drugs and violence opens the door to even more lethal police violence and intertwined corruption — and in El Salvador it's gotten much, much worse in the last few years.

A couple of the young men are from Williamsburg, Pennsylvania, another community plagued by violence. A Texas company is planning to move sixty thousand workers to Williamsburg to open up a huge natural gas field.

As we sit, one person after another comes by. When there's an open chair

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in the circle, it gets filled over and over again with another amazing person doing great work. My old friend Grove Harris turns up — she has been doing lots of interfaith work and was a major organizer of the World Parliament of Religions.

We go on to Grace Lee Boggs' ninety-fifth birthday party in the ballroom. It's a beautiful tribute to her life and work — and sweet to see how much she is loved and respected. Listening to Grace Boggs, connecting with the wonderful people she and her late husband James collected around them, I am struck by how unafraid they are to talk about love. With all the anger, our own frustrations and the violence we face, they still put love at the heart of their work. So do the other great organizers I know — Marta, Lisa, and Lena in the Bayview. Anger is real and vital but you can't sustain a life built on anger as its sole foundation.

Marta wants to dance — her style of organizing requires much dancing. I remember one great day when I visited

her in El Salvador. We were cleaning up and rebuilding a school to be used for technical training. But before we started work, we had a gathering and some of the organizers were honored and given certificates. Then a local band played. After that we put on some music and danced the Macarena. Later we worked — and blasted through a lot in a few hours. Finally we went to the beach and swam and played in the waves. At the end of the day, I led a ritual. By then we felt we had known each other forever. "If it's not fun, why do it?"

There's a sense of love and joy that permeates this gathering. Very little grumbling — although there are things we could grumble about — and lots of radiant delight. If we can knit these strands into a whole with a unified sense of purpose, what a power we can be!

JUNE 26 — A CONFESSION AND A GREAT DAY

I confess — I stayed so late at the party last night that I didn't make it up in time for the March for Clean Air.

What can I say? I could plead age, or asthma — the march is against the world's largest incinerator, which fills

the air with toxic smells — and I've been staving off an asthma attack since I got here. But really, I think you should just stop reading now and denounce me. Go ahead. You'll feel better, and so will I.

Okay, now that that's over with, let me give you some highlights of yesterday:

- Our morning workshop on Organizing for the Long Haul — a great morning hearing some of my own elders talk about what keeps them going.

- After a too-quick lunch, a workshop on Vision-Based and Solutions-Based organizing. We move outside under a shady tree, and talk about vision and story and drama in how we frame our issues. Our time runs short, but something comes clear to me that I've been pondering for a long time about reframing the story around Israel and Palestine — I promise to write more on that soon.

- At the end of the workshop, Shea steals me away for a boat ride. She's got an old inboard/outboard motorboat and we cruise down the river while a couple of the Detroit Summer folks make a music video. The river is blue and cool, the sun is hot, I even get a short nap and come back refreshed just in time for the ritual.

- We do a simple ritual at the Canopy Village, making an offering to the land, then calling in the elements by asking people who work on issues involving air, fire, water, earth, etc. to come into the center. I lead a short meditation, using an image Shea spoke about in the morning when she described being six years old, and seeing a spiderweb covered with dew illumined by the sun, and suddenly knowing what 'beautiful' meant.

We raise energy for the web of connections we have and are creating — like a spiderweb, we don't always see them until the light hits them just right. The forum has been like that light, allowing us to link up with others working



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on the same issues or facing the same challenges. And like that dew melting back to Earth, the energy from those links will flow into solid work and manifest change.

We imagine the water flowing, pooling underground, rising through springs to become streams and great rivers, bringing healing to the land and spilling out into the oceans, sending special healing to the Gulf. We dance a spiral, leaving the pattern on the grass, raise a cone of power and ground it back into the Earth, and end with gratitude to all we've invoked and to each other.

- By the time we find food and make our way to the party, it's after midnight. The party is spread over a whole street of warehouses, with lots of tables out on the streets and music and dancing inside.

Lisa and I enjoy cruising around

outside, seeing such a beautiful mix of people filling the space and enjoying themselves. We find Jasmine and Oya, another young woman, sitting at a table and join them. It's a joy just to watch the interactions around me — everyone

feeling good, a table of young black kids performing hip-hop, a couple in a long kiss, a mix again of every race and color.

Why can't we have this in San Francisco? Why can't we have it everywhere?



Starhawk is an activist, organizer, and author of many books. She teaches Earth Activist Trainings that combine permaculture design and activist skills. Visit www.starhawk.org

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