

Achieving the impossible: Stories of Courage, Caring, & Community
A book review by Bruce Bulloch

For the past year most of us have been following the Obama campaign, usually via TV and from the comfort of our couch. Recently, I stumbled upon a little book about people who have taken the “Yes we can” phenomenon to be more than a spectator sport.

“Achieving the Impossible: Stories of Courage, Caring and Community” (edited by Lois Marie Gibbs and published by the Center for Health, Environment & Justice) is a collection of first-hand accounts by people who suddenly found themselves thrust into the role of community organizer, usually because no one else was willing to take the lead.

“Achieving the Impossible” is determined to press home two points. First, that no matter what position you’ve managed to attain in American society, you can’t insulate yourself from serious problems that someone is going to have to fix. “Malcolm in the Middle” star Jane Kaczmarek walked out of Neiman Marcus while shopping for her red-carpet outfit to find herself face-to-face with a homeless woman. Lois Marie Gibbs was enjoying her life as a suburban housewife until she was confronted by the revelation that her neighborhood sat on 20,000 tons of chemical waste in what soon would become known as the notorious Love Canal development in upstate New York. Ed Wiley had fewer expectations about life. As a miner in West Virginia, he thought he was hardened to the grime and pollution of the coal industry until he saw his granddaughter playing in her schoolyard under the shadow of a toxic sludge pond.

Second, considering the sometimes-cynical nature of politicians and corporate lawyers, the “someone” who does the fixing may end up being you.

The strength of “Achieving the Impossible” comes from its very human voice. These are the stories of people who have little in common except that they are all facing an urgent situation and all starting from square one. “Achieving the Impossible” isn’t so much a “how to” book as a “how I did it” book. The storytelling can be a little uneven, but the solutions these people found are compelling. Some are creative: Jane Kaczmarek organized her Hollywood friends into auctioning their red-carpet wardrobes for charity. Some are cunning: Lois Marie Gibbs learned hard lessons from her corporate adversaries about manipulating the agenda of public meetings to ensure that the media cover your side of the issue and not the other. Ed Wiley simply set out walking, all the way to Washington D.C. This was, after all, about his granddaughter.

What “Achieving the Impossible” is not is light summer reading. You’ll read about pollution showing up in places you wouldn’t think possible (You may find yourself looking under your beach chair expecting to see puddles of chemicals).

But, if you’ve found yourself facing a threat to your community, “Achieving the Impossible” offers a dollop of inspiration. It gives you confidence that social change isn’t rocket science and ordinary people can achieve important things.

I don’t imagine “Achieving the Impossible” hitting The New York Times best-seller list, so I think I’ll send my copy to Lou Dobbs. Dobbs likes to ask the question, “Don’t we deserve a government that works?” “Achieving the Impossible” will introduce him to people who didn’t sit around waiting for an answer.