

Award: Mike Doyle Activist of the Year Award
Recipient: Jake Narup
Presenter: Andy Bloeser

Good evening.

As everyone here tonight realizes, community organizing is a special life choice. Whether we are involved with a community for a relatively short time or devote our lives to one, the choice is significant. It tells us who we are. Community organizers often refer to this life choice very simply as “the work.” And the work is sacred. The work is your bond to the people with whom you collaborate in shared struggle. It is through doing the work that you learn who is for real and who is not. You look around you and you see who is putting in the time and effort—doing the things that few may see but which need to be done and done well.

It is my privilege tonight to recognize someone who has distinguished himself through doing the work. It is my privilege tonight to present Mr. Jake Narup with the Mike Doyle Activist of the Year Award.

I met Jake in the place where I first learned that the work is sacred—in the North End of Champaign, in the neighborhood around 5th and Hill Streets, where Ameren’s pollution and disrespect to the people remain problems of first-order concern. I met Jake when he became involved with the 5th and Hill Neighborhood Rights Campaign, and we began working together as door canvassers. Like with so many parts of the work, you can’t fake it as a door canvasser.

For those of you unfamiliar with what door canvassing involves, let me tell you. It requires time and it requires a consistent commitment. As a door canvasser, the part of the work that you are responsible for is in a way very simple. You need to show people that you are genuine, that you can be trusted when you speak, and that you know how to listen. This requires knowing how to be in the moment with someone—to give them your undivided attention. Even if the person you are talking is the 30th person you’ve talked with that day, after 3 hours of walking door-to-door. Like I said, door canvassing takes time.

When you're spending your time going to door-to-door, you aren't multi-tasking. You're focused, moment-for-moment on the person or people with whom you are talking and nothing else. That's how you prove yourself to people. And that's how Jake began to prove himself to people. I know, because I've been there to see it.

From day one, Jake showed he could create a moment with people on the doorstep. And every day since, he has come prepared to make that happen. Again, a door canvasser's responsibility is to generate trust and maintain trust every time you come to the door. That requires knowing your facts forwards and backwards so that you develop a reputation for having accurate information and an ability to answer questions. Jake joined the 5th and Hill Neighborhood Rights Campaign three years into the struggle. He had to learn about the extent of the pollution, the potential risk to health posed by the pollution, and how people might be exposed to the pollution. He had to learn about how Ameren was intending to leave polluted groundwater in the neighborhood by hiding behind the fine print of a little known city ordinance. He had to know what people could do to fight that. And just as often as not, he had to explain it to me so that I was prepared to talk with people about it. He's never let me down. In fact, he's made me better at what I do.

Jake's contribution to the work extends even beyond door canvassing. When Jake joined the 5th and Hill Neighborhood Rights Campaign, he not only took the time to learn about the issue. He also helped produce new insights about the size and scope of the problem at hand. He did research on the toxins Ameren is responsible for in the neighborhood and prepared plain-language handouts to distribute in the neighborhood about possible health effects.

I mentioned a city ordinance a moment ago that was allowing Ameren to leave polluted groundwater behind. Here in Champaign the residents working on the 5th and Hill Campaign spearheaded a major victory when they convinced the city council to call for a repeal of that ordinance. But in other communities around the state of Illinois, ordinances that allow polluters to leave toxins in groundwater remain on the books. And is likely that many communities do not even realize what's happening. It is even likely that many communities do not even realize that companies like Ameren are responsible for pollution affecting

their neighborhoods. And if there's one thing we've learned here in Champaign, it's that you can't rely on companies like Ameren, or the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency to bring these matters to light. So Jake has taken the lead on some research being done by CCHCC to identify where polluters are using city ordinances to leave contamination behind and to identify where else in Illinois pollution like Ameren's may be harming people.

The fact of the matter is that not every community has a 5th and Hill Neighborhood Rights Campaign. The residents of the neighborhood around 5th and Hill Streets have created something very special here by getting organized and staying organized. They helped the city council see the injustice happening here, and motivated the council to take action. They have put a spotlight on the issue. And the work that is happening here has the potential to help other communities, where companies like Ameren would otherwise keep people in the dark, while the Illinois EPA sits on its hands. Jake's research to identify these other communities across Illinois was undertaken to extend the efforts begun by people in this room tonight. When we say the work is sacred, it's because people like M.D. Pelmore, and Ebbie and Magnolia Cook, and Eileen Oldham, Beverly and Mel Lacey, and other 5th & Hill resident leaders make it so.

And while Jake Narup is as fine a researcher and canvasser as you will find, and while he makes tremendous contributions to the work of the 5th and Hill Campaign, his foremost quality is this. He recognizes that his own talents are given both direction and meaning by the people who live in the neighborhood around 5th and Hill. Their knowledge and wisdom and toughness is what makes the contributions of folks like Jake and I possible. Jake gets that. He brings that ethic to the work every day, and that above all is why he is deserving of our recognition tonight.

Mr. Narup, it is an honor to present you with the Mike Doyle Activist of the Year Award. Sincerely, thank you for all you do.