

# HOW TO CHANGE SOCIETY

Former Seattle Councilman Nick Licata, author of 'Becoming a Citizen Activist,' says everyone has the potential to make a difference. And he is bringing his message to Portland.

BY ISRAEL BAYER  
STAFF WRITER

**N**ick Licata is a lifelong political activist who spent 18 years as a Seattle City Councilman.

His early activism involved work on anti-redlining and poverty issues in the early 1980s in Seattle. During his tenure as a city councilman, he has been an avid supporter of low-income people and progressive causes.

Licata will be speaking and promoting his new book, "Becoming a Citizen Activist," at 7:30 p.m. Thursday, May 19, at Powell's Books on Hawthorne. The book is described as a playbook for citizen activists wanting to improve the world around them. It doesn't disappoint.

**Israel Bayer:** You say in your opening to the book, "You don't have to be a Marvel comic book superhero to change the world. You don't even have to be a saint, a revolutionary, a political leader or a community organizer." Say more.

**Nick Licata:** I hesitated in using the word activist in the book title. I think sometimes people don't realize that we all have the potential to be activists. I think what may hold some people back from trying to change their immediate environment is that the tasks ahead of us look so daunting. It's like climbing a large mountain. The first step is recognizing that you can actually change political and social environments. A long journey starts one step at a time. Any time you begin a journey, the first step is usually the hardest because you're going to think of a thousand reasons of why there's something else to do first.

**I.B.:** In your book, you talk a lot about movement building in local government. Talk about moving people in power and elected officials closer to your position on progressive issues.

**N.L.:** One of the things that I discovered being inside of government is that many people get elected really wanting to make change. You don't get elected to office to become a bureaucrat. Many times bureaucrats are a bigger hurdle to overcome solving problems than the big, bad corporations, but there's a different reason for that.

A reason most politicians don't follow through on what they promise is that they don't know how to get there. They become frustrated. Also, water runs downhill. It's much easier to start taking larger contributions from fewer people the longer you stay in office. You start talking to a narrower stream of people and are informed by a smaller group of people you trust. It becomes easier to follow this route because of life, time or money crunches. People in

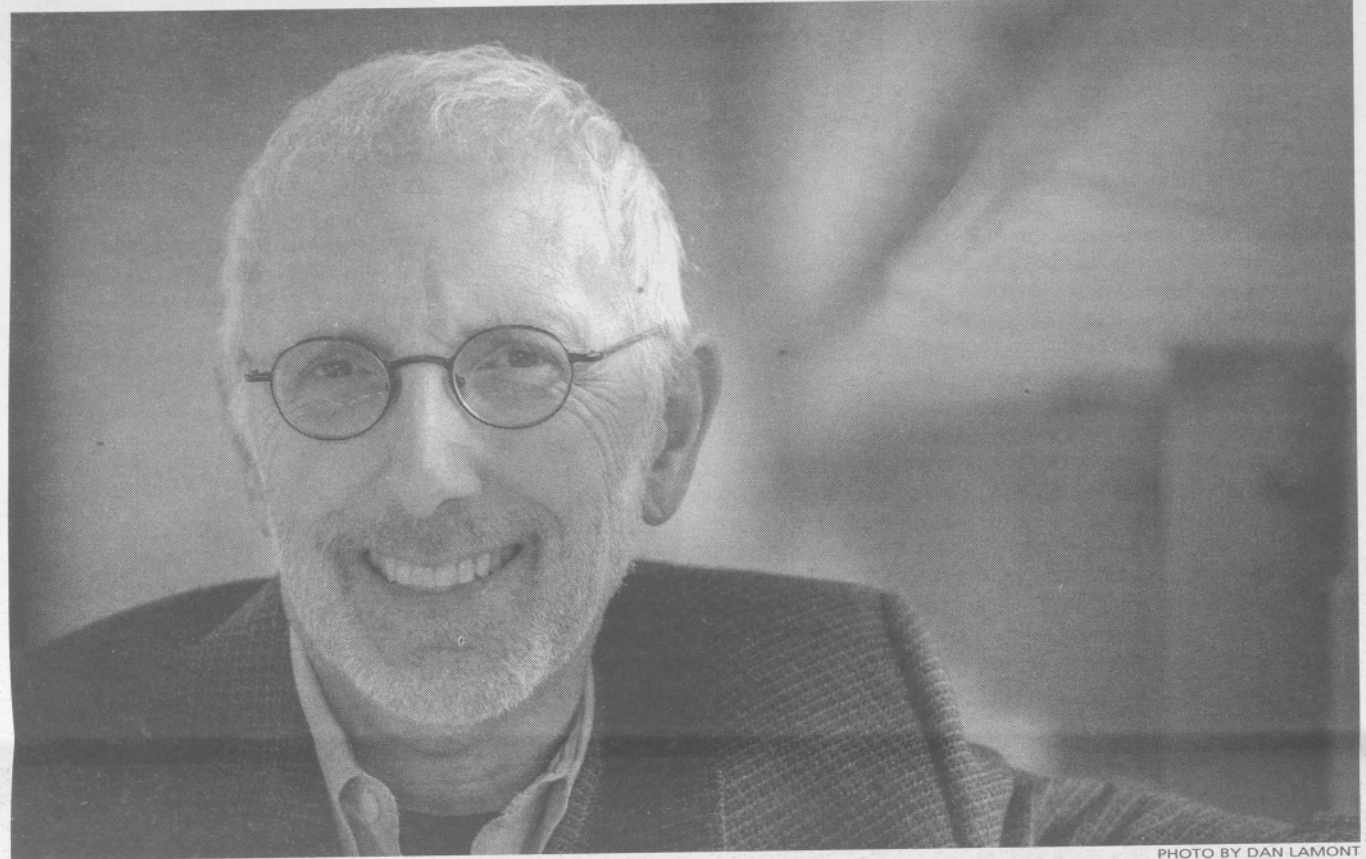


PHOTO BY DAN LAMONT

Nick Licata will talk about his book, "Becoming a Citizen Activist," at 7:30 p.m. Thursday, May 19, at Powell's Books on Hawthorne.

power typically have more powerful networks. A lot of people get elected to office as idealists, but they become more practical. Over time the practicality begins to overshadow their idealism. In the end, it ends up hurting progressive movements overall because then elected officials can't deliver on their promises and even worse yet, begin to drift off in other directions.

Part of my message for citizens that run for office and get elected is don't walk away from the people that got you into office, and my message to citizens: Don't walk away from people in office. You have to build and sustain authentic relationships.

**I.B.:** You spent 18 years as a Seattle city councilman. Were there times you lost your way and had to reassess where your values were?

**N.L.:** It is a scary process. One of the things I tried to do was tell myself every election I wasn't going to run for office again and that life would go on. I would assume that I would either not run or not get re-elected. It's the opposite of optimism. It's like, OK, this is the only time I'm going to be here so I'm going to do what I want to do or what the larger community pushes me to do. Every politician worries about being re-elected. It's a job that you're

up for review and have a new interview every two to four years.

**I.B.:** You said, "Many times bureaucrats are a bigger hurdle to overcome solving problems than the big, bad corporations." Talk more about that. Tell us how you define bureaucrat and why they become a barrier in creating real social change.

**"There's never going to be any progress without hope. In the end, the final element you have for social change is your attitude."**

**NICK LICATA,**  
AUTHOR OF  
'BECOMING A CITIZEN  
ACTIVIST'

**N.L.:** The term "bureaucrat" certainly has a negative connotation. And I don't try to use it to describe staff. However, I have found in my 18 years in government that sometimes, all too often, unfortunately, central staff not directly accountable to an elected official see things through a narrow focus: how to get something done without taking into account what is best for the public or those who might be negatively impacted.

Perhaps they have become jaded over time as to how to look at things differently. They tend to do things the way they have always been done. And therefore that is the right way. They are not risk-takers, and because they are not risk-takers and they are not rewarded for being that way, they tend to lead newly elected officials down the path of caution, pointing to why something cannot work, like providing paid sick leave or banning plastic bags. It's not

that they are conservative or liberal, but rather they most often see the status quo as working so don't rock the boat. Because of that attitude and frame of mind, they have a very nuanced yet powerful way of shaping issues that discourages challenging the status quo.

**I.B.:** It feels like the same conversation is happening in cities up and down the West Coast about the issue of homelessness and massive rental increases. What are your thoughts on the current climate and ways we can address the growing need?

**N.L.:** We have to be more open to encampments. It's just a reality. It's not a final strategy. The battle then, of course, is that neighborhoods come in and say we don't want encampment in our neighborhoods.

The debate about affordable housing has to be a very focused and visible support for the lowest strata of people surviving on our streets and in low-income housing, our most vulnerable.

As you get pushback from neighborhoods and others, the response has to be creating more subsidized units so more people aren't on our streets. I know the argument from the market-rate developers is that we just need more market-rate housing built and the reality is that doesn't solve the problem we have in front of us by any stretch of the

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