

CHAPTER 5

Chicago

'I want every child to have the chance to learn to read.'

After college, Barack took a job in a big business in New York. He had his own office and money in the bank. But he didn't want that life.

He decided to become a community worker. He knew things in America needed to change. The White House* needed to change. Government needed to change. He thought change could come from people in communities. And he wanted to help in one of those communities.

After many letters asking for a job – and very few replies – Barack finally found a job in Chicago. He arrived in Chicago in 1983 as a community worker. Chicago had its first black mayor**, Harold Washington, and the black community was full of hope.

His first job was to talk to ordinary people. He had to ask questions and listen to their answers. What worried them? What did they want to change?

There was a housing project on the South Side of Chicago called Altgeld Gardens. It was a good place to start. People there remembered when it was a happy place. Children played outside and families met in the park on holidays. But then the jobs went and a lot of the families left the area. Now the children didn't play outside. There were always groups of teenagers, doing nothing. Nobody took care of the houses. People left old cars on the streets.

* The President of the United States lives and works in the White House.

** The mayor is the leader of a city's government.

Barack worked hard. He planned meetings, he talked to people, he asked about their problems. But it wasn't easy.

Barack met a woman called Ruby. This woman was worried about her son. The week before, there was a gun fight in the street. Someone killed Ruby's son's best friend outside his own house. Barack set up a meeting. He invited church leaders, people from the area and the police chief*. But the meeting didn't go well. Only thirteen people came. The police chief didn't come. But Ruby wasn't surprised. When did anything ever change?

* * *

Barack and another worker had a new idea. They held a meeting in the street. Three of them stood on a windy street corner in late autumn. Nobody came at first. Then people slowly came out of their houses. The group on the street grew bigger until there were about twenty people.

'What problems do you talk about around your kitchen table?' they asked them. For almost an hour, people talked about the buses, the empty houses and the old cars.

Barack held more street corner meetings. Soon there were about thirty people coming every time.

* * *

The Mayor had offices ('MET' offices) to help people get jobs all around the city. There was no MET office in Altgeld, and they really needed an office! He called the head of the MET offices, Cynthia Alvarez. She agreed to come to a meeting. Barack and his helpers invited everybody and the churches helped too. A hundred people came. Ms Alvarez promised to open a MET office in the area in six months' time. And she did! Barack was beginning to see that things could really change.

* The police chief is the head of the police in the area.