

David Hahn-Baker (1959-Present)

Founder and President

Inside/Out Political Consultants

"Know your own goals! The clearer you are on what you want to accomplish, the more likely you are to succeed. Do not be afraid to make mistakes E." David Hahn-Baker, 2005.

Overview

Hahn-Baker is the Founder and President of Inside/Out Political Consultants. An independent national consulting firm based in Buffalo, NY, Inside/Out works with national and local organizations across the country to address the intensifying environmental crisis. Hahn-Baker's organization has worked with numerous local and national environmental organizations, including: Community Action Organization of Erie County; Earth Day Network; Buffalo Foundation; Tides Foundation; National Religious Partnership for the Environment; American Resources Information Network; EarthShare; League of Conservation Voters; National Wildlife Foundation; Lawyer's Committee for Civil Rights Under Law; Greenpeace USA; Southern Organizing Committee. Hahn-Baker has also taught graduate and undergraduate classes at the University of Michigan and George Washington University. Additionally, Hahn-Baker was instrumental in the development of the Environment Health Advisory Network at the State University of New York at Buffalo.

This interview was conducted in 2010.

Early Life and Education

The second of two children, David Hahn-Baker was born in Chicago, Illinois in 1959. Hahn-Baker graduated from Princeton University in 1981 with a bachelor's degree in political science. Hahn-Baker says that growing up in Chicago greatly influenced his interest in the environmental field. Also influential was the time he spent outside the city, where he attended camp every summer from the time he was 12 until he was 19 years old. His fondness for being outdoors led Hahn-Baker to become a camp counselor while in high school, and also led him to participate in Outward Bound, a wilderness-based educational organization, during his time at Princeton. His interest in the environment is complimented by an interest in politics, which his sixth grade teacher introduced him to. The teacher, noticing that Hahn-Baker was bored with the class, gave him the book, *Boss*, by Mike Royko to read. "That was [a] key [experience] it was the first political tract I had ever read," says Hahn-Baker.

Career

In 1982, Hahn-Baker received his first job after graduating from college. He was hired by the National Clean Air Coalition, a group of mainstream environmental organizations working together to protect and expand the Clean Air Act. Hahn-Baker was responsible for working in the National Clean Air Coalition office to provide information to lobbyists and congress persons regarding the Clean Air Act. While in this position, Hahn-Baker was able to work with people involved in grassroots environmental movements around the country. He enjoyed his job because it allowed him to “pay the bills” while working to leave the world “in as good of shape as I [Hahn-Baker] found it.”

Hahn-Baker has continued to work towards improving sustainability in the world. For the past fifteen years, he has been the president of his own political consulting firm, Inside/Out Political Consultant, in Buffalo, New York. Hahn-Baker says that his firm is able to help national environmental groups improve their networks with local groups. His firm also assists foundations in their development of programs to support environmental protection. “A big part of my business is helping conventional environmental organizations do a better job with diversity issues and outreach,” says Hahn-Baker. He was involved in the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit. Hahn-Baker felt that the summit was important for people of color to “make demands, educate themselves and to be involved in environmental issues impacting their communities.” Hahn-Baker says that as people of color reach out and expand their environmental movements, it is crucial that conventional environmental groups respond positively and not as though they [conventional environmental groups] are doing people of color a favor. He says that conventional environmental groups must begin to see that there is as much a benefit to themselves as to people of color when they (the conventional environmental groups) are involved with environmental justice work.

In the early 1990s, Hahn-Baker was invited to teach a course on Environmental Advocacy at the University of Michigan’s School of Natural Resources and Environment SNRE (he filled in for Professor Bunyan Bryant, a faculty at SNRE, while Bryant was on sabbatical). Later, he taught at the University of Buffalo (in a social sciences interdisciplinary program) for four years and at George Washington University for four years. As a teacher, Hahn-Baker taught many sections of different campaign courses, as well as a full course on community organizing and the environment. Hahn-Baker says in a jovial tone, “I like the variety because I have a short attention span.”

Hahn-Baker also works as a chair for the city of Buffalo’s Pest Management board (BPMB) one of his greatest achievements. The board’s mission is to reduce the city’s use of and dependence on synthetic toxic chemicals. Hahn-Baker has chaired the board for about nine years and has been a member for fifteen. During his time with the pest management board, it has succeeded in getting the city to stop using the pesticide Sevin – a broad-spectrum insecticide. Eight city council districts have stopped using the pesticide and the last district plans to discontinue its use soon. Hahn-Baker says that there are three phases to the board’s work: reactive, low-lying fruit (taking advantage of existing opportunities), and the proactive phase. Though BPMB has been successful using all three types of strategies, it was the use of phase-three strategies that resulted in city phasing out its use of toxic chemicals.

Advice to Young Professionals

Hahn-Baker has this advice for minorities considering a career in the environment, “Know your own goals! The clearer you are on what you want to accomplish, the more likely you are to succeed. Do not be afraid to make mistakes, people understand that you learn from them and the mistakes make you a better person and professional.”