

Anyone Can Be An Organizer — Transcript

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Music: [fiddle and mandolin playing]

Host: This is Rural Roots Rising by the Rural Organizing Project, a monthly podcast created by and for rural Oregonians who are creatively and courageously building stronger and more vibrant communities for a just democracy. My name is Courtney Neubauer. I'm an organizer with the Rural Organizing Project and I will be your host for this episode. The theme of today's episode is Anyone Can Be An Organizer. Today we will hear from Brenda Flores with Raíces in Stanfield, Umatilla County, Juan Navarro with Here to Stay in the Mid-Willamette Valley and Monica Pearson with Indivisible North Coast Oregon in Astoria. Both Brenda and Juan were Rural Organizing Fellows, a program focused on building up and supporting rural community organizers, which you will hear them talk about during their interviews. In rural Oregon, we believe in fairness and looking out for our neighbors. Brenda, Juan and Monica are working with their neighbors because they wanted to create safe communities for all. First we hear from Brenda,

Brenda: So I live in a small town in Umatilla County called Stanfield, Oregon. It's really small. Like there's only one light signal and there's only like one main road and we have a gas station. It has never grown. They grow a lot. Corn, Mint, uh, in that area. Mainly Hermiston is known for their watermelons. And Chile farms. That's how you say it. Um, but yeah, it's a lot of foods. I feel like it has a lot of room for growth. Um, and that's one reason why I went back home because growing up everyone has that feeling where they're like, Oh, I can't wait to leave and I just want to get out of this area. But then you leave and then you're like, Oh, you know I kind of do want to go back. So that's how it was for me. Like, um, I left and then I saw everything that was going on in the Western side of Oregon, like with organizing, um, for the Latinx community. And I wanted that for the Eastern side of Oregon just because my family's there. And then there's other families that have like the same background. So I decided to go back to be closer to my family. See my siblings grow up and also make a change.

Monica: I am Monica Pearson. I am an ROP board member. I live in Astoria, Oregon. Um, locally I'm involved with Indivisible North Coast Oregon. Uh, I moved to Astoria about three years ago from Denver, Colorado and we actually moved because my husband got a job here. Um, he's the library director in Astoria. That's kind of what keeps us here. haha I mean employment, but we also do love it. Like since we moved here, we moved from a big city and we were a little hesitant what it would be like living in a rural community. Um, but we both love it. We've acclimated very quickly, got super involved in all kinds of things locally. Um, and it really feels like home now.

Juan: My name is Juan Navarro. So I'm from the Willamette Valley area. Um, I'm specifically in the Salem area, so it was small town outside of Salem and one of, uh, the landscape is just like any other really small town all around a big city. It's gets this, uh, portrayal of being small town, old, good old American hardworking, which knida often translates into very conservative. So I lived in that area since I was three years old, so that's 20, almost 24 years. And I, what brought me here was, well, kind of a little backstory of why I'm here. It, I, I went there because I had off family that lived there and me and my parents immigrated, uh, to the United States when I was three years old. I needed six surgeries to kind of be able to walk and through the grapevine. They were able to find, um, health care options for me to get the surgeries and not go bankrupt in Portland. So

we decided to be stationed ourselves in, in Oregon. Originally. We weren't supposed to stay in Oregon, uh, that long. I was just supposed to get the surgeries, go back to Mexico, be good. But at that time I already knew English. I was already doing really well in school. My siblings were born in the United States, so we already had a mixed status family and my parents were starting to get decent paying jobs for not being citizens. And that's kinda what kept me there. As a youth being in a town that doesn't reflect what you, what you value, it's very hard to really love it. And for now, uh, I don't want ever really want to go back in, organize there. Um, but now I'm slowly, as I've been a fellow, I've been more comfortable coming back to the area and like advocating and becoming the fullest of myself to transform that area into what it could be. And my siblings still are in the area and I know that I have to organize as much as I can to make their experiences a lot better than were.

Host: In 2018, Oregon voted down Ballot Measure 105, which tried to appeal Oregon's Sanctuary Law. The law prevents the use of local resources for federal immigration policies and protects against unfair targeting, interrogating and detaining of Oregonians simply because they are perceived to be undocumented. Rural Oregonians were able to defeat Measure 105 by talking with their neighbors about how it takes years and thousands of dollars to get legal immigration status in this country. For those who are in the country without legal status, there is no way under our current system to gain legal residency. Even if they have lived here, most of their life, are married to a U S citizen or have citizen children. Carrying the momentum from that victory forward. Communities across the state lobbied their legislators to successfully pass Driver's Licenses for All in June, 2019. The ability to drive legally is a core everyday need, especially for rural Oregon families. As we take our kids to school, commute to work and get groceries where there's often little to no public transit available, this legislation will make Oregon roads safer because driver's licenses will be accessible to everyone who is tested and insured. We begin with Brenda who worked on these policies as part of her project during the rural organizing fellowship.

Brenda: So my project was to create an organization in the area because a lot of organizations that do a lot of immigrant rights are all in the Western side of Oregon, so Portland and Salem and there's no movement in our area, like the Eastern side, uh, the Umatilla County. And in that area there's a lot of farm workers. Um, and who are immigrants as well, so they don't have that kind of representation. I decided with my project, I wanted to start up an organization, um, because whenever I did ask organizations to come down to the Umatilla County, they never wanted to because they said that it was too far or they didn't have connection. And it's like, well you have me as a connection so we could still do something. But they always had like excuses. So I was kinda fed up about that. So Raíces isn't affiliated with the one from Texas. Cause there's one in Texas that we didn't know about. Um, but the reason why we chose that name is because Raíces means roots and in our area it's agricultural. So roots ties up and also everyone, um, in our organization, our grassroots organization, we all grew up here. Like we all came back to our roots cause we all went to college and then we just came back. So then we thought it would be a perfect name for our group. I found a group of people who kind of had the same idea when we started organizing for Measure 105, um, to vote against measure 105, because in Independence, Oregon, I believe there was three, um, Latino citizens eating at a restaurant and, uh, a cop racially profile them, arrested them and said that

they were undocumented and they weren't. So, um, one of the persons like sued them. And in our area, uh, it's well known that the Umatilla County sheriff is very, um, against immigrants and he has a lot of strong Republican views. So we felt like that was definitely gonna affect our people. And they're already afraid to be driving around.

Monica: I don't know if it was the first time I was organizing, but it's the first time I organized in Oregon. Um, and I actually was, it was the first time that I was in charge of it. Like I'd helped with other events before, but I was the main person for organizing a, actually it was with ROP, um, to do a know your rights session. Um, so it involved like finding a venue and you know, all the logistics of it and the marketing. And um, so that is the first time and it was little scary. Like I didn't, I had no idea what I was doing. All I had was like the name of a person that, um, had a movie theater that might let us use it. So I kind of went from there and just it, it, but then it really did kind of become easy. And then once you do that once and you know, a person, then it made it easier. Like the next time we had events, like I kind of very quickly started networking and figuring out like who to call or who knew somebody. And I do think in rural towns it's almost easier to network because you're pretty much always going to know somebody that knows somebody. Um, the and, or you know, like they know of a guy or so, and you can usually figure out a way to get connected to them. Um, and because I think we're all small town too, people are way more willing. Like we do all of our organizing here. We have no budget. We have absolutely no, like there's never money at all. Um, but people are just willing to sponsor us. And you know, we have meetings at local restaurants and you know, us buying coffee is kind of our rent for using the space kind of thing. So, um, I dunno, I, and I've said before, like I don't feel like an organizer, but I know that I am, you know, it's just, it doesn't feel like that cause it actually feels like you're just kind of talking to friends and getting the word out and like you're just part of the community. Most of the work that I enjoy the most is actually the partnerships with the lower Columbia Hispanic council in town. And I mean, what I feel the strongest about is making sure that everybody's treated equally. And, um, but in this, in Astoria, it's a lot of white people, you know, there is a, there is a Latino community. Um, there are a lot bigger than I think people realize that they are, but there is a lot of separation, you know, like it's not really crossing, you know, in community the way that I would like to see it. Anyway, we had organized a rally, um, and I did it in partnership with the Lower Columbia Hispanic Council, but we, it was the first like joint rally that we both were, we advertise it as co-sponsoring, you know, like it was the first real partnership. It was like a breakthrough really. And it, it really was probably equal allies and members of the Latino community at the rally. Um, you know, people were playing music and you know, it was, it was a great example of, you know, kind of a combination of trying to build this partnership. But since then, um, like I feel like we're really on the same page and like they will call me if there's something that they want support with, with my group. And you know, I'm kind of like the go between person, but um, people showed up for the rally that like we had never seen before. So that was, that was, that felt really good.

Juan: I have actually haven't been around organizing as long as people might think I have only been around for five years and, and that's when I was 22 years old. So I never really cared. And I know that sounds horrible, but I didn't, I really didn't. How was I was Latino male. I was told to just do your work, work hard, go home, take care of the family. Nothing much. I didn't have those battles when I was younger, where I was up against a

racist teacher or something like that. I was very reserved. I didn't care. So my first experience comes at Western Oregon where, where I had to help with the presentation actually I had to organize a presentation about like undocumented students. And it was the first time I had to speak and I was scared because I didn't understand. I was like, there's only going to be me and no one's gonna understand my story, no, no one's going to care about me. They just want to tokenize me. But I go into the room and there's like 30 people that were just like me. They were DACA. They were never undocumented, residents. They were like non-citizens. They understood the struggle and that was, that was the best feeling in the world. Cause I was really lucky that I got to be my first experience of coming out to a large number of people. Uh, coming out of the shadows per se was around people like me. Um, and that ever since that day, I've been emboldened to do what I can for them, for that community. What keeps me doing this work? I mean, I've got a master's in higher ed. I want to help people and knowing that I can help my parents get a driver's license because I started, I started getting active in organizing when the, when the driver's license didn't pass in 2014 and after that I wanted to do right for my parents. I wanted to do right for them. They're still, they're still in the same area they've always lived in. So when everyone in the town where mom works likes her, but then they've all voted against the driver's license, it hurts. It really hurts. You can pump, you can punk me all you want and I'll respond and I'll do my thing, but you do not treat my parents that way. You not dehumanize them in any way. My parents sacrificed so much for me and now I have a masters. I'm working and as far as what keeps me going in the community too, there's another, there's another, there's another undocumented youth that their parents need the help too. One of the touching stories about what made me keep going was when I was doing the Causa day of action lobbying day in the, in March for the HB 2015 , for the driver's license and there was a lot of people from Albany that came up. They took the day off from, from work and they worked in the fields. They were like, I want to be safe. I'm here to talk to legislators and with field workers want to want to do that. When field workers want to have their whole families around, that's special. It's more special than us being young and privileged and like that. We know the issues and we care and we fight, but they have everything to lose. We have a support network that knows us. We're safer and we're not completely safe of course, but, knowing that they risked everything, that means a lot and that's what keeps me going.

Host: All of these organizers began by seeing a need in their community and connecting with others to build power. In this next section, we will hear Brenda and Monica both talk about meeting new people through canvassing, which is going door to door talking with folks at their homes or businesses while Juan highlights how engaging in elections isn't just about turning in your ballot. We begin with Brenda,

Brenda: we decided to uh, bring awareness about the measure 105 in our area. Cause whenever we would bring it up to people they didn't know what it was about. They didn't know what was going on and that was a huge problem. We would do door to door canvassing. We would tell them about measure 105 and they were pretty surprised and then we would get them to vote, which a lot of them, it was their first time voting. And in our area also like the voting is pretty low. So it was great to see, um, that there was a lot of first time voters and it was good to see that it failed because then they, it made them feel like they made a difference. Cause I feel like, well a lot of the things I do because

with my family I wouldn't, with the things that I went through, I would wish like someone would have helped us through things. But then I also think of other, um, other families that are going through the same thing and probably wish, like they had that same help as well. Like that I want, I feel like sometimes some organizers like doing things just to get the credit. But I mean I don't really mind about the credit. I feel like that's how I was in the beginning. Well before this, like when I first started organizing in college, like I wanted that credit. Like, because I would see other people getting praise and it's like, where's my praise? I did work, but now I'm glad that my mindset shifted and I'm kind of okay with not getting that recognition because in the end it's all about the impact that the community feels and the change that the community community is feeling. Um, and that they start feeling empowered and start taking charge.

Monica: In organizing. I've definitely had to work outside of my comfort a lot, but I think that I've grown the most doing it. Um, like for example, canvassing, which sounds like, I mean, I guess a lot of organizers like do a ton of canvassing, but that's like not my thing at all. I will get up and lead a training and you know, I can do all that, but I, I don't like confrontation. I, you know, so like canvassing to me is really, really freaky. But I did do canvassing, um, but, and I did it like as in a, like in as a partnership kind of thing. It was actually with the Lower Columbia Hispanic Council. We were canvassing businesses for, um, the no on Measure 105, and we would go in like as a pair, you know, one, um, one member of the Latino community and one ally. Um, and going into local businesses, just trying to get them to put posters up in their windows to, um, for the, just so the community knew that businesses supported it and I don't know why that was so scary for me, but I did it. And then, but then, you know, we did it multiple times, but after the first time I did it, then, you know, I all of a sudden became like an expert. So then people are looking to me for like advice and so, I don't know, I just, I guess it's just, you just have to put yourself out there. You have to work outside of your comfort zone sometimes. Um, if it's something you really believe in, in terms of like developing skills, ROP is always like, if I reached out, didn't hesitate to, you know, talk me through something on the phone or, you know, the going, you know, have they have a caucus that go there and go to workshops or come to town and have an organizing meeting with us to kind of, you know, facilitate meetings. So, um, that has been a huge thing for me and helped with confidence as an organizer. Um, but don't be nervous about it. Like you can do it. I mean, that was the biggest thing. I just was, I everything, well, I still do it actually. Anything I organize, I'm like, nobody's gonna come. And it's, it's just so, you know, putting pressure on yourself. But, um, people do show up and even if it's not a lot of people, even if it's only a couple people, you know, it did make a difference to those people, like those are, that is a value too. So I don't think it always needs to be a huge turnout because sometimes the events we've had that it's small. It actually is more meaningful or more people get to, you know, speak up. Um, yeah, just, just do it. What brings me joy is really meeting other people, meeting people that I never, never would have met, you know, in other, you know, in the community. I'm going to, you know, the Hispanic Heritage festival and you know, not just being at the event cause I want to show up and think it's cool, but like actually knowing people at the event, you know, or having people come to my house to have cake or what, you know, like, um, moving to a new place and I don't have family here. It did, you know, I feel like I have family with these other organizer people.

Juan: there's a lot more people that need your help in rural areas and they don't have the privilege to advocate for themselves. So we'd have to be that voice as, as being a young undocumented immigrant, you are essentially the voice for your parents. Um, that's what keeps me going. And other set that keeps. Another thing that keeps me going is that I'm part of the electoral process. I worked a lot in electoral work. I, one of my, one of my mentors told me, Juan, if you can vote get five people to vote! And to all those people, especially latinx people that don't vote. Think about this. When you're in a mixed status family and you vote metaphorically, imagine that the, that your uncle, that your tia, that your sibling, that your whatever family members or friends that can't vote you are their voice. You are their channel and I want to get more people to vote more people to get active in the community like that and knowing that I'm not privileged and I can't vote, I have to fight for my human rights but knowing that I'm privileged enough that I can be protected and still be heard is why I really want to continue moving forward. There's a lot of things I want I would like to talk about but I would just keep getting more emotional. I just know that as an organizer I've always felt like I was just that derp college student that that just was saying a few things, doing a some things you know, but they know when I leave or when I graduate and I see the sheer magnitude that I'm able to do alongside. Fantastic organizers is amazing. I am a someone that cares a lot about immigration rights and like like the great Emiliano Zapata's quote. His quote is my life motto, "prefiero morir de pie a vivir de rodilla" I rather die on my feet than live on my knees.

Host: If you're inspired to organize with your neighbors or if you want to learn more about Raíces, Here to Stay or Indivisible North Coast Oregon, head to RuralRootsRising.org, we are currently accepting applications for the next cycle of the rural organizing fellowship. If you'd like to apply or nominate someone to become a fellow and build their community organizing skills, go to rop.org/fellowship. Our first episode, Anyone Can be an Organizer, features music from The Road Sods! Rural Roots Rising is created by the Rural Organizing Project, a network of over 65 autonomous member groups committed to advancing human dignity and democracy across rural Oregon. To learn more about the Rural Organizing Project, go to rop.org. Do you want to help us share powerful rural organizing stories from across Oregon? Send us your organizing stories. Share this podcast with your local radio station and donate to sustain this project at ruralrootsrising.org. If you like what you heard today, you can find more episodes ruralrootsrising.org. Please follow Rural Roots Rising on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and subscribe wherever you get your podcasts. Rural Roots Rising is made possible because of volunteers like Michael Gaskill and Courtney Cooper. Thank you!