

Episode 2: Rural Community Building – Transcript

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Jess Campbell: You are listening to 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. Today we are going to talk about rural community building. We will hear from Martha Verduzco from Hood River County and Katie Cook from Gilliam County about how their communities' needs drive their work.

Martha Verduzco: ...latinos and people of color, felt there was nothing there where people could feel comfortable calling and saying, "hey where do I go talk to an immigration attorney?" or ... "my husband is beating me and I don't know what to do you know other than calling the police what resources?" ...those type of things. "I have a letter thats in english I don't know what it says I need somebody that i can trust to tell me exactly what it is"

Katie Cook: My friend and I and the county judge got together in a room and the judge wanted a committee to work on getting public childcare in the town. Because it was becoming kind of an issue between the haves and the have nots. And the people that were the favored families in town, could find childcare and the people that were known or were more on the margins did not have childcare.

Jess Campbell: My name is Jess Campbell, and I'm the Director and an Organizer with the Rural Organizing Project. During every episode of Rural Roots Rising, you'll be meeting inspiring community organizers from across Oregon that we get to work with, like Martha and Katie, who see a need in their communities and get to work organizing their neighbors and community to meet that need. At ROP, we often hold Living Room Conversations, which bring people together from across a community to discuss the difficult issues impacting them the most, together we make a plan about what we can do together to address it. This podcast is an evolution of that sharing and learning. Together we can build up communities that are truly safe and welcoming for all. This is an act of practicing democracy.

You just heard Martha Verduzco talking about why the Hood River Latino Network came together and Katie Cook sharing why leaders in Gilliam County built access to childcare for all.

In Oregon, we believe in showing up for our neighbors, what we see is that the most powerful organizing is led by people taking on the issues that most impact them and their communities. Part of rural life is having a deep connection to the land. Let's hear a bit more about Martha and Katie's homes and what moved them to take action in their rural communities.

Marl live in Hood River county, Mt hood Parkdale, its about 13 miles south of Hood River of the Columbia Gorge. um I live on 6 acres on a little farm husband 3 kids and my dad. We have a horse named Aztec we have 6 goats four big goats and three little ones, two calf, and my neighbor who's like my family she's got 3 horses a little foal, a pig, like 60 chickens. So I feel like their mine too. When it gets colder then you can definitely smell the chimney you know the firewood from the chimneys from the three houses around. I've lived in Parkdale six years but I was born and raised in hood river county so I've been there forty years. Hood river county Wasco that gorge area there's a lot of latinosaurs, you know orchards and packing houses. My whole family is there, my grandparents my mom my cousins my sisters brothers. It's an amazing place to be. I used to travel out of town a lot but I was always happy to be back thats where I belong.

When I was in high school I was a junior and the leadership teacher came up to me and asked if I wanted to run for ASB president. That was what got me started because I would have never imagined to run for student body president because I never looked at myself as a popular student, because that what I thought to be ASB or student body representative you'd have to be popular student. My little campaign that I did was unity, and then I did a little Mexican dance before my speech. Back then they called it the hick hall and the latino hall I just said I want us to all be united, we should all be together. That was my motto. So I did win but I was actually the first latino and woman to be student body president in my school

Katie Cook: Yeah, it takes a lot of strength to live out there. I grew up in the city and so when you live that far from a hospital or from a grocery store. Or from people. I don't think people should underestimate what that experience is like. And it's given me a huge amount of strength and I love it. But there's also been some pain with the isolation. I often wonder about what it was like for women in the early 1900s when they couldn't access vehicles very easily and I know that a little bit of history was that some women just walked off and said they couldn't do it. And they just left.

When you drive down the driveway about two and a half miles and you'll see an old school house where probably about 30 kids at one time went to school in the 1900s and you--- views from the ranch: you can see Mount Adams and Mount Hood and Mount Rainier and the sunsets are absolutely stunning and the stars--you feel like you can go out and touch them. And the wildlife is interesting and I almost ran into a badger the other day, which surprised me. Sometimes I get close to stepping on a rattlesnake so I have to be careful about where I'm walking.

When I first came, I'm I'm I met my husband through the United Church of Christ. My brother is a UCC minister. He's now the director for the National Council of Churches in New York State. But he was always learning how to be a minister. He was in Berkeley and they had a program where he went to Condon and the other little town lone as an internship and he met my husband. I was still in the Bay Area at that time, I was working for doctors and Planned Parenthood and different health organizations and working on a Master's in Public Administration. And when my brother got ordained to be a minister, he took his wife out to Condon. And they went out to my husband's what is now our ranch, and they, my brother's wife, my sister in law said "So Tom, how's your love life?" And he said, "Well, it's not that great." Just "well you're tall. She said, I know somebody's tall. Don't bring anybody to the ordination service. There's somebody I want you to meet." So I was grumbling about going to the ordination service because I had to leave all my responsibilities in Oakland and go up to Oregon to do this thing for my brother. And then I walked in the door and there was my future husband, and I knew the minute I walked in that we would be married. And I didn't know anything about him. I thought he had awfully funny suit on though. And I was from the Bay Area, San Francisco, you know,, and in my late 20s and we thought a little bit more about fashion. I thought that was awfully funny, you know, we need to do something about that.

When I first came to Condon the United Church of Christ was the big community church, and lots of people went to church and we had a minister and it did lots of active things in the little community, you know, worked on food banks or helped people who needed money for power. and if you know about the United Church of Christ it works a lot of social justice issues and progress pretty progressive and their theology the ordain gays and lesbians and women and and so they were really a voice in the community. Everybody said, we really need a youth group. We need something for our youth. They have sports they have 4H, but they need a place where they can talk about, you know, their spirituality and their community and so I said, "Okay, well, we'll give it a try." And we made it. You know, one thing about organizing is if you can really think about your time frames and what time would work best to attract the most

amount of people, you know, when you're trying to get people to do something, don't ask for huge time commitments. And I think that was one of the real successes.

Jess Campbell: Living in the country and working with the land often conjures images of pastoral landscapes, and serene silence. While those images are often accurate, living in the country can also be mighty isolating, particularly for rural Oregonians who find themselves on the margins. Breaking isolation by building connections, relationships, and community through organizing is a skill that many of us learn through necessity. Not only is it a part of rural culture to show up for barn raisings, but to stay for the long haul we need to work with our neighbors to keep each other safe during the storm, flood, or fire, and to show up for each other when tragedies strike.

The Rural Organizing Project was formed in 1992 by and for rural Oregonians for the purpose of connecting, resourcing, and supporting each other. To break rural isolation together and to build communities that are safe and welcoming for all. Today we work with over 65 autonomous groups across rural Oregon. And we continue to serve as an interconnected web.

It was true in 1992, and it is still true today, that most rural leaders and organizers that we meet are doing so to meet an immediate need but ultimately their goal is to break isolation.

Katie Cook: It was really difficult at times, but I also knew that I was doing the right thing. The isolation was extremely challenging and I was living next to my in laws who were wonderful people, but also struggled with some of the isolation issues. Particularly my mother in law she didn't know quite how to handle it and depression was really a big issue for her. One of the things that was pretty challenging as sometimes we'd have like a winter where it'd be like minus five degrees and the power would go out for like five days and he had to be out checking all the calves and just trying to keep the water troughs going and I was alone in this little double wide with a baby with no power for you know, minus five degree weather and not good insulation. And I just remember going out and trying to chop the wood and put the baby right by the sliding door so I could see him and then I'd chopped the wood and then I gather some snow and I put that in a big pot and then I'd start the fire and put the snow water on wood stove so I could give the baby a bath. And I thought, at that moment, I don't think I could do this. But I did! And we had two more children, a son two years later, and then a daughter four years later, and we eventually built a home that has beautiful views of the mountains, and it's very comfortable. And we made a life for ourself there.

Yeah, I think that one thing that's really really cool about a super small community is you. Anybody can take leadership and anybody can organize and get something together. And you know, the next thing I did when I had a baby, I started to realize that there's no childcare in town except through a private provider. And that's not really public childcare. And so then I was like, Okay, so my friend and I have been friends for a long, long time. She's really good at budgets, and she's now the city administrator and we just thought okay, well we'll get on a committee, we'll work with the county judge. But they're not somebody with a legal background and so its very confusing when you say "county judge" but they're like the main administrator for the county. It was becoming kind of an issue between the haves and the have nots. And the people that were the favored families in town could find childcare and the people that were known or were more on the margins did not have childcare. So we just started with that little group and it grew and got a few more people on our board and then we put together something and loose structure and got got the Baptist Church to rent us a little space. It went from there, now it's morphed into really steady program with a million dollar building. The person that we had hired many many years ago to be the director is still there and she put the building together and everything and got the grant and it's a beautiful program.

Martha Verduzco: February or March of 2016 um I had a my friend Jose Vivian made a phone call to me and said are you willing to help me organize a march for the immigrants it was “a day without immigrants” and apparently he had had a number of phone calls. I always like to help, I consider myself a humanitarian so I mean, thats one of the reasons that I didn't hesitate to say “yes I'll help you,” people need to be heard and if they were calling us that meant something. We made a fb event with two days prior to the day and we had a turn around of about 200 people walk from the Heights of Hood River to downtown waterfall, the memorial overlook, which is about two miles in the rain! There's a couple faces I remember that were right behind me and I never knew them on a personal level but. They were all community members, people I've grown up with, that I don't know on a personal level but when I go to grocery store I would see them or go to church there's a lot of people there and you see them but you never know who they are. The people that do work out in the farms they don't like to be in the public eye but their always willing to say “Well could we take waters?” You know they're willing to participate in their own way and I think that we should... I appreciate that, because that's their way of, that's their voice, that's how they're voicing that they appreciate the causes that we're working for or with. So after the March a group of us about five of us that are kind of like public people in the Latino community thought we should create some type of a group where people where Latinos felt, latinos and people of color, felt there was nothing there where people could feel comfortable calling and saying, “hey where do I go talk to an immigration attorney?” or ...”my husband is beating me and I don't know what to do you know other than calling the police what resources?” ...those type of things. “I have a letter thats in english I don't know what it says I need somebody that I can trust to tell me exactly what it is.” So we met a couple times and ended up creating this Hood River Latino Network. Its an advocacy group that we have in Hood River. We made a fb page and just told people that we were there to advocate for them, to empower them, to create opportunities, and a place of resource, if you have a question of where something is, send us a message call us, text us and if we don't know we'll find out and guide you to the right place. That was like March. April I got a phone call from a friend who has worked in the community for a long time and said that there was a group of people coming in from out of town to talk about the immigration situation that's going on at the jail. We have a mini detention center in our backyard. Hood River, Wasco, Sherman and Gilliam counties. Our county jail, its a regional jail and it has a contract with Immigration and Customs Enforcement and we don't want it there because it gives a sense of fear to our community, and thats when I met the Rural Organizing Project: Cara and Jessica and Hannah. And then things started happening I began to look into things a little more. I'm loud and obnoxious, but now I'm loud and obnoxious with a purpose I feel. So that's what's changed, continues to change I think all the time. Its the affirmation that we are doing something right and that we can change things a little bit at a time. So we've created a coalition Gorge ICE Resistance, theres been counties that have cancelled their contracts with ICE, thats a big success there in itself and we're just continuing to work to get ICE out of NORCOR.

Jess Campbell: Listening to these two interviews side by side, I was struck by how different their stories are. Katie began building community out of the need to break her own isolation, while Martha's community is who called her into doing the work she does today with the Hood River Latino Network and Gorge ICE Resistance. Both Katie and Martha's stories illustrate how sometimes it just takes sharing an idea to find people to work together with, and how those people together can build momentum to take that initial idea to heights they couldn't have originally dreamt of.

Katie Cook: I mean it came out of a personal interest again because of my extreme isolation I said I have to go to town and I just worked at the local clinic when my kids were little, just a little bit, just to get some interaction with people. But I was like, “Well, where do I take my child?” If there's something that's really important to you, that you need in your life, whether it's childcare or healthcare, or you know, concerned about immigrant issues or climate issues or whatever that need is, that's, that's the flame that will get you going and then you start

talking to a few other people that that those same issues are important to, you know, and then from there just depends kind of where you think the need is next. I mean, do you need a center? Or do you just need a group or what? And you just really just start circling and doing or having a lot of conversations with people. And then if it seems like you need to reach bigger goals, whether it's a child care center or something else, then go for it. Because if you get enough people behind you, anything can happen.

Martha Verduzco: We'd been working on Know Your Rights trainings throughout the last couple years. When we were doing them there was raids, well we never had a big raid in Hood River but people are still fearful, "what if we go to these Know Your Rights trainings and then they show up there?" And not everybody has access, even though Facebook, you know the internet, is a popular place for people to find information, some people don't know how to navigate it. I hope I make people, that we, not i, our group, makes people feel that theres a little bit of hope, that their not helpless or hopeless.

So we do a Latino Festival, I guess we could begin eventually changing it and saying Multicultural Festival. Its basically like a resource fair and because I'm Mexican thats what I know is Mexican music and the majority of latinos are Mexican in Hood River County. So we bring entertainment. SO I know that in my culture the way to get people to come and find out about resources and information is with food and entertainment. So at this latin Festival we have a headliner band and local food booths that come and sell to promote their businesses as well and we have a lot of community agencies that come and join us. We talk about the issues you know "We feel your frustration and we're working as hard and we can to make it better." So i figured that looking at an actual judicial warrant signed by a judge is versus the detainer form. So what I did was I went ahead and printed two of each and passed them out in the audience. And we had one of the local immigration attorneys go up and talk about it and give examples "if they knock on your door you have the right to ask 'let me see your warrant'". Explained the difference between both of them. We asked the audience, "was is this helpful?" "Yay!" Yes so people were happy, so it was good! I wish theres a place where my mom could have gone when she felt that they weren't treating them well at the packing house or my dad was being yelled at by his foreman. I wish there was a place a person who they knew they could go and trust and at least hear them out, maybe not be able to do anything for them but at least hear them out. Because sometimes that in itself, just being able to talk about whats going on gives you that relief. I want us to build a community resource center where people could come in and just chill or just ask for information. We need that, a place thats zen it doesn't matter if your homeless, people who have a lot of money sometimes feel the most lost. Sometimes its just about not being understood and its not just about latinos there's so many other issues that we're battling within our communities, you know, mental health, drug addiction, acceptance of who we are. Our mission is that everybody is safe, that we have a beautiful environment, there is a place for our kids to go to be safe. We want to be part of community as one.

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If you are inspired to organize with your neighbors, go to ruralrootsrising.org. Our website has more information and resources about the childcare cooperative Katie helped start, the Hood River Latino Network and Latino Festival, as well as more information about NORCOR and ICE contracts in Oregon.

We featured music from The Road Sodas, the Low Tide Drifters, and Diana Wild in this episode.

Do you want to help us share powerful rural organizing from across Oregon? Send us your organizing stories, ask your local radio station to play this podcast, and donate to sustain this project at ruralrootsrising.org!

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.

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