

Rural Roots Rising Episode 4: It Takes All of Us -- Transcript

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Hannah Harrod:

Welcome back to Rural Roots Rising by the Rural Organizing Project! If this is your first time listening, Rural Roots Rising is a monthly radio show and podcast created by and for rural Oregonians who are creatively and courageously building stronger and more vibrant communities for a just democracy. Today we will be sharing a story about the power of thousands of committed people who joined together across communities and faiths to respond to a human rights crisis in rural Oregon in this month's episode, "It Takes All of Us!"

Navneet Kaur:

So I just the next day, I drove to Sheridan, just on my own. And they were prison guards there and they stopped me there and they were like, oh ma'am, what can we help you with? And I just pulled my window down. I was like "oh, I hear that they're men from India. And I would like to see what I can do to help them" and they're like,---Oh, they were actually laughing in my face they like, Mam you can't go in there. "like Why not?" I said "let me meet at least one of them. Let me see what they need. Because you know, they can't communicate. I'm pretty sure they can communicate in English." And is like "no Ma'am, please turn around and go back home."

Hannah:

My name is Hannah Harrod and I'm an organizer with the Rural Organizing Project. You just heard from Navneet Kaur in Marion County. When she found out there were asylum seekers from around the world being held in horrible conditions in Federal Corrections Institute in Sheridan, a nearby prison, she took action. Her trip to the prison by herself didn't get her anywhere, so she helped organize hundreds of volunteers including members of Oregon Sikh communities, and she worked closely with pro bono attorneys to fight for the rights of the asylum seekers.

When the Rural Organizing Project got the call, we immediately went to work building ICE out of Sheridan, a coalition of human dignity groups raising money to pay for bonds, organizing interfaith vigils outside of the prison, and stirring up attention about what was happening to build pressure to release the asylum seekers. We partnered with Innovation Law Lab, who went to court to fight for the right to offer free legal representation to every person who wanted a lawyer who was detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE, at Sheridan.

I hadn't met Navneet yet when I got that first phone call. But within weeks of the flurry of organizing, it seemed everyone I talked to would respond with "Have you met Navneet? You really need to meet Navneet." When we finally met a few weeks later, before I'd even finished introducing myself, Navneet had hugged me and I immediately felt like one of her inner circle.

I sat down with Navneet a few weeks ago on her living room floor to learn a little more about how she got started and to reflect on all those months we worked so closely together. We drank tea and played with her grandson who would occasionally come in from the other room to visit.

Music

Navneet:

My name is Navneet Kaur and I live in Salem. Salem is not a very huge city. And we have a really nice close knit community here.

I think there were about 110 men that were brought overnight to FCA Sheridan. And these men from all over the world, some from Mexico. Some from El Salvador from Brazil, South America, all parts of South America, from China from Nepal from India. Yeah, so many and from Bangladesh. From Bangladesh, so all over the world. The prison administration was unprepared for so many men that were brought there overnight. The head did not have enough space or other things to accommodate these guys.

Hannah:

Would you tell me about how you started? How you got involved as an interpreter?

Navneet:

(laugh) Yeah, that's an interesting story. So I just did not, when I stepped in, did not think that, first of all did not think that it will become such a big thing. I just thought, that "Oh, okay. They have legal representation and the lawyers need to help with interpretations." And then it just evolved into this big thing which I got involved in to at every, I think every level. So when I didn't know about these men even though I was closer to Sheridan than my friends and other community members in Portland. And so one of my friends from Portland he, or actually Vancouver area, called me and was like, "Oh, did you know this has happened? Did you know there's so many men from India in Sheridan?" I was like, "Hmmm, in Sheridan? What are they doing in Sheridan?"

And so I just because I'm a layman, a lay person, I had no idea about the legal system. I don't know how the prison system works or anything for that matter. So I just the next day, I drove to Sheridan, just on my own. I just drove to go when I got on to that road that leads to the main prison gate and saw a huge, like a pole running across to block, comings and goings. And there were prison guards there and they stopped me there and they were like, "hello ma'am, what can we help you with?" And I just pulled my window down and was like "ahh I hear that they're men from India. And I would like to see what I can do to help them" and they're like,---Oh, they were actually laughing in my face they like, Ma'am you can't go in there. "like Why not? let me meet at least one of them. Let me see what they need. Because you know, they can't communicate. I'm pretty sure they can't communicate in English." And they say "no Ma'am, please turn around and go back home."

And I had no, no other option just then to come back home and then again and again and again. I kept calling Victoria's too, you know what, I think the process still hadn't started. And then I think in like two or three days, I got a call from them that they needed help with interpretation. So yeah, then, that's how it got started.

Narration

Hannah:

Navneet learned that there was a growing network of people and organizations working to address the needs of the people being held at Sheridan. One of those organizations was Innovation Law Lab. They provided free legal representation to move people quickly through the first steps required to seek asylum. Stephen and Victoria, who Navneet just mentioned, are both staff with Innovation Law Lab. As Navneet joined in the work, she saw firsthand how the asylum-seekers held at Sheridan were being denied their basic human rights. Navneet took on a new role to help organize ways to address the daily indignities they were being subjected to.

Navneet:

Think about us stepping into other countries to grant access to human rights to those populations in those countries, and then not give human rights to people that are in our own country. So how can we look the world in the eye and do that where we had hundreds and thousands of men, and let's just talk about the hundred plus men that were in here in Sheridan that were not given legal access at all, were not given interpreter services, because that was their right too, right? They could not speak our language, they could not express their needs. If one of them--- I remember people having gunshot wounds, not given any treatment or any medical attention. I remember someone having a heart problem that was not given medical aid. So I don't even know where to start. These are just the big things.

The little things being seeing them in tattered prison clothes--dirty and tattered. The men they had such bad body odors because their uniforms or their their clothing was unwashed and that they did not have soaps to wash their bodies with. You know, the first time I saw - and I understand if that's a prison policy I don't know if it is - that I belong to the Sikh faith and there were many Sikh men in those people too. And the first time I saw like a six feet tall man walking in with his long hair and a beard and nothing to cover his, not even a beanie to cover his head with. And the first emotion that I felt were tears running down my face because that was the humiliation of the biggest kind that that person was facing

I remember one man that expressed feeling of feelings of so many others, and said, "You know, I wish we had just died where we were. I mean, it's worse than that. This life that they are, we've been living for the past three or four months is worse than that." It so it was really hard to see them suffering through all that.-They thought that America was one of the nations that was really safe and really welcoming. And that's why they chose to come here and this is what we did to them.

I think I was really depressed at that time, I was really depressed. I remember one time, my children were here and I was just, I would just sit and stare into nothingness. And my husband said that, you know, "I feel like you leave. When you come home, you're not even home. I feel like that internally, you're still, in that prison you leave yourself there when you come back home, you don't really come back to us."

I think that the drive was quite a bit. It's about 50, 45-50 minute drive. And then the process of getting into the prison was crazy even in itself. I remember that one time I was told to go back because I wasn't dressed decently enough. And I have not known myself to ever dress not decently. It's to do with my culture too. So I'm always like, covered, I'm covered up and always and so "No, no, you can't go in" and one time I think I was wearing an underwire bra that beeped and I was like I will take the bra off and put it in my purse No, you cannot take it in. And so I just took it off and put it in the locker - like , "I'm going in like that" . What else can I do? You know? And one time I was told to, because I was not wearing, I don't know what he saw in my clothing. I went to my car and luckily I was driving my nephew's car that day and he had a gym bag in it where he had a t-shirt that he wore during a work out and it was stinking, but I wore it! I was like, yep! I'm not stopped, I'm going in. I know when I went in the prison the guard inside said "You know, if it were me I would have let you in. But it's about personal choices too, he can say no if he wants to." And I was like, "yep, I know that already - I've experienced that."

I remember one time that I was given a few names by the lawyers at Innovation Law Lab saying that all these people were being released today. And one, one or two of them they said "oh we haven't received any paperwork." And I said "I have the paperwork, how do you not have the paperwork?" and so even though that they were brought out and the whole process in the prison system went through they were not actually released at that time. So, I think that, It was just a horrible time, all in all. Because some of the bonds, some people were able to afford the bonds, and for some of them, the bonds were really high and then their parents in India and the sponsors here, were struggling to get that money.

Hannah:

Navigating prison visitation is really difficult. One of the things I've encountered when I've visited people in prison is the frustration with rules that often seem arbitrarily enforced. Whether your clothing is modest enough, whether staff at the prison put your name onto the list to be allowed visitation that day, or, whether the file of the person being released has reached the front office often feels like it changes by the day and depends on the staff people on shift.

Navneet also mentioned the challenge of coordinating with sponsors of the asylum-seekers. Sponsors are often relatives or friends who are responsible for helping asylum seekers to become permanent residents. Having a sponsor is one of the first steps in seeking asylum.

Navneet:

Like I remember calling the parents and the sponsors incessantly. Like Day and night "What are you guys doing?" And so what happened also was once these people were transferred to the prison system, their sponsors here even though they were related, they bailed out on them thinking that now they are criminals because they are in the criminal system now. That that might reflect on them and they might lose their own status or something like that.

And then few of them do not have sponsors. And I saw them, I remember one time telling, I was given the hard time, hard task of telling that guy that his sponsors bailed out and he just broke down right in

front of me thinking "What am I going to do? I'm just going to be staying here for whatever time it takes to get my to pass, my you know my case or you know whatever?" And I remember community coming together even for that, you know offering to be the sponsors.

That's the story so it was a long process, tedious process. I think the last guys got released in early september last few of them were released in early September. So that's a long time. To be detained because you're an asylee, or a refugee, and many of these guys have lost hope, lost faith, you know, in us even, you know, they were thinking again, you know, whether to trust us or not because it wasn't happening. And many of them lost their mental balance. For sure, at least two of them because of being detained for so long and being confined in such horrible circumstances that they were in. Yeah, very difficult, very difficult process.

Hannah:

The important work taking place inside the prison was amplified outside by thousands of people from all over the state. Interfaith vigils were held outside Sheridan, which ended with the sharing of Langar. Langar is a community meal prepared at the Gurdwara and shared twice a day and on special occasions for anyone who needs it, as part of the commitment of Sikhs to ending hunger.

At the largest of the interfaith vigils, 1,200 people joined together in prayer and protest, whether Sikh or Quaker, Muslim or Evangelical Christian. And afterward everyone sat together in the grass on the hillside, sharing daal, rice and chapati with the barbed wire fence and the prison behind them.

Together everyday people built the foundation and then a movement home, from welcoming in new volunteers to making sure everyone had meaningful roles. We practiced our shared values by breaking bread together and building deep and lasting relationships for the long haul.

Navneet:

It was an open park I could see like various fruit trees, and it wasn't like a flat ground or something as it has ups and downs and that some part of it was rocky too. And it was right outside the prison walls and you could see the barbed wire on top of the prison wall. We actually the first time we went there we did not know where our prisoners were kept. But the prisoners that we could see from there--we could actually look into the compound we could see the inside of the prison, so we just assumed that this was our population, the immigration detainees. But then later we were told that they were not, because the immigration detainees could not see out, we couldn't see them they were in a separate, like a building that was a guarded building actually, a walled building so they couldn't.

I think we all of us offered prayers in our own way. Like because these were interfaith vigils. So everyone one representative from one faith or two, we did our prayers, we sang. I remember the hymns from Christian communities or churches, from Indian Sikh communities. I remember one of the girls coming from Vancouver, offered prayers in Hindi one time, and then catching up on how things are going, what is happening inside the prison. And so I was a part of that updating too and then at the end, we shared meals together.

So Langar is a big part of Sikh faith. We, that's that's the word of the guru, that we every Gurdwara must have Langar. And so that's why we wanted to provide Langar for everyone that was there and the community came together for cooking it and then we carried the big like casseroles or bowls or big utensils to Sheridan. Luckily it was a summer so there was no like "oh it's getting cold" and stuff like that. I remember the first time we cooked even though we cooked so much we fell short. So we bought pizzas from, I think it was Figaro's in town, in Sheridan. So we bought pizzas from them. And then from there on we knew like how much to cook. So I think we were getting so like good at it now. We knew like how much to prepare and how to bring it there.

The McMinnville communities were providing the speaker system or the you know the sound system. That was pretty amazing. I remember that, and organizing that in the open field was beautiful. I think that everything, just everything just fell in place, right? I think it's the spirit behind the heart behind it that matters. There was, nothing there was unorganized or disorganized. Just everything fell in place like real quick during those vigils. It's strengthened my belief in humanity and strengthened my belief in what the Guru's taught because What they taught was to do the right thing.

Music

Hannah:

Thanks to the many people who held vigil outside the prison, created media attention, interpreted for people imprisoned at Sheridan or provided legal counsel, every asylum seeker passed their credible fear interview. It's the first step in the legal process of seeking asylum that establishes that you had reason to fear persecution or torture in your home country. As people were released, local organizers faced a new challenge: Where would they go next, and how would they get there? How could the community prepare to receive and support them in the weeks and months that followed?

Navneet:

People as far as Eugene driving down here, to Salem even to first to Sheridan, and then to bring in, then bring them to Salem. And then from here on to the Portland airport. So then the original thing was where, where are they? So once they're out, where are they going to stay the night? And how are we going to transport them to the to the port to the airport or to the bus stations or to the train stations? So I think he connected with you and you set into motion or mobilized the welcome team. I was like, okay, "we have the Gurdwara." I told Stephen how we have a lot of beddings like mattresses and comforters and everything. And we have a lot of space. But there are only two rooms that are actually, like that have, like have proper bedframes and everything and Stephen was really like hesitant there. And I said "You know we could put the mattresses on the floor and stuff and there could be like even 50 we could accommodate like 50 at a time. There's such a huge Hall." And Stephen was a bit like hesitant and he was like, "I want them to feel humanized and respected again. So I don't want them to be staying in like sleeping on the floor." So I explained to him how it's like, for Indians, its cultural. So for events when we get together, we just lay the mattresses on the ground and we all sleep together. So then I think I convinced him and so that's how we offered the Salem Gurdwara.

You know, some of these men had left their countries, like, some of them years before, I know of one man who was stuck in Guatemala for over a year because his father passed away, and he had no funds to enable him to travel further. And so he was staying with this family where he was doing their household work to survive, to provide for his food and shelter. And so this is just the story of one man, but there were so many men who had left their homes for like who had been out in like different countries in dangerous circumstances for over a year. And just to get to America so that they could find that respite, which they did not get. And we have talked at length about that. So I think the word respite in this context was really powerful. Because once they got out, they were given this welcoming and loving environment where they will eat like home cooked meals and served to them in like this warm atmosphere so that they could be like, at ease and, and breathe, you know, breathe for once, in all this time.

Hannah:

Many of us in rural communities often feel powerless against the neglect of our eroding social services, schools, and libraries and the forces that tear our communities apart, like ICE. Despite being stereotyped, criticized, and blamed for how our natural resources, labor, and wealth have been extracted, rural people continue to invest in building their communities and helping each other as best we can, patching together solutions from the resources and skills we can pool together with our neighbors.

The organizing that led to the release of asylum-seekers held at FCI Sheridan showed me that our rural communities have more power together than we realize. Our rural skills, like rugged interdependence and ingenuity, give us the tools we need to do this work.

You'll hear some faint background noise in this next part, because Navneet's grandson was playing with his mom in the other room.

Navneet:

Seeing what happened at Sheridan I think that it was not just the lawyers that did all that, it was all of us together. So, I think community organizing is a big part of these things. So start with that, you know, reach out to people who are doing community organizing and tell us then, like, How can I be of help? What can I do? So that's all I think I can say right now. For me it's just because the community was already mobilized, and so I got in touch with those communities during the vigils and all that, I got involved. So get involved in these movements and these communities to help because I think we can take a singular person you can't do much. Right? I went to Sheridan right? By myself. I drove there. Did anything happen? It was once I became a part of this big community, this large, larger group that things started to happen.

You know, on the one hand, you're seeing the ugly face of humanity. And on the other you're seeing such a beautiful face of mankind. We're like all the communities come together to pray for people that they don't even know. To, you know, I remember that one time. Somebody threatened one of your volunteers, you know, "be careful, or somebody's gonna ram their car into you" or something like that. And in despite, in the face of that, that threat and danger and everything. We were steadfast and

there no matter what. So that was beautiful. To see that, I think that I need to remind myself more of that when I see the ugliness in humanity that I need to remind myself more of the beauty of communities that surround us.

Hannah:

What have you found in your process of healing? And I'm sure that it's ongoing - not to say that it's over.

Navneet:

Yeah, I just think that once I started seeing the process working that helped. And I think the system works, and I think I have experienced that. But it took so long for that system to get into action! That was really difficult.

Hannah:

And it worked it seemed like, in many ways because so many people. Like it wouldn't have worked ...

Navneet:

No, No, it wouldn't have.

Hannah:

If they wouldn't have had access to pro bono lawyers and interpreters, like yourself, and other people who took action.

Navneet:

And I think that it was the whole community that came together. You know, it was not just the lawyers. I know of other places that have had pro bono lawyers. And no, I know other places where they were - Let's take for example, there was some I don't remember the name of the city in in California, where there were over 700 such men detained and nothing happened there. Because the whole community did not come together like we did here. So that is what, that is what worked, that is what I love about Oregon.

Hannah:

You have been listening to "It Takes All of Us," the fourth episode of Rural Roots Rising by the Rural Organizing Project: (try saying that 3 times fast!) a monthly radio show and podcast created by and for rural Oregonians who are creatively and courageously building stronger and more vibrant communities for a just democracy. Do you have any comments, questions, or reactions to what you just heard? Tell us what you think at info@ruralrootsrising.org!

You can Learn more about the organizing stories you heard here at ruralrootsrising.org. Our website also has more information and resources about the powerful organizing that led to the release of the people detained at FCI Sheridan.

We featured music from the Road Sodas, Etienne Roussel and King Peaks.

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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Thanks for listening!