

Rural Roots Rising Episode 9: Fighting for Rural -- Transcript

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Kim Schmith (0:05): And I realized once I opened my business, that that's right. And I love the people here! I fit in here. I am rural. You know, I may have traveled the world, but I'm still rural. And again, and I like that. And that is again what I want the kids to know when they leave here. There's like, there's a lot right about growing up in rural Oregon.

Narrator (0:33): Hello and 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. My name is Emma Ronai-Durning and I'm an organizer with the Rural Organizing Project. In today's episode, "Fighting for Rural," we'll hear from Kim Schmith, Kelsey Olivera, and Kelly Huang, of the Madras Key Club, in Jefferson County. The Madras Key Club is a powerful group of high school students working to ensure that those on the margins are included and supported in Madras by celebrating their family Kiwanis, which is the parent organization to Key Club. Zacs daz txt ex da EST rest a Zac z

Narrator (1:49): I first met Kim at the Black Bear Diner in Madras. I'd sat down with her to get an update on Jefferson Positive Action Group, a Rural Organizing Project member group that has worked since Trump's election to make their community safer and more welcoming for all. But then, over banana cream pie, Kim said, "Well, what I'm really excited about these days is getting to work with students at the high school!" And I was immediately struck by her enthusiasm and deep respect for the young people she's building community with and organizing alongside. Since then I have participated in a Key Club meeting, interviewed Key Clubbers back in January and, after COVID-19 disrupted life as we knew it, I caught up with them again in June. Kim told me about the first time she met the students.

Kim Schmith (2:44): I was pretty nervous. I remember, and I only found out later on, I had asked them, what do you guys - OK, we're doing community service. This is Key Club. Key Club is about community service. And I explained that most activities in the school appropriately are focused on the school, and that's the inside of the building. And that Key Club was going to be about the outside of the building. It was going to be about our neighbors. All of the different community parts. And that, but if you have a strong neighborhood, if you have a strong community, your school will also flourish, that this is supposed to be a team. So I gave a little bit of talk about that. And then I said, "So when you think about projects, what would you like to do? Tell me what you think would be great to do." But I also wanted to hear, they definitely are interested in the food banks. A lot of people here go hungry. So the, the food, community kitchen, that all came up.

But mostly it was quiet for a bit. And I was like huh, well maybe they don't want to do things. And I found out a couple months later, Kelsey told me, she goes, "We had never been asked what we want to do. We had only been told what we had to do, and maybe even how to do it."

Narrator (4:02): The person Kim just mentioned--Kelsey--is now one of Key Club's brilliant organizers. We'll hear from her in just a moment.

Kim Schmith (4:10): And I was like, well huh, that's great because that's not how I work! Doesn't mean I don't do a lot of guiding. I do want them to, again, be successful and there are certain things that help, but they come to me- they being the Key Clubbers. They come to me all the time with fantastic ideas, and I do my best to support them.

Narrator (4:30): Oftentimes, when young people start organizing, older generations don't necessarily welcome them into leadership, or support them to build up their skills and vision. Madras Key Club though, is a different story.

Kelsey Olivera (4:45): My name is Kelsey Olivera. I'm 17. I'm a senior at Madras High School. I'm very involved in school, I am the lieutenant governor for Key Club in Division 78. I am Interact Club president and I'm also on the Jefferson County Cultural Coalition Board.

Narrator (5:01): Shortly after Kim invited Kelsey and her peers to set their own priorities, Key Club submitted a grant application for their first major project. Successfully securing the funding, they spent months preparing. And then over the summer of 2019, held three cultural events at a local park.

Kelsey Olivera (5:22): Um, last year we did Mexico, El Salvador and Peru. We were just basing it off of like, the Latino cultures in our community, which those are like the three main ones here in Madras. So we just recognized that those three cultures needed more recognition in our community. Like we have Mexican restaurants and Mexican stores. So why don't people learn more about that, like if they're not super like, informed about it? Our first cultural event was this summer in June, it was a few days after school got out. We did it in our local park on the day that they have the Saturday market. So we, the Saturday market took up a portion of the park and then we had our own area with like, our canopies and we had everything set up. We had our craft set up. Our first event was Peru, and there was a lot more people than we expected. A lot of the parents were drawn to the food that we had. We had free samples provided by one of our Key Clubbers' mom. She was, they were Peruvian. And I think we had about 100 people at that event, parents and kids. It was really, we had music playing, everything. It was really vibrant and just, it was a really fun time for like, us putting it on and the little kids. You could see like their eyes light up when they made like a new craft or something. It was really fun.

Narrator (6:38): Kelly Huang is another student leader in Madras Key Club. When she's not in class, playing volleyball, or at Key Club meetings, you can usually find her working in the kitchen at Hunan Chinese Restaurant, which her parents run.

Kelly Huang (6:54): My name is Kelly. I am also a senior at Madras High School. I am 18 years old. I am involved with National Honor Society, Skills USA. I am currently the president of Key Club. I'm also a member of Interact Club. For me, I remember we just had this little corner of the park and kids would just start coming there, to come all at once and then they would just circle around the activities or the crafts. And they would just, every time, I think I was doing buttons. Every time they came over to mine they would show me like something they made from another booth and I would just... Just watching them have so much fun that was, that was pretty nice.

Narrator (7:42): Working together, the students were able to connect with one another and with the larger community to provide meaningful opportunities for celebration that hadn't existed before. Here's Kelsey again:

Kelsey Olivera (7:55): I think it was really fun to work with this group of people that we had with our events last year. A lot of us were from a Latino, well, are from a Latino background and we were all, we all related to the events that we did quite well and we were able to like, share stories from our like, childhood like, oh, when we broke this piñata or something. Like, we were able to bond at the events and like in the preparation of everything, we had a lot of fun working together, like making the crafts at Kim's house and stuff. And just with everybody in the club, it's always a good vibe.

Narrator (8:27): Madras has a population of 6,900, sits on the edge of the Warm Springs Indian Reservation and is surrounded by expansive pasture and agricultural lands. Madras High School students are about 20% Native American, 40% Latinx, and 40% white. But their community's diversity isn't always represented in public events, school curriculum, or local elected positions. So the students made it a priority, starting in 2018, to share and celebrate their many cultures in public spaces. At a time when the Trump administration has emboldened white-centric ideas of what rural America should look like, and in the midst of a global uprising for Black liberation, Key Club offers us one pathway toward the safe, welcoming and multicultural communities that many of us are working towards.

Kelsey Olivera (9:30): I love how diverse our community is. Like, there's a lot of issues and problems that occur in my community. But there's always people who come together to solve those problems and make it more equal for everybody who lives here, and there's lots of opportunities regardless of your color, age or where you come from here.

Kelly Huang (9:48): For me, the one thing that always um, I always recognize about Madras is that it is very diverse. And while there's still problems like Kelsey said, We... It's just amazing how people come together in this small community just to help you out or just help other people in general.

Narrator (10:11): Kim intentionally trusts the leadership of the students in tackling these problems. By supporting the skills and vision of new leaders, Rural Organizing Project and rural organizers across our network strengthen each of our communities and truly make a better

world possible. Here's Kim remembering a conversation that motivated Kelsey and her sister to take on major roles in planning the cultural events:

Kim Schmith (10:40): It was Kelsey and her sister Erica. And they said to me, we want to have events so that if we were those two little, little Latina girls, we would feel like we could celebrate our culture in the middle of a park that was filled with white people, and know that we were accepted and that it was exciting, and speak our language. And I was like, that's fantastic. That's where the cultural events came from. It's amazing, like Kelsey, to watch her get down on her hands and knees and look a little girl in the eyes and start speaking Spanish to that little kid, about what we're coloring and why and which one do you want? And I have enough Spanish to understand what's going on. But the rest of it I'm clueless on. And just to see that immediate bonding and Kelsey becomes like, Wonder Woman right then and there. And it's, it's amazing. It's very empowering.

Narrator (11:26): After their first three cultural events attracted at least 600 people, Key Club went back to the Jefferson County Cultural Coalition to apply for a second year of funding. This time though, Kelsey sat on the Board, and participated in deciding which grant applications to accept. When I interviewed Key Club in January, Kelly had just heard that their application had been accepted with flying colors. This time they were bringing activities into second-grade classrooms and Kelly was getting excited, reflecting on her own memories of childhood celebrations.

Kelly Huang (12:04): I spent two or three years after I was born in China and then I came back and I've been here ever since. I believe the idea for Chinese New Year --a cultural event about Chinese New Years came from people coming to our cultural events and talking to Kim about doing one for Chinese New Year. And I think, while there's not many of us, Chinese people here, Chinese events, Chinese New Year is such a huge event that I feel like almost everybody knows about. Because I know in China, they would take at least seven days off just to celebrate the event and they would have these dragon performances, which weren't actual dragons, just people in the costume but, and then fireworks and then just kids running around the streets. Throwing the little popper thingies on the ground. I think me and my sisters might have set off a car alarm once by doing that, but it's just such a big event and just, if you've ever been to China and seen the fireworks during that time, it is amazing and just being able to bring it to our community here is just... That's gonna be awesome because the kids are going to love it, to have, to have these animals being represented by the New Years. And just getting to like, make crafts about it. I think we're gonna have so much fun!

Narrator (13:37): Key Club is creating public spaces in Madras that truly reflect the people who live there. And Kim knows first hand that high schoolers can make meaningful change in her community. In fact, she chose to be Key Club's advisor because she was a part of Key Club when she was in high school, and it changed her life.

Kim Schmith (14:00): So when I was in high school, it was-- to date myself--1983 and 84. They started a Key Club. And I didn't know what Key Club was. I didn't know it was related to Kiwanis.

I just knew it was the first student organization that we were going to have that wasn't for freshman, sophomore, junior, senior, or student body. I was pretty excited about that, but this was something that was just specific for leadership and community service things outside the school. And so we actually raised money and bought garbage cans and arranged for them to be picked up, picked up along Buff Street, which is the main street that feeds three schools, including the high school. Back then you had an open campus so a lot of people went to the Dairy Queen or Erickson's and got lunch, and they threw the trash on the ground. And there were no trash cans. That's not, I don't think appropriate behavior. But it's somewhat expected if you don't give people the ability to do the right thing. And so we put in trash cans and it cleaned up the street.

Narrator (14:58): One of the core principles of organizing is that the people experiencing the problem are best suited to solve it.

Kim Schmith (15:05): And that was the first time I realized you can make a difference, being a part of the team, you can make a difference. And that shaped me. It just flat out shaped me.

I think it was the first time I recognized that students were creating the trash, students were creating the problems, and students could create a solution. And again, that was, that was pretty powerful to me.

Narrator (15:31): Whether it's hosting cultural events or installing trash cans, the Madras Key Club is addressing the challenges that they are experiencing most directly and making a tangible difference. In Jefferson County, which claims the lowest per capita income of any county in Oregon, one of the main challenges that Key Clubbers are tackling as a group is poverty. Let's go back to Kelsey and Kelly.

Kelsey Olivera (15:57): There's a lot of poverty here and there's like, food banks and organizations like Key Club, how we did trick or treating for canned foods. There's also like the community kitchen here, where we have like a soup kitchen. And there's also clothing drives for people that help like, the youth who need clothing during the winter. And that stuff is really powerful to me.

Kelly Huang (16:18): Yeah, and one of the things being a - With a lot of poverty happening around Madras, one of the things that people don't have is that they don't always get Christmas gifts. And one of the programs that Key Club does is Operation Rudolph, which helps give presents to these families that don't have a lot. And that is just amazing because I know how it feels not to have, um, waking up on Christmas and not having presents.

[Music]

Kelsey Olivera (16:53): I think it's really important for everybody in our community to have the chance to enjoy the holidays with their families. It can be a really devastating time for those who don't have money with like, Thanksgiving and then Christmas being so soon after that, like

some people don't even have enough for like, dinner and then the pressure of parents having to buy their children like, gifts and provide dinner on that same night for Christmas is probably hard for a lot of people. And I think like, everybody should be able to enjoy their childhood and not have to like, know that their parents don't have any money. I think it's just, it's good to help the parents when they need it.

Kelly Huang (17:30): For me, just trying to take something on personally is really hard, especially like a program as big as Operation Rudolph. I know, Operation Rudolph is, mostly relies on Kiwanis, and then Key Club and then other clubs coming and wrapping. But just having, just having a club or a group of people you can work with just helps get everything done and you don't have to worry about taking everything on. So you don't have to put your life on hold just to get this program finished. You can have um... rely on other people, and then get it done and maybe even make it better with other people's suggestions and ideas.

Narrator (18:14): Key Club is brilliantly using the resources that they have access to, through Kiwanis and their public school, to have the largest possible impact on the community as a whole. Through this work, they are not only influencing their town, and the organizations they work with, but they're also affecting one another.

Kim Schmith (18:36): Wow. Kids teach me something all the time. They surprise me all the time. They're so positive. They really believe that they can solve things. So, I'm like "Game on, let's solve something." They give me that optimism. They teach me all the time to work through adversity, because it's amazing some of the backgrounds that they come from, and they leave it at the door of the school. We had a kid, he's... He's one of my most active Key Clubbers, and he's been on the food drive. He did hours of work at Operation Rudolph. And when I went to get the names for the students for Operation Rudolph from DHS, he was there. And that taught me a lot. How do you still give, when maybe you don't have much to give and he gave, he gives what he can, which is his time, and his positive attitude and his enthusiasm. And so that's an example of something that they teach me.

Narrator (19:36): Key club is all about face to face engagement. But here we are now, 5 months into a global pandemic where the whole country is trying to figure out how to return to school safely amid COVID-19. I gave them a call in June, a few months after our initial interview, to check in on how the pandemic and the related stay at home orders were affecting their community in particular.

Kim Schmith (20:01): We're one of the many rural counties that because of our internet access and poverty, like my sister, her kids are in Portland in a more expensive, expensive isn't the right word? They have a lot more money in their schools. And so the kids there all, have they do all their classes online. Even the kindergarteners have classes online. And so, and yet in Madras at Jefferson County, 509j School District, every Tuesday, everyone goes in and picks up their assignments on paper. And what if you can't go? What if your family doesn't have a car? What if they're a second grader and the family isn't able to do that? So it really made, that part of it is hard. And I know that if Key Club could have been meeting, we could have been

solving some of those problems. That's the reality. And so it was hard to know that I couldn't use Kelsey and Kelly and their ingenuity to go and solve those problems. So it was hard.

Narrator (20:58): From a lack of food and internet access, to not having reliable running water, these past 5 months have been extremely difficult for communities across Jefferson County that didn't have the resources they needed even before the pandemic and related economic recession. Through it all, Key Club members continue to support each other and are figuring out how to advance their work when they can't get together in person.

Kelsey Olivera (21:28): So, one thing that we did towards the end of the school year was Kim helped Kelly and I, we decided we wanted to make a little gift bags for each member with their Key Club certificate for the year, and we made something special for the seniors. We got them like little bit of supplies for college like, like, a little like, like little shower supplies and like a little basket and just some like, like a little first aid kit and stuff that they might need for college. So Kelly and I personally went and we delivered them to each person's house and just left them like, on their porch, and some came out and said hi but it was just a really fun thing that we were able to do to end the year since we weren't able to do it together like, as a Key Club.

Kelly Huang (22:11): We also did like, a Zoom meeting for like so for like, certificates and awards, which I thought that was kind of fun even though there was only about 10 people. But that was fun, just getting to see people.

Kelsey Olivera (22:27): For me, if I was a junior going into Key Club next year I'd be, I'd probably be a little bit nervous. Just to see how everything would like play out or if we were going to do all of our community service projects still. But I think a big thing is that like, there's a lot of community service that is needed in our community right now with like a bunch of people struggling with like the Coronavirus, like financially and just like physically, and that's like a big gap that Key Clubbers can fill in our community. And like, it's just like a matter of if they would like, if we would be allowed to because of all the restrictions, but I think I'd probably be like a little bit nervous but excited because there's a lot of work that you could do in the community right now.

Narrator (23:06): Coronavirus may have put a wrench in Key Club's spring plans, but it hasn't changed Kim's commitment to her community. She is still fighting for rural and wants to make sure students not only have a voice in decision making today, but are able to live and thrive in Madras once they finish school too.

Kim Schmith (23:28): So many kids go to college, many kids go to trade school, many kids go to work, you know, for a career. If you stay local, your options are not fantastic. There's some.

We tell kids: go do this stuff. Instead of going to college, if this is a better fit, go do these things. Go get that licensing to be a plumber, to be electrician, and they do it, and they come back here, and what? Nothing. There is no business plan to support them. And I know from owning, owning, starting my own business, you can come with a great education and be ready to go.

You know, we have to do interning for a year, you know what you're supposed to do. But if you don't have some business sense and training, I worked in a dentist's office through high school and some of college. If you don't have that, how do you actually open a business?

Narrator (24:23): Kim's focus, like rural organizers across the ROP network, is on recognizing the needs in her community and finding local solutions. The challenges she faced upon returning home and starting her acupuncture business didn't stop her from ultimately falling in love with her community. But she wants to make sure that those same barriers don't block anybody else from thriving here either.

Kim Schmith (24:50): And I realized once I opened my business: that that's right. And I love the people here! I fit in here. I am rural. You know, I may have traveled the world, but I'm still rural. And again, I like that. And that is again what I want the kids to know when they leave here. That's like, there's a lot right about growing up in rural Oregon.

Most kids are going to come back even if it's to see family. And so, and many people do come back and they stay. Regardless, I want people to see Madras and our surrounding area, as a place of strength, as a positive place. So whether they come back and their parents are here, and they've moved on, I want them to realize that their parents live in a good community. And if they come back, they, they bring a different skill. They've brought a different type of diversity, if they bring a different skill. And so, and I want them to be able to come back and be successful here. I was really frustrated. And I learned a lot about knocking my head against the traditional doors of business just because my business was different. That taught me so much, really taught me a lot. I was like, Wow, I can't imagine what it would be like if I was doing this and uh, and to be a Person of Color. You know, bad enough that I did a kind of a scary business and to be a woman and just be like Just shut. We didn't. No. And they would say "We didn't do that," like, "Yes, you did." You know, and again, is it different now? Absolutely.

But I don't want kids, when they come back as that adult, with that vision in their eyes. I want them to be successful! I absolutely want them to be successful. I believe that the whole community is successful when we get somebody back, who brings something back to us, and expands us, that's fantastic. And if they stay, many people stay, there may be many people stay in any community they grow up in. And I want them to know that you stayed in a good place, you made a good decision and/or, you know, go and come back, whatever. I want it to be. I don't want people to ever feel like they have to get out of town because they're not welcome here or they can't be successful here. One of the things I say now is that I'm fighting for rural. That's just one of my personal slogans "fighting for rural." Rural, by itself is not good or bad. It just is. And we have a different set of needs. And community is, is vital to us.

Narrator (27:26): You have been listening to "Fighting for Rural" the ninth episode of Rural Roots Rising by the Rural Organizing Project. This monthly radio show and podcast is created by and for rural Oregonians who are creatively and courageously building stronger and more vibrant communities for a just democracy.

For photos and articles highlighting Key Club's cultural events, and resources on how to start your own group, head to ruralrootsrising.org. Do you have comments, questions, or reactions to what you just heard? We want to hear from you. Contact us at info@ruralrootsrising.org!

We featured music from Diana Wild, The Wild Wood and the Road Sodas.

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