

Rural Roots Rising Episode 3: Building Community Power -- Transcript

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Narrator: You are listening to Rural Roots Rising by the Rural Organizing Project. Welcome back! 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's episode is "Building Community Power." Miriam Vargas Corona in Yamhill County and Bruce Morris in Deschutes County share their stories of how we can win when everyday people unite behind a common goal and take action.

Miriam Vargas Corona: "You know, our legal observers have told us you know, people will walk next to them and say very quietly, like, thank you for being here. Appreciate your work. Appreciate your time. They've had even attorneys I think they've had public defender attorneys actually thank them"

Bruce Morris: One of the city councilors actually said that he wasn't planning to vote for the ordinance originally, because he didn't think we needed it. He didn't think we had this discrimination. He didn't, hadn't seen it. And he said what he, and actually said this at the hearing! "So what I have seen here tonight, has convinced me that this town has discrimination that needs to be remedied, and I didn't know that until tonight."

MUSIC

Narrator: My name is Emma Ronai-Durning and I'm an organizer with the Rural Organizing Project. In my work, I get to see how rural Oregonians win incredible victories by figuring out how to get people with different perspectives working together toward common goals! You just heard Bruce sharing a powerful victory in changing a city councilor's vote and Miriam talking about how her community defends themselves from detentions and deportations carried out by Immigration and Customs Enforcement or ICE. When we recorded this interview earlier this year, we weren't sure of the outcome, but since then her work has also led to a concrete victory.

Miriam: My name is Miriam Vargas Corona. I'm the Executive Director of Unidos Bridging Community. We are a small nonprofit organization in rural Yamhill County and we advocate for Latinx immigrants here. We are a primarily agricultural community. A lot of wineries have sprung up. I think generally what we heard from our immigrant communities, a lot of fear I think that social media is the method that has worked for us, for people to spread information quickly. So when the community was first hearing about these arrests, you would see on Facebook people posting "ICE at the courthouse don't go there". Like I remember early on when the ICE courthouse arrest were becoming more public somebody put on Facebook I heard that ICE is going to be in Yamhill County this weekend, be careful. And again, this just spread like wildfire. And I spent like half of a Saturday trying to get to the bottom of this, trying to figure out like,

Where did you get your info? How did you hear about this? So it's at the at the same time, it's scary and frightening for the community. But for those of us that are trying to build this infrastructure of support and defense, it can be really hard to equip the community with factual information and not spread the fear. Like, "Yes, when you come to your court house hearing, you are running the risk of getting arrested." But we also don't want to scare people from not coming. If you don't show up to your court hearing, then you're more likely going to get into more trouble with law enforcement and the criminal justice system because you didn't go to your court hearing. So it's it's hard sometimes trying to strike this balance of like setting up support defense structures for the community, but also not continuing to spread this fear and really like terrorism that's happening by ICE and the Trump administration. Like they're doing everything possible to scare our community and keep them in the shadows. So it's, it's hard. It's a hard balance that we have to always have.

Bruce: You're listening to 889 KPOV Bend, High Desert Community Radio. It's 9am time for The Point on KPOV. Hi, I'm Bruce Morris.

Narrator: I met with Bruce at KPOV, the community radio station in Bend where he works. Thanks to Bruce and feedback from listeners, KPOV's software is improving the sound quality of Rural Roots Rising. The radio station is housed in a brick building and inside the tables are covered in literature about their shows, posters for upcoming events plaster the walls, and multiple recording booths are soundproofed with pieces of foam and egg cartons brought in by volunteers. I sat down with Bruce to ask about his journey from being a corporate lawyer to organizing a community response when someone was attacked at a queer dance night in Bend.

Bruce: Yeah, then we moved out here. I lived in Texas for my first 37 years and we moved out here in 1998. Well, it's a lot bigger, in 20 years. So it's almost doubled in 20 years time, which is a, you know, kind of a really rapid rate of growth for a small city. I got started organizing, because I was I was very frustrated and very upset. You know, in the late 90s, and everybody said, everything was great. People were suffering. People just were, in large numbers. I had been a corporate lawyer for a long time. I got really, really fed up with that, and eventually quit doing that. I was complaining constantly around my house, I would just rant and rave and my daughter, one of my daughters finally just started screaming at me "Do something about it! Do something about it!"

And I got to be friends with some folks, one of whom became the programming director for the Human Dignity Coalition, which is a small human rights organization. It was one of the original Rural Organizing [roject groups. She, I also ranted and raved around her. And so she said, "I've just got this job. I want you to come to this volunteer meeting, and see if you want to get involved doing this work." So I showed up. There was some violence, there was actually one instance set up at a local bar where there were some gay men dancing and one of them was attacked and badly injured. So there was you know, everybody was nervous after that. That's when it's like, "Okay, wait, maybe we're not safe in this town. Maybe there's work that needs to be done."

Actually, in some ways, the rallying around after that event after that attack, that actually helped to coalesce a group to move towards the ordinance. So again, that's how we pulled together this coalition of all these different groups that just wasn't happening other places. We had a very, watched the first the original "Not In Our Town" movie had it at this nightclub. It was very well attended, standing room only. And then people wanted to do more like let's do something else. Let's move, let's keep moving forward. So the coalition there was born with HDC and some other groups to move forward towards this Equal Rights Ordinance. And then that happened over the course of about the next 18 months.

MUSIC

Narrator: For listeners who haven't heard about "Not in Our Town", "Not In Our Town" is a documentary from 1995 that highlights the story of everyday people in Billings, Montana organizing to build stronger community out of attacks on Black, Native, and Jewish communities and congregations. In the early 2000's, when Bruce was working on the Equal Rights Ordinance with Human Dignity Coalition or 'HDC', "Not In Our Town" was a film they used to bring the community together for discussion and move into action together. Let us know if you want a copy to screen in your town by emailing office@rop.org and we can send you the DVD!

For both Bruce and Miriam, making change in their communities required building people power through making connections with other community members. For this next part, remember that back in the early 2000's, Bend had about 35,000 people, and the development that defines the city now, had just barely gotten started.

Bruce: So it was just, I mean, a lot of it was just, you know, small town. We all had to work together. You know, we're all working in this conservative town on these controversial progressive issues. It was it was a very controversial to try to get a an anti-discrimination ordinance protecting against discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity in this town at that time. People were nervous. We'd have rallies and we were nervous. You know, so it was it really was a it was, again, it was a very intentional process of reaching out to a wide variety of different groups, faith groups, business groups, labor unions, other social justice organizations, Chamber of Commerce,.

Yeah, there was intensive trainings of people who wanted to speak in, you know, even, to the point of role playing. But actually, you know, and actually selecting certain people as key speakers not that they will be the only people to speak but like, and yeah, and walking them through it and practicing. That's how it works right? Yeah, it was. Yeah, it was really intense preparation. But that's how it that's how it works, right? It looks spontaneous. You know, it looks like magic, but it there was a lot of work that went into it. It was kind of a work of art on our side, but to be honest, just to watch people that knew how to do it, right. That knew how to introduce themselves and talk about why they why it was important to them and And lay out their story and do it, you know. succinctly, and persuasively and not just sort of ranting and rambling, and

impressing the city council! And one of the city councilors actually said that he wasn't planning to vote for the ordinance originally, because he didn't think we needed it. He didn't think we had this discrimination. He hadn't seen it. And he said what, and he actually said this at the hearing: "So what I have seen here tonight, has convinced me that this town has discrimination that needs to be remedied, and I didn't know that until tonight!"

So yeah, you're talking about building power. It's classic, right? It's the classic power building of laying, you just lay the bricks. Right? One at a time, reach out to these groups find out who you need, find out who has power, who has influence, who can you reach? Who can you reach who can reach that person?

MUSIC

Narrator: Let's return to Miriam in Yamhill County.

Miriam: So over the past year we, through community members, we have learned about more people in our families being arrested by ICE. But then we started to hear about more folks being arrested at the Yamhill County Courthouse. And like our building where the courthouse is, it's not just the court rooms like there's a floor where you go to pay your property taxes like if you have a traffic infraction, like you need to pay your speeding ticket. If you want to go attend to county commissioners meeting, you need to go in that building to take care of your business. So it's not just people that have a court hearing that are affected by this.

And so through community partnerships that we've developed with other groups and organizations that do similar work like ours, we started to learn about what they're doing to defend their immigrant community members. And we put out an invitation to community supporters to say, 'Hey, we want to start this legal observer program here.' And we got a lot of community response. I think now we've trained, we've had two trainings and we have a roster of like 45 people that have been trained. And so we have a superstar volunteer that every week, I asked her how much time she spends coordinating. She says anywhere from 4 to 12 hours a week. And then we create some shifts for volunteers to team up and be present at the courthouse, just being vigilant to see if ICE is there, trying to arrest somebody. And so I think this community really put their support behind us and starting up this program.

So our legal observers also play a big role in the bigger picture of keeping ICE accountable legally, in regards to constitutional rights. So when a legal observer is present during an interaction between an immigrant and the ICE agents, they're documenting with video, their phones, writing down what they saw, with the goal that we can create a database of how ICE is operating and how often they're in our communities, how they're behaving. So that, you know, in these public spaces, we can't prohibit them from coming without some sort of legal guidance or legal requirement. We can't just close the doors on them. So we need to have data to back up why this is necessary to have a courthouse rule prohibiting from making arrests. We need to have data backing up that they do violate people's constitutional rights. So part of the legal observer's role is to collect that data. So it's not just about being present there. They play a key

role in this bigger picture. You know, this bigger movement that we're doing to resist ICE and their presence in our communities.

And generally our volunteers are white, older retired folks, but we do have some others who don't fit those demographics, which has been really helpful because I mean, obviously, these shifts are during business hours. And so I think it's been a good way for people that are in a white ally role to really use their ability and availability to fill this important, needed role.

I wish that we could get to the point where they don't come, but they haven't stopped coming. ICE has not stopped coming. I think that's the ultimate goal that they know we're paying attention so that they don't feel like they have free rein to just come in here and do whatever they want. Yeah, I wish they could just not come.

MUSIC

Miriam: You know, we've received good feedback and supportive comments from staff at the courthouse, they have a fine line that they need to walk between not being perceived as being obstruction to justice, according to ICE, and also being caring members of the community. I mean, most people, I think, live in this area. So they care about what happens. And, you know, our legal observers have told us you know, people will walk next to them and say very quietly, like, "Thank you for being here. Appreciate your work. Appreciate your time." They've had even attorneys I think they've had the public defender attorneys thank them. And so I think courthouse staff has been really helpful or not helpful, but appreciative of their role. Even you know, we've had a conversation with the circuit judges about, you know, this is an issue. We need to work together to figure out a way to stop ICE from coming. And you know, there's only so much that they could do within the legal bounds of their role. But I think generally they are concerned about how ICE's presence is stopping people from accessing the justice system. I think they understand that.

MUSIC

Narrator: Since recording this interview, the courthouse rule Miriam just mentioned has passed! Thanks to a cohort of lawyers and pressure from groups throughout the ROP network and partner organizations, Oregon's Supreme Court Justice issued a ruling on November 14th, 2019 barring Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE, from making warrantless arrests inside and outside of courthouses. Making space for courthouse workers, judges, retired community members, those with legal status and without to all play a role was a huge part of this victory.

After Bruce and the Human Dignity Coalition passed the Equal Rights Ordinance, they used their momentum to dream big about starting the Social Justice Center with groups they had built partnerships with across Deschutes County. The Social Justice Center has been the epicenter of community organizing in their area since it got started. It offers a public meeting room any social justice group can use, and has inexpensive offices for union representatives, immigration

attorneys, and others doing social justice work. In the past year, ROP has been creating a Community Organizing Center in downtown Cottage Grove, and we are taking many lessons from the Social Justice Center and other places like it.

Bruce: So the building, we first got the building in the fall of 2012. And then we really got cranking on the coalition building in the summer of 2013. It's almost hard to describe how much it meant because of the conservative history of this area. So to actually have a space dedicated to social justice was powerful. You know, it was something that brought tears to people's eyes that we actually had this space where we could do social justice work. And that's what that's what it was all about. We didn't have to go rent something from somebody, we didn't have to, you know, be careful what we said. You know, it was this was ours. This well, not ours! This was this was the movement for social justice's building and that's what it meant, I guess sort of in an emotional and mental and I guess you could even say spiritual sense.

What it meant practically again, was, it was a launching point, it was a place where people could come, it was a place where we could meet it was a place where groups that had no place to meet could meet. So the Social Justice Center was available again, it was free. There was a signup sheet, you just had to get in there and get signed up to have your meeting and you'd have your meeting and we'd figure out how to get people keys and get the door locked, all that kind of stuff. And, and then just the, you know, just the synchronicities that happen when people had just happened to be there. You know, when you're running into people and you're all working on the same kind of stuff, you eventually have conversations that lead to something else or somebody, you know, you find out somebody knows something or somebody has some expertise that you never knew about before. And those kinds of things happened because we had that physical space. So yeah, it was easy to work across issues because we were literally right there, you know, in the same building, and, and all recognizing that moving forward together on our specific issues together was important and would make us all the more powerful.

MUSIC

Bruce: I think probably the biggest thing I learned is that people will stretch. People will do the work, people will expand. People will do things that they didn't think they would do, when they're supported, when they have the resources, when they have the confidence, when they have people around them. I think I learned that. I and I really did and it almost sounds cliché, but we really are more powerful when we work together. When you know, when a city administrator comes and sits in a room and realizes there's representatives from several different groups representing several different constituencies, all united and on the same page, they pay attention. Right, that's a different room than everybody who then just a bunch of representatives from the same group or a bunch of people bickering. Right? That makes a difference. That's the Equal Rights Ordinance too, going back to that, you know, all these different groups working

together, if there's power in that there that there's not in anything else. But the bottom line is we are more powerful together. We just are!

MUSIC

Narrator: Bruce shared with me that when the Equal Rights Ordinance passed, they didn't have time to celebrate because at that same moment a ballot initiative started threatening to ban same-sex marriage across the whole state. Similarly, the courthouse ruling hasn't stopped ICE from detaining community members across Oregon. We asked Miriam what she does to recognize victories when the work isn't over yet.

Miriam: I try to keep that in mind because it can, I mean, if you just get stuck in the emotions of this work, you're not going to like your job. And so I think, for me, I've really been more intentional about thinking of this work as building community power in defense of our immigrant community and not getting stuck in the like, crisis mode. Yes, there are these things that are harming our community. But it's also an opportunity for us to come together and build community power, build leadership skills. So I try to see it in that framework. And so what brings me joy is when people come together and really own their participation and feel empowered to lead the work. I would really like to get to a place where Unidos is an organization that facilitates the change. We bring the resources and the tools. And the people are the ones leading the work. The Latinx immigrants are leading the work. And so I think that gives me hope. And really, I feel joy, like when I see in our community, women are often the ones leading the change. And so to see, you know, powerful women, getting together coming up with brilliant ideas and making it happen like that brings me joy.

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Learn more about the organizing stories you heard here at ruralrootsrising.org. Our website also has more information and resources about Unidos Bridging Community, the Equal Rights Ordinance, the Social Justice Center, KPOV, the court ruling banning ICE from detaining people in and around Oregon courthouses, and ROP's Community Organizing Center.

We featured music from The Road Sodas, The Wild Wood, and Wilhelmina Frankzerda.

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