

Rural Roots Rising Episode 13- Hindsight 2020: Telling Rural Stories -- Transcript

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Abbi Aldrich:

You're listening to Rural Roots Rising by the Rural Organizing Project, 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 on our season finale, we'll be looking back and looking forward. Catching up with folks who were interviewed in our first episode, talking about local victories this election season, and exploring how sharing our own stories helps us become more strategic organizers.

Brenda Flores:

Like I remember four years ago, we were doing all this work, but we were still thinking, Oh my gosh, we should have done more. And we don't appreciate how much we've actually done until it already passes and then you realize like, okay, yeah, we actually did a lot.

Abbi Aldrich:

My name is Abby Aldrich, and I'm a new organizer at ROP. I've been heading up our defend democracy hotline. One of the many resources we created to protect against voter intimidation and disinformation in the lead up to the 2020 election. Over a year ago, when ROP committed to making 13 monthly episodes to share organizing stories from across rural Oregon, we had no idea what 2020 would bring. A global pandemic? A massive economic recession? A Black liberation movement growing and winning incredible victories? Catastrophic wildfires? One thing we did know was that in 2016, Trump's victory was blamed in large part on rural America, and very few rural voices could be heard over the noise of urban commentators. Whatever 2020 had in store, we want it to be better prepared to highlight the many ways rural Oregonians would, like every year, take action in the 2020 election season. As a network, we wanted to collaborate with our incredible community media partners in the important work of expanding the number of rural stories told by rural people. So let's go back to episode one called anyone can be an organizer. We featured three relatively new organizers who each carried a deep love for their community. One of those people was organizer and ROP board member, Monica Pearson from Clatsop County. At the time, she was busy organizing events and talked about the power of building relationships,

Monica Pearson:

Not just being at the event, because I want to show up and think it's cool, but like actually, knowing people at the event, you know, we're having people come to my house to have cake. What a you know, like, um moving to a new place and I don't have family here. It did. You know, I feel like I family with these other organizer, people.

Abbi Aldrich:

When my colleague and ROP organizer Hannah Harrod reached back out to Monica last week, she shared that strong relationships have been key to her work building community security and

getting out the vote.

Hannah Harrod:

Monica, when we were talking before you were telling me about the importance of creating a community safety plan, including a phone tree, can you tell us more about what led to this and the steps that you've taken?

Monica Pearson:

Once Black Lives Matter protests started happening in Clatsop County, the counter protesters started coming out, like in full force and not just coming out, you know, coming out carrying their weapons openly. These Black Lives Matter rallies, a lot of them have been organized by high schoolers, like, these are younger people that it's their first time participating and but we've had counter protesters literally like getting in their face with the megaphone, like screaming right in their face and carrying their AR-15s. And just really ugly, scary things happening. So they've also, you know, trolled people on Facebook, and single some of our group out, it's so much so that, you know, they know him by name, they say they know that where they live, they've showed up at some people's place of work and been threatening and we, you know, started just worrying about that and trying to figure out like a safety plan. And one of the things that was just knowing where each of us lived, knowing our phone numbers, you know, we don't engage if they start trolling us. I know it makes us feel a little bit better, just that we all know that we're supporting each other.

Hannah Harrod:

Yeah, that makes so much sense. You know, it's like your people have your back because that's so scary.

Monica Pearson:

Yeah.

Hannah Harrod:

So last episode, You and I talked to did an interview for you, you know, you mentioned like getting out of your comfort zone and that for you canvassing is one of those things. Right, right, it really gets you out of your comfort zone, which I really relate to this one thing maybe about introvert organizers and canvassing, that's a thing. I wanted to ask you, like about this election, and what your organizing looks like, I know, it was, you know, really different with COVID and the issues you were working on?

Monica Pearson:

It was a lot different, um, mostly stuff you could do at home. So a ton of letter writing, like postcard writing. Here in Clatsop County, we had measure 4-205 which was going to make Clatsop County a gun sanctuary county, so that like a lot of the work we did was actually for that measure, because we really did not want that to pass in our county, because we already had like some increased militia activity. And we thought that if that passed, it would just make the

county like a beacon for any of those militia minded people to come here. But anyway, and we called local elected officials and the sheriff. Once we found out that, you know, some of the mayors and the sheriff were of the same thinking that we were like, they didn't want this matter to pass either. We actually partnered with them and they ended up creating a statement of their thoughts on it and why it would not be a good thing if it passed in our county.

Over the years, we've built up really good relationships with the newspaper and with the local radio stations. So we actually had a guest column in the newspaper about Measure 4-0, uh, 4-205. We also one of our members was on the radio doing an interview with the sheriff, like the two of them were on together, talking about you know why it would be a bad thing for that to pass in the county. We did some like little pop up protests. One of our people she has an inflatable an inflatable T rex costume, so she did some pop up protests that it was just her holding signs on, like some of the major traffic corners, just saying no on 4-205. And we, we had somebody videotape it and then like I created like Tik Tok videos and set it to music so that we just to try to make it we're trying to think of ways we could go viral. We didn't really quite go viral, but we did have a lot of people sharing the video so that was good.

Hannah Harrod:

I love it so much. It's just so good. I like it's just feels like it's such a, it's speaks so much to like the creativity of organizing in the time of COVID like making Tik Tok videos in a T-Rex suit is

Monica Pearson:

Right.

Hannah Harrod:

definitely one of the most creative I've heard.

Monica Pearson:

Right. Well, we were intentionally trying to make things fun and silly and off the wall. Because we all were really feeling bogged down and we were trying to think of out of the box ways that you know, we could engage with each other and have fun with each other.

Abbi Aldrich:

One thing Monica didn't mention was all the hard work paid off, Clatsop County defeated Measure 4-205 which would have prevented local law enforcement from enforcing gun laws in the county. And many other rural communities are celebrating local victories this election season too. In Deschutes County, Bend elected four new city councilors, including Rita Schenkelberg, Bend's first person of color and openly queer person elected to the city council. In Rita's conversation with my colleague and ROP organizer, Emma Ronai-Durning, you'll hear Rita use the term BIPOC, which stands for Black, Indigenous and People of Color. It's a term used to acknowledge how racism impacts Black people, Indigenous people and people of color in different ways.

Rita Schenkelberg:

Hi, my name is Rita Schenkelberg. My pronouns are she/her and they/them and I'm currently the councilor-elect for Bend City Council.

Emma Ronai-Durning:

So we are talking exactly a week after the 2020 election. How are you doing? What are you seeing and hearing in your community?

Rita Schenkelberg:

I mean, in the span of this week, I have felt just so incredibly inspired by the City of Bend, seeing the numbers that turned out not only for me to be elected, but also just the turnout in general of voters in Bend was inspiring and in Deschutes County. Having so many progressive individuals elected in a county that just really shifted from the majority republican to democrat is incredibly inspiring. And feeling excited and hopeful and of course, like a little bit of heaviness and weight of the new responsibility of being a councilor-elect.

Emma Ronai-Durning:

awesome, and correct me if I'm wrong, but you're pretty new to politics. And at least in this specific direction! What are some, are pieces that you're like particularly excited about or nervous about?

Rita Schenkelberg:

As a mental health counselor, I see the world in a really different way and working in mental health, most of my adult life, I have this strong duty and appreciation for, like, an individual's experience. And so really excited to bring that to politics and to government. I'm just really excited to write equity, into policy, and how to create systemic change, and how to protect and empower and uplift the entire community here in Bend within housing and structures and infrastructure and sewer and basic needs, and all of the pieces that City of Bend is in charge of.

Emma Ronai-Durning:

With all the people like looking to you and finding hope, like, who are what are you looking towards for hope or inspiration?

Rita Schenkelberg:

When the press confirmed that I was the first person of color, and then the first queer, openly queer person, and then one of the youngest humans who has ever run for city council. I hadn't really thought about it the entire campaign, because I'm not quite sure like what really goes with the energy of being the first of so many things. And what I know from my perspective is when I see people like me, or a lived experience that's similar to mine, I get inspired to, to do and to create, and to follow my dreams. Just other people of color that are running and who have an advocacy perspective, just remembering that there are other humans like me running in many different levels of government, and that we are all doing it together, separately in our locations, but also together, creating systemic change. And we get to share ideas and challenge one

another and stay in contact.

Emma Ronai-Durning:

For people that don't live where you live, what would you want people to know ~~about~~, about bend and about the conversations that are happening around what's coming next?

Rita Schenkelberg:

Um in Bend, we have this amazing group of community organizers who are not only supporting local government, but are also doing their own advocacy work, separate from local government. And it's just, it's amazing. And it's creating a lot of movement and even in the state of Oregon, getting a lot of statewide recognition connected to that. And being able to bring kind of those equity policies and those conversations into the local government. And I am wanting to continue to talk to community organizers to build a strong bridge and communication so that we can work together and not against one another.

Emma Ronai-Durning:

Are there particular questions you'd love to ask other rural Oregonians right now?

Rita Schenkelberg:

I would want to talk to them about the Black Lives Matter movement and even more rural parts of Oregon, I would want to ask their community members, and specifically BIPOC community members, how ~~a city of Bend, city~~ a city like Bend that's got rural parts, but also has like an urban part, how we can support them? And how do we continue to build those connections and create a stronger Oregon as like bend is is surrounded kind of by a rural area. And that I wonder if a lot of the conversations that people who live in Bend are having with people in Redmond or having with people in Prineville, if some of those conversations, and maybe even if policies come out of those conversations if those would also be helpful for other parts of rural Oregon.

Abbi Aldrich:

If you've been listening to our show since its beginning, you might have noticed that our season ran from November to November. We had no idea what this November would bring, but we knew that some people only really pay attention to rural perspectives in a presidential election year. As rural Oregonians rooted deeply in our communities, we organize all year round!

So let's go back to our first episode again, and this time catch up with Brenda Flores from Umatilla County. When we interviewed her last year, she was a Rural Organizing Fellow who had recently co founded the group Raíces, which is the Spanish word for roots. She expressed the tension she felt returning to her hometown after finishing college.

Brenda Flores:

I feel like it has a lot of room for growth. And that's one reason why I went back home because growing up, everyone has that feeling where they're like, Oh, I can't wait to leave and I just want to get out of this area. But then you leave and then you're like, Oh, you know what, I kind of do

want to go back.

Abbi Aldrich:

My colleague Hannah checked in with Brenda last week and discovered that Raíces had been sharing STAND Election Guides at local mask distribution events. The STAND Guide is a nonpartisan election guide made by and for rural Oregonians that cuts through the divisive rhetoric common during the election and breaks on the issues we are voting on. Human dignity groups use these newsprint guides, available in both English and Spanish, to start conversations and build relationships in their communities. To adapt to the pandemic, we turned the everyday language of the STAND Guide into a social media guide, a full length radio program, radio ads, and public service announcements as well.

Hannah Harrod:

Brenda, when we first heard from you, for the podcast, you were talking about how you decided to go back home and how Raíces was an organization about you know, y'all were folks who are returning back home after leaving for college and things like that as well. And, and just curious to hear from you like, what is home like now? And how are you feeling about that, like sense of home and rootedness that you've created with folks.

Brenda Flores:

~~up, um,~~ well, I definitely see a change in the community. With the Trump administration--having him as president and everything. Of course, I did see more people being openly racist, but also the positive is that I've seen more, more people actually speaking out and getting involved when it comes to political talks. And just be more aware, there's some negatives and then positives of, of now being back home. I like seeing more people being involved.

Hannah Harrod:

And I'm curious if you feel like has Raíces played a role in that? What do you see as your role in that, of helping folks to be more engaged?

Brenda Flores:

We were able to, like, encourage a few people to be involved. Like a lot of older adults, because we sometimes whenever we do something, or like have an event, we always have older adults come up to us. And say like, oh, like, usually they say, you guys are the future like you guys can, we'll support you. But we're not young enough to do the work. But then we encourage them and tell them no like you guys. Even if you're older, like it doesn't matter the age, you can still be involved.

Hannah Harrod:

In the first episode, you talked about the importance of voting. And I'm curious, you know, just what the election organizing looked like this year for y'all. And especially doing that work in a time of COVID. And, but I know there was so much that, that you all were able to figure out creatively around ways to engage. So I'd love to hear about that.

Brenda Flores:

We just really focused on creating posts online, on our Instagram and Facebook pages. We used the STAND Guides to create our posts and educate the community, we did see that we would get a lot of shares from those. And then we we would be invited to like drive through mask events. go and give out masks to our community, especially our farm working communities. And sometimes we would also have free COVID tests at the site. Once we had our STAND Guides, we started getting those out as well. We kind of felt uncomfortable to ask them, "Hey, can you vote?" but then we just decided to give it to everyone even if they can't so just do that they can, you know, know what's going on in their state. Because they, on the STAND Guide, it also had like information on why it's important to vote and about, like the different levels of the government. So we would just explain to folks like: "If you can go, this is helpful if you can't, this is just a great resource for you to learn and, and get to know what's happening in your community that can either affect you or your family."

Hannah Harrod:

Totally, that makes so much sense to me. And we try to create STAND Guides I know with that in mind around like, the importance of everyone feeling engaged, and like they have information around the election, whether or not they're able, they're allowed to vote, I actually really appreciate you naming that, that makes a lot of sense. I know you are posted up in parking lots in different places, you know, talking with folks as they were coming to these events, and I'm just curious what, what that was like for you.

Brenda Flores:

Sometimes our community's very shy when it comes when it comes to getting help or receiving help. Or they were probably overwhelmed with how much, how much material they were receiving at that moment. But a lot of them were, you know, thankful that they ~~that they had~~, that they were giving out STAND Guides, because it's just hard for them to sometimes even watch it on TV, because they just don't have time, or they just might not understand so well. Now thinking about it, uh, we have community members who who, who possibly can't read, actually now I'm thinking about it, we probably should have shared another resource that they can listen to as well, because I know that you all had the podcast too, talking about the measures and the information on the STAND guide. So we could have directed them to that. I just realized that, oh my god!

Hannah Harrod:

That's actually one of the things I love about doing these interviews for Rural Roots Rising is I feel like they're also always organizing conversations, you know, like we're talking about organizing and are like, "Oh, yeah!" Like sometimes, I know, for me, I'm moving really fast from like one thing to the next and organizing. So actually having a moment to stop and reflect with somebody I'm like, "Oh, yeah, we could have done that!" Or "what about this thing?" So that's awesome. I love that. And I love that you're the kind of organizer who's reflective of all of the time in those ways around how to continue reaching more folks and bringing more folks in. Just

take time to celebrate yourselves too and all of the work that you're doing and how much you care!

Brenda Flores:

Yeah, thank you. I really appreciate it. Yeah, I guess like, it's crazy. Because during those times when, like. I remember four years ago, we we were doing all this work, but we were still thinking *oh my gosh, we should have done more*. And we don't appreciate how much we've actually done until it already passes and then you realize like, "Okay, yeah, we actually did a lot!" And I feel like that's gonna happen with this year too where we're, where we're thinking we didn't do anything. But I mean, in reality. I mean, we did our best, and we definitely were, you know, out there working out working with other orgs in caring for our community.

Hannah Harrod:

Yes, exactly. Oh, man. Yeah, that's not nothing. That's so important. Totally. Totally. Mhm. Well, I just appreciate you so much, and it was so nice to catch up. Thanks again for taking the time.

Abbi Aldrich:

For Brenda and so many others. Finding the space to fully grasp the impact of our work is a real challenge. A year ago, we expected to use the show to celebrate powerful examples of rural organizing and tell stories in our own words. But we didn't realize that producing these episodes would also change how we tell ourselves these stories. As COVID cases rise and people struggle to meet their basic needs, it can be hard to celebrate our victories, much less envision a better future. But reflection and celebration are central to strategic organizing, especially when major barriers are still blocking our way towards the thriving rural Oregon we all want to see.

Through hundreds of conversations across the network, we have laid out our priorities for the months and years to come in the Roadmap to a Thriving Rural Oregon. And we know that in order to achieve it, we will need to lean heavily on the lessons learned over the nearly three decades of ROPs lifetime.

This brings us to our last clip, a conversation between two of my colleagues who haven't been featured on the show before. Meredith Martin-Moats has been working behind the scenes on Rural Roots Rising since day one. And she sat down with Kate Orazem, ROPS new archivist. Just this week, Kate was preparing to dig into our many boxes full of organizing history from across the state: everything from protest photos to local action plans from over the decades.

Meredith Martin-Moats:

I just want to start us off with asking a little bit about you, Kate, and what drew you to be in an archivist?

Kate Orazem:

I have always just kind of been someone who was interested in old stuff and history. As a kid, I really liked visiting cemeteries. And I was always just reading old books, I've always bought

vintage clothes, stuff like that. And then, as I kind of got older and started thinking about what I wanted to do, I studied history in college. And I ended up doing a history thesis. On the archives of British colonial rule in Kenya, I was writing about women's role in the Kenya Land and Freedom Army, which rose up against the British in the 1950s. And I found that it was pretty difficult for me to find sources, not so much because they didn't exist, but partly because there just was no kind of indexing based on the gender of people represented in the archival materials. And so that experience got me really interested in some of these questions about power and history. Who has control over the record? Whose voices and stories get preserved? And whose are left out? How do you read primary sources or archival materials knowing that some of that silencing has gone on? How do you kind of work against that? And how, as an archivist, do you sort of transform collecting practices so that future generations won't have the same issues, they won't find so many of the same absences or silences or silencings in the historical record?

Meredith Martin-Moats:

I'm curious, like, what are some things that you're excited about digging into?

Kate Orazem:

On a personal level, I always am really fascinated, and looked kind of looking out for, sort of, visual collections. So if someone has a lot of photographs that they took of their movement work, or a collection of flyers and pamphlets that were produced in the course of a campaign, I think when you feel personally connected to a story about organizing, or a campaign or a struggle that happened in the past, one of the things I think it does for you is it helps you stay invested in your own work. Jess Campbell, our director, has said you know, that stories are what keeps people in movements.

I also think that one of the things that having a personal connection to the past does for you, is it builds a kind of radical humility or a self reflexivity. So if you feel connected to organizers in the past, who worked on things you care about, and you can see where they made or fought for victories that are really important to you. But you also kind of with the benefit of hindsight, can see ways that they made mistakes. I think that that is really valuable in looking at yourself critically, and understanding where our own movements might be falling short, where we should be pushing ourselves to do better, because you have that kind of sense of, well, how are people in the future going to look back at me, the way I'm looking back at these organizers in the past?

Meredith Martin-Moats:

I love that humility, that you brought that up. So if someone is, is listening to this, and they're like: "Oh, wow, I'd really like to, you know, use this archive!" How can others use the resources that you're going to be putting together in a cohesive way for ROP?

Kate Orazem:

So we're at a pretty early stage of our work, but my goal is to really prioritize access, we're going to be kind of figuring it out as we go. But for now, what I am really going to try to do a lot of is do

some outreach and try to talk with anyone who is interested in these materials. My email is Kate@rop.org. And I, if you're interested in this kind of stuff, then I would love to talk to you.

Abbi Aldrich:

This brings us to the end of season one of rural roots rising. Thank you so much for joining in as we learned how to create a radio show and podcast. We'll be back next season with more rural organizing stories created by rural media makers. We hope you'll join us as we pull back the curtain on what we've learned about storytelling over the course of making Rural Roots Rising. If you're listening by radio, we're so grateful for the opportunity to grow through creative partnerships with your local station. And please be sure to submit your own radio shows and recorded content for us to feature, or get support in telling your own rural stories by reaching out to us at info@ruralrootsrising.org.

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. More information about what you heard in this episode is available at ruralrootsrising.org

Rural Roots Rising is created by the Rural Organizing Project and network of over 80 autonomous community-based groups committed to advancing human dignity and democracy across rural Oregon.

To learn more about the Rural Organizing Project and the Roadmap to a Thriving Rural Oregon go to rop.org

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Thanks for listening!