

## Rural Roots Rising Episode 8: Black Lives Matter: Voices of Rural Oregon -- Transcript

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CROWD NOISE

Emma (0:06): What's your name? Anything you're willing to share?

Adriana (0:08): I'm Adriana Aquarius. I am the 21 year old who put the protest together, downtown Bend on Saturday.

CROWD NOISE & MUSIC

Narrator (0:31): Over the course of the month, there have been Black Lives Matter protests all around the nation and beyond. Here in Oregon, rural communities have hosted over 75 protests throughout every corner of the state. People are gathering on street corners, in churches and parks and in socially distanced car caravans to protest and hold a vigil for George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, and the many other Black and Brown people killed by police. Some rural actions had attendance in the hundreds, others were smaller, with only a handful of dedicated community members. Almost all of these protests were organized (CROWD NOISE) by young people braving a pandemic. With actions now in every county across our state, there are no signs of them stopping.

Emma (1:19): Why did you decide to come out today or, why did you decide to organize that protest?

Adriana (1:23): I'm fighting for the generations behind me. I'm fighting for the generations that I'm going to bring into this world. Things need to change now.

CROWD NOISE & MUSIC

Narrator (1:38): 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 Sasha Blankenship and I'm an organizer with the Rural Organizing Project. In today's episode *Black Lives Matter: Voices of Rural Oregon*, we'll hear from protest organizers like Adriana Aquarius in Deschutes County and Giana Espinosa in Wallowa County about why they're part of a global movement for justice. For the past few weeks organizers with Rural Organizing Project have been supporting the planning of protests, vigils and demonstrations across rural Oregon and capturing conversations with local leaders about why their communities are showing up in defense of Black lives. Let's go back to the conversations one of those organizers, Emma, was having with Adriana.

Emma (02:53)

Have you ever organized against police brutality before?

Adriana (02:55)

I've never organized anything before, no.

Emma (02:58)

What motivated you to organize this time?

Adriana (03:00)

I've wanted to forever. I just didn't have, I didn't have that courage to do it. And I literally woke up. I posted a Facebook post about how angry I was about things going on and how Bend can make a change. And before I knew it, I had people reaching out to me and like "Yo, let's do it." And I was like, "Alright, let's do it." And we've from then, we started planning just everything and getting everything together, getting the news channels involved, getting radio stations involved and everything like that. And now this is the third protest, or the second protest has happened since mine, third, technically, if you count the vigil and this is just amazing. It's so scary and so intimidating. But once you do it you just feel so successful and kind of like a weight has been lifted off your shoulders. Setting up and organizing an event is a lot. It is a very heavy job and is a very full time job but with the right support team and the right allies, anything's possible, so just do it. Reach out to me if you need somewhere to start. I know people to contact, people, and add me on Facebook or Instagram and I'll do the best that I can.

Emma (04:01)

What's the vision that you're fighting for? What's the world you want to see?

Adriana (04:03)

I want to see peace. I want to see peace in our justice system. I'm hoping that once this movement is successful, that'll mean that the justice system has been fixed for all People of Color. Right now we're preaching Black Lives Matter. That's our that Black lives are on fire. Hispanic lives are on fire right now as a Black American woman, I've decided to focus on Black Lives Matter.

CROWD NOISE & MUSIC

Mary (04:37)

My name is Mary, I'm 11 years old, and I organized the protest here. We live in La Grande, Oregon.

Colleen (04:46)

My name is Pastor Colleen Nelson and I'm a retired pastor here in La Grande and involved in progressive causes.

MUSIC

04:57

Narrator: La Grande with a population just a little over 13,000 is about 300 miles northeast of Bend. Just like in Bend, there wasn't just one protest, but multiple events that grew as the word spread across town. And just like in Bend, it was young people that are leading the way.

04:19

Mary: So I was up on Friday morning, reading the New York Times and seeing all these protests in the cities. And I was, and I was like, well, La Grande isn't as big as all the other cities, but we can still have a protest and we still should. And we started by inviting like five people we knew. And then, and then it got to a few other people but it just started with those five people.

05:46

Pastor Colleen Nelson: I got a notice from my friend who said it was going to be going on and I had, I had just returned home from the farmers market and the protest was in 10 minutes. So I turned my car around. And I

went back, so I didn't have a sign. So thankfully, Mary had signs. So I was able to hold a sign. Um, so after, after Mary's organized the protest, I went, I'm a pastor, I went to church the next day. And a lot of people said to me, oh, I mean, we don't go to church, we were on Zoom. But anyway, people said to me, wow, If only I'd known I would have been there. So my friend Cheryl took that, because she's really good with getting the word out on social media. There were actually four of us that got together and said, should we organize something or should we just be present? And the decision was just to let people be present and have a place where they can be present. So we didn't, we expected maybe at the max some hundred people and they just kept coming and coming and coming and we had at least 400, probably more than that. Probably a lot more than that.

MUSIC

06:59

Narrator: Protest organizers lay the groundwork that participants bring the gatherings to life, whether that be five people on a street corner or a packed downtown. Let's head back to Bend where Adriana Aquarius' initial Facebook posts led so many people taking action for the first time.

CROWD CHEERS, CHANT "NO JUSTICE, NO PEACE"

07:21

My name is Grace.

07:21

My name is Ali

07:23

My name is Tate.

07:27

Emma: Why are you here today?

07:28

Grace: Just to support.

07:30

Ali: Same, I mean, I want to support everyone and have equality for all.

07:34

Tate: Yeah, I guess just to support because I feel like I've benefited off of my privilege my entire life. And if I'm doing nothing, then I'm continuing to benefit off of it. So I just gotta come out here and do what I can at least.

CROWD CHEER, CHANTS "NO JUSTICE, NO PEACE"

07:55

Emma: My name's Emma, I'm with the Rural Organizing Project, do I have your permission to record this interview?

07:59

Kash: Yes, you do.

08:00

Emma: What's your name? First, or full name, whatever you prefer.

08:03

Kash

08:04

Emma: Why are you here today?

08:05

Kash: We thought that was important to come out and show support in our own city for the events happening around the country. I wanted my daughter to see that her voice matters and that it needs to be heard.

08:17

Emma: What do you see around us, for people listening?

08:20

Kash: A lot of young people, it's amazing. Just a lot of solidarity. People are being really responsible with the masks and it's just really moving to see.

08:30

Emma: Have you ever protested against police brutality before?

08:33

Kash: No, I never have. This is a first.

08:35

Emma: What changed for you?

08:37

Kash: Just the events of the last week and how the police have responded to the protests and just the antagonizing effect on our communities. Enough is enough.

CROWD, CHANTS AND MUSIC

08:55

Emma: What is your name, if you don't mind? You can say first name, or nothing, whatever you want.

08:59

Lynn: My name is Lynn Pickens.

09:01

Emma: Where are we today?

09:03

Lynn: We're in Bend, Oregon.

09:06

Emma: What does it look like around us?

09:08

Lynn: Lots of love.

09:09

Emma: Why did you come out today?

09:11

Lynn: I felt it was my duty even in rural places like central Oregon, it's our duty to come and spread the word and be aware of the privilege that exists here in our own community.

09:21

Emma: What does your sign say?

09:22

Lynn: My sign says, "Tu lucha es mi lucha." I'm Latino American. And I believe that your struggle is my struggle and I stand in solidarity with you.

CROWD CHANTS "SILENCE IS VIOLENCE", MUSIC

09:41

Narrator: Earlier this month, the Movement for Black Lives called for a week of action that focused on six specific demands. We demand the rights of protesters be respected. We demand a divestment from police and an investment in Black communities. We demand local schools, colleges, universities and all public institutions cut ties with the police. We demand immediate relief for our communities. We demand community control. We demand an end to the war against Black people. You can read more about each of those demands on their website, [M4BL.org](http://M4BL.org).

10:32

Narrator: Rural Organizing Project's multiracial network has responded to this call with protests, and vigils in parks and on street corners. Local organizers have been calling and emailing elected officials to talk about systemic racism, defunding the police and investing our resources into the things that help our communities thrive. ROP has also held multiple statewide calls to strategize together about how the national demands translate into each county specific context and how to continue organizing in the face of intimidation and threats from white supremacist counter protesters. Brianna Spencer, a former rural organizing fellow from Umatilla County, shared with us what inspired her to travel to Salem for a 2000 person strong march for George Floyd.

11:26

Brianna Spencer: Natives are actually the second most national race to be killed by police, African Americans and Native Americans So, but it's always been, we're also like, pushing forward, like, you know, we understand that we've gone through, both have gone through systematic oppression, that we've gone through all of these things that do connect us because we've all experienced them. But also we're not taking away from Black Lives Matter saying this is well, what about us? What about Natives and we're like, we're here to support you.

We understand after this, like you were here to support us, you know, and vice versa. And so we're just making sure that people have that support.

12:02

Narrator: Brianna is a member of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation. She's working with other organizers across Umatilla County to plan a countywide action focused on bringing people together across communities and identities in solidarity with Black lives, and to demonstrate a commitment to ending white supremacy in all of its forms,

12:26

Brianna: Just because we're of People of Color does not mean that we do not have internal racism within our teachings. So we're trying to dismantle that as well to make sure all People of Color can kind of come together. And I feel like that is like a big connection because you know, it is through like, Hispanic cultures or you know, even Native cultures. And then, you know, African American cultures who don't like Hispanics or don't like Natives, but we're all trying to work together to dismantle that because it is a colonized mindset that we have to be against each other when I feel like all People of Color should be able to band together and like, not be like it's a competition, but just like, okay, I see yours and this is ours, like how can we combine them together to work towards something together.

13:11

Brianna Cont'd: If you're going to be an ally, be an ally, don't try to take it over and twist to your own narrative for something, you know. It goes beyond protesting and like, being there and making sure you're showing up and like, even goes like, educating your family, you know, and making sure that your family understands things, you know, I'm constantly educating my family because they're older, or my stepdad is white and like having to - things that, things that they said in the past that were there were like, you know, people weren't highlighting how it impacted them, you know, so they're just like saying things that are aren't appropriate anymore. And I'm just like, you guys can't say that, you know, or constantly reminding them when they do say stuff like 'all Hispanics' and like, I'm Hispanic or African right. like I'm African right? Like you guys can't disassociate me just being a Native person. I'm all of these things and you need to recognize that when you group everybody in like that you were also talking about me. And that's something that is, I know it's hard for people but, I, you kind of have to, it starts with you, you know, educating everyone around you and making sure that they're aware, You know?

14:24

Narrator: if you drive down Highway 395, South from Brianna's home in Umatilla County, you'll pass through John Day, Burns, and then arrive in Lakeview, just before crossing into California. Lakeview, population 2313, turned out about 40 people in a walk through town for George Floyd. We spoke with a few people in Lakeview and Sandra Watts shared with us not only her idea for the action, but also about her work in the 60s and why this moment feels unlike any she's known before.

15:00

Sandra Watts: I'm a fifth generation Oregonian from this area. Well, of course I've been sitting in front of my TV and I'm a civil rights worker in the 60s. I was in Mississippi in the 60s. And so this whole issue of Black Lives Matter is just ingrained in me. When I went to Mississippi, I graduated from the University of Oregon and went to Mississippi right away and my parents had a fit. And most of the people in this town didn't understand. So I wanted to do something after this horrific lynching. I talked about having a demonstration and people were sort of hesitant and reticent. So we just backed off on it and decided we'd send a letter instead to the paper. And then all of the sudden, it just caught on. I had a feeling that, that this was really meaningful that, to think that an

officer knelt on someone's neck for that long a period of time, even after he died, was both horrifying and, and the fact that we were all there, horrified ourselves was, was the, it was the restorative thing for me. And he was the spark that hopefully is going to create a movement although, you know, we've all been disappointed before. When the sparks sort of peter out, but I, this has enraged like 75% of the population and that's something.

17:02

Narrator: The results of a recent Pew survey showed that a majority of Americans do support the movement for Black lives, and only a small subset opposes the powerful actions taking place across our country for racial justice. Unfortunately, in many cases across our state, those opposed have shown up to intimidate protesters at demonstrations. In Wallowa County, Giana Espinosa received countless threats from militia members and white supremacists prior to the protest and shared with us the experience of facing armed counter protesters in Enterprise.

17:39

Giana: You know, that was like the first time in my life I'd been part of something so big like that in such a small place. And also, it was also kind of terrifying with the, you know, community backlash that we received from counter protesters and the continual harassment and badgering of law enforcement to continually prove that we were peaceful.

18:02

Giana Cont'd: The county commissioners and the police officers be like, well, I heard Antifa is coming around in buses and I know that's a huge widespread rumor right now in small communities. And it's just a way that people are stirring the pot, inciting fear so people don't join the protest.

18:21

Narrator: The threat started before the protest and swelled to actual weapons at the event.

18:27

Giana: Before the protests we received, you know, numerous death threats on Facebook because, you know, rural people love Facebook, and a lot of them included saying, you know, just stomp them to death, kick them to death, you know, they were threatening to spray us with like, weedicide or pesticide. They were complaining if certain restaurants got looted or rioted, quote unquote, that they would hunt us down. Literally hunt us down. Someone dug out his old uniform and said that he was sworn to protect enemies foreign and domestic. And he's the one carrying the assault rifle in a picture. Someone said for real, guns are loaded. Are we organized, you know, put your ducks in a row, get your bullets out. And then at the actual protests we had, there were people on rooftops with rifles and semi automatic weapons, who were watching us. And as my mom actually came into town, she saw people posted on porches, with walkie talkies, and rifles, and they were hiding behind trees, behind bushes, on porches. And we told law enforcement and I think they were more concerned about the quote busloads of Antifa than possible snipers. And honestly, it was terrifying. I was a little scared when I was, you know, standing and marching, I was just thinking, I'm such an easy target, you know. And then I just remember like, how privileged I am to like, you know, be able to do something like this and stand up for more marginalized people than I am. And the fact that I could plan for my life after death, you know, when my Black and Brown siblings are just being killed, and they don't have that privilege, and I definitely, that definitely made me feel more calm and more secure in the protests.

CROWD CHATS "BLACK LIVES MATTER"

20:38

Narrator: While the dangers that Giana and other organizers have faced may have been meant to weaken the movement, it has only served to strengthen the resolve of those that know that the path to justice is as long as it is necessary. This has been true for every movement that has come before. And yet there is an additional physical risk that we must face as we organize in this moment in history. A worldwide pandemic. In Burns, Janelle Wix planned an action with her friends after months of strictly maintaining social distance in response to the COVID-19 stay at home orders. But this moment, she says, is worth that risk.

21:24

Janelle: being in the midst of stay home orders and non-essential travel restrictions and being really cautious about you know, spending time with friends and family and not having gathered with anyone for quite some time now. I had been rather hypervigilant about being careful with regards to the coronavirus and keeping myself and my community safe. But there's nothing that's going to keep our community safe from racial injustice, short of standing up and speaking out.

22:00

Narrator: For organizers and participants like Janelle, this moment is about taking risk and stepping out even in small towns to amplify Black led movement that is building a future where we are all safe. And where human dignity for everyone isn't just something we strive for. But is a reality.

22:18

Janelle: I believe, personally, that I am fighting for a world where we don't have to pit ourselves against one another to get ahead and create communities that we feel safe in, and that we feel like we're a part of. To get the education that we want or need, to find employment that can sustain food security and safe and affordable housing for everyone and, and for God's sakes to de-escalate and demilitarize the force of policing in this country. It's Pride Month and so it's very hard to also not bring up the issues that are faced by trans People of Color, you know, that are disproportionately murdered. I heard something today. I was watching a Vox piece on the Tulsa massacre, Black Wall Street. And one of the interviewees said, "Injustice plus time doesn't equal justice." And, and that really stuck with me and, and I got to thinking about it and I thought, well, what does equal justice? And the only thing I can think of is that only systemic and personal, individual reform can bring justice. And we've got to start working on that.

MUSIC

24:06

Narrator: The movement for Black Lives didn't begin this month. For hundreds of years racism has festered at the heart of our country's foundation. Uncountable voices, most of them leaders within Black, Indigenous, and People of Color communities have risen time and again to push for racial justice. We know that the energy currently motivating so many people to take to the streets won't last for forever. And organizers like Giana, Colleen and Brianna that you heard from In this episode, are already digging in to figure out how to use this energy to create lasting change.

24:46

Janelle: I just think winning, right now for me, is overall community acceptance. And, you know, more education and hopefully, someday people can just be how they want to be here. You know, like, why should that be any different than anywhere else?

25:08

Colleen: We want a world where the United States, the people of the United States are honest about our history. Confront what's happened here in terms of racism, in terms of white privilege, in terms of white dominance. To come to terms with that, and to, to correct it in ways that makes sense to communities that we have oppressed. That means talking about it, raising consciousness, being honest about it, but, but to, but to take specific action to right some of the wrongs and lift up communities that have been oppressed for all these 400 years.

25:53

Brianna: Like, we have a protest in Walla Walla and they are actually focusing on like, their next one is like education. they're focusing on topics. They're writing legislation, you know, excuse me, to their wallet, like to their city hall and stuff, you know, and I think that's so powerful to like, educate your people. This isn't just gonna end in like, these few days, like people are going forward and they're making sure that we're being heard, through marches, through legislation, through, you know, calling people up and making sure that we have a standpoint here, making sure that we're represented it represented, we're able to have People of Color rep like, point of views in all aspects of life, not just the police. Because there's so much more. The whole point of the conversation of the protest was like it's not against, People of Color versus non people of color. It's like, everybody against racism, is not as pitting against each other as against these 400 years of systematic oppression. That's happening and George Floyd was like, just the tip of the iceberg.

27:03

Narrator: You have been listening to *Black Lives Matter: Voices of Rural Oregon*, the eighth 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 more information about the movement for Black lives across the country, go to [M4BL.org](http://M4BL.org). To get involved in local organizing for racial justice in rural Oregon, contact us at [office@rop.org](mailto:office@rop.org). We are continuing to host strategy sessions and training to support the ongoing racial justice work across the state. Head to [ROP.org/BLM](http://ROP.org/BLM) to get the latest details. Do you have comments, questions, or reactions to what you just heard? Tell us what you think about that [info@ruralrootsrising.org](mailto:info@ruralrootsrising.org). In this episode we featured music from Trouville and The Road Sodas. Rural Roots Rising is created by the Rural Organizing Project, a network of over 65 autonomous member groups who are committed to advancing human dignity and democracy across rural Oregon. To learn more about Rural Organizing Project, go to [ROP.org](http://ROP.org). If you liked what you heard today, you can find more episodes at [RuralRootsRising.org](http://RuralRootsRising.org). Please follow Rural Roots Rising on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and subscribe wherever you get your podcasts. Thank you so much for listening. Stay safe and stay powerful.