

Mentor Interview, ACLU 2018

Interviewer Name: Izadora Lopez McGawley

Mentor Name: Gerrlyn Gacao

Date of Interview: May 29th

Device on which interview is being recorded: Iza's Phone

Script

Interviewer: Thank you Gerrlyn for agreeing to be interviewed. The purpose of this interview is for me to better get to know you and your career path in becoming a community organizer. Is it okay that I record our conversation for the purposes of transcribing our conversation at a later date?

Interviewee: Yes.

Interviewer: Great, thank you. My first question is...

Interview Question	Gerrlyn's Response
1. What experiences in your life pushed you into becoming a community organizer?	Like we talked about last week when we had a one on one, I think a more digested version is that I grew up somewhat comfortably in Stockton California, which is the Northern tip of the central valley in California, but definitely within a community that was severely under served. I normalized having you know, there is a big homeless population near me, there is a huge section 8 housing near me. The schools that I went to and attended and around that area are all severely underserved and under resourced. All of those things I did not really realize were not normal until leaving Stockton and going to college at UCSD in San Diego. I look back and one I feel really privileged to have been able to jump out of that world to experience something new and to realize all of those things. Then I think about if I hadn't what would my reality look like because at the time I just thought those were all normal things, it's just the way that things were. I didn't realize that you don't have to live that way Actually there is a life that is... better? Hahaha. Right? And that you can actually do something about it and fight for it. And there are people out there who can help you do that. So as an organizer and looking back on my past experiences, it's all about, "What can I do to really help people feel empowered and understand

	<p>that they can do something to better their lives and how can we do that together?” How can we lift each other up.</p>
<p>2. What did you study in college and how do you think this helped you become a better organizer? Would you change anything?</p>	<p>My major was urban planning, urban cities and planning at UCSD and the major is actually super interdisciplinary which I loved. In the profession itself the professors are all really great in that they point it out to very relevant scenarios and contexts in San Diego. So I learned a lot about like, housing patterns and housing development history in San Diego and how that creates and has perpetuated gentrification for example. I learned a lot about how certain communities in City Heights are criminalized for hanging out outside of a 7/11 because culturally they just... like to hang out! People create gathering spaces, right? I learned a lot about access to food and lack of access to food, food deserts in San Diego, all kinds of things. For me, it really opened my eyes to thinking about all these different things that really affect our quality of life but also what people are doing out there to make it better. So that also was a big inspiration about really thinking about, “What can we do to make this world better and improve the lives of people who need the help?” Also living in a binational region, it’s important to note that there are many organizations out there that work to bridge the connection between us and Tijuana, through environmental advocacy, etc. A lot of those things I was definitely exposed to and essentially the injustices which come into play, which piss me off. I think a lot of that really led me to just really caring and being really motivated to want to make that difference. I went through a couple of different ways of thinking about where my place is in creating that change so when I got to the point where I said, “You know what I really want to formally do more organizing.” All of that passion really translated into the job. Where it’s just like now, the way right now that I am choosing to do it is through on the ground, organizing, talking to people, engaging them, and showing how community action and activism is the best vehicle to get to the same goal.</p> <p>I don’t know if I would have necessarily changed what I learned, but I wish I was more daring and braver in terms of connecting and really learning more deeply about what was happening in San Diego and applying myself specifically at UCSD you tend to be in such a bubble of academia and unique at all to the campus. In the academic world you tend to be in a very theoretical space. I wish that I had made more of</p>

	<p>an effort to apply theory by reaching out to organizations, doing more research about organizations that do work that I cared about, and reached out and applied it. Then learn more because I feel like I didn't do enough of that. I feel like after college when I started to connect with all of these groups it blew my mind because there was all these groups doing amazing work. For me I just didn't know. I wish I would have done that because it would have made and enriched my academic experience because also the way that I think is that I am a very practical thinker and I am visual, so it doesn't really come alive for me until I really get to see it.</p>
<p>3. What do you think have been your most important steps in becoming a more successful organizer? Would you do anything different?</p>	<p>One of my most important steps was definitely humbling myself and trusting myself and owning my own power and being, like we talked about last week, being comfortable with who you are and accepting your entire identity and utilizing that to help others. That's not easy and there is a lot of imposter syndrome and insecurities that come into play that you have to grapple with. Humility is huge because as an organizer you, well you have your own skill sets, but as an organizer it is important to really be vulnerable and be humble when it comes to learning from the community. It's a two way street, there is no doubt about it, you have to feel comfortable learning about them and accepting and embracing residents or a person's expertise of their own community and their own life, just as much as they can benefit from learning with you and growing with you and developing skills in their leadership. There are so many other things, but that is so key to moving this kind of work.</p>
<p>4. What is your life like outside of your career and what do you do to manage the separation between work and life in such a strenuous career?</p> <p>In a career where you have to devote so much time, and not be overbearing, but that does not make the most money, how do you</p>	<p>What is my life like? I have a dog? Hahaha. It's hectic, I will tell you. The workload here is really really hectic and everyone here works really really hard and during election season, it's even busier. I really enjoy music, I really enjoy going out and having fresh air, I have always been someone who likes to keep busy somehow, no matter what, but also on the other hand I am more than happy to just relax and hang out and enjoy conversation. I would say my biggest passions is traveling and experiencing different cultures and meeting new people and eating new food, or just eating food. If I can get some combination of that in my day I am happy.</p>

<p>manage to find ways to travel?</p>	<p>It's challenging, and this is not unique to organizers, it's just something that anyone that is involved in social justice has to learn and is essential to practice, just saying no and drawing boundaries. I am such a people pleaser and I have always been a hard worker, so for me it has been really challenging to learn to do that. In the last couple years it has just been key, no overloading yourself, not stretching yourself out too thin, just appreciating yourself and giving yourself time to relax. I think for me it comes in waves because like now it is extremely busy, but in a few weeks it won't be that way as much so like balancing that. Whatever brings you joy, I always think that something that Norma said about a year ago during a team meeting was, there is this quote and I don't know who wrote it, but it's, "Don't postpone joy." That is super simple. Whatever way that you can find joy, even if it's small, block that out in your schedule and do whatever you can to prioritize that just as much as you are prioritizing anything else. As far as traveling goes, because the workload comes in waves, I always take a break, like a little hiatus, right after. I need that to recharge. I love it so much that I will find a way to do it no matter what. I don't think anything has stopped me so far.</p>
<p>5. Do you envision yourself doing anything else in the future? What do you see as options for growth from your role as lead organizer?</p>	<p>I actually think, and I believe more and more every day, one of my mentors has told me this, if you can be an organizer, you can be anything. I have so much pride in that. I believe it everyday. It's tough! Everyday you are asking someone to do more, who you are developing a relationship with. It's hard to get our families to do things! That's what it feels like. So to get someone or to get people to do more everyday is tough. If you can survive and be great at organizing, your boundaries are limitless. I always look at Norma as a great example. A person who doesn't have a law degree or whatever, her background is in organizing, and now she is the executive director of the ACLU of San Diego and Imperial Counties! She is not a lawyer but she is the boss of attorneys instead. There is something really empowering about that and you possess skills that a lot of people don't think about. Or you carry a value that a lot of other folks in different professions may not have but can benefit from when we work together. I think that is really awesome. To me you can be anything. Policy, direct services, an executive director of a non-profit for civil rights, you can do anything, I think, especially if you want to continue doing public service, I truly</p>

believe you can be anything. We have a council member, a queer, Latina, council member in San Diego who, her background is in organizing as well. In addition to that, even if you wanted to do the private sector. The private sector can also benefit from people who understand the community because of the fact that there needs to be transparency and people need to be involved in decision making processes. No matter what, whether it is some type of outreach coordinator or whatever, organizers possess a very strong value to any company that they are going to work for. They just think about things a little bit differently.

In terms of myself, I am definitely an open book, but I know that I want to go back to school to get my masters degree in city planning as well, probably in community development. I'm not too sure yet where I want to go from there, but I would love to create programs. Do more programming or some type of community development program and manage that or oversee that in the near future. Maybe make my switch to that part of working with communities. There are all these different sides of working with communities and I'd really love to carry my values around like organizing and stuff into the way that programming or say housing is implemented in cities and switch up the way that the process looks in terms of getting there.