



# “A Struggle for Our Lives”: Anti-Racist Organizing in White Working Class Rural Communities

## An interview with the Rural Organizing Project in Oregon

By Chris Crass

*“How can I go back to my white working class community and organize to build anti-racist power to advance racial, economic, and gender justice?” “What would it look like to build the left in white rural communities like the one I grew up in?” “How can we bring together our anti-racist politics, community organizing, and our visions for collective liberation?” These are some of the questions that we get at Catalyst Project and it was with these questions in mind that we reached out to the Rural Organizing Project (ROP) in Oregon to share their history, reflections and lessons. With hundreds of volunteer leaders and sixty-five member groups across Oregon, the ROP is a powerful example of a statewide social justice organization with a statewide strategy. At the center of their work for peace, justice and democracy is an organizing strategy to develop anti-racist politics, leadership, and action in rural white working class communities. Across the country, innovative approaches to anti-racist organizing in white working class communities as part of larger campaigns and efforts to build grassroots multiracial movements for justice are developing. It is in support of these efforts and the many more to come that this interview was conducted.*

### **Chris Crass: What were the conditions that the Rural Organizing Project emerged from and what is the organization’s history?**

Amy Dudley: Rural Organizing Project (ROP) developed as a progressive rural response to homophobic ballot measures initiated by right-wing organizations that considered rural Oregon to be their political base. In the late eighties and early nineties, the Right was on the prowl for issues and locations to wage culture wars. They were seeking out wedge issues that would effectively divide working class people from their own economic self-interest and encourage fear and the worst of human nature to create a vacuum that the Right would then fill with “moral” leadership and “family values.” Sounds familiar, right? By equating being queer with pedophilia and a list of evils, the Right was able to whip up homophobic fears, focus the mainstream on a non-existent threat, scapegoat a vulnerable group of people, then enter the divide that they had created with anti-queer policies that would distract from the real focus of their platform – to create unfair tax structures, subsidize the rich, establish corporate welfare, and destroy the social safety net.

So the Right had their plan, now they needed to find communities to launch this attack. Where better than white rural America? Oregon is an incredibly white state as is much of the Northwest, though that is changing primarily due to a growing Latino immigrant population. The state as a whole is 81% white, 10% Latino, 4% Asian Pacific Islander, 2% African American, and 1% Native American. Most communities of color are concentrated in a few areas of the state, including Oregon’s largest city, Portland. Like in many historically white rural communities across the nation, that demographic is shifting. Latinos comprise only 10% of the population of the state, but that population has increased more than 200% since the 1990 census. That growth has occurred in urban centers like Portland, but also in rural communities, like Umatilla,



Hood River, Morrow, and Jefferson Counties. There is a reason that the Aryan Nation chose to make the Northwest their home. Rural Oregon, like much of rural America, is downwardly mobile, predominantly working class/working poor, with a tendency to more conservative politics and religious fundamentalism, and a long history of openly white supremacist organizing. All of these factors play a role in why the Right focused their organizing in small town and rural communities across the US.

This is where ROP enters onto the scene. While all of the above is true to some extent about rural America, we are not homogenous. We don't fit easily into gross stereotypes of hillbillies or rednecks, terms that are intended to make fun of poor, white, rural people. Rural Americans deal with anti-rural sentiment that is most deeply rooted in classism.

While all poor people are oppressed and treated in classist ways, making fun of poor, white, rural people is one of the few places that it is socially acceptable to be classist. In the same way that working class people are often blamed for perpetuating homophobia or characterized as exceedingly homophobic, poor, white, rural folks are often blamed for perpetuating white supremacy or characterized as exceedingly racist. In both these instances, perhaps it is true that working class people are more likely to verbally express their homophobia or racism, but it is the wealthy, owning class that is exercising the power to keep these systems of oppression in place and ultimately use homophobia and racism to keep working people divided from one another. This is not to ignore or diminish the racism or homophobia of working class people. Those are things that we are working to challenge and change. It has been our experience at ROP that finding solidarity between working class rural folks and the queer community, and between white rural folks and people of color, and between white rural queer people and immigrant farmworkers has been a journey of finding common cause and a shared sense of struggle against the same systems of oppression that are working to keep us all divided and to keep us all down. That is a journey that is much easier to take as a working class person than as a wealthy person who is invested in keeping the system in place.

The reality is that rural communities can hearken back, like all communities, to the radical struggles that we have been a part of – from civil rights to labor struggles to farm worker organizing and indigenous resistance. Our values and our sense of community can be a uniting force against hatred and oppression. This is the hope and belief that ROP is founded on. At its core, ROP is committed to contesting the notion that rural Oregon is a ready-made base for the Right.

When the Right brought the culture wars to Oregon, they utilize their politics of division focused on anti-choice, censorship, and creationism efforts as well as the anti-queer statewide Ballot Measure 9. As petitions started showing up outside post offices and grocery stores, justice minded folk in rural Oregon stepped up. They contacted progressive leadership in urban areas and asked for support. The reality of most



urban based organizing, particularly during campaigns, is that time and resources are focused on where people are most densely concentrated, meaning rural communities are often left out. Undeterred, these same concerned rural folk took what support they could glean from urban supporters and set out on their own traveling the state and holding living room conversations that called on people to recognize the human dignity that is innate in every person, to ask themselves what treatment their neighbors were deserving of, and ultimately to talk about what a real democracy requires of its members. From these living room conversations, local human dignity groups were organized.

The defeat of Measure 9 was a huge victory for Oregon as well as the nation. However, within a year, more than 20 local ordinances using the same language as Measure 9 had been passed in rural communities, underscoring the critical significance of rural organizing for true statewide justice and emphasizing ROP's role resisting the Right's focus on rural Oregon as well as the Left's urban centric tendency to ignore rural Oregon. The greater legacy for rural Oregon was after the campaign, when each of the newly formed human dignity groups got together and made two decisions: The first was to form Rural Organizing Project as a connection and support to these local groups. The second decision was to hold anti-racism trainings with each of these local groups. While we had been focused on resisting attacks on the queer community and understanding them as a wedge strategy to undermine all civil rights, we quickly realized we needed to expand our initial focus to include immigrant rights. Leaders within ROP and the immigrant community recognized that we shared an opponent in the Right and had much to gain and learn by working together.

The beginnings of this relationship between the immigrant community organized by PCUN, Oregon's farm worker union, and rural allies who would soon form ROP began on a march opposing Measure 9 that led through the heart of Oregon's Willamette Valley. Pineros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste (Northwest Treeplanters and Farmworkers United), is Oregon's union of farmworkers, nursery, and reforestation workers, and Oregon's largest Latino organization. During the March for Love and Justice, PCUN opened the doors of their union hall to the marchers unlike many local white churches that refused to allow the LGBT community and their allies a place to stay the night. And unlike some of the caretakers of the churches that did allow the marchers to stay the night, rather than quickly turning over the keys and limiting their association with the marchers, the farm worker leaders at PCUN sat down with the marchers and engaged in a deep conversation about alliance building. PCUN leaders questioned why this was the first time that the communities were coming together. They noted that there were struggles in the immigrant community that had been going on for some time. They also shared that they were working to deal with homophobia in their own community as some Latino leaders questioned the validity of building such an alliance. They called on the marchers to remember PCUN's hospitality and support in



their time of need by reciprocating with support of their own when called on by PCUN to stand up as allies to the immigrant community. Both PCUN leaders and the future leaders of ROP affirmed that real solidarity is a two way street.

When ROP was formed, that call from PCUN for solidarity become part of the philosophy and core commitment of the organization. That is why the initial anti-racism trainings were held with each of ROP's local member groups. When PCUN and other immigrant groups organized themselves into an immigrant rights coalition called CAUSA, which translates from Spanish as cause, campaign, or movement, ROP was a founding ally member. Over the last 15 years, ROP has continued to serve on the board of CAUSA and lead immigrant solidarity efforts around the state.

So from the beginning ROP grew from the base up with two seemingly contradictory realities in mind: the deep moral and philosophical or even spiritual justice-for-justice-sake kind of level that called on rural communities to organize ourselves and resist the Right regardless of whether or not we could win; and the second, which was the strategic necessity to organize white, increasingly impoverished, rural Oregonians as allies for racial, economic, and gender justice given the demographics and power balance in our state. In terms of leadership this has meant that from the beginning ROP was primarily white, led by women, queer folks, and straight allies, many of whom were working class.

My story is also a rural one but it begins a decade earlier in the Blue Ridge Mountains that make up the eastern edge of the Appalachian Mountains. I grew up in the 80s in rural Botetourt County, just outside of Roanoke, VA. Growing up in a close knit Christian family that became Southern Baptist when I was thirteen, the only kind of activism I saw was the kind that condemned choice, evolution, queer and trans people, and stood up "proud to be an American" when the first war on Iraq began. I began to learn how my vision was limited and current and past struggles were hidden from my view. When I looked around my hometown I did see the kind of community that knew and cared for one another. And I began to run into the contradictions that anyone who takes the message of truly loving your neighbor to heart will find when they look around them at the inequities and injustices that surround us. I also wanted to run about as far away as I could from my hometown, which in my case ended up being Cameroon, West Africa. From the time that I got my first yard sale book on Europe, I had always been drawn to cultures that were different than my own. I was probably 10 when I realized that there was more to the world than the US and Europe and I quickly became interested in any place outside the US that I could read about in National Geographic. I went to college an hour and a half away from home and quickly switched my major from international affairs to anthropology. My senior year thesis was on Nigerian Women and International Feminism and Development. I wanted to be in the Peace Corps but without having to be a mini-ambassador for the US government. I found the perfect opportunity when a friend in the Peace Corps hooked me up with an organization in



Cameroon who worked with women farmers.

I was well on the road to the life I had dreamed of: traveling around the world, helping people to improve their lives, changing the world one village at a time. It was an amazing time and I can't express enough gratitude to the Cameroonians who welcomed me into their lives and homes. But what I learned more than anything was that these folks didn't need me – at least not in the way that I thought that they would or the way that most international agencies suppose that they are needed. The local people of Cameroon, just like local people around the world, don't need well meaning Americans or Europeans to help them to organize their own communities. They know how to do that better than we ever will. What they need is our help to organize the communities that we come from. All of the villages and towns that I worked with in Cameroon creating locals plans for sustainable logging, hunting, and non-timber forest product harvesting were left with the stark reality that decisions about what would happen to the forests around them were ultimately being decided in board rooms and intergovernmental meetings in France, Belgium, Malaysia, and the US.

It was this realization that if I truly loved these communities and cultures outside of the US, the best way that I could support them was to work in the US for the cause of global justice starting in my own backyard, my own community, my own culture. As a young, white, American I could do a lot more to dismantle capitalism and white supremacy by accessing other white Americans, my neighbors, friends, and family to change the way that our systems work and thus help change the way that our systems impact the rest of the world. Having this truth hinted at in my heart and mind, the closest I could get to my own backyard while staying in the US was still 3000 miles away in Portland, Oregon

In Portland, I learned what community organizing was. I was given language to name the injustice that I saw around me and developed an analysis to ground my social justice work in. I began to think in terms of power – who's got it, who doesn't, and how you build it in terms of people not profit. I found that the work I most wanted to do and seemed best suited for was – and is – base building and ally development. In Portland this was creating organizational infrastructure, events, and campaigns that would bring together mostly white, middle class, home-owning neighborhood activists with people of color, immigrant communities, homeless people, and low-income tenants. After three years, I had the opportunity to leave Portland and join the Rural Organizing Project. I was truly thrilled to have the chance to do organizing in communities that felt like a return to my rural roots.

**Chris: What is your strategy and how do you see that strategy fitting into a left movement building approach?**

Amy: ROP is working to build a rural movement for justice in Oregon. This is our piece of the larger global justice movement pie. We see this as the simple but difficult work



of base building coupled with analysis building, or political education and action. The structure that we use is local, autonomous human dignity groups who are committed to our shared values of democracy and justice. We generally organize on a county level but also take into account state and federal legislative districts for the purpose of larger campaigns. The work of these local groups is to build the infrastructure and do the ongoing work of growing their base locally that in turn is a part of ROP's statewide base. These local groups are really the face of ROP. Members of a local group will identify primarily with their local group and secondarily as a member group of ROP. The kind of campaigns and issues that these local groups work on is up to them. Sometimes they work collectively with other human dignity groups through ROP; often times they work on their own with a local focus and rely on ROP for back up and support as needed.

ROP has a staff of three white women who are the behind the scenes support for the local leadership of these 60+ groups. We keep a lean budget that allows us to focus on organizing instead of fundraising and rely extensively on volunteer support people for everything from database and webpage support to donated cars and yard work. ROP's office is a small house in rural Scappoose, Oregon that was converted into an office through volunteer labor and is now owned by the organization so we don't have to pay a monthly bill for rent or mortgage. We are funded through member donations and independent foundations. ROP's role is to support local leadership of these groups to develop and maintain the capacity to take action with a goal of establishing rural progressive infrastructure for the long haul and secondly to mobilize our base and bring the collective power of ROP to bear on issues that are important to advancing true democracy. The core capacity areas that ROP supports local human dignity groups in building are: 1. a named leadership team (whether you call it a steering committee, a board, or a spokescouncil, the important thing is that membership is clear); 2. communication systems (database, email, etc.); and 3. an organizing and action plan (goals for taking action and growing your base).

ROP now works with more than 60 local groups in nearly every one of Oregon's 36 counties. While building local progressive infrastructure is our core mission, we have a variety of issues that we focus on - tax fairness, funding for human needs, stopping the war(s), queer rights, protection of civil liberties, and immigrant rights. Of all of these, immigration is the most threatening as a wedge issue not only in the communities that we work in around the state, but within the progressive groups that we work with.

We unite this work under a shared vision of true democracy and human dignity for all. This is the kind of language that we use to mean collective liberation, the notion that we are not free until all of us are free, that all oppression, and therefore liberation, is connected. We put this vision into practice by organizing a base that brings together targets of oppression (queers, immigrants, communities of color) and beneficiaries of privilege (white folks, straight folks, allies) to work on one another's issues by challenging



one another to stand up for the kind of democracy and kind of community that we want to live in.

The current focus of our collective action is united under the framework of “dismantling the war at home and abroad”. When we talk about the war at home in addition to the destruction of public services, unfair taxation, and funding for the war above human needs, we are particularly focused on lifting up and fighting against the targeting of immigrants as scapegoats in the “war on terror”. To this end, we have developed an immigrant rights program that has as its goal mobilizing rural communities to take action for immigrant rights. This work includes responding as allies to action alerts from the immigrant community, whether that is lobbying for or against proposed legislation, writing letters to the editor, monitoring and responding to anti-immigrant activities, or literally standing in solidarity with the immigrant community at rallies and community forums. The internal work of our immigrant rights program is supporting predominately white, rural people in developing and taking action from a progressive understanding of immigrant rights and global justice and their personal role in countering racism and the anti-immigrant movement. We believe that ROP’s membership and geographic base as predominately white, middle and working class, rural people in a predominately white state is a target for the anti-immigrant movement. In this way, we have positioned ourselves as a resistance movement.

Yes, a lot of racism and oppression does go unchecked and unchallenged in rural communities, as in most communities, but this is not natural or necessary. In fact, as in all communities, there are many hidden stories of struggles and resistance in rural communities against racism and oppression. Meanwhile the systems of white supremacy, homophobia, and patriarchy are hard at work here. The Right knows that and is working to use that to its advantage and build its base. As rural social justice organizers, we believe that our communities, and white people broadly, are more firmly rooted in a sense of fairness and justice than in hate, if we can tap into that. And fundamentally, white people have a stake in creating fairness and justice for all people. That is what we are trying to mobilize and build on within our own base.

Our success hinges on our ability to “inoculate” our base against the anti-immigrant movement and create leaders who are able to carry this “inoculation” forward in their local communities. We want to create leaders with the skills, analysis, and relationships to advance immigrant ally work in a significant and meaningful way. But at a minimum, we want to stop rural Oregonians from becoming anti-immigrant activists or supporters. As one of our allies at the Northwest Workers Justice Project says, we are working with folks who are likely to either become minutemen or freedom riders. So this is where the notion of really working with people where they are at hits home. Many of us, myself included, want to be the “perfect” ally, a good white person. What we have to understand is that being the best ally that you can be usually means working with other white folks. And the truth is that just like us, most white folks still have a lot of learning



and growing to do when it comes to their own internalized white supremacy. But if we are going to end white supremacy, I believe that we are going to have to do a lot more work within our white communities to dismantle the systems that have us all by the neck.

As far as how this fits within a “left movement building approach,” ROP is first of all concerned with building up our progressive base in rural and small town Oregon. The assumption that is at work here is that we all need to be organizing and building our movement where we live if we are to build a strong movement for justice in the US and in the world. ROP does this by supporting infrastructure and base building through local human dignity groups in every corner of rural Oregon that we conceptualize as movement centers or hubs. Ideally these local groups are always growing and engaging more people as centers of a growing progressive movement. This is the infrastructure piece that relates to the skill and practice of literally building a movement, growing your local database, using sign-in sheets, creating an active welcome wagon that brings new people into your organization.

The other strategic way that ROP relates to building a movement in the US is by focusing on rural white folks. Again, there are statistical reasons for why we should organize rural white folks. White people comprise 75% of the US population. White folks also overwhelmingly control the wealth and power in the US and the world. The Right has targeted rural white communities as their base and we must counter that. In rural Oregon, the reach of the infrastructure in the immigrant community that primarily exists via CAUSA is limited. CAUSA sees ROP, as do other allied organizations with a more urban focus, like Basic Rights Oregon, the statewide LGBT organization in Oregon, as a vital link in their efforts for statewide legislative and electoral wins.

As a predominately white rural organization building this truly inclusive movement means that we seek out relationships with all kinds of allies in our shared movement building work. We actively support reproductive justice, criminal justice reform through the Partnership for Safety and Justice, economic and racial justice with our urban allies at Oregon Action, Sisters in Action for Power, a youth and women of color led organization in Portland, and UNETE, a farmworker organizing project that we fiscally sponsor. While our membership includes many people who experience privilege as white people, they also experience oppression as poor and working class people, as queer and trans people, as women, as youth, and as people with disabilities. Our solidarity with organizations who prioritize work on issues that affect these groups of people acknowledges the experience of our members as whole people who experience both privilege and oppression and gives us the chance to put into action our belief that all oppression and all liberation is connected. We organize with white people in a way that attempts to model what our movement should look like. One of our board members talks about how at ROP she doesn't have to choose between her identities. She doesn't have to only be a queer woman or a peace activist or an ally to the immigrant



community or a pick-up truck driving Okie transplant to rural Oregon. She can be all of these things. ROP's vision of movement building holds up Martin Luther King Jr.'s notion of "beloved community" as a place where all people are valued and their human dignity is respected and where there is fundamentally just and democratic power sharing.

**Chris: What are the methodologies you use to work with white people? What has been successful and what has not?**

Amy: ROP is above all about organizing and building a movement in small town and rural Oregon. Whatever we are doing we are always asking how can this grow our contacts, engage new people, build for the long haul. We don't go anywhere without passing around a sign in sheet or asking people for their contact information. When it comes to our anti-racism work, the same thing is true. We want to grow a large base of anti-racist allies who will take action when called upon and incorporate this vision and awareness into their own organizing.

Growing our base means that we have to start where people are. Really. Of course you want your leadership to get it at the core – to be committed anti-racists. But if we are truly committed to building a base, we have to make room for the base. And that means making space for learning, having the patience and compassion that it takes to move with people, often move really slowly with people. It is a real balance. On the one hand, you need to take this time with people if they are going to stay with you. And on the other, you want your work to be true to your vision and not always waiting for everyone to get to the point where they agree with every part of your analysis or vision.

I think that ROP has walked that line well, but not without tension at times. We believe that building a democratic rural Oregon is not just about involving white, straight, middle class folks. We have held as one of our core tenets that our struggles and our liberation are connected. We were multi-issue before that was cool. We have always understood that the strength of our democracy rests on the quality of life and respect for the human dignity of the most vulnerable, the most oppressed, the targeted members of our communities: queers, immigrants, poor folks, people of color, youth, elders, disabled people. When we started out fighting Measure 9, we had a strong base of queer folks and allies. Soon after that, when we started working on immigrant rights, we lost some of these folks, and continue to face challenges and resistance from within our base, but we have also gained more members who are allies and members of the farm worker and immigrant rights community. When we took pro-choice and tax fairness positions, the same thing happened. We lost folks who had been with us for more than a decade when we prioritized our organizing on stopping the Iraq war. We also gained more than a dozen new member groups.

So in building our analysis through multi-issue work, we have lost some single-issue folks and we have seen some of these folks stay with us but essentially stand aside



when it is “not their issue,” but what we have seen much more of is that when you can link together one another’s concerns and experiences into a framework that makes sense and rings true for one group of people, they are willing to see those connections and bring them into their work. We seek out ways to connect our communities concerns with an anti-racist analysis and vision. We also try to create community that includes support and a sense of identity with ROP and with anti-racist and anti-oppression action. We take the time to build relationships and trust between ROP and local members. If someone has months, years, or even a decade of history with ROP, it’s a little easier for them to take the next step, to take a risk knowing that you and the rest of the ROP community have got their back. But don’t get the wrong impression. This is difficult and active work. It doesn’t happen without struggle. But it is often in the struggle that we learn and grow the most. It is absolutely worth it.

There is always a tension in community organizing between the organizer, particularly if you are talking about a paid organizer, and the community. This tension often grows the more removed the organizer is from the community. Particularly around election time, urban or out of state organizers will “parachute” in without any real knowledge and often times a lack of respect for the local community. This is why at ROP, when our base becomes involved in electoral organizing, we encourage them to take ownership of whatever campaign work they do and to see this as an opportunity for longer-term base building. ROP’s model relies on local leadership to head up their local human dignity groups. We want all of our members to see themselves as organizers and we offer trainings and support that are intended to encourage local leaders to develop those skills. ROP staff is seen as skilled behind the scenes support for this leadership and as slightly removed friends who can offer statewide or national perspective on issues, advise on campaigns and organizing challenges, and provide skills training and support to local group members. As staff, we don’t see ourselves as the local experts and we have immense respect for the knowledge and experience local communities members have by virtue of living day in and out in a community that we are only guests in. But as staff we also recognize that we do have the privilege and benefit of forty plus hours a week that we are paid to think about organizing, stay updated on current issues, and learn from the experiences of communities around the state. Collectively, the three of us have been organizing for more than forty years. Our members pay us to work for them and they expect us to be excellent organizers. We are accountable to them, but they expect us to also be leaders who have something useful to offer them when they are struggling with a challenge and who will stay firmly rooted in ROP’s organizational values of human dignity and democracy that have always included a commitment to racial justice and anti-oppression. This dynamic means that there can be tension. Staff does challenge our members to be better organizers and to be stronger anti-racist allies and there is resistance at times. There is always resistance to change, fear of change, of appearing inexperienced, of doing something new, of challenging power. ROP staff see our role to encourage members to work through that fear and resistance,



offer an analysis and framework that allows members to see how the struggle for anti-oppression is the same struggle that they are engaged in as rural human dignity activists, and share skills, tools, and opportunities to turn that analysis into action.

Since ROP's beginning we have used "Living Room Conversations" as a tool to bring contentious issues literally into someone's living room with the intent of gathering community input, presenting outside observations and a framework, and then discussing how those observations match up or not with the wisdom of the local community. These conversations have also served to break isolation; being progressive in a rural community in the age of Fox news and online organizing can feel especially lonely. There is no substitute for face-to-face personal contact when you are trying to change culture, not just policy, particularly in rural communities, and these living room conversations are an important first step. When it comes to building our base of anti-racist white folks who are committed to countering the anti-immigrant movement in rural Oregon, we have used living room conversations over the past two years to dialogue with more than 400 people in 20 different communities. We open by sharing our analysis of the anti-immigrant movement in Oregon alongside a framework for talking about immigration that emphasizes human dignity and human rights, democracy, and global justice. Then we use the bulk of the time to talk about what folks are noticing in their own communities and what they think of the information that we have just shared. We believe that this method of popular education allows the wisdom and reflections of the community to lead the group towards action that is grounded in the realities of their community and allows ROP to act more as a facilitator and convener which in turn leaves room for local leadership and direction to emerge. At the close of the conversation we suggest options for ways to keep the conversation going and ask anyone who is interested to sign up to be a member of ROP's Immigration Fairness Network (IFN) and their local Rapid Response Team (RRT).

From an organizing perspective, these living room conversations serve at least two purposes. The first is to inoculate everyone in the room against the anti-immigrant movement. The second is to identify leaders who will be part of the IFN and members of their RRT. While we want everyone to be an active leader in the struggle for racial justice, we know that is not going to happen immediately. Think of our work as concentric circles. The first circle is ROP board members and staff. The second circle is the leadership of local groups. The third circle is the membership of local groups. The final circle is the broader community that our local groups operate in. When we have a living room conversation, we are essentially taking a slice of this pie with representation from each of these circles. While we would love to have everyone join as a member of the IFN, at a minimum we want everyone in the room to not join the Minutemen. By talking through the white supremacist vision that the anti-immigrant attempts to hide and debunking anti-immigrant myths, we hope that most folks in the room won't fall for these arguments. By sharing the impacts of global economic policies



like NAFTA on people in Mexico and the US and affirming that white folks can choose to welcome their immigrant neighbors and appreciate their contributions and suggesting active ways to organize to make that happen, we hope that some of the people in the room will take that work up. Part of what is most effective about Living Room Conversations is that they are conversations. While the leader of the conversation will share information for the group to reflect on, we truly do allow it to be a conversation where people can put their thoughts out there and have time to talk through them. We find this to be more effective than talking “at” someone trying to convince them they should feel a certain way. This style allows people to come to conclusions on their own that are grounded in justice and human dignity and creates more ownership and commitment to a cause.

Through these living room conversation and other activities, anyone who has expressed an interest in fighting the anti-immigrant movement or supporting immigrants is added to the IFN. The IFN is the basic level that allows us to know who to go to when we want to connect with the local community around immigration issues, whether that is to check in about anti-immigrant organizing, alert folks to an anti-immigrant protest that we want to monitor or counter protest or provide solidarity to the immigrant community, encourage local pro-immigrant letters to the editor, collect postcards for legislation, or offer other resources relating to immigrant solidarity. The members of the IFN are also the first group that we will go to when we are encouraging local leadership on immigration issues, whether that is leading Living Room Conversations of their own, becoming part of a speakers network to oppose anti-immigrant ballot measures, building direct relationships with the local immigrant community, or leading local campaigns to advance immigrant solidarity.

Rapid Response Teams are local groups who have pro-actively identified themselves as immigrant allies and are organized and ready to respond when needed. We realized the need for these teams in the wake of Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids in Portland in June of 2007. ICE is the federal government’s immigration enforcement agency that falls under the Department of Homeland Security. Also known as *la migra*, ICE was formerly called Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS). When the Portland raid happened, it wasn’t enough for ROP to have a list of who in the local community was an ally; local communities needed this information themselves so that they could respond immediately to threats, whether that be an ICE raid or a nasty anti-immigrant letter to the editor. Within a week of the Portland ICE raids, ROP had established 8 RRTs in the areas most threatened by ICE activity. Some of these teams are already well organized, trained in Know Your Rights in a Raid and ICE monitoring information thanks to the quick work of American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), Jefferson Center, Western States Center, and others, and are in dialogue with the local immigrant community, elected officials, and employers. Other groups are still building their team. In addition to responding to ICE raids, RRT members work to deal with



other immigration crises in their communities. In order to continually build our base and grow our movement, RRTs are also working to educate their communities and bring in more supporters for immigrant rights and fairness. RRTs have organized rallies and letter writing campaigns following a hate crime and are currently leading a campaign to defeat a local anti-immigrant ordinance.

There is a real balance between education and action at ROP. You will rarely see us doing one without the other. There are a couple of reasons for that. One is that we believe that people stay engaged when they are not just doing education, but having the chance to take action. And vice versa, people are more likely to commit to actions when they understand why they are doing something. Secondly, since we are about building a base of people, we believe that action is what allows us to reach and engage new people. Talking without taking action just won't do it. This isn't to say that we don't take time for reflection. We encourage spaces for reflection and strategy, but the conclusion is always planning next steps that include action and base building. The third reason that we combine education and action is that we feel a real urgency about our work. We aren't waiting until we have the "perfect" analysis or until everyone that we are working with is fully on the same page, committed to the "right" anti-racist principles, and fluent in the "correct" anti-racist language. While we take responsibility for supporting people to move in that direction and act in ways that are accountable to immigrant communities and grounded in good anti-racist principles, we don't believe that our communities, including the immigrants and people of color who live in them, have the luxury to wait until all white folks get it. And if we are going to have a base, not just a few people, who are active in the struggle for anti-racism, we need to take action while we are continually creating spaces for reflection and education. We believe and have seen that through action and experience, learning and analysis are developed.

The path for many of our leaders in our immigrant solidarity work begins with an individual interest or expression of support. This might be writing a letter to the editor. It might just be responding with interest to a ROP email that talks about immigration issues. It might even be something that is not a particularly useful or strongly anti-racist action; the point is that this person is willing to take action. From this point, we try and move that person into taking collective action. This could be by joining IFN or their RRT and participating in ROP immigrant solidarity, like writing letters to the editor opposing REAL ID or helping out with security at May Day Immigrant Rights Marches. This is also the time that we are starting to be in relationship with the person and support their learning. Our hope here is that through these experiences and opportunities for trainings and discussions, we are providing tools and a framework that helps the individual to develop an anti-racist identity and a stronger understanding of racism, privilege, and anti-oppression practices.

If you are interested in developing an anti-racist base of white folks, you need to support interest in and inclination towards anti-racist work in your base. Find ways to involve



local leaders in creating political education pieces that will speak to their community. That sounds obvious, but I think it is harder than it sounds. As an organizer, you will have to challenge yourself to stay open and make room for the leadership of new and perhaps less experienced folks, rather than judge and shut the door behind you. We are afraid of being the “bad” anti-racist ally and that can lead us to abandon the people whose leadership we need to support. We are a lot more valuable to communities of color as organizers working with white people than being the “perfect” ally who doesn’t get our hands dirty by working with all the other racist white folks out there. Of course you are going to make mistakes, but that will be how you know that you are taking risks to change the world. Don’t let fear or guilt stop you. Those are tools of white supremacy that want to keep us white folks immobilized.

**Chris: What key challenges have you faced in your organizing and how have you worked to overcome them? What helped you address those challenges and what lessons do you draw from those experiences?**

Amy: ROP has been engaged in immigrant ally work since our beginning in the early 90s. We have had many successes along the way, including defeating a guestworker proposal in the late 90s, participating in the Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride, organizing the Walk for Truth, Justice, and Community with CAUSA, Oregon’s stateside immigrant rights coalition, in 2005, and stalling REAL ID implementation. And we should celebrate these successes. Meanwhile there are core challenges that continue.

Rural communities hear the rhetoric of the Right and in many cases it goes unchallenged. In May 2007, two Latino men in rural Clackamas County were attacked by a mob of 20 to 30 young white men shouting racist slurs and throwing rocks the size of grapefruits. The men were injured and the car that they were attempting to escape in was damaged, but the grand jury declined to label this as a hate crime. While this incident has not been linked to an organized white supremacist group, this kind of violence indicates the tension and climate of racism in rural Oregon. In June 2007, Oregon was home to a huge ICE raid that has detained 128 people. In October 2007, white supremacists associated with the Hammerskin Nation, a neo-Nazi organization, attempted to hold a national gathering in Oregon; fortunately it was shut down by a local coalition of anti-racist organizers. Meanwhile Congress’s debates of immigration policy seem to get worse and more compromised with each failed attempt.

Anti-immigrant groups in Oregon have emerged and strengthened over the past several years, namely Oregonians for Immigration Reform out of McMinnville and the Coos County Citizens Caucus, a small group from Coos Bay that has been associated with the former Oregon Chapter of the Minutemen, also an apparently small group. More challenging than these overt anti-immigrant efforts is anti-immigrant sentiments from progressives. “Progressive” talk radio hosts like Air America’s Thom Hartmann give permission and support for local leaders to oppose legalization on the flawed



logic that immigrant labor undermines workers rather than seeing the possibility for workers globally to unite against the corporations that conquer and divide. Local peace movement leaders can clearly see the immorality in an unjust war and are willing to engage in civil disobedience, but can get hung up on the idea that undocumented immigrants are bad because they are breaking the law when their families' and communities' survival depend on it.

In 2005, ROP and CAUSA partnered to create the Walk for Truth, Justice, and Community, a weeklong 50-mile march from Salem, the capitol of Oregon, to Portland, Oregon's largest city. The Walk brought together more than 2500 people over the course of the week who took their shift on Oregon's back roads to lift up the message that rural Oregon demands funding for human needs, not war, and respect for civil rights and civil liberties at home and abroad, namely immigrant rights and queer rights. In many ways, the Walk was a beautiful creation of what movement and solidarity can look like in the flesh. Over the week on the road, the partnership between rural white folks and immigrants and farm workers brought these groups into real working relationships with one another in a way that would not have been easy to do elsewhere because so many parts of the state are so white and there are limited opportunities for exposure or relationship building with people of color. But what we also ran into by bringing these two communities together was that some of the white peace folks complained about the immigrant rights focus. "I thought this was a peace march," was the complaint by a small, but vocal minority. That is often what we run into with anti-racist organizing with white folks. There is resistance, a desire to wait to move what is considered a contentious or "complicated" issue, or the claim that this is not my issue. So we are faced with a choice. Do we simply write these folks off? Do we challenge them in a self-righteous way that blames them for not getting it – and then more often than not means that they are going to get defensive and not get it? Or is there a way that we can challenge and support them at the same time to see their issues as connected? At ROP we believe that when white folks can see their liberation and the creation of the just world that they are yearning for as inherently bound up together with the liberation of people of color, immigrants, other poor people, women, queer and trans folks, youth, elders, and other people who are struggling under the same interlocking systems of oppression, this is where the real movement building can start.

In this case, we realized that the peace community could be a good ally in the struggle for immigrant rights and that we were well positioned given our connections and commitment to ending the war in Iraq to be the ones to help develop them as allies. So we started putting things into a "War at Home and Abroad" Framework that linked the common systems and inequalities in power that have created the global war on "terror", the war in Iraq, and subsequent erosion of civil liberties, breakdown of the safety net, and targeting of immigrant communities. We started using this language in our communications with members. We made it the theme of our annual membership gathering and opened the



day with a panel that brought together peace, immigrant rights, and labor leaders to define what connections they see between the war at home and war abroad. We got this analysis up on our website. We framed our legislative platform in this language, including our opposition to REAL ID. We wrote articles for peace publications. We sought out and referenced examples of immigrant rights struggles that would speak to the peace community, such as the overrepresentation of people of color as well as rural youth in the war and among the dead in Iraq, the attempt by the US government to create a backdoor draft that offers citizenship to immigrants in exchange for military service, how it is the same corporations that are profiteering from the war in Iraq and benefiting from the militarization of the border, the rise of “homeland security,” and detention of immigrants, and how scapegoating and targeting immigrants in the name of the “war on terror” through divisive anti-immigrant legislation and ordinances that prey on fear, racism, and scarcity of resource prevents blame from being placed where it belongs – on the corporations and governments that seek to keep workers vulnerable and unorganized.

A more internal challenge has been to keep our work accountable to organizations of color. Both ROP and CAUSA recognize that we need one another to work successfully in Oregon. To stay coordinated and accountable, ROP serves on CAUSA’s board and acts as a lead ally on CAUSA campaigns. We also seek out advice and involve CAUSA leadership on ROP campaigns. Once a year we bring our leadership together for some intentional overlap time. And while we believe that there is a lot of internal work that should be done predominately in a white-to-white way to allow for real honesty and racism to arise, be challenged and discussed, we also highly value opportunities to bring together ROP’s base and immigrant communities for joint collaborations led by people of color and immigrants.

There are still a lot of challenges though. When you are focused on action with less experienced white allies the way that we are, when most of our base does not have ongoing relationships with people of color, when there are few areas in the state that have an organized immigrant presence, and when you are talking about ROP’s more than 60 local autonomous groups, there are plenty of examples of times that we have messed up and things have not gone in a story book kind of way. The important thing, I believe, is that we try and learn from our mistakes and keep on trying to do the work in the best way that we can.

One of our challenges is our choice to remain as we historically have been as a white ally organization given the changing demographics in rural Oregon. Since our allies at CAUSA have limited infrastructure, they are not able to work in every part of the state with a growing Latino population. Oftentimes these are areas that ROP does have a presence, but as a white staff of three, we are trained to organize white allies against the anti-immigrant movement, but we are not very skilled or suited to organize with the Latino community. We are attempting to bridge these gaps and establish relationships



with the local Latino community, but as the demographics of rural Oregon continue to shift, we have to continue to question the logic of our role as a white ally organization and as the only statewide rural progressive organization, especially when the capacity to organize the Latino community in several parts of rural Oregon does not yet exist among Latino organizations.

A second challenge has been to create relationships with the Native communities in rural Oregon. Though the Native community comprises 1% of the state's population, in some rural counties, they make up as much as 30% of the local population. Beyond the demographics, the history of genocide and continued oppression and poverty that Native communities face demand more solidarity on the part of white allies. ROP has made some headway in building relationships with Native community leaders through our youth organizing effort to connect white rural youth with Native youth, but we have a long way to go. There is a wide gulf that we have yet to bridge between most reservations and the surrounding communities resulting from deeply rooted racism.

Given the demographics of rural Oregon, it is challenging, but necessary that we do our anti-racist organizing in a way that is accountable to communities of color. But at the same time, we want to be sensitive to tokenizing individual people of color by asking them to speak on behalf of their entire race or ethnic group. In some rural communities, there may not actually be an established community of color; there may only be individuals of color. If there are organizations of color, they may be religious in nature, like the Catholic Church with a Spanish language service, or they may be more business oriented, like the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, and these groups and their members may or may not share our anti-oppression values. Nevertheless we need to seek out relationships with organizations of color and talk about the racial justice work that we are doing and be open and responsive to critiques, suggestions, and requests.

At ROP we encourage people to seek out organizations and individuals who are members of or who work with the Latino community and get to know one another by introducing themselves and finding out what issues and projects are important to the immigrant community. Start by listening and showing up, not only asking people of color to join your group or support your issue. Be sensitive to tokenizing, but don't let that stop you from reaching out. If there are no organizations of color in your community, find organizations of color in your state or region. Somewhere there is a group that can be a resource for you! This may not mean that they have time or interest to sit down and talk with you about your organizing, but it is likely that they will have a website or newsletter or email list where you can learn more about the issues and concerns and history and culture of the community broadly. In addition to educating yourself about the communities of color in or near your own, seek out opportunities to learn what it means to be a white ally. There are also trainings and resources that you can take part in with other white anti-racists to learn more about how to understand white privilege and organize against white supremacy.



This is not a perfect science, even in urban communities or communities that have large communities of color. People of color and the organizations that they create are diverse. There are different politics and different visions of social change. They will have different ideas of what white allies ought to do and how they should support communities of color. So, depending on your perspective, the good news, or bad news, for white folks is that you aren't off the hook; you will have to keep thinking critically no matter where you live and what your community looks like.

Don't let the complexity of white anti-racist organizing stop you. Build intentional relationships with organizations of color and invite dialogue with these groups so that you can be accountable and responsive to the priorities of communities of color. But don't be deterred if these relationships take time or don't manifest as strongly as you would like. Ultimately this organizing with white folks thing is our work as white people. It is our responsibility. Don't wait around wondering when an organization of color is going to decide to prioritize organizing white folks and call you up and tell you what to do. This is not to say that those organizations won't value this work. It is just that they have plenty of work to do themselves, like surviving white supremacy and the systems of oppression working to destroy communities of color. And it is not to say that you won't hear from these groups when you mess up, which you hopefully will. This might even be the opportunity to really deepen a relationship with an organization or individual of color that has not been possible before. But the most important thing that you can do is to do something. Take action. It is better to mess up in the pursuit of justice than to be perfect at doing nothing! This is risky work. Which leads back to the notion of working with folks where they are at. It is good to have spaces where you and your circle who share politics can support and encourage one another, read and discuss, scheme and plot, but if we are truly about building a movement we need to be able to organize outside this comfort zone. For many of us this means doing a little personal work to develop communication skills and confidence, patience and humility. The best advice I can offer about this is to try and cultivate what your love for justice can look like when you apply it to yourself and to the people around you. Even the goofy, awkward white folks that remind you just a little too much of yourself. I believe that this love in action truly can transform the world.

Like many young people who grew up rural, I left as soon as I could and never thought I would look back. What I have come to realize is that for me this "battle for the hearts and minds" of white folks is largely a rural struggle. There are many logical reasons for this, not the least of which is that the Right realizes this, but for me there is also a deeper, more personal logic. Rural folk are my people, my grandparents, the friends and family who made me what I am and whose love inspires and sustains me to believe in transformation and hope for justice. I want to do right by them. And I want them to do right by the world.