



Power, not panic:

Community organising and narrative practice at a time of anti-immigrant violence,

an interview with Susan Shaw

Susan Shaw interviewed by David Denborough



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Abstract

In this interview with David Denborough, community organiser and narrative therapist Susan Shaw reflects on more than three decades' work with communities in the United States, exploring the rich connections between narrative practice and community organising. Central to Susan's approach is the belief that those most affected by injustice are the experts on their situation and the possibilities for change. Through conversations that name shared experiences of hardship, participants connect personal stories to broader social forces, opening pathways for research, collective analysis and action. As experiences of suffering are externalised and linked to their structural causes, this creates space for grief, solidarity and a renewed sense of possibility. Against a backdrop of intensified immigration enforcement and public hostility, Susan shares grassroots responses grounded in mutual aid and solidarity. Guided by the phrase "power, not panic", community members form support networks, resist fear-driven narratives, and circulate stories of resistance that are often absent from national media coverage. Storytelling becomes a strategic and ethical practice within organising – one that strengthens collective identity, communicates shared purpose, and amplifies the knowledge and leadership of those closest to injustice.

Key words: community organizing; social movements; mutual aid; undocumented; immigrant; collective narrative practice; narrative therapy

In recent months, the Trump administration in the USA has unleashed relentless and deadly violence against immigrant communities and those seeking to protect them. The most vivid examples of this violence to date have occurred in Minneapolis. Across the USA, immigrant communities themselves, and those acting in solidarity with them, have responded to this state aggression in courageous and skilful ways. The responses in Minneapolis have been vividly described by long-term prison abolitionist and organiser Andrea Ritchie:

Minneapolis has met escalating state violence — part of a larger strategy of targeting Democrat-controlled cities and states ahead of this year’s midterms — with courageous, leaderful, decentralized, skilled, and adaptive resistance at scale, rooted in decades of Black and Indigenous resistance, and in the rapid response and mutual aid networks built during the first months of the COVID pandemic and in the 2020 Uprisings.

- Wherever there is an ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] vehicle, multiple cars and bikes follow behind, sounding the alarm with horns and whistles.
- Staff, parents, and community members are guarding blocks, schools, childcare centers, and apartment buildings.
- Noise demonstrations are mounted nightly outside of hotels housing ICE agents, hotel workers deny ICE access, and people book out hotel rooms to make it harder for ICE to find anywhere to sleep.
- Mutual aid networks are supporting people who can no longer leave their homes.
- Organizers are pushing the state to issue an eviction moratorium to protect people who are afraid to go to work for fear of ICE.
- Rank-and-file health care providers are organizing to defend their patients from ICE assaults and violations.

And so much more. Pre-existing networks are being reformed and renewed; while people without prior organizing or community defense experience are picking up whistles and joining rapid response chats. Together, they are creating hyperlocal, block-by-block, neighborhood-by-neighborhood networks of community defense. When no one is a leader, everyone is, and the ubiquitousness of resistance is its strength. (Ritchie, 2026)

To gain a greater understanding of the history of these highly significant responses, and also to explore links between community organising and the field of narrative therapy and community work, we reached out to Susan Shaw who has been involved in both community organising and narrative therapy in the USA for over three decades. Despite Susan’s reticence to speak of her own experiences as the work has been so collective, we greatly appreciated her agreeing to an interview and to meeting with students in an online session of the Master of Narrative Therapy and Community Work (University of Melbourne and Dulwich Centre).

The following piece was generated from the interview and the meeting with narrative therapy students. In addition to David Denborough (DD), Tanya Newman, Toni Murphy and Tiffany Sostar also asked questions.

DD: Susan, we’ve all been watching in horror at what’s taking place with Immigration and Customs Enforcement raids, abuses and even killings throughout different communities in the USA, but we hear far less about how those communities are responding, and even less about the histories of community organising in those communities. That’s one reason why it’s great to be able to speak with you today, because I know that for decades you have been part of community organising and community relationships and community solidarity in California and Mexico and with links to the rest of the North American continent. It’s also significant

to speak with you because you were one of the first people in North America to become interested in narrative therapy and community work – even before it was known as narrative therapy. I think you and colleagues at Sonoma State University hosted the first solo workshop that Michael White taught in North America. This was back in the 1980s. So, you are both a narrative therapist with decades of connection to narrative ideas and a longstanding community organiser. Do you have a sense of where we should start this conversation?

Susan: I want to start with something from chapter 11 of your book *Collective narrative practice* (Denborough, 2008) because it meant a lot to me. Is that okay if I read a paragraph? In the last chapter there's a list of themes of collective narrative practice and this intersects greatly with community organising. And then later, I'll add one caveat.

DD: Go for it.

Susan: "People's responses to hardship and trauma are forms of local social action. By acknowledging these, by more richly describing them, and by creating an ever-increasing sense of personal/collective agency, this makes it possible for people's initiatives to become linked, and for further actions to be taken. These actions may be in relation to reclaiming their lives from effects of trauma/hardship and/or in relation to preventing further harm or injustice to themselves, their community, or others" (Denborough, 2008, p. 199). So well said.

DD: How does that link to your history of community relationships and community action in your part of the world, Susan?

Susan: As was true for many young people of my generation, it was within the movement to end America's military destruction in Vietnam that I started to try to learn about

community organising: about how people can take collective action to prevent the harmful policies and practices that come out of our government and impact the rest of the world, and from then on becoming part of movement work, wherever I lived. At the same time, I was on a path to becoming a family therapist. In the areas where I worked, the families were highly impacted by dominant practices and policies within my own country, and I also gradually became more aware of what the United States was doing in Central America, in El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua. In 1993, our family moved to Chiapas, Mexico, during a year-long sabbatical. On January 1st 1994, the North American Free Trade Agreement took effect, and the Zapatistas launched a revolution for land reform, Indigenous rights and democracy.¹ We were involved, at the request of the communities, in investigating the torture, murder and disappearances of members of Zapatista communities. We were supported by Centro De Derechos Humanos Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, Physicians for Human Rights and Human Rights Watch.

DD: Can you tell us a little more about your relationships with people from Central and South America within California? Because I know that it's been those relationships that have led you to be connected with so many people responding to the current raids and deportations.

Susan: In the 1990s, we moved from living in the city of Santa Rosa into a rural area of California, and in that area on the road every day were men walking up and down, and in the night, they were sleeping in the rough. We soon learnt that these men were going to this little town near where we lived to look for work. After the North American Free Trade Agreement between Mexico, Canada and the United States passed, it effectively instituted a further,

larger economic apartheid between the United States and Mexico, and led to many people, mostly men, leaving their Mexican communities to look for work. This area had been a traditional place for men to stand on the street corner and get hired for agricultural and construction work, and so they came here. They didn't have anywhere to sleep, they didn't have places to live, so they were sleeping under bridges and living on the edge of a vineyard. In the winter this was a swampy area, but in the spring and summer it was dry and people were staying in there. These men were walking up and down the road every day, going to the little town to seek work. At the same time, the town was gentrifying, so there was a lot of conflict between some of the new people who were moving into the town and those who had been coming for over 50 years.

It was in response to these circumstances that I got involved in a community initiative and we then formed what is called a labour centre. People joined this centre as members. We held assemblies twice a week, and they made all the decisions about the process and whatever else they needed. This collaborative process and centre, which was directed by the members, brought dignity to the work seeking. In time, doctors from a clinic started coming to the labour centre and providing an opportunity for people to access medical services. There were also various classes and trainings, like English, work safety and workers' rights.

We were connected to a national organisation called the National Day Labor Organising Network. Many of the key folks from this network were from El Salvador and were using Paulo Freire's pedagogies (Freire, 1970, 1972, 1994). We all trained in Freirean approaches, and we connected with others who were organising day labourers in San Francisco and other parts of California.

From that, we realised we didn't have enough power as day labourers and domestic workers. In a broad community effort, begun by David Walls, we started to develop a bigger organisation in order to collaborate with congregations, unions and conservation organisations. We formed something called the North Bay Organizing Project, which linked these different organisations specifically to build power so that we could effect policy and structural change.

From that point onwards, we started winning policy changes as we worked together. It's our belief that the people who are most affected by the problem know the most about it and know how to identify solutions. Our members, the people most affected, were identifying which issues were most problematic and leading research about these issues. In turn, the findings of this research enabled us to take action. Some of the early campaigns that were successful included ensuring that all of law enforcement would accept government matricula identification cards from Mexico, El Salvador and other Central American countries as valid forms of identification.² This campaign was sparked by a community event in which a couple of people were essentially kidnapped off the street by local police and detained in the local county jail and then given over to what at that time was called La Migra – now Immigration and Customs Enforcement. So, we went to meet with the local chief of police about this, and he said that the reason people were being taken to jail was because the police didn't have any way of knowing who these folks were; they didn't have any way of verifying that they are who they say they are. One of our leaders started talking about the matricula ID from his country of El Salvador, and that led to a nine-month-long process of

working with the county sheriff, building community engagement and creating outside pressure. The sheriff then sent his assistant sheriff to the Mexican Consulate in San Francisco to research how they give out these IDs. The sheriff led meetings with all the police chiefs in the county, and they then decided to accept these IDs countywide. It reduced the number of people being taken off the streets by 90%, and it also dramatically reduced the numbers of people who were being turned over to ICE detention, reducing the numbers of deportations by 90%. This also coincided with the beginning of statewide campaigns that resulted in new laws that limit local law enforcement collaboration with ICE in order to protect immigrant communities.

These changes occurred after we had formed an immigrant defence task force. Something important about this task force was the collective storytelling forums in which people could share their experiences with each other. One person would share their story about their experience with the police and another person would say, "That also happened to me" or "That happened to my child in school". Within these collective settings there were opportunities to talk about what was traumatic and creating suffering in a way that was externalised. The collective would clearly state, "Let's put this where it belongs. This is not about you and anything wrong with you. This is about these particular policies. This is about the sheriff behaving in a certain way – it's against the law what he's doing". These conversations would lead to problems being named and then all kinds of research would get done to work out what was happening and what could be done about it. These conversations and this researching changes the person who first told the story. It also changes those of us listening and changes our relationship to what's happening.

DD: I recall other significant achievements too, including campaigns in schools. Can you say something about these also?

Susan: Yes, we also created an education taskforce that took on the practice of discipline in the Santa Rosa City Schools District. At the time, the Santa Rosa school district was fifth in the state in relation to the rate of expulsions – the number of kids being expelled from schools. This has major implications in the lives of individuals, families and whole communities as there is a huge connection or pipeline to incarceration when you've been expelled from school. Many parents whose kids were experiencing expulsion and wrongful detention cited profiling at school. They came together in the education taskforce. The task force did a whole lot of studying, talking to people in the school district, talking to attorneys, working with other groups of students and parents, and eventually they compelled the board of directors of the school district to adopt restorative discipline in schools. This implementation of restorative discipline practices reduced the number of people being expelled by over 90%.

David: Wow, that's a huge achievement with significant intergenerational effects! That is a huge issue here in Australia and in many parts of the world. Sounds like we could learn a lot from that campaign alone. These stories and histories give us a bit of a glimpse of the rigorous grassroots relationship-building and organising approach you and your communities have been involved with. You mentioned the approach of Paolo Freire, and in those storytelling forums you just mentioned, I could sense a little of the influence of storytelling or narrative approaches. Before we focus on some of the responses to the current crisis, can you say a little more about how your training and experience as a narrative

family therapist was influential in the roles you have played in community organising? You've mentioned the collective storytelling forums that are involved, but in many community organising traditions, particularly those of Saul Alinsky, one-on-one conversations also play a key role (Alinsky, 1971; Walls, 2015). Can you say more about these and how your narrative family therapy skills are linked to this?

Susan: Yes, sure. "One-on-ones" are the individual conversations that are a part of building relationships that then build broader community actions. As a community organiser and a collective narrative practitioner, we are always very interested in finding more people who might like to join others in taking action. We are constantly looking for anyone who's yearning, who's looking, who's interested in wanting to do things to change what is happening for them, their families, their community. Someone may have come to an initial public meeting, or we may have met them in another way, and I would always be inviting people into these one-on-one conversations. And in a one-on-one, what we look for is what is really alive for the person in their life that has drawn them to come to the first meeting or to express interest in participating in something that's bigger than them. These conversations are precious to me. As therapists, we know it's an amazing gift to be able to sit with people and to hear about what's going on in their lives and how they're being affected by the things that are going on. I really appreciate how the Just Therapy Team refer to these conversations as sacred.³

Of course, they are also very diverse! Generally speaking though, we ask someone for a one-on-one, sit down with them and start to enquire about their experience. We ask them about what was bringing them to these meetings, what did they care about, what they are

angry about, what's happened in their life that's connected to their values. We also ask about what they are hoping for and looking for. And then ask, "What is it that you want to do?" And we look for links between what has happened to them, what they have experienced, what they care about, and links to particular social actions that they want to take. We ask: What are you looking for in terms of creating community with other people? What are you looking for in terms of action that you want to take linked to your own hardship and suffering? Of course, we weren't just asking one question about hardship and suffering. We are really listening to what it is they want to talk about and what they want to share.

And I have to say that people don't often have the opportunity to have this kind of conversation where someone is really interested in them. They might be sitting in meetings with someone or going to church with them for 20 years but there will be things they've never gotten to talk about. These kinds of conversations have their own sort of power. They can be incredibly rich and moving. These conversations hopefully open a little door into where a person's pain and suffering and their desire for social action might have a home.

DD: That's an incredibly beautiful way of putting it. I remember when we talked a few years ago, you were very clear that this one-on-one conversation was often the first chance folks have had to talk about their suffering, so in no way did you rush over their experiences of hardship or suffering. Can you say a little more about that? Obviously, you were also then finding ways that this conversation could be generative, but can you just say a little bit more about how the ethos that might accompany you in a therapy room perhaps also assisted

you in knowing that there was something very important about honouring the hardships and the suffering that folks were talking about for the first time?

Susan: You're actually saying it really well, David. These were not therapy conversations and so the invitation and my responsibilities are not the same. But these conversations are an opportunity to ask more questions and to find out what it is that people did about the suffering and hardship that they experienced, and that's where I feel like narrative practice really informed these one-on-ones. I always felt that within the Alinsky model of organising, what was missing in the one-on-ones were questions that elicit buried stories, alternative stories, and that explore what people are doing to overcome hardships and trauma.

In the one-on-one conversations we are a part of, the hardships people had experienced weren't just acknowledged with "Oh, that sounds really hard". Instead, we had the chance to ask more questions about what it is they did to mitigate their suffering and how they did this. Or what it is they did to protect others and what was important to them at the time. And then how these experiences connect them to a larger desire to take social action that will lead to other people not having to go through the same things. In these conversations, we're creating a window for agency.

DD: I really appreciate that concept – "a window for agency". At the same time, I have a sense that in these conversations, whether the one-on-ones or the collective forums, you are also very deliberately trying to make visible the broader operations of power that have caused suffering and are continuing to produce injustice. Can you say a little more about this?

Susan: That is definitely part of the one-on-ones because there has to be an acknowledgment of what the person has experienced and what the effects of dominant practices and policies have been on their lives. That becomes part of the conversation. There has to be an acknowledgment of the role of what one might call "dominant power" in their lives and the lives of their family. In the collective meetings and trainings, we facilitate people having these kinds of conversations with each other.

DD: What Freire (1970) would refer to as conscientization/conscientização?

Susan: Yes, and when someone's speaking about their experiences of hardship and in the conversation this is connected to what's actually causing the suffering, it brings a particular sort of resonance and an externalisation. Sometimes this creates room for further expression of grief, but it can also bring a sense that there's a way out of this. Especially when people then embark on research in collective processes. We ask: What's holding up the problem? Why does the problem exist? For instance, we managed to get free student bus passes for local transportation, and addressing the problem led us to research about where the funding for local transportation actually comes from and how it works. We learnt that money comes from the federal government to communities through a nine-county regional government agency, and that's who makes decisions about who gets money for what. Those are political decisions.

It was an incredible research journey when we started to look closely at any of these issues. There wasn't very much money needed to make bus transportation in our local county free for college students, high school students and middle school students. It was something like

\$5 million. Once we figured that out, then we discovered the levers of who makes this decision and how can it be made. That involved meeting with a lot of the transit people – both the city transit people and the county transit people – and our local elected representatives. This also always involves forming new relationships. Our leaders and these folks who didn't necessarily make the policy could give us information that we could then take to the people who made the policy. We gathered different groups' and people's support along the way, and we won the campaign.

DD: Let's come to the present, when the communities with which you have been in solidarity and in relationship for so many decades are now under renewed attack. I know this is not the beginning of attack, this has been happening for a long time, but there's now a renewed hostility, violence and horror taking place. Every day on our screens we see ICE raids and arrests, and abductions, detention and deportations. I know people are responding in so many different ways, but these are less known to us. Please can you tell us whatever you think would be important for us to know.

Susan: Well, I think one thing that has been significant is the creation of rapid response networks, and in our case, of the North Bay Rapid Response Network. After Trump was inaugurated in 2017, the vitriolic, cruel, hateful language that was coming out of the president and his people was terrifying for many people who lived in our county and all over the country. In response, groups of us started meeting and investigating what could be done, and one of the things was to develop a rapid response network. This was inspired by earlier groups including Migra Watch (ICE used to be called Migra). In turn, Migra Watch had been inspired by Cop Watch, which was created by the Black Panthers back in the 1960s.⁴

We took on developing the network, which had several components. First of all, we created a hotline that people can call and say, "ICE is at my door". Secondly, we started to get information out and did trainings all throughout the community about people's rights. And thirdly, we trained about 1000 people called legal observers. These are people who could then be called or texted, and on a minute's notice get to where they then videotaped and documented what Immigration and Customs Enforcement were doing. The dispatchers would also stay on the phone with the person to keep supporting them in the exercising of their rights. And then the documentation of these assaults would be sent to our attorneys regionally and nationally.

Our rapid response network was able to link up with rapid response networks all over the state that were forming, and together we formed the California Collaborative for Immigrant Justice.⁵ Once this was in place, we were then able to have attorneys attend the processing centre in San Francisco where people were detained to help them understand their rights and give them legal advice about what they could be doing.

Importantly, this entire process was directed by a group of people who are most affected. They put together principles that we followed in our meetings, and then we could engage a huge number of allies who really cared about what was happening in their community. Alongside this, we also formed a cohort of people who would attend legal hearings with people. Further groups of people then formed to help people who did get refugee status or who were waiting to get their status to help them find housing and support them. This became a broader project besides the hotline in relation to showing up for people as they were being

attacked by Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Crucially, we were building networks of people in all the different parts of our county. These small groups formed relationships with families and people who were under attack and assisted them. We saw this as a mutual aid endeavour, not a service project.

DD: So, these were all put in place after 2017. What has happened between now and then?

Susan: We used to call Obama the “Deporter in Chief”, because up to the point that Trump was elected for the second time, he was the person who had deported the most people from this country. But when Trump was put into office this time around, it became so much worse. The overt cruelty and power grabs are having a huge impact on our communities – and on all of us, actually. Our rapid response network is very active and growing. We have way more dispatchers and another thousand people have been trained as legal observers. That’s just a local example. The California Collaborative for Immigrant Justice has become much bigger. Many other organisations, like the National Day Laborer Organizing Network, are much more outspoken and active, and people are finding ways to draw courage from each other.

Our slogan is “power, not panic”. All our actions are about taking our power and supporting each other to not necessarily feel like we have to start hiding out or caving in. Those of us with more privilege and more safety are able to call out these dominant practices, fight them, and support each other to keep doing that. But it’s really, really difficult now in this country.

DD: I bet it is. Those histories of how the rapid response networks began seem really significant to me. I knew of the

current networks and the work that they are doing, but I didn’t know those histories. Can you say more about “power, not panic” and finding ways to enable courage in each other? These are devastating, terrifying times.

Susan: I agree with you that histories are important, and I want to acknowledge the long history of communities standing up to the police. I mentioned earlier that Migra Watch grew out of the Black Panthers’ Cop Watch. As we were building the rapid response network, we were learning from people from New York to California who had already built these networks.

DD: Aunty Toni, did you want to say something about this?

Toni Murphy: Yes. I love that reference to the Black Panther movement. They had a really big influence on my family members in Sydney. That shared knowledge helped Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people here to stand up for civil and human rights and to create health services, legal services, and to keep the police away from our people. I was recently talking to one of my aunties about a reunion of the Black Panther movement throughout the world. So, thank you for mentioning the Black Panthers, it really brings back some good memories for me and my family. These histories still motivate me to be proactive in this space.

DD: Thanks, Aunty Toni. For those who would like to know more about the Black Power movement in Australia, we can include links to Uncle Gary Foley’s website and archives.⁶ Susan, can we come back to what you said about your slogan being “power, not panic” and how at this time you are collectively finding ways to give courage to each other or spark courage in each other? In these disturbing times, those themes seem so important.

Susan: The circulation of accurate stories and stories of resistance is a big part of this. The national media doesn't circulate any of this, so our own connections to local media, and to media that is national but is of smaller size, are really important. We have a whole process now in which we try to confirm that Immigration and Customs Enforcement has either detained/kidnapped someone or is currently in the community. We circulate that information. We have a template that gets filled out and put on Instagram and Facebook. People can follow this network and access accurate information, which is crucial because there are so many rumours.

DD: And rumours, disinformation and confusion are a key part of the strategy of authoritarianism ...

Susan: Yes, so when there's a rumour, we can investigate it. If the rumour is found to be not true, we post that. When it's found to be true, we post that. When it's something in between, like we're investigating, we post that. This sharing of information helps a lot because people then have a way to find out accurate information.

Circulating the stories of resistance, the stories of powerful actions that people are taking, is also crucial. These stories really help us and help each other. They also communicate "power, not panic", and that we're stronger when we're together in community, we're stronger when we know about each other. It's incredibly heartening to be able to hear and see those stories. There are so many local actions that we broadcast and that people then turn out to. This includes national actions across the country and also local stories that are not covered accurately by national media.

Another key factor in "power, not panic" involves holding community events where people can come and eat food and dance

and have fun together: any actions that convey that we're not alone – that no-one's alone – make a huge difference.

DD: Thanks, Susan. We have a few questions from other folks now. Over to you, Tanya.

Tanya Newman: Thank you so much. I also come from a background in community organising and community development and am now really appreciating learning about collective narrative practice. I'd love to hear your reflections on what you see as the key similarities and differences, and whether there's any sources of friction you find between those different traditions in your work?

Susan: That's a great question and brings me back to the caveat I mentioned at the beginning of the conversation. One thing that stands out for me is that in community organising, there are the overt discussions about power and then organised actions to seek to address policies and dominant practices. The desire to take social action to mitigate or influence or make a difference in the lives of other people who might be experiencing the same problems, which is a key principle of collective narrative practice, doesn't necessarily lead into conversations about power that deconstruct the dominant policies and practices that are affecting people's lives. Contributing to the lives of others also affected by dominant power doesn't necessarily lead to collective efforts to directly tackle or address those dominant policies and practices – and that's the focus of community organising. The Just Therapy Team in Aotearoa have certainly combined therapy and research to seek to influence social policy in New Zealand, and I find that work very liberating.⁷ So, I'm very interested in combining collective narrative practice and community organising. Perhaps that's also something you are interested in?

Tiffany Sostar: Can you say a little more about how the forms of community organising you have been involved with relate to the material realities of people's experiences and to mutual aid?

Susan: We have so much to learn about mutual aid from the communities who are most marginalised in any country. One example that stands out for me is how folks here in California responded to horrific fires in 2017. In the fires, 5000 homes were destroyed, large numbers of people lost their work, and so many people were displaced from their communities and fled from the fires to the beaches. It's actually very cold out on the beaches here, and people didn't have enough to keep them warm. The local community mobilised and provided blankets and food, but the broader material needs of people at this time were quite extreme and many of the folks most affected were undocumented, so they did not qualify for assistance from government agencies including the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). At this time, our organisation and a number of others⁸ joined to create a mutual aid fund we called UndocuFund⁹ to aid the undocumented community in disaster recovery. It's based on the principles of centring those closest to injustice to build power and identify solutions.

DD: That sounds really significant. I read in one of your reports (Lopez-Grady et al., 2020, p. 1) how you recommend empowering, sustaining and financing "culturally competent community leaders for mutual aid disaster response and policy development" and funding "community-driven navigation, preparedness, response, and recovery". It sounds like UndocuFund is a very different form of disaster-relief "agency" because it invests in community organising and mutual aid – it invests in local "agency".

Susan: Yes, and UndocuFund has become a prototype, and they are now all over the country.

DD: But the first one originated in Sonoma County. How did you begin?

Susan: During the fires, four organisations embedded in the immigrant communities met to talk through what was happening and what we could do. UndocuFund was born in that meeting. After the fires were out, our organisation, North Bay Organizing Project, was organising with undocumented people whose houses had burned down, had barely made it out with their lives, and with many who had lost their jobs. The first step involved them talking with each other, sharing experiences. From these conversations, they investigated, and from these processes they developed a series of demands: how they thought people should be treated by officials who supposedly "respond" to disasters. The group became very close through the sharing of stories and over the following year successfully won changes from the county in their emergency response.

We moved quickly before even the end of the fires, and once UndocuFund was established, every applicant was interviewed in Spanish and we only kept notes on a piece of paper. We couldn't create online files because this was right after Trump was elected, and we were terrified about people's identities being exposed and putting them at risk of being detained or deported. There were so many intricate solutions we had to find. I truly believe that there are myriad solutions to the problems we are facing in the world, but they're not going to come from the people in power. The place they're going to come from is people who don't have power. Consulting them and shifting power so that what *they* know can take up more space and be acted upon is a way

forward. I think it's those beliefs that are also what drew me to narrative therapy.

David: There's one other connection between community organising and narrative practice that I'd like to ask you about, and that's in relation to "personal narrative". Marshall Ganz (2009, 2011) has taught for many years about the public narrative framework (see Leading Change Network et al., 2014) within community organising. Can you say more about this?

Susan: Yes, there's been a lot of work about how community leaders and organisations can tell their own stories in public arenas in ways to strengthen campaigns, and at the same time, how to do this in ways that don't leave us more vulnerable after the telling. We do trainings in relation to this, and storytelling is actually a key element of organising. One of the things that we will say is, "If you don't tell your story, somebody else is going to tell it for you". It's often a definitional moment when someone decides they want to publicly tell their story – the story of how their life is connected to this campaign. But we take a lot of care with this. We offer training about ways of shaping and sharing personal narratives. When they do tell their story and this resonates with other people in the room, this brings collective richness. It can also be a very significant turning point for individuals as they step into leadership. I can still vividly recall the moment when particular people who now play key leadership roles as community organisers first told their personal narrative in public. For instance, I remember the first time that a young man who went on to lead the education taskforce first shared his personal narrative publicly and the thought and care that went in to those preparations.

David: Can you say more about these preparations and how you train and support people in relation to

telling or performing their personal narrative? I'd be particularly interested in how your experience in narrative therapy has influenced you in this.

Susan: In our tradition of community organising, we are constantly supporting *local* folks to step into leadership. This is different to some organising traditions in which outsiders to the community come in to lead the organising. Part of the work of constantly supporting new leadership involves working closely with them about how they want to talk about themselves and their lives. They are going to be leading meetings, or they're going to be leading a press conference, or they're going to be meeting with public officials. For each of these contexts, what they are going to share and how they are going to share it is planned ahead of time so that they have control over this. We hold workshops in which people break into small groups to work on their stories and to practice telling them to each other. This process of preparation means that folks are making choices about what to share and what not to. You're not just blurting out something that then could leave you feeling really vulnerable.

David: So, this is about having some control or autonomy and authority in relation to the personal narrative that you are choosing to share publicly. Earlier you were describing that in the one-on-one conversations, people often share with you some very significant experiences of hardship, and how narrative therapy practices have been helpful in eliciting people's *responses* to these hardships. It sounded like narrative arcs were being shaped in ways that were generating an increasing sense of personal agency. Are any of these sorts of considerations also at play in preparing for the telling of personal narratives in public places? I'm assuming

that narratives that are representative of *personal* agency may also generate resonances for collective agency.

Susan: Listening for submerged stories of how folks are dealing with things is a huge part of organising practice. Huge. I wasn't thinking about this in the same way when I was a younger organiser.

David: Susan, these considerations of story, narrative and community organising are multifaceted! Thank you so much for talking with us about all of this. We have such respect for the ways you and your team and communities are responding to the current horrors and degradations in your part of the world. We'll include some links so that folks can learn from you all, and/or join you in your efforts.

Links

North Bay Rapid Response Network:
<https://www.northbayop.org/nbrn>

North Bay Organizing Project:
<https://www.northbayop.org/>

California Collaborative for Immigrant Justice: <https://www.ccijustice.org/>

UndocuFund: <https://undocufund.org/>

Notes

- ¹ To read about the Zapatista uprising, see Holloway & Pelaez (1998); Marcos (2022); Ross (1995).
- ² Matricula ID is an official identity card issued by the consulates of Mexico, El Salvador and other central American countries to nationals living abroad.
- ³ The Just Therapy Team's three key values are belonging, sacredness and liberation (see Waldegrave, 2000).
- ⁴ To read about the history of the Black Panther Party, see Bloom and Martin (2016).
- ⁵ <https://www.ccijustice.org/>
- ⁶ To learn more of these histories, see Gary Foley's Aboriginal History Archive: <https://kooriweb.org/foley/indexb.html> <https://www.youtube.com/@AboriginalHistoryArchive/videos>
- ⁷ To learn more about the work of the Just Therapy Team, see this free online course: <https://dulwichcentre.com.au/courses/just-therapy-team-free-online-course/>
- ⁸ These included the Graton Day Labor Center, North Bay Organizing Project, Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees and North Bay Jobs with Justice.
- ⁹ For more information about UndocuFund, see Lopez-Grady et al. (2020), Pho (2020), and <https://undocufund.org/>

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