



Main Street Project Civic Engagement Call 7/22/08
www.mainstreetproject.org

“Youth Organizing in Rural Communities: Experiences and Strategies”

Featuring
Edyael Casaperalta, The Center for Rural Strategies
Theeba Soundararajan, Third World Majority

Editor’s Note:

Much of what follows refers to a specific project called The Raices Project. Over the past 2 and ½ years the Main Street Project was part of this collaboration—and in this capacity worked in partnership with Third World Majority to conduct four digital story telling trainings in rural Latino communities. The Raices Project is not a stand-alone organization, rather, it’s a four-state, four-year project focused on building community capacity in rural Latino communities in Iowa, Minnesota, Idaho, and Oregon. The project was a partnership between the Northwest Area Foundation, the University of Iowa Institute for Support of Latino Families and Communities, and the Main Street Project. The name Raíces, or roots, refers to the deep roots that connect rural Latinos to their communities, and the strength of that culture, history, and connection in addressing challenges facing communities today, including poverty, and working together to sustain a vibrant future. Throughout this interview, you will see that Main Street Project and The Raices Project are often used interchangeably. Main Street Project is, however, the community based organization—the Raices Project, is one of the programs of Main Street Project. For more information on the Main Street Project and our continued Rural Media and Media Justice work, please visit www.mainstreetproject.org.

Theeba Soundararajan – Third World Majority

The work we have been doing with (Main Street Project)--are digital storytelling workshop, and in those workshops participants get the chance and opportunity to make a short 5-minute movie about their lives and experience.

Taking an other step back as a media organization we kind of started out thinking about media and technology and realizing media and technology has such a huge role in our communities however, a lot of our communities and our families didn't have the access to the tools to make the movies and to tell the stories and the experiences that we know, that we are close to. And so we started TWM knowing this and recognizing this and seeing technology and media as tools as to retell our stories and because of that we came up with a concept called Media Justice.

Media Justice looks at a larger framework the current media systems right now; in terms of media justice we look at how we all have the fundamental human right to communicate. But because of current media consolidation we as marginalized communities whether we are poor, people of color, women, poor people, indigenous people recognize that right to communicate. So for us to really to take up a camera to turn on a computer is actually an act of self-determination. So coming back to our program of digital story telling we go into communities work very closely with communities kind of tease out the story that is kind of hidden like under years of denial and silence and saying our stories aren't true we try to really tease out that story that is kind of core of the work we do. In 3 days we kind of guide people in process of what is the stories that want to tell whether it is the reason why they became an activist or an organizer what it is like to be young in a rural community or even about a specific issue.

Now in terms of The Raices Project—a program of the Main Street Project, we worked closely with coordinators and the communities and the 4 communities and worked with the young rural Latino youth. And teasing out the stories they thought were important and the spectrum the stories crossed the spectrum just being young and having a voice, to actually talking about immigration, to identity to what it means to have a home, what it means to be considered between two places, policy wise and issue wise, what it feels to be an outsider, what it feels like to be pushed away or not be considered or complete. For us the workshop opened up the work and opened up our eyes and kind of looking at how we as a media organization work closely with rural communities. It is a complicated question because we are not from the communities that we represent, however we are in terms of issues there is a very thin and complicated intersection where are issues meet, and I see that more as how we define ourselves as allies and it means coming into a community knowing that you may have certain privileges and unpacking them and you have to learn about balancing the stakes, when you speak and don't speak and how you can support a community and whether you are a part of that. And I think with the Raices project it has opened us to a new opportunity and also a new thinking on how we support young people and how we can kind of complicate issues about immigration and identity, multiculturalism if you even want to think about it that way, and also about media justice. If we look at our digital storytelling workshops and we look at it from the angle of youth organizing being able to take up a camera is a very powerful act, however, if we look at it from being a young person as you were saying Ana it is great to have the energy of young people either as volunteers or part of the movement. In our trainings we have taken it a step further the young people are always the people to have to make the decisions about the movies, to determine the direction,

the narration, the flow and the tone of their movies and we do that deliberately and purposefully because we want the young people to feel like in the 4 days that they are in control of how their stories are told.

Background on Main Street Project's Use of Digital Story Telling with The Raices Project

The Raices Project was collaboration between the NAAF, MSP and the U of IA's Institute for Support of Latino Families and Communities. As part of the Raices Project Ana Najera Mendoza of the Main Street Project has been working as the coordinator of the Jóvenes Latin@s Cuentan program which is a program that outreaches Latino youth who working the rural communities where the Raices Project is found, Idaho, Iowa, Minnesota, Oregon. As part of our curriculum we focus a lot on identity and how our identity is power and to do an exercise like that we invited TWM to come and to do 4 digital storytelling trainings one in each state and we have been able to produce a collection of videos of digital stories that Theeba has been talking about. In terms of what TWM has really provided the young people with the tools and the space to create their stories. As a result we have these videos that we have been able to show at different conferences, at a Presidential Forum in Iowa, at a national hearing on ICE misconduct. And they have been numerous venues where they have been used as tools for organizing but also as a way to share what the stories of young rural Latinos in the United States are and they talk about so many topics that Theeba has touched upon, being bicultural, or about what is going on about immigration why doesn't it seem to be working, and what is happening in their schools. They have been a very powerful way to get these stories out and so it is with that experience that we have been able to work with Third World Majority

Theeba Soundararajan – Third World Majority

One thing that I found very interesting with all of the workshops the first day almost every young person was very hesitant or shy to talk about what they thought about immigration the biggest challenge was to tease that out and say no everything that you see with your ears and eyes whether it is right or wrong is absolutely valid. It speaks to the value of the training that we did with Raices in all 4 states because it was with young people in all 4 states, they may have had similar experiences they may have been different but with each one of them each cluster they have been told their experience has not been authentic they don't feel validated whatever it is what they thought wasn't right. For Raices and us the work was to debunk that and break it down and say that wasn't true your story is right and what you see and hear is very important.

Edyael Casaperalta, The Center for Rural Strategies

Theeba thank you for going first, as I thought about the questions I was wondering what, but I've just seen the email and it gave me time. At Rural Strategies not directly with youth organizing to the extent that TWM and Llano Grande does so I think what I can speak to in terms of organizing with youth in rural communities is about the experiences I have had with Llano Grande and as Ana mentioned earlier I have been a part of the work of Llano Grande since I was in high school, sophomore in high school,

Theeba came down to Llano Grande Center when I was a junior TWM trained us in digital storytelling, it was the first time ever the group of students that was training was exposed to this technology. It was taking the work that had been done by other students and the students that were there at the time the stories that were collected by local students and their grandparents and the elders in the community later transcribed and taken to next level in terms technology.

Llano Grande has been doing amazing work with digital storytelling, now in fact it is one organization that trains other organizations does training for other youth organizers. Can use digital story telling for their work. So thank you guys I didn't know you were sisters until I connected with Thenmozhi. The work that Llano Grande Center does with youth has been always been a part of education and it has been out of the high school. Juan could speak better to this. They have an office in the local high school, students from 3 surrounding towns or other towns come, it is called (name) high school, the thing that is most inspiring with the work of Llano Grande Center its an organization that was created by a teacher that was also a student in that high school. He went away and came back as a history and English teacher, it was started it was to provide information and more access to local youth to receive more access to a higher education. When he came back and was working as a teacher he invited some students talked to some students about taking a trip to visit the East coast to visit Ivy League and that is how one of the directors and Juan became involved in the organization. That is how the chain process where everyone started to learn about the work being done via higher education or trying to get students to going away to college and those students going back so there have been generations of students that go to school come back to either teach or do the work in Llano Grande Center, clearly everyone doesn't come back to work because it is a small non profit but everyone stays connected to the work.

That is my case I haven't been officially employed by Llano Grande Center other then when we worked with the Spanish immersion institute but we will always remain connected. It is has been such a big part of our affirmative process as young adults and members of the communities. Some of the strategies we use, weren't necessarily thinking how do we really engage youth, but it is more about conversations, I don't think there was this idea of how do we get the youth to do this program but genuinely interest in getting the youth to talk about what we cared about. To have an open conversation with everyone in the community, not just the youth but everyone in the community because it wasn't just youth on how to improve our community that is one of the ways the Spanish immersion community was born. Llano Grande Center was born out of asset mapping, looking at what we had in the community and focusing on those positive of what we see as positives where others see them as deficits and one of those things that everyone in the community speaks a certain level of Spanish and while everyone had told us, most said because we didn't speak very good English we wouldn't get very far.

We speak all right Spanish maybe we can do something with it. There were 3 students when I was a senior in high school we started working on the Spanish immersion

institute for a few years. The very valuable thin and individual storytelling and something that is being done at Llano can't be replicated and the input of everyone in the community that is community coming together to talk about what is going on in the community. The students that go to the high school, parents, grandparents all of these youths whether we want to or not, it is a small town, a lot of youth don't want to be here, engaging everyone what does community means to us, what it means to us and our families. What are the things we can do to make change an inclusive process very much tied to a very personal love for community that we have for our community. It is not that everyone agrees with what is good or bad for our community nor do we agree what we should work on but we feel very much a part of the community, we find common ground in that, creating a space where we can work on the things that we can work on. I'm not sure that is clear, that is what has driven youth to the organization and parental support. It does work out of high school, there is always student coming in and out because of the class schedules there are always students that give time to Llano and not being in class, organizing the students on how they can do that.

At the resource center I have always thought that my ideas and even until now I thought my ideas mattered about my community and about the things I like to see and so that space was created for us to take action on those ideas or to take action on our opinions and so they provided resources for us. There was never one leader there was collective kind of feeling to the work that gets done there, everyone has input to it, it belongs to everyone. Some of the successes has been the work with digital storytelling has taken out. It speaks to the personal voice that Theeba was talking about. Too many times people in our communities have been told that we cannot and should not talk on anything. Specifically the work of Llano Grande, higher education. And I remember when I was applying to college Llano Grande were my personal mentors.

When it comes time to write our personal statement analyzing our personal story with a very authoritative a very certain voice a very important what we know (Theeba), what we know is our right, whether it is right or not it is our truth. Important to put out there it creates very personal statements for youth when we apply for colleges. But now there is digital storytelling a lot of those statements are digital stories a lot of those digital stories can be used for college application purposes. Some of the successes lie in that and the importance of the work that is done at Llano and how it gives a personal voice and in a community context, how we build community and how community builds personal voice. The challenges it is a small rural community it is difficult to create space for people to come back and become connected in more direct ways. It is a small non-profit and struggles with every issue that non-profits do, reflecting on the work I do with Rural Strategies. When I worked at Llano Grande I didn't think that was media was so powerful, my perception of media has dramatically changed because I see how much power I see in the images and the images we perceive we create and I see the impact in our communities.

The challenges Even in South Texas, and even in Appalachia even though I don't work in Kentucky where our offices are for Rural Strategies I have seen some lengths in these communities, a lot of our youths are so sad to be in our community because there

is no positive portrayal in the media of our communities or the work we do of our cultures. It is a huge challenge of anybody not only youth, in helping anybody there is a huge challenge of the work we do. It is why it is important to do the work within media and I was originally introduced to the concept of media justice I thought Thenmozhi worked in this kind of statement and I was pleased to see that this was being addressed in a different way, all of this media and the script around media is pretty new to me. But I can see that it is everyday applications in the community where I have lived or visited or have been part of or continue to be part of. I think that it is always a huge challenge for anybody who does organizing with communities that have been disenfranchised and have been kept at the margins of producing knowledge including media production.