

Collaboration Offers Hope

Savannah Paz



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Participant Bio



Savannah Paz

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My name is Savannah Paz and I am a community development major with an emphasis on social change at Portland State University. In my experience through higher education I have had the opportunity to work as a student advocate at the Women's Resource Center and volunteer with the anti-gentrification project Not in Cully and the Campaign to End the New Jim Crow. I currently serve as Vice Chair on the board of trustees for Trillium Family Services where I am also a spokesperson for their community program Chrysalis. I am passionate about achieving social justice and consider myself an agent of change. I am the mother of two amazing little boys who bring so much joy to my life and keep me very busy. In my free time I enjoy spending time with my family, reading books, watching documentaries and enjoying the company of friends. After graduation, I look forward to a career that allows me the opportunity to work from within communities so that we can collaborate and rise together. In the future I would like to return to higher education to pursue a master's degree in public policy.



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As a young woman getting ready to graduate college with a degree in community development, I should be excited and optimistic about the future. I want to feel inspired and be an inspiration to others, but to be honest, my education and understanding of the world sometimes leaves me feeling deflated and a little depressed. I know I am not the only person from my generation who feels this way. Many young people have a hard time holding on to hope for a better future. For those of us actively seeking positive change, hope is not how we start our day or what motivates us to do our work. Anger, rage, fear, deep sadness and sense of loss are often the emotions that evoke us to carry on, fight, organize and educate within community. The overwhelming feeling of “this is wrong and we will not tolerate it anymore” is behind our passion and determination to work towards a better tomorrow.

Our deep pain and sorrow are what force us to show up, not for ourselves, but for those who suffered before us and for those that suffer today and for those that will suffer tomorrow. I think it is important to understand and speak to the daily reality of people who are both affected by and working to address the many social inequities that exist in our everyday lives. This is not to say that my generation does not celebrate small victories, enjoy life, and know how to be happy. However, we see the American dream slipping away, as more people fall into poverty. The road ahead is going to be a long and hard journey. It will require courage, strength, and collaboration to truly accomplish the social change and justice we seek.

When I think of effective collaboration, I immediately think of the need for more organizations to collaborate directly with communities. Organizations in the social service sector must learn to value the voice and experiences of people living in these communities. Too often organizations make the mistake of working as the “experts” to “help” communities, which only perpetuate the victimization of oppressed groups. Working in alliance with communities must be intentional, evolving, and a humble process for effective and lasting change to occur.

What service professionals must realize is that oppressed communities have the capability to engage in social justice work. What these communities need most from organizations is resource, agency and support. Organizations can provide these things through their work by listening to the needs expressed by the communities who are directly being impacted by the issues at hand. It is important that every member of the community knows he or she has

a voice, and that organizations are ready and willing to listen and will be authentic in solving and addressing issues.

Organizations must listen to the values and needs of a community to understand their cultural norms and experiences. Paying attention to these details will allow an organization to better protect the interests and well-being of communities. This builds on trust and creates a strong relationship. The trust needs to go both ways, which means organizations need to take a positive stance towards what people know from their lived experiences. If organizations make it the norm to value these experiences and recognize that the members of the communities in which they serve are the experts, together they can build on community strength and local knowledge. Organizations need to engage community members in idea generating and decision-making from the start so that together they can determine common goals and missions. Often this is done only in the beginning and at the end of a planning process which can be insulting to a community and lead to organizations missing out on key information.

Community members need to feel a sense of ownership and empowerment in order to mobilize themselves. Organizations and community members must work together to address community needs by recognizing what conditions of a community need to change. There cannot be change within communities without there being a change in the systems and environments that impact communities. This work requires the resources and agency that organizations possess combined with the people powers that exist within communities. There can be no movement without both of these dynamics at play. This may require that organizations invest in more community organizers and outreach staff who can build on-the-ground relationships. These positions should be filled with individuals who are multi-lingual and multi-cultural to use culturally relevant communication efforts in order to reach as many people as possible and provide appropriate opportunities to engage with diverse communities. These key players of an organization can also develop and support leadership by mentoring youth and local community members and ensuring that there is an ongoing inclusion of community perspective through active participation and problem solving.

To best collaborate with underserved communities it is vital that organizational leaders first take the time to educate themselves and their staff about the past and current political interactions a community has at a local, state, and federal level. This will give the organization a better understanding of the type of marginalization that a particular community is facing. It is important for organizations to pay attention to the history of a community in order to understand where trust has been broken so that they can actively work to build trust and avoid repeating mistakes that have been made in the past. This allows for transparency, and organizations are better equipped to create a safe space for community members to discuss dynamics of power, oppression, and barriers that they face.

Lastly, it is beneficial for everyone that organizations adopt a social justice framework that not only recognizes, but actively works against systems of oppression, along with members of the community. This type of collaboration moves organizations from a place of working upon communities, to working within communities so that organizations and communities can rise together.

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