

Ancestors in Training: Intergenerational Movement Building in da South

Isabell Moore and Manju Rajendran

We can't keep reinventing the wheel.

We've got to learn from the past if we truly want to shape the future. We need loving, supportive relationships with movement folks of all ages if we want to keep our heads together and our hearts in the struggle. In fact, most other 20-something North Carolina organizers the two of us know have at least one strong relationship with a person significantly older or younger. As adult allies to youth, we support youth liberation. For real, we just can't help but prioritize intergenerational relationships and movement building in our lives.

There's a different culture around intergenerational stuff in the South. Growing up, there's a strong sense of respect for elders, and a deep appreciation of children and youngsters. Movements in the South have both a strong history of intergenerational cooperation and intergenerational tension that makes age a present, if not always easy, issue in our work. Our organizations often have an extended-family feel, and because organizing often takes place in smaller towns and rural regions, people count on each other to form mutually supportive relationships across generations. A lot of this culture originates from Southern African-American traditions that have helped people survive and resist the institutions of white supremacy. We are blessed to have a strong regional tradition of family and community.

Lately, explicitly intergenerational events and projects have been popping up around the region, and we want to tell you about three such projects in North Carolina and Tennessee.

Greensboro, North Carolina June 11, 2006

I am never going to quit, myself. What I hear from some younger folks is that older folks say 'Oh I'm passing it on to you now'. I'm not ever passing it on to you. Until I die I'm going to be working on this stuff. -Terry Austin

The two of us with a third younger generation organizer pulled together a multi-generational multi-racial group of thirteen panelists from Durham and Greensboro, NC to share wisdom with an audience of about sixty. The "Roots+Wings Intergenerational Dialogue" event was part of a tour stop for Dan Berger, author of *Outlaws of America: The Weather Underground and the Politics of Solidarity* and co-editor of *Letters From Young Activists*. "The Greensboro event was one of our best stops," said Dan. "It was such an honor to participate with so many veteran organizers, old and young."

These veterans were Terry Austin, Mandy Carter, Nettie Coad, Nego Crosson, Javier Garcia, Noe Juarez, Tim Hopkins, TC Muhammad, Tema Okun, Dannette Sharpley, Nayo Watkins, and Ed Whitfield, and they organized around immigrant rights, anti-racism, labor, and more. As Mama Nettie said, you gotta: "know your neighbors".

Dan Berger set us up with a short and dirty version of history over the last fifty years, providing context for the wide range of experiences of the panelists. He pointed out that international conditions were different in the 1960s and 1970s, including Vietnam War resistance, with its clear anti-US, anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist analysis. He also pointed out that national liberation struggles with in the US led by people of color had an analysis of themselves as "Third World people," explicitly connecting their struggles to those of people around the world. He also pointed out that different tactics were being used, and the media reacted to movement events in different ways.

The panel was large since we invited our s/heroes and welcomed anyone who said 'yes'. We handled this by doing 'speed-paneling', our innovation where each panelist gets a maximum of three minutes to speak. Most audience members enjoyed hearing short and sweet story-nuggets dropped, one after the other, even if the pace was clipped. What emerged? Older and younger participants hungered for more intergenerational relationships and treasured the ones they already had. Older and younger panelists felt pride in the movements they'd been part of, and had criticism for their own generation. Rather than having a Q&A and reinforcing the expert-audience dynamic, we had small group conversations after the panel.

It was beautiful to have elders we admire from Durham and Greensboro meet each other for the first time. This was the first sister city project we tried, and our great experience led us to working collaboratively this fall on "Evidence: An Art Show About Police Brutality" in Durham and Greensboro. The event was best summed in Dan and Andy's reflection: "Intergenerational movements are not simply about people of various ages being in the same room. Instead, it is about building respectful relationships of mutual learning and teaching based on a long-haul approach to movement building."

Go to the Head-On Radio Network spot and listen to the conversation:
<http://headonradionetwork.com/2006/06/12/>

New Market, Tennessee July 28-30, 2006, Manju Rajendran, with collective writing from the participants of the Intergenerational Thinktank

What would it take for us to build a healthy intergenerational liberation movement in the South? Most of us casually experimented with multigenerational work in our grassroots organizations, but we were a long shot from consolidating our lessons learned into a Southeast-wide intergenerational framework and developing strategy. We needed a chance to gather and consciously confront the troubling ramifications of ageism in our organizing work. And to pull this off, we had to recognize the incredible resources we had in our history, experiences, vision, and passion.

The Intergenerational Thinktank at Highlander Research and Education Center was organized by Suzanne Pharr (age 67) in New Market, Tennessee; Paulina Hernandez (24) in Atlanta, Georgia; Hollis Watkins, Sr. (65) from Jackson, Mississippi; Caitlin Breedlove (25), Nayo Watkins (67), and me, Manju (25) with some input from Naeemah Kelly (13) from Durham, North Carolina. Except for Mr. Hollis, we were a crew of women-identified people, and most of us identified as queer. Our planning happened over conference calls and kitchen tables, mostly talking about Southern intergenerational philosophy and giving feedback to each other's ideas, and logistics over email. We did homework and reported back to each other. After long conference calls, we devoured melting popsicles and plunged into the cool Eno River. Nothing beats Southern summertime.

Come June 2006, twenty-five diverse organizers and activists from ages 15 to 67 gathered at Highlander, legendary popular education center in the Southern Appalachians, training school of the likes of Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr. for a weekend of reflection and strategy. Here were a few of our reasons for meeting: "There is no liberation, not even survival, in isolation... Our young are dying in prisons and the military... Each generation has strengths and experiences with much to learn from and give to each other... Strong inter-generational relationships provide strength, support, knowledge and protection to our communities... Times change and practices and methods have to be updated and modified... Ageism will not prevent potential relationships, alliances, and new leadership... We want to disrupt the fragmentation our families are suffering because of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita; the prison industrial complex; and immigration

crackdowns... We want to heal and re-build a sense of extended family... We, as young people, value the history we learn from our Elders... The Civil Rights Movement relied on intergenerational work, and it is important to us to build on this legacy.”

We discussed the mechanisms of ageist oppression and the different ways it manifests in our lives. Common patterns emerged in ageism’s damaging effects in our movement work. We played Theater of the Oppressed games to work through these patterns, and discovered that we had a vision for working together across age: “We envision our work together as a circle. We want to work as a team, as peers who listen carefully to one another, who respect each other’s different experiences of our communities’ conditions and our varied strategies of liberation work. We want to create organizational structures that support us and hold us accountable. We want to be able to work collectively with respectful confrontation.” Throughout the weekend, we acknowledged the ancestors and the yet-to-be-born as part of our circle.

Some of the steps we, as a group, figure could get us to the Beloved Community:

- We need to create a shared democratic space—**shared power, resources, and decision-making.**
- We need to do more **skill-sharing and training** in our work, especially across generations. We need to figure out broad skills helpful for having healthy, inter-generational organizations and meet to gather these skills, then we have to bring these skills back to our communities and put them to use. Some skills we need to develop and share: **leadership skills for democratic organizations, finding ways to challenge unjust power within organizations, and skills to improve our work and help us hold tight to long-term commitments**
- Do fishbowls/listening circles in our organizations about intergenerational tensions
- Cross-generational co-mentorship programs—where each person has a clear goal of one thing they want to learn from the other person
- **Elder/youth pen pals**
- Consciousness-raising→making folks aware of the need for intergenerational work—through articles, conversations, letters, etc.)
- Talk to our closest friends, comrades, and family about these issues
- Give people responsibility: **Expect truth** from people and have systems of accountability
- Schedule **regular reflection and evaluation time**, instead of only evaluating when something is going wrong. In these reflections, re-visit our group’s goals and agreements
- More **celebration**, and intentional hanging out/socializing time
- Accountability around who gets a say: Members have to be in a working group of the organization in order to vote on whole group decisions
- Create a balance between internal and external work—for individuals and organizations
- We need to be thinking outside of ourselves—making connections to other communities, and being grounded in understanding of other communities and the realities of their lives
- **Teach and lead by example. Start with ourselves.**
- Be intentional and speak about it when we are doing intergenerational work—structures, check-ins, honest communication, trainings, truth-telling—in order to make working this way the norm
- We need structures in the organizations to move towards active equality in how we deal with pay, staff development, and decision-making. Equal Pay=Equal Say
- Challenge decisions leaders make that are “organizational”, “executive”, or “personal”—define all this

- Institute a “smack-down” committee for **intervention, conflict resolution, and accountability**. Beyond internal organizational processes- across our Southeast region and across our organizations

Roan Mountain State Park, Tennessee Oct. 6-8, 2006, Isabell Moore

The Southerners On New Ground (SONG) campout in October fulfilled my deep longings for multi-generational, multi-racial Southern queer spaces. Driving from mid-North Carolina to the mountains of eastern Tennessee, I felt like I was time traveling, driving out of late summer and into fall. Afterwards, I had a chance to talk more to Caitlin Breedlove, one of the SONG co-directors, about the organization and the event.

The intergenerational campout was the second one hosted by SONG, an organization that connects race, class, and gender in the twelve states of the Southeast US. Founded in 1993 by black and white lesbians, it recently went through its own generational transformation. The original board was all LGBT folks who became active in the 1960s and 1970s, but now five out of six members are under 33, and the two new co-directors, Paulina Hernandez and Caitlin Breedlove, are 24 and 25. Mandy Carter and Suzanne Pharr, two elders, are founders and former board members who remain active as “volunteer staff,” advising and sitting on committees around specific projects.

When I chatted with Caitlin later she explained: "We shaped the campout by listening to our base. People were asking for opportunities for rest, renewal, and recharge time". SONG intends to have a spring and fall campout each year as a way of staying connected with their base, building relationships amongst the “SONG family”, providing space for reflection, and allowing for informal intergenerational sharing.

We got to the campground in the dark Friday and followed signs through church groups and family reunions gathered around their fires and huddled inside their RVs until we reached the SONG group campsite. There we found a little group of old and young queers circling their own spot of warmth, sharing chili, marshmallows and stories. By Saturday, our little community had grown to about 30. Folks were there from North Carolina, Georgia, Florida, and Louisiana, old and young, black, brown and white, non-trans women and trans men.

The weekend-long gathering was intentionally unstructured to allow for an extended stretch of the “hall time” many of us are always trying to squeeze in during conferences and planning meetings. On Saturday we ate meals together, some folks went on hikes in the surrounding woods, and others chose to participate in a healing session that included meditation, active listening, movement and music. That night many of us stayed around the fire after dinner and answered our own versions of slumber party questions like: “How did you get involved in social justice work?” and “Who was your first queer kiss?” For me, the night concluded with music-making and made-up poems and songs with two friends. During a pause in our rhythms and rhymes, a deer glided out from the trees into the moonlight, yards from where we sat.

A volunteer committee of the board, including founders Suzanne Pharr and Mandy Carter had done most of the logistical work. Co-directors Paulina Hernandez and Caitlin Breedlove joined planning calls a few weeks before the gathering to share information. Attendees gave twenty dollars to cover the campsite and dinner, and we brought our own food for other meals. "We're trying to be open to different structures and ways for our community ways to support leadership in the organization besides board, staff, and even founders. It's really important to us that the campouts be, simple, and inexpensive so the retreats aren't a huge drain on our resources", Caitlin explained.

Most people I talked to left with new relationships, and a renewed sense of Southern queer community. Though I spent more time with youngers than elders during the event, I met an older self-identified “land-dyke” who lives on land about 45 minutes from where I live who shared some history of the lesbian and women’s land movement. I plan to take a fieldtrip with some friends to visit her land.

In Loving Conclusion

Those of us from the South who do national work are accustomed to having to explain to deluded Yankees that we really are on to good things, and we have powerful lessons about organizing and movement-building to share with folks who are willing to listen. Though the three events were radically different in their format, they did a splendid job of accomplishing similar goals. There are many models of addressing the critical issues of passing on knowledge through the generations and building the kind of sustainable relationships that hold movements together. We hope this Southern spark starts a wildfire. Thanks for listening.

Yours Truly

Isabell Moore is a white anti-racist 27-year old organizer active in economic and racial justice issues in Greensboro, North Carolina as well as fighting war and police brutality. She has written for NC Indymedia, Copwatch, and Urban Literature Magazine, and was a researcher for “Sir, No Sir”, a documentary on GI war resisters during Vietnam and for the book *Freedom Is An Endless Meeting: Democracy in American Social Movements*. **Manju Rajendran** is a desi 25-year old artist, organizer and biologist based in Durham, North Carolina, the center of the universe. She is on the media/communications crew of Ubuntu, a women-of-color and survivor-led organization fighting sexual assault and she is part of a team creating an incredible online directory of the dopest progressive youth organizations across the country called the Future 5000. Isabell and Manju are the media/communications divas for the South Carolina Equality Coalition’s Fairness for All Families Campaign. Manju gratefully ripped the title of this article from her homeboy Ibrahim Abdul-Matin.

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