

Bold and Intersectional Organizing for Trans Liberation



By Shelby Chestnut
January 18, 2024

My family's originally from Montana. I had a pretty working-class upbringing. I'm also mixed-race half white, half Native—Assiniboine specifically. I'm not really the poster child for having a supportive family. But I was really lucky to come out as queer at age 12 in the 1990s and to have my family be super supportive. I experienced a lot of bullying and struggled in school because of learning disabilities and being targeted for being queer and trans. My family always had my back.

I realize what a difference that made as an adult—that I didn't have to worry about being myself. But I was still pretty isolated as a young person. I had a few queer friends growing up, but, really, I just was so starved for people like me. I was probably 19 or 20 the first



time I met another queer or trans person of color, and that was in college. I remember the internet was just becoming a thing. I applied to college on paper.

I chose to go to Antioch College. Most people pick Antioch because it's this radical place where you can work and study full-time, and it's great. I picked it partially for that reason too. But, honestly, when I went to their website, I saw queer people, and I was like, "Cool, sign me up."

Antioch has a rich history of community organizing, specifically Black liberation organizing. It's located in southern Ohio, so there were a lot of Black students, a lot of white students, a lot of Jewish students that came from the East Coast

throughout its history, and a lot of famous alumni like Coretta Scott King and the biologist Stephen Jay Gould. David Goodman and Steve Schwerner, brothers of two of the white men killed in Freedom Summer in the 1960s, also attended. So, at a very young age I was politicized into the idea that regardless of your race, we needed to think about

racism. We needed to prioritize racial justice and in essence Black liberation as a fundamental value that would liberate all people.

This essay is a part of a series produced by The People's Think Tank, a grassroots think tank network composed of forty community organizing groups and national alliances in the education justice movement. The think tank is conducting a participatory action research project to learn from community organizers across a diverse set of communities and issue-based movements. This work is supported by The Spencer Foundation and UMass-Boston.

For more, visit www.peopleshinktank.us or follow us on Instagram at [@peopleshinktank](https://www.instagram.com/peopleshinktank/).

To say that college impacted my life is an understatement. I met so many people like me who were looking for a place to belong. I don't know how Antioch became a beacon for young LGBTQ people of color, but for a tiny liberal arts college, there were probably 20 of us there. They're still some of my closest friends. A lot of them have gone on to do community organizing or advocacy work in some shape or form.

After graduating from Antioch, I moved to New York City to go to graduate school at The New School. I went to their Milano public policy program and studied with a woman named Erica Kohl-Arenas who was a community organizer by trade but ended up getting a PhD and teaching community organizing. I was moved by the idea that if you actually had the people at the table who were impacted by the issues, you found the solutions a lot quicker. I've always held that commitment in my professional work and in my personal life.

In New York, I worked with the New York City Anti-Violence Project. I'm grateful for having had the opportunity to work in the anti-violence LGBTQ movement because it made me realize my own passion to do trans-specific work as a trans person and as an Indigenous person. It's what I was called to do. I love that every day I get to work with queer and trans people around the country to think creatively about solving systemic issues. It just seems natural to me, and that's how I got into it.

The Trans Agenda for Liberation

I am currently the executive director of the Transgender Law Center, but I served as Director of Policy and Programs for many years. I led our movement building work at the time, which meant I had the pleasure of working with trans people around the country on a daily basis, thinking about the issues that impact trans people, and finding ways to organize around those issues, create model policies, and pass legislation that enhances people's lives.

The history of the Transgender Law Center is interesting because it's less than 20 years old. It was a project originally of an organization called The National Center for Lesbian Rights. It started as a California-based organization and, at the time, did a lot of name and gender marker changes. Twenty years ago, a lot of people in the mainstream didn't know what transgender people needed, or even who they were, and there were a lot of barriers to services. There was a major barrier in the California area for trans people to access medical care and get legal documents that reflected their identity. Fast forward, and now we do a lot of impact litigation on the federal level, and we have a number of organizing projects. We have TRUTH, our TransYouth Project, which works with GSA Network to increase trans youth storytelling and movement building. We have a disability project, which is one of our newer projects. We center our work with a disability justice framework. Since disabled queer and trans people are often erased from the LGBTQ movement narrative, we think about how to get their stories and their needs out to people.



We also launched what we call the *Trans Agenda for Liberation* with five guiding visions. We believe that if we prioritize these issues, center the needs of trans people, and listen to trans voices, we will meet the needs of people across movements, whether that's racial justice, whether that's gender justice, whether that's economic justice, or whether that's looking at violence or

violence prevention. It was written by a majority Black and Indigenous coalition of trans people and reflects what they're saying are the priorities in their communities. We launched the first pillar before COVID, called "Black Trans Women and Black Trans Femmes, Leading and Living Fiercely." It confronts the violent epidemic directed against Black trans women and lays out a framework that anyone can understand and utilize, even if you're not a Black trans woman or femme. If everyone prioritizes these issues in their own work and thinking, we would begin to address the violent epidemic that is impacting Black trans women and femmes across the country, and globally to some extent.

We have a responsibility as people to understand the deep-rooted impact that anti-Black racism has in this country and what it was founded upon. When we're saying BIPOC, Black Indigenous People of Color, do we actually work with Black people and Indigenous people? Oftentimes I find that the answer is no. We can say it as a nice sounding term and sit in that discomfort. It doesn't mean that you're a bad person if you're sitting with the discomfort of the history of this country and its exploitation of people.

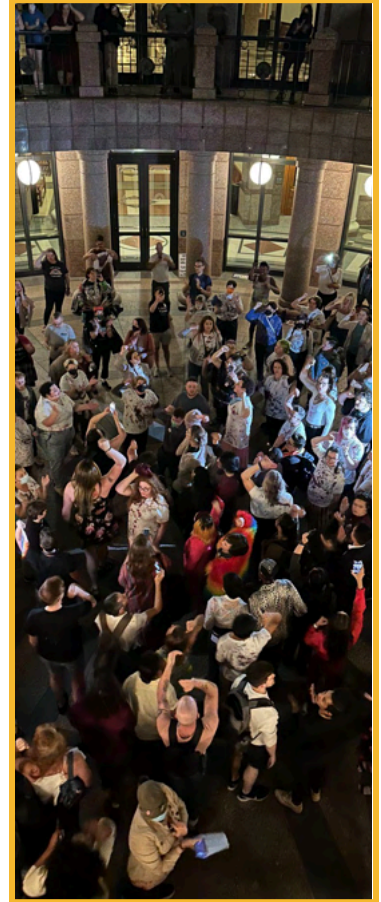
Solidarity Work Centers the Trans and Gender Nonconforming Community

So much of the work that one does if you're centering trans people of color, or LGBTQ people of color, is solidarity work. The Immigrant Rights Movement is a great example of this. During the Obama administration, people like Ola Osaze, who founded the Black LGBTQIA+ Migrant Project, and Isa Noyola, who is the deputy director at Mijente, were pushing the conversation on the detention of LGBTQ migrants. They pushed to end trans detention and highlighted the horrors of trans people in detention. Their arguments were falling, for lack of a less ableist term, on deaf ears. The Immigrant Rights Movement was like, "We don't want to fight about trans people. That's not our issue." The trans community was like, "Well, we just

want rights to be protected." Out of that came a bigger movement to demand that we hear the stories of trans migrants and that they not be left to the wayside.

Some of the best organizing I've been part of in recent years has been around immigration specific work in a Trump context where immigrant rights were just greatly under attack. The country woke up to what a lot of people had known was happening for decades around immigration in this country during Trump. For years TLC was looked at as this super radical group, with mainstream immigrant rights advocates thinking, "They're so out there with their immigration demands ending trans detention. That's not going to happen."

Yet I sat on a call last week with big national organizations with multimillion dollar budgets, prepping for the start of the Biden administration. Five years earlier, these groups thought anyone who was calling for ending trans detention was "too far left." They believed, "This is an abomination to our rights as LGBTQ people." People were losing funding if they had that stance. But last week, all of these groups were like, "Yeah, we should scrap the memo and just demand that trans people be released. "I realized that we have created enough intersectional organizing and educated people that they understand the perils of this moment: if we don't end these systems, people will die.



We have a pilot project on the border right now. We have an attorney on the Mexico side of the US Mexico border who helps trans people cross. They help people get prepared to cross and be detained, then place them with organizations that do post-release work. It really blew my mind when, during the few times I've been to the US Mexico border pre-COVID, I learned that people would make these really, really long journeys and nowhere along the way would they be told that they would be held in detention when they presented themselves at the US border. To see the shock on people's faces when they were like, "But I'm not a criminal." They really aren't criminals, and there's no reason why people should be held in detention. But we knew that was going to happen to them, so why weren't we prepping them and telling them, "Yes, you need to leave because you're not safe; but let's also be real about what you're going to encounter."

Many folks are leaving their countries of origin because it's not safe as LGBTQ people; but then they're arriving here to be targeted by the government and by police at levels that are terrifying. How they're filtered into the immigration system is just horrible. I went down to Tijuana a year and a half ago with Ola, Isa, and a number of other activists to do some community building with organizations down there. It's amazing what Haitian migrants who were stuck at the border had built, because this country will not let them in for temporary protected status.



Some of the best organizing I saw at the US-Mexico border, or just in immigrant rights, was people who are truly willing to do the solidarity work, to say, "I'm not trans and I'm not Black," or, "I'm not trans and I'm not Latinx, but the death rates that these people are going to face is so severe

that I, as a cis immigrants' rights organizer, need to do the work." It has just been really eye-opening to see trans people showing up for immigrant rights and saying this is a shared issue and we owe it to our people to make collective demands that will free everyone. To me, it was a moment for my own learning, where I realized that this is a global issue, but this is also an intersectional issue that needs much more solidarity than we have currently. We all have an obligation to do work that highlights this kind of solidarity and humanity.

Bold Intersectional Organizing in the Trans Community

Oftentimes there's a race to the finish line. We want to do something quickly and create a rapid response. Some of the best organizing I've seen has been organizing that's happened over generations and decades of time. So many trans people don't have a long life expectancy. One of the pillars of our trans agenda is intergenerational organizing and lifelong care. We need to prioritize the needs and movement building of trans elders with just as much care as we're putting into youth organizing. We need to explore how to create stronger intergenerational relationships and how to create mentorship. I'll be honest. I was almost thirty-five before I had my first trans mentor. We had a thirty year difference in age between us, but wow, we had the same exact struggles.

There's been a history in law and policy of leaving out trans people in an effort to get rights for lesbian, gay, and bisexual people. What good has that done us? None. You look at how philanthropy has followed that. I think it's about .3% of LGBTQ philanthropy that goes to trans-specific work. That's

tiny. Since TLC is one of the few groups that have been able to benefit from philanthropic dollars, we have an obligation to move those resources to the communities that most need it and lift them up.

We can see how attacking trans people feeds a movement attacking all people's rights. And trans youth are the most vulnerable. Right now most state legislatures are attacking trans youth in one way or another. They gave up on the bathroom stuff because they were like, "Well, we're not going to win that," and now it's sports bans and it's restricting kids access to hormone blockers. It's not like parents are sending their kids to the doctor to be like, "Give my child a sex change." That's not what's happening. These are life saving measures to keep kids from potentially killing themselves.

To build the coalition that wrote the Trans Agenda for Liberation, we handpicked about twenty people from across the country doing grassroots trans organizing, prioritizing local communities, prioritizing communities of color, low-income communities, and trans youth. They came up with the agenda that is our north star to organize around. They created some of the most needed and visionary ideas, and now we get to do the fun work of building it out across the country, whether that's folks organizing sex workers in Seattle, whether that's folks doing HIV prevention in Honolulu, whether that's Indigenous folks doing broad Native sovereignty work, or whether that's Black trans women looking at the effects of the HIV epidemic in Black trans communities. It's all connected.

Another example of boldness in organizing is the Black Visions Collective in Minneapolis. They're a small group of mostly young, queer, trans, Black organizers who five years ago said we don't like the ways that young Black leadership is deprioritized in this city. They formed a collective. They started organizing, strategizing, influencing themselves, and teaching each other. In the wake of George Floyd's murder by the Minneapolis Police Department, they got the city to commit to starting

the process of defunding the police. It was people power, and it was people being bold and saying they're not going to settle for this reform agenda. We want something bigger for all of us. The people that understand that as a big win aren't scared of the uncertainty of the moment. What's possible? Another world is possible if we actually dare to create it.

To me it's understanding that if we don't have each other, we don't really have anything. This work, it's never ending. But it's also so vast in what we're capable of changing in my and in our lifetime. ❖

Shelby Chestnut (They/He) is a mixed-race Assiniboine and Norwegian, queer, and trans community organizer with roots from Montana and Minnesota. Shelby is the Executive Director of the [Transgender Law Center \(TLC\)](#). Prior to stepping into the role of Executive Director, Shelby served for five years as TLC's Director of Policy and Programs. In that role, Shelby helped successfully launch projects like the Disability Project, Black Trans Circles, Justice for Roxsana, and Free Chin. They also helped create the [Trans Agenda for Liberation](#), which Shelby describes as "the community-led guide towards the future we deserve."

