DOIN' THE WORK: Frontline Stories of Social Change

Civil Rights Organizing – Alesandra Lozano, MSW
Episode 44
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Shimon Cohen:

Welcome to Doin' The Work: Frontline Stories of Social Change, where we bring you stories of real people working to address real issues. I am your host, Shimon Cohen.

Shimon Cohen:

In this episode, I talk with Alesandra Lozano, known to colleagues and friends as Ali, who is the Director of Communications and Advocacy of the Texas Civil Right Project (TCRP) based in Houston, Texas. Ali shares how her own coming out experience as a lesbian in 2009 propelled her into grassroots organizing work for LGBTQ liberation. She landed in the electoral space in 2012, working to elect openly LGBTQ candidates in states like Wisconsin and Arizona. It was through these campaign experiences between 2012 and 2014 that Ali observed different voting rules and transitioned into expanding the electorate through voter registration work with an organization in Texas, which she has called home since 2013.

Shimon Cohen:

Ali talks about the work being done by TCRP, specifically on voting rights, though they also have programs that address criminal injustice and immigrants' rights. (Spoiler, all three are connected). She explains how people can get involved with policy advocacy and provides specific strategies and tactics, such as paying attention to what is happening at the local level and showing up to county hearings and city council meetings to testify, and how organizations such as TCRP support these efforts.

Shimon Cohen:

Ali outlines guidance when giving public testimony, discusses coalitions as a tool to build political power, and talks about how TCRP engages in coalition building by detailing their work with the diverse Texas For All Coalition, which has unified around combating the increased attempts at voter suppression by the Texas legislature. The organizations of this historic first-of-its-kind coalition, work in different issue areas from reproductive rights to labor to LGBTQ equality, but all agree - policy that aligns with our values cannot move forward unless we protect the right to vote. She talks about TCRP strategy to work at the local level to pass pro-voter reforms, as well as the importance of redistricting and what we can all do to have fair and true representation of our communities. Ali really gives us a master class in policy advocacy and organizing! I hope this conversation inspires you to action.

Shimon Cohen:

Before we get into the interview, I want to let you all know about our episode's sponsor, the University of Tennessee Knoxville College of Social Work. First off, I want to thank them for sponsoring the podcast. UTK has a phenomenal social work program with the opportunity to do your bachelor's, master's and doctorate of social work online. Of course, they also have excellent classes in person in both Knoxville and Nashville. UTK is committed to preparing social workers who will support human potential and dignity, and challenge racism and all forms of oppression. Scholarships are available. Go to www.csw.utk.edu to learn more. And now, the interview.

Shimon Cohen:

Hey Ali, thanks so much for coming on Doin' The Work. I'm so excited to have you on here. I've been following your work for a while. So let's just to kick stuff off, if you could just share a little about what you're currently doing.

Alesandra Lozano:

Yeah, so I'm Ali Lozano. I'm the Director of Communications and Advocacy at the Texas Civil Rights Project. I'm based here in Houston. We have five different offices all across the state and we work in voting rights, criminal justice reform, which we refer to as criminal injustice, and then also racial and economic justice, which is our team that focuses on things like fighting the border wall, fighting the family separation crisis, and overall immigrant rights and immigrant justice in Texas.

Shimon Cohen:

All of that sounds amazing and it also sounds like you've got a lot going on.

Alesandra Lozano:

No shortage of things to do here.

Shimon Cohen:

Right, right. So I'm hoping we can get into those different aspects of what you do, and also have a conversation where people listening can even pick up some skills to maybe enhance what they're already doing, or it gives them some ideas on how to get started in this work. So I think one thing just to get to talk about before we get into the specifics is how did you get into doing this type of work?

Alesandra Lozano:

Yeah, so I love this question because I entered this work I think in a way that a lot of people entered this work, which was that the personal became political for me. So, I had a whole plan after high school to go to college on the East Coast somewhere that had a really strong international affairs program and I wanted to become a foreign service officer. That was the plan. And I did end up going to George Washington University in DC, which it does indeed have a very strong international relations program. And I entered my freshman year in 2008 and it took less than a year of me being away at college to come to accept the fact that I was a lesbian. And at that time, if you're thinking 2008, 2009, the state department, which of course employs all of these foreign service officers, looked very different than it does now. This was pre Hillary Clinton entering the state department.

Alesandra Lozano:

And as part of my undergraduate program and my studies doing international affairs, I started to hear a lot of stories that were not good, about some of the internal policies, whether formal or informal, that were really negatively impacting openly LGBTQ foreign service officers. Primarily hearing that foreign service officers who were openly gay, who were then deployed and chose to go somewhere, be deployed somewhere with their spouses, that their spouses were not getting the same benefits as their heterosexual counterparts. And so I started to just hear some stories through my networking, trying to make this into a career for myself. And not only did I get really scared about whether or not I actually was going to have a place in this field, but I got really angry.

Alesandra Lozano:

And mind you, I mean, 2009, we... At that point don't ask, don't tell is still law. We have no federal employment protections for LGBTQ people. Marriage equality was not ruled on by the Supreme court yet. Marriage equality was only a thing in a handful of states. So really all of these different laws and policies that were keeping me a second class citizen really hit me in the face at the same time with my coming out. And so that really propelled me into the organizing space in, both DC and New York City. And I got involved with a non-violent civil disobedience direct action group at the time called GetEQUAL in DC, which then turned into a full-blown nonprofit, long after I had left it. But that was really how I got propelled into the work. And from there, it was both a linear and non-linear journey of ending up in the voting rights space, doing actual voting rights policy work in the state of Texas.

Alesandra Lozano:

So I ended up as the political manager at the LGBTQ Victory Fund after my undergraduate degree because I knew that I wanted to be in the domestic political space at that point. And what I figured was, that was a great space for me because I knew that in order to get the policies changed that I want to changed, that I needed folks who were like me. So, needed to change that representation at every level of government. But then, while I was working at the Victory Fund, I was sent out to help up the field teams for about five different campaigns, at all different levels, all over the country. And I started noticing, while working these campaigns, the very different voting rules and voting laws that existed in every state. And that then propelled me into getting more interested in expanding the electorate.

Alesandra Lozano:

So, I went from wanting policies changed to help my community, thinking that I needed to change the people in power, but then while doing the work to change the people in power, I figured out that I needed to expand the electorate. And then that really got me into the voting rights space. So, I moved to Texas in 2013 and did a lot of hardcore organizing work with the Texas Freedom Network around voter registration, but also LGBTQ equality issues and reproductive justice. And then after organizing with them for a few years, I decided to go back to graduate school where I got my MSW and then landed here at TCRP post-graduate school. So, that is my 12 year lifespan in three minutes.

Shimon Cohen:

It's incredible. Like you said, like so many people, people start experiencing or understanding the oppression that they're facing, right? And then that next step is what do we do about it? I want to back up to that and then get closer, get into what you're doing now. But, back when you're in DC and you're coming against these barriers, these heteropatriarchal, homophobic, oppression that is blocking what was your dream, right? How did that process take place, where you went from feeling like these things are blocking me and I can't do this to this is what I'm going to do about it? What was that process like?

Alesandra Lozano:

Yeah. I actually remember a specific activist meeting that I was at, where I learned way more about tax law than I ever would have wanted to in my life, right? At that point, because again, marriage equality wasn't legal nationwide. And actually this was an entire dialogue within the marriage equality movement internally about the narrative shift of going from talking about, "Well, we need marriage because everyone should be able to file taxes jointly," to, "No, we need to talk about the actual love that exists between these two people and that they are consenting adults and have the right to marry just

like everybody else." But just the way I work, I'm definitely much more of a... Policy will get my attention is basically what I'm trying to say.

Alesandra Lozano:

For me, it was both the emotional aspect of it, right? This realization that if I found somebody that I loved a ton and who I wanted to marry, I was not going to get to do that. And the other half of my brain was like, "Well, in terms of administration, this is also not fair," when it comes to things like taxes and stuff like that. In terms of the process of what I was going to do about it, I mean, I came out at 19. I was still in college. I definitely did not have the same resources and platform now to do a ton about it other than to organize my peers and to organize out in the community, and to get arrested and to get detained by police doing protests and interrupting congressional hearings, which I also did.

Alesandra Lozano:

And so, yeah, I don't know. For me, I mean, everything really did hit me at once, both the emotional aspect of it and just being really sad about it. But then also the real, tangible, concrete impact that all of these policies were going to have on just the day-to-day of my life. Whether it was being able to feel secure in my housing without fear of getting evicted for being gay. So yeah, all of that really, really hit me at once.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah. And I think, I mean, we're both social workers, right? So I think to talk about that for a second, in terms of in social work, we talk about person in environment, in these systems. But your story is one more example of how these systems just destroy people's lives, infringe on people's lives. And then you got really into the policy aspect of it, the target to change is the policy and then what are the strategies to do that?

Alesandra Lozano:

Yeah.

Shimon Cohen:

Sometimes I think that's really missing, that work. And so that's a big part of why I wanted to have you on here to talk about that. So, let's jump ahead a little bit to the work you're doing now. How would someone get into the type of organizing that you're currently doing? Someone who cares about these issues. Stuff's been blowing up and everyone's on social media and everyone's learning if they hadn't known already, about all these different social issues. There's a lot of people who want to do something about it. And other than of course, people can join a protest in the streets. They know that and they can vote. But what are other things? How do people get involved with the organizing?

Alesandra Lozano:

Yeah, great question. So, one of the biggest things that people can do that, number one, I think that a lot of folks don't know they can do this, but they can totally, they have the absolute power and autonomy to do this and/or are a little bit intimidated by the idea of doing it. So much happens at the local level and so much policy is passed at the local level and the state level. There's so much to be done where people live. And so one of the biggest things that I think people can do is pay attention to what's going on at the county government level and actually show up to things like commissioner's court hearings

and testify. And show up to city council meetings and testify. Testimony is one of the most powerful tools that we have in our toolbox, in my opinion.

Alesandra Lozano:

I'm definitely speaking from a Texas lens, from a Texas perspective because I've been here for so many years and I've been organizing here now just under a decade. And one of the things that we use as a mobilization tactic here in Texas at the state level is testimony, is getting people to actually show up at the state capital and testify against really bad bills, or in favor of really good bills. Things that folks want to actually see implemented in their communities. But we also have an entire campaign at TCRP where I work completely dedicated to county level government, and to not only getting information out to people about things happening at the county level, but then also saying, "Look, these are the hearings that you can show up at and get involved in this work." These are the, even if they're not formal legislative hearings or formal county hearings, if they're just meetings that are open to the community, these are things that you can actively show up at and speak at that will insert you into the work, directly insert you into the work.

Alesandra Lozano:

Something that we've been trying to do in Texas more and more is testimony trainings, really equipping people with the skills that they need to feel confident in order to proactively take hold of their own power and show up at a county commissioner court meeting, or a city council meeting and testify in front of the people who work for them. So I think that in-person testimony is an incredibly powerful tool that more folks I think absolutely could take advantage of. And particularly that social workers could take advantage of, whether you were clinical or macro. I actually think that a stronger social worker voice at all of these governmental meetings and hearings is something that is actually very much missing from the policy conversation.

Shimon Cohen:

So you were talking about these trainings you're starting to do, and that was one of the questions I had as you're talking about testifying. So what would someone want to cover when they testify at one of these hearings?

Alesandra Lozano:

So of course it would depend on what topic they were testifying on, but really the template for testimony is pretty uniform. So, number one, you want to make very clear who you are and what your positionality is within the community. Are you a constituent of X district or Y district? Why is that important? And then very clearly stating what your position is on whatever topic that you're testifying on. You will see sometimes, and very frequently actually, public testimony occur and then the state rep or the county commissioner, after the person is done testifying, will say, "Wait, so what's your position?" So you want to make very clear whether you are for, or against something, and then make your case, semi briefly, because usually testimony does not exceed two to five minutes.

Alesandra Lozano:

And then make a clear ask of these elected officials or of these policymakers, and then restate your position extremely clearly at the end. So, the content around the argument that you're making can absolutely vary depending on what exactly it is that you're testifying on. But the overall format of effective testimony is pretty uniform. I mean, there's a bunch of national groups for sure, but definitely

many statewide and local groups who have a bunch of effective testimony trainings as well. And it's something that TCRP has gotten into a lot more in recent years, specifically because we consider it such a powerful tool.

Shimon Cohen:

I agree. And I think that's great that you're doing those trainings and that we're having this conversation so people can plug in. Because people are busy and they've got their jobs and families or school, whatever's going on. And so to have an organization like yours where people can plug in and get that training, so they can really maximize the time they are able to give, is so critical.

Alesandra Lozano:

Yeah. And actually that brings up a equity issue because we try to do, well not only us, but a lot of our coalition partners as well. We try to do multiple trainings at different times of day because people have different working schedules and people have childcare needs, and people have school, and people have family obligations, all of these things. And I will say that a lot of times, particularly at the state level, again, I'm speaking from a Texas perspective. A lot of these committee hearings that we try to push people to testify at, are at very inconvenient times of day. And that's done on purpose. That's specifically done on purpose to try and keep people away. One little silver lining of the horrendousness that has been the COVID-19 pandemic, is that here in Harris County where I'm located, where Houston is, the county commissioner's court because of COVID, started allowing people to just call in to testify. So you did not have to actually go in person and make the trek down to the commissioner's court building and find parking and pay for parking.

Alesandra Lozano:

But you were able to just call in on the telephone. It was this completely revelatory thing where we were thinking, "Oh my gosh, why haven't we been doing this all along?" This is making this entire process so much more accessible to people, for working people, for parents, for students to actually have a say in this policy process. And so that hasn't really hasn't been 100% the case at the state level. They did, in certain committees say, "Okay, we're not going to allow virtual testimony," which is absolutely a barrier to accessibility that is done on purpose. So, I say that testimony is one of the most powerful tools that we have in the organizing toolbox in terms of getting people people entered into this space. But there's still absolutely are equity issues around meeting times and locations, et cetera, and things like that.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah. I want to talk about voting rights because it has always been important and it's increasingly, I don't know if I should say increasingly, but we've seen the nationwide mobilization by the right, to completely attack voting rights because they know they can't win if Black and Brown and working class folks are able to vote, right? Period. So how are you addressing that issue? An overview, but also some specific strategies?

Alesandra Lozano:

Oh, man. So I think it's fair to say increasingly. I would say that we are in the middle of the biggest democracy crisis that we have seen in a very, very, very long time, arguably since the Jim Crow era, 100%. Everything that we have seen happening nationally, particularly in states like Georgia, Texas, Arizona, those three in particular, it is completely a coordinated campaign from the other side, from

those that would seek to undermine the very fabric of our democracy to insulate their own power and shield themselves from public accountability, for sure. We are in an existential crisis when it comes to democracy.

Alesandra Lozano:

And in Texas in particular, there are very different things happening at the state level versus the local level. So, I mean, if anyone is listening to this podcast, you probably have seen on the news by now at least in some headline form or in a Twitter header or something, that Texas during our regular legislative session, which ended last month, that lawmakers attempted to pass a massive voter suppression omnibus bill, which died in the regular session because Texas House Democrats decided to break quorum and walk off of the House floor, thereby killing the bill. Today was actually the first day of the special legislative session, which was called by the governor, specifically to pass a voter suppression omnibus bill.

Alesandra Lozano:

He also put a bunch of other bad stuff on the agenda, but the inspiration really, the heart of this special legislative session is to pass voter suppression legislation. And at the state level, we're in a Republican trifecta state and I'm saying all of this from my nonpartisan hat, by the way to be clear. But these are just the facts, right? We are in a Republican trifecta state and that political party happens to be on the complete opposite side from us on the voting rights issue. Therefore, legislatively we have... The folks who are representing our side of the policy debate on voting rights, have very few options in terms of leveraging power within the legislature, to an extent that the bill would die, unless they took particularly extraordinary measures like breaking quorum and walking off the House floor and leaving the state, which is what Dems actually did in 2003 when Rick Perry was governor.

Alesandra Lozano:

And so because of that, it's really fallen very much on organizations like mine, Texas Civil Right Project. Also some of our closest partners, ACLU of Texas, MOVE Texas, Texas Freedom Network, Common Cause Texas, and so many others to come up with effective strategies that are emphasizing public outcry as much as possible. And basically since we have very little power within the legislature here in Texas, basically making the public outcry so loud that it is as politically painful as possible for these elected officials to pass voter suppression legislation. So, that comes with a lot of media, a lot of press. But that also comes with mass mobilization of regular people to the Texas state capital. So as of right now, I mean today was the first day of the special session. On Monday, we're planning a gigantic advocacy day and all of our groups are working together to pull funds and logistic support together so that we can bus people from all over the state to the capital on Monday for a massive public advocacy day and lobby day.

Alesandra Lozano:

And then the other strategy has really been an inside strategy of trying to get as many talking points from real people who would be affected by this legislation, like Texans with disabilities, Texans who for English is not their primary language or their first language for students. Even for LGBTQ Texans, because voter ID actually really impacts the trans community. Trying to get as many stories and again, personal testimonies of people who would very much be directly impacted by this voter suppression legislation. Not only getting them to the capital, but getting them to testify as well. Those have been the strategies at the state level.

Alesandra Lozano:

But another campaign that we have actually had going for the last two years, actually a little bit over two years now, is our democracy from the ground up campaign. And that campaign actually bypasses the state altogether. And we work directly with county clerks, election administrators, and county commissioners courts to try and get pro voter reforms passed at the local level. Because when you're in a state like Texas or Georgia or Arizona, where the state leadership is incredibly hostile to expanding voting access, right? One way to get pro-voter reforms passed is at the local level.

Alesandra Lozano:

Now, of course you have to deal with the risk of state leadership then passing a bunch of preemption laws. But, in our case, the state legislature only meets every two years. So, we have a little bit more time for actual county commissioners courts to pass pro-voter reforms. And so, we've been working at the local level around expanding voting access for many, many years. And in fact, if anyone has been paying attention to Texas since the 2020 election, you will know that the biggest inspiration for all of the ideas that Republican lawmakers got for some of the worst provisions included in the voter suppression omnibus bill during the regular session, were all specifically aimed at brand new pro-voter methods that Harris County implemented during the 2020 election.

Alesandra Lozano:

So literally a bunch of these local reforms were implemented in Harris County that made voter turnout soar and that were able to actually be accessible and convenient, particularly for Black folks, for Brown folks, for AAPI people and working people. And literally the state lawmakers saw those reforms and that they worked, and that people liked them. And they took those reforms and turned them into provisions that would otherwise ban them at the state level.

Shimon Cohen:

So, I mean, this fundamentally comes down to an issue of power, of who has political power and who doesn't. Mobilization can be a way to build power. Getting more people who can vote, counteracting these voter suppression laws, if these lawmakers actually care though. If they actually care that... It's almost like even with national embarrassment, what we might think would be embarrassing to them and the outcry, it's almost what it seems like now is – and maybe it's been like this for a long time, you tell me – is that the GOP and the right are thriving almost off of the outcry, where it's like, "Oh yeah, look at," because they want to like own the Libs or whatever. And it's like, "Yeah, yeah, yeah. These people came and they did all this, but look what we did. We stuck to our guns," or whatever. How do you deal with that?

Alesandra Lozano:

Yeah, so I actually... How we deal with it is that we put a lot of effort, time, energy, blood, sweat and tears into the redistricting fight. Because when we're talking about power, we're also talking about accountability, right? And so really the voting rights fight really does start with redistricting, which is when all of our state district and congressional maps are redrawn to reflect new census data. So redistricting is done in conjunction with the census, only once every 10 years. Congressional district two here in Texas, I actually believe is the most gerrymandered district in the country. Actually. I'm pretty sure that we hold that title here in Texas.

Shimon Cohen:

Wow.

Alesandra Lozano:

And so you know the reason that these particular elected officials – and this would be the same thing for the Democrats, right – the reason they're able to be like, "Oh, look at these one million people at the capital, I don't care." It's because they know that they are shielded from accountability because of how the maps are drawn. Because the maps have been drawn intentionally to carve out people who would likely vote against them because that elected official does not represent their interests and does not actually advocate for the things that they need. So, when we're talking about the voting rights fight, I mean, we can talk about all of these provisions all day and I certainly can. But I really do think it does start with the redistricting fight because I think you're absolutely right. It is about power. And when I think of power, I think of accountability. And when I think of accountability, I think redistricting. Because the way that these lines are drawn, I mean, this is a national problem, really shields these people from being accountable to the people that they should be accountable to.

Alesandra Lozano:

So I actually, when I talk to social workers, whether it's in a university setting or at conferences or on a podcast, whatever, I always ask social workers, I beg them, "Please pay attention to the redistricting process." Because number one, redistricting does not only impact electoral wins and losses. It doesn't only impact who's actually in power and who is not actually in power. It also impacts actual financial resources that certain services and agencies get, which drastically impact a lot of our client populations. And really put a lot of our most vulnerable neighbors at risk if that redistricting process is misallocated. Because it definitely dictates a lot of monetary funding in certain programs and areas of local jurisdiction. So, it all trickles down like a bunch of stuff. Everything trickles down really for redistricting. It's so incredibly important. And so, yeah, I mean, I really think that the power game doesn't only start with being able to register to vote. It really does start with the redistricting process, which we only get to do once every decade.

Shimon Cohen:

That was like a masterclass right there. That's how I feel. I feel like I just learned so much and I hope people listening are feeling that way and getting some ideas of how to get involved or how to build on the ways they're already involved. Continuing on this idea of building power, so you've got the work you're doing mobilizing individuals, because that's a big part of it. And then there's also, you already said, there's like this larger coalition that you're part of. So I want to break both of those apart too, so we can talk about each one. Maybe we can talk with the mobilizing individuals first, which I assume involves a lot of one-to-one conversations. Can you talk about that? I mean, you've probably done that and then maybe now you're in a role where you're helping others who do that?

Alesandra Lozano:

Yeah, that's right. It's actually funny because I mentioned earlier that I was organizing with the Texas Freedom Network for several years here in Houston, but I was also doing some, actually I was also doing some organizing work for them up in North Texas in Denton and in Dallas also. And that work was absolutely, I mean, I was working primarily with college students and that was very, very much one-on-ones, one-on-ones, one-on-ones. Just consistent one-on-ones, hundreds and hundreds of one-on-ones, to, and really get these students fired up about, not only voting, but also just other policy areas affecting

their lives. The most effective thing I found when I was working with college students, because I would always get this from mostly older folks. "Oh, college students are apathetic. They don't care about politics. They don't care about voting. How do you get through to them? How do you even do that?"

Alesandra Lozano:

And what I would do is that in my one-on-ones, or in very intimate student meeting settings, I would ask each of them, "What is the thing that keeps you up at night, in terms of life worries? If you're thinking 5, 10, 15 years down the line, what is the thing that keeps you up at night?" And I would hear, "Medical debt, student loan debt, parents and retirement," things like that. And I would say, "Okay, all of those things literally depend on the people in power and you literally have the power to dictate who the people in power are, that is going to determine all of those things that you're worried about." So when I framed it from a policy perspective, not just you should vote because we want this person to be in congressional district seven. That's not getting to the heart of what they care about.

Alesandra Lozano:

And so yeah, doing that organizing work, it was very much one-on-one, very emergent strategy. I just read Emergent Strategy by Adrienne Maree Brown, which I recommend to everybody. It's an incredible book on organizing. And it really was that one-on-one, most oftentimes not a flashy interaction, but causing just that little ripple of getting a young person to realize their own power, just in a one-on-one meeting. And eventually if you build that out enough in different regions of the state, now Texas Freedom Network is able to mobilize hundreds of students at a time, whenever we do big lobby and advocacy days like we're doing on Monday. And now I'm in a little bit of a different chair working at the Texas Civil Rights Project with the Texas Freedom Network is one of our closest partners, where TCRP is really providing the policy analysis of all of these bills at the legislature, but also of actual election code and election law.

Alesandra Lozano:

Because that stuff is not in English. You crack open the election code and it's just like, "Oh my God, what is this?" And you do need some lawyerly help sometimes to really break it down in real people language. So I like to think of TCRP as the policy hub for the broader movement, and also as the bridge connector of folks working both on the ground, as well as grasstops. Coming into the work where I came from, and by that I mean, I started as the person getting arrested and going to jail at a protest. And now I'm working at an organization with a bunch of lawyers and I describe my org as the policy hub. It's very different and I feel like I've done all of those levels. I went to jail and then I was doing hardcore organizing, but not going to jail. And then I went into electoral work and now I'm at this very nerdy, cool policy organization.

Alesandra Lozano:

And I think what I'm getting at here is that we need all of those things. The movements for social justice need all of those things. So I hate when people really drag on folks who get arrested at protests saying, "That's not effective. Why are they doing that?" We need all the tactics at this point, because there are so many things that are under attack, like the entire state of our democracy, and so many other things. Diversified tactics are needed, of course in a targeted and strategic way. But, we need everybody that we can get and tactics on the external facing front, like protesting, and then what I would consider a middle ground of hardcore organizing one-on-one interactions, very emergent strategy focused. And

then the more broader, higher level policy analysis space. All of those things are needed if we're going to win.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah, totally, 100%. So you were talking, I mean, I want to come back to this part because you're talking to college students, but let's shift into the conversations of when you're in some neighborhoods, or the folks at TCRP are going out or these other organizations you're working with and they're talking with folks. Are they using that same type of conversation? I mean, that's a pretty brilliant question to ask, is what keeps you up at night and then link it back to policy and power. Is that the approach or is there a different approach?

Alesandra Lozano:

So, I mean, I definitely don't want to speak for the approach and strategy that other orgs are taking. But I think that framework is fair, the one I just talked about that folks are taking. I mean, I think that the overall movement, particularly in Texas, has gotten better at actually putting a lot of our materials and our work into languages other than English and Spanish, which I actually think have made a big difference. In Harris County it's made a big difference, certainly. Even all of our voting materials from the Harris County elections administrators office is in, I mean, a lot of different languages. I think that's been an added approach. And I mean, I haven't worked in TFN in a minute, but, there's also a coalition here called Houston In Action, which is essentially a collective of a bunch of different organizations working at the local level here in Harris County, primarily with communities of color and immigrant communities.

Alesandra Lozano:

And it is very much that one-on-one time and really asking, making the intentional ask, like "Hey, what do you care about?" Because chances are what you care about is something that we're working on and do you want to get involved? But I have always maintained that approach when I have met resistance around voting as a concept or as an actual action. I'm like, "Hey, what keeps you up at night? Because it's connected to voting probably."

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah. I mean, there's so many issues you said, just from those conversations with the students. And then you think about folks who are going to talk about their kids and what the future holds. And I want to get into the coalition building part too. So, we talked about working with people one-on-one. You're part of this Texas For All coalition, right? Is that what it's called, Texas For All?

Alesandra Lozano:

Yes. That's right.

Shimon Cohen:

And so can you talk about how do you build a coalition? What's that look like and how does that then build power?

Alesandra Lozano:

Wow, what a question, yes. So, I'll preface with I mean, that's one of the coalitions that we're in. I'm in so many coalitions. I'm in way too many Slack workspaces, let me tell everybody way too many, so many

coalitions. Everyone has five Slacks for every coalition. The Texas for All coalition though, is indeed pretty special. And that's because normally when you think coalitions, you think of them in subject areas, right? You think a voting rights coalition, you think a criminal justice coalition, you think environmental justice coalition. And the Texas for All coalition is a compilation of basically every progressive organization in the state of Texas, at least the major ones, working on almost every policy issue under the sun in the state. So we have a lot of abortion rights groups, reproductive rights, and justice groups, criminal justice, environmental justice, housing, labor, voting rights, immigrants rights. And I'm sure there's even more that I'm missing.

Alesandra Lozano:

But it's basically 35 organizations working across all of those different policy areas. And we were all working in our own spaces, doing our own thing, as we always do during the regular legislative session. And then something really shifted in that I think everybody had a telepathy moment where we realized that the state leadership was going to be particularly horrible during this legislative session. So, we had all started talking to each other a little bit before the regular session had started, and then the Texas freeze happened in February. And if folks don't remember, what we called the Texas freeze, is basically literally when Texas froze over and we got snow in Texas, which is not usual in many parts of this state. But with that, I mean that would have been fine. People live in places with snow and ice and they're fine.

Alesandra Lozano:

But the thing about Texas is that number one, we do not have insulated homes. So our homes are not built to withstand that climate. That is just not the climate that we are used to here. And number two, we are not on the national energy grid. So we have, because you know Texas, Texas loves to be individual or whatever. And we have this separate electric grid that is run by the state and that was completely neglected by the state for years and years and years. So then when this freeze happened, the energy grid just collapsed basically. And we were told that we would get rolling blackouts for 15 minutes, maybe a few hours, but then everything would be fine. But, a lot of people ended up losing power for days and days and days in the middle of a freeze with no insulated homes. So no heat and no insulated home.

Shimon Cohen:

Deadly, it's deadly.

Alesandra Lozano:

People died from hypothermia in their homes and the state government did nothing. Literally how... People who are normally inclined to maybe vote for the Republican party, I was hearing a lot of people say, "My state leaders literally left me to freeze in my own home." And so when the Texas freeze happened, it was like all of these different groups in the Texas for All coalition, realized that we had a common narrative and a common Texas value set that we could work off of for unified messaging and to really create a formal unified structure, a coalition structure to push back against the state leadership priorities at the legislature. And really that value that we really work off of is that we've been through so much environmental trauma here in Texas and what Texans believe, at the end of the day, I mean truly, is that we help each other.

Alesandra Lozano:

So, during Hurricane Harvey, people were not asking how you voted in the last election. People were kayaking you to safety. During the Texas freeze, it was the same thing. And in both instances, because after Hurricane Harvey, the governor did not call a special legislative session to help Texans after Hurricane Harvey. And now he has called a special session to literally go after trans children being able to play soccer at school and making sure that people who do not have capital and money stay in jail, because they're trying to abolish personal bonds. Restricting abortion for the one millionth time. They've already banned abortion at six weeks twice during the regular session. I don't know what else they have left to do. And then also diluting the right to vote.

Alesandra Lozano:

And so the Texas for All coalition realized this, like we all realized after that freeze, like, "Oh my God. No matter what issue area we're working on, the common thread here is that the governor and state leadership could be working on all of these different things and instead they're going for our issue areas that are, I mean, what I guess would be considered in some cases if you're talking about abortion, controversial social issues, when we can't even keep the electricity on. So that was the unified message that we were all able to really rally around. Please don't worry about trans children playing baseball or softball or soccer. Can you please make sure I have electricity, which is the entire basic function of government.

Alesandra Lozano:

And so that's what happened. So then this coalition came together and now we are collaborating all together on this massive advocacy lobby day on Monday. But the other thing I want to just mention about this coalition is that we had a million meetings really trying to figure out how you navigate everybody's different legislative priorities, because obviously TCRP's priorities are very different than an environmental justice group, right, or then a reproductive rights group. And what we also all discovered was that because of the complete onslaught of legislation attacking the right to vote in Texas, everybody also realized and agreed that everybody's individual issue areas were literally going to depend on defending the right to vote in Texas.

Alesandra Lozano:

So that has now become the core issue that we are organizing around for all of our issue areas. I mean, that's included TCRP's own criminal justice work. So it's an incredible coalition. 35 organizations working all over the state on a ton different policy areas, unified around the common Texas value of we help our neighbors. That defending the right to vote is necessary for all of our survival. And that state leadership should be keeping electricity on, instead of wasting taxpayer money on all of this nonsense.

Shimon Cohen:

Right, blaming the Green New Deal that doesn't even exist.

Alesandra Lozano:

Yeah. Oh, I loved how they blamed the entire electric grid collapse on renewables. I was like, "Oh honey, that's not what happened."

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah. They blamed it on AOC and she has nothing to do with Texas. I mean it was like–

Alesandra Lozano:

Her power, it extends all the way to Texas, you know?

Shimon Cohen:

That was wild. But it also shows how horrific it is, because that's what they're focusing on while their own constituents are dying, like literally dying,

Alesandra Lozano:

And I will also say, and this goes back to the power building and coalition building question that you have. I hope I answered your question. But, the reason that I think this coalition from all these different, vastly different areas of work were able to come together so quickly, is because all of us organizers and advocates here in Texas, we all have really strong trust. I have such trust in all of these people, working at all of these different organizations and that did not happen overnight. That has been relationships that have been built over many, many years, over many, many campaigns, over many, many squabbles. Because, I mean you really are, it becomes a family because we are literally fighting, not only for the people that we care about to survive, but to thrive. And so all of this has really been built on mutual trust between, not only the leadership at our various organizations, but also down to the organizers, probably more so even at the organizer level.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah. I feel like you answered it in that you went beyond with that. I think the trust thing is so important and hard. It can be really hard because we've, especially with... The larger it gets, the harder it can be. There can be like lots of maneuvering and different issues become prioritized versus, you know how that can go.

Alesandra Lozano:

I also would like to social work shout out if I could, right? Because we actually, we have so many social workers working in the advocacy space here in Texas and Stephanie Gómez, who is a social worker, is the Associate Director over at Common Cause Texas who is a partner of ours. And then Maria Renee Morales is at Jolt Texas, also a social worker working in this coalition space. And Amanda Williams, also a social worker working at the Lilith Fund, an abortion fund here in Texas. So we have a bunch of social workers up in this mix as well. So shout out to all the advocacy social workers in Texas. We're tired, we're all tired, but we're still going.

Shimon Cohen:

We're going to be getting towards the end, but there's a couple more things I definitely want to cover. And I know that there could be so much more. I mean, even all the specifics of the issues you, your organization works on. So one thing is how can people connect with what you're doing and learn more? And of course I'll link anything in the show notes and on the podcast website.

Alesandra Lozano:

Yeah. So, I mean, I would say social media, right? Everyone's going to talk about social media. It's so funny. I'm the director of communications, but I have this loathing for social media, which is I hope I don't get fired for saying that. But I mean, we're definitely incredibly active on our Twitter @TXCivilRights. That is actually where we do the most rapid response and live updates around things happening in the state, as it relates to issues that we work on. But, that's also the platform where I think it's easiest to see action alerts that everyday people can take.

Alesandra Lozano:

And also updates about very high hovering legal stuff happening in the state, I think that we put into layperson language. And that's really been, that's one of the unique things about TCRP is that we're able to put all of that legalese, because we do work inside of the courtroom and outside of the courtroom. And we're able to put that into layperson language so that hopefully anybody can understand it. So certainly, Twitter is you're going to find all of our stuff. And then of course signing up for our email list. And if you're ever at the capital, you can definitely catch us at the capital in person. We basically pay rent there now at this point.

Shimon Cohen:

Another thing is for people who do want to get involved – in Texas, they can go to you – but let's say people outside of Texas and they want to get involved, or even I mean, I guess they need to look for those organizations that are doing similar work where they are, right?

Alesandra Lozano:

Yeah. I would say I think that if folks ask a friend, I mean, I think a friend is hopefully at least going to know somebody who knows somebody, who knows of an organization that they trust. I've definitely found that a lot of folks will roll into this space by accident because they're like, "Oh yeah, my cousin's friend gets this organization's emails and I heard about this meeting, and I came to this meeting." And also I mean, social media is handy, right? I think perusing even Instagram hashtags, you can probably find a movement space that is accessible to people.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah, that's a really good point. That's a really good point. And what would you say to social work students who might be listening, who want to do this, but feel like their programs are maybe clinically focused and they hadn't really ... they went to the local program and for a number of different reasons, and they didn't really do all that research or it really wasn't a choice. Because it was like they're going to go to the local public college or university and it's not really going to focus as much on advocacy. What can they do?

Alesandra Lozano:

Yeah. So, I get this question a lot as well. I would re-up my recommendation that social work students, even if you are in a very clinically focused program, you can still show up at city council meetings. You can still show up at county commissioner court meetings. You can still testify on stuff. The other thing that I've run into quite a bit from clinical students is that they have either heard this rumor, which is not true, that it is somehow illegal for social work practitioners certainly, or social work students, to ask clients that they work with if they are registered to vote and to provide that information or actively supply a voter registration application to their client. It is not illegal. That's absolutely not true. There's

somehow this myth got started that it's illegal and totally against our Code of Ethics and we're not allowed to do that. That's absolutely not true. In fact, it's quite the opposite. I think it's within our Code of Ethics, that we are actually morally obligated to try and get our clientele registered to vote.

Alesandra Lozano:

And actually there's a section of the National Voter Registration Act that requires certain agencies that provide specific programs and don't write this in stone everybody, but it's things like WIC. If there's an agency that is engaged in WIC programming, based on that section of the National Voter Registration Act, you're actually legally required to ask your clients if they would like to register to vote. It's actually the opposite of what a lot of people think. I've also heard from some clinical students that even though they know it's permitted to do that, that their clinical supervisors have said that it's unprofessional, which I know it kind of–

Shimon Cohen:

My head just exploded. My head just totally, like I–

Alesandra Lozano:

I would get calls. I would literally get calls from students telling me that, even long after I had graduated, because they're like, "Ali, what do I do?" And it was like, "Oh man." And that is, I mean, that's for those students I mean, and some of these students were out of state. And I was like, "Well, I'm not there. I don't know how helpful I can be." But that's a one-on-one conversation and that's maybe a conversation with a field instructor at your program because that's horrible to say that it's unprofessional to ask a client if they would like to register to vote. And I mean, you can also provide folks with nonpartisan voter education materials. The League of Women Voters is a phenomenal organization for easy to print, easily accessible, nonpartisan voter information and candidate information.

Alesandra Lozano:

So that's one of the ways that I always say that social workers can get into this mix is both through the voter registration process of asking clients if they would like to register to vote, providing nonpartisan information, showing up to testify at the local and state level, wherever they are. And also at the national level, sometimes departments or agencies will open up portals for "public comment." I'm doing quotations with my fingers, "public comment" on specific policy, things that they're looking into or that they want to do. And something that Dr. Suzanne Pritzker, my social work mentor, always encouraged students to do, social workers both while they were students and also once they exited our program and were actual social work practitioners, was to submit public comments via those portals at the national level too.

Alesandra Lozano:

So, always really just trying to make our perspectives as social work practitioners heard. Which again, I think is something that is really missing in a lot of these policy conversations. And we bring such unique, not only unique knowledge, but unique perspective because a lot of us are working with some of the most vulnerable populations every single day. We are really seeing what people actually need. So, those are some things to start. And no, it is not illegal and it is not unprofessional to ask someone to register to vote if you are in a clinical space.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah, I'm so glad you brought all of that up and the part in particular, that part and also this whole idea with, and I'm not going to get totally into it because I've actually had a lot of podcast episodes breaking down how professionalism is a tool of the status quo and white supremacy and gets weaponized against people. And that was saying that advocacy is unprofessional. The new Code of Ethics says that we must–

Alesandra Lozano:

That we must, yeah.

Shimon Cohen:

Work against, take action against oppression. I'm not quoting it exactly, but the must part is in there.

Alesandra Lozano:

That's right.

Shimon Cohen:

And doing something against oppression is in there. And so, that's actually now not ethical to tell... For a supervisor to say that is actually unethical.

Alesandra Lozano:

Now it's literally against the rules.

Shimon Cohen:

Right, and then I wanted to just mention, I don't know if you've seen this, but something I would use when I would teach about policy advocacy is there's like I found it online a free PDF. And I don't know a lot about this organization, maybe you do. But the Center For Lobbying and the Public Interest had this Make a Difference for Your Cause guide and it completely broke down what nonprofits can do and can't do, in terms of advocacy. So, I think that's another thing that's really important is we need to know exactly what we can do and what we can't do, and not just rely on word of mouth.

Alesandra Lozano:

That's right.

Shimon Cohen:

Because as you said, some incorrect and actually harmful information can get passed on that way.

Alesandra Lozano:

That's right, yeah.

Shimon Cohen:

I've got two more questions for you. So, what do you love about what you do?

Alesandra Lozano:

Oh, my gosh. Do you know what? You are giving me such a lesson in gratitude right now, because just today I was so stressed out with the special session that I was like, forget it, I can't do this anymore. You're giving me time to pause and have a lesson in gratitude. I mean, I love working with the people that I work with and I don't just mean at TCRP. I mean, all of the advocates that I work with across all of these organizations. And that's because I really, I get a lot of spiritual fulfillment from my work, to be honest. I'm a recovering Catholic, but those Catholic roots still run really deep. And when I think about my Catholicism, I mean the roots of Catholicism really are social justice.

Alesandra Lozano:

And so I really get a lot of spiritual just centering and fulfillment from the work that I do. But, it's also there are very few things as strong that make me pause with gratitude as much as being in the State Capitol for hour 18, with a group of people fighting as hard as me to make other people's lives better. There's a sense of connection there and a camaraderie there that is just unparalleled and I love that about this work. I love the human connection aspect of the work. And actually, I'll give a quick anecdote because it's just so cute. During the regular session, I was so preoccupied with all of my Zooms and all of the strategy meetings and et cetera, et cetera, that my fiddle fig plant died and I was very upset. I was very, very upset about this plant dying, even though it's a very temperamental plant, but I was so sad and upset. And the Policy Director at the ACLU of Texas drove to my home and dropped off a new fiddle fig for me.

Alesandra Lozano:

And that's also what I mean about this extremely strong trust bond that you develop with coalition partners, right? It's just like drove to my home and dropped off a new fiddle fig because she knew I was so upset about my fiddle fig dying. So that really is, on my feelings level, that's my favorite part. On the policy level though – look everybody likes to win. I love a good win every now and then. I am a Leo. I am a fire sign, I'm competitive. We love a good policy win every now and then. 100% that feels very, very good as well. And I also love, from the TCRP side, my other favorite thing is that I get to marry within my work, both litigation and advocacy. It's super fun for me. That's three favorite things, but those are my favorite things.

Shimon Cohen:

I love it. And the story about the plant and that I mean because it's–

Alesandra Lozano:

I was so upset.

Shimon Cohen:

That's the fuel also. You need that. You need that fuel when you're doing this work to have someone come and do something like that, especially someone who's that busy too, I mean.

Alesandra Lozano:

I know. When I tell you I cried, I mean, I was already crying over my dead plant and then I just wept, just wept. I was like, "Oh my God."

Shimon Cohen:

And then the last question I have for you is, and I mean you've definitely discussed this. But what is the biggest challenge of this work for you?

Alesandra Lozano:

Self-care and balance for sure. Oh man, that's a whole, that's another episode.

Shimon Cohen:

And taking care of your plants.

Alesandra Lozano:

I'm sure you've already had it already. Taking care of plants, yeah.

Shimon Cohen:

Taking care of your plants.

Alesandra Lozano:

Yeah. I mean my girlfriend right now has a rule for me that at 6:00 PM, by 6:00 PM if nothing is on fire, I got to put it down, because I'm really bad at not putting it down. I will go all night, every night. I'm very, I have a very high threshold for work and hours. And yeah, really the balance, the balance. And also, I just mentioned one of my favorite things is the human connection and the incredible trust and bonds that I have with so many of our coalition partners.

Alesandra Lozano:

But, it's important to get outside of the work sometimes. So, I do my best to do activities and see people who are not necessarily trying to have brunch and talk about the election code only throughout brunch. Because that happens to me too a lot. But, that's absolutely the biggest challenge is the self care and balance. Because, I think folks in this work, we feel... God, I mean, especially in Texas. You feel a certain sense of responsibility. You're just like, "I got to do it. I got to do it." The weight of democracy is on our coalition's shoulders. And so definitely I would say the self care and the balance is absolutely the biggest challenge.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah, yeah. I'm glad you, I mean, I'm glad you said that even though I'm not glad you said that at the same time. But burnout is real and you're needed for the long haul. And so, our bodies can have a way of telling us things if we're not taking care of ourselves and it can come unexpectedly. So, it's really important. It's really important.

Alesandra Lozano:

Yeah. And I actually, I really did have a legit burnout in 2010. And so I've also become much better at being very aware of when my body's check engine light is on.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah, yeah. Ali, thank you so much for coming on the podcast, for sharing your experience, for sharing your knowledge, your expertise. I got a lot out of this. I know others are going to, and I just really want to thank you for doing the work in the community.

Alesandra Lozano:

Thank you. This was so fun.

Shimon Cohen:

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