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What works? Black, queer and black queer organizing

By Carla Christopher-Wald

Editor's note: The following is art of a series by LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and beyond) members of Put People First, in response to the mass-killing of queer and trans people at Latin night at the Pulse Nightclub in Orlando, Florida, on June 12, 2016, as well as other acts and systems of violence that affect and target LGBTQ+ people.

I'm a mixed girl. I'm a mixed girl activist. I'm a Black, Queer, cisgender woman, alternately-abled, older-than-magazine-pretty but young-enough-to-not-be-able-to-give-up-yet powerhouse of grassroots activism. And I walk predominantly in two worlds. Race-based activism, people of color activism, is (appropriately) becoming more and more poor-and-marginalized-people activism. We talk about the preschool-to-prison pipeline, we talk about institutionalized racism and divide-and-conquer politics being deliberately sown into communities of color as a deliberate disempowerment tactic. We talk about the evils of a militarized police department and how, no matter what kind of education Terrell or Daequon has, he won't get the same callbacks on his resume as John or Thomas. Then there is queer activism. Marriage equality and gender-free bathrooms and non-discrimination in public services, housing, and employment. I rarely get to be all of me in either space...because those worlds, even in liberal activist spaces, rarely mix.

In people of color activist spaces I see the incorporation of the church and community centers. I see the incorporation of poor people, of the homeless, of the disabled. I

see strengths. I also see apathy, debilitating rage, lack of education as a priority and a frustrated lack of new ideas. Mournful preaching to the choir about how "We been fightin' this same fight since slavery, reconstruction, Jim Crow, Martin Luther King and crack. When we gonna see some real change?" In LGBTQIA+ spaces I see powerful use of the media, targeted lobbying of legislators, mad fundraising skills, the development of specific objectives and the cooperation of cultivated allies and previously fractured communities – hence the ever extending alphabet of movement letters. I also see elitism, a lack of inclusivity, and largely short term, single issue vision.

Both movements have sophisticated incorporation of arts and culture in the movement. Both groups have made bold strides and won dramatic victories, legally and spiritually. Both groups are also making stumbling and exploratory attempts at accepting one another into their spaces. Black activists are tripping over "G...L...B...TQR something?" LGBTQIA+ organizers are calling every number in their cell phone to get a person of color on the panel at the conference. "Do you know anyone Native American? We definitely need a Native American." The question both groups could and should be asking – what works? Who has had a recent victory that can share their strategy? How did you successfully change portrayal of members of your group in the media? How do you continue the work after budget cuts take all your staff away? The answers are there, hidden in the history of resistance of SOMEONE.

To unearth those answers, to incorporate that knowledge into our work, we have to start by remembering that each other's activism exists. Indeed, there is a proud, if often rarely highlighted "insert footnote here" history of intersectional organizers like queer feminist of color artist-activist, Audre Lorde, Martin Luther King's personal

secretary and advisor, Bayard Rustin, and HIV+ anti-apartheid activist, Simon Nkoli. Too often though, these world-changers felt marginalized at best, and rejected at worst, by the communities they served. As Audre Lorde wrote, "It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences."

Black people. My beautiful Black people. Queer activism has had more legislative victories in this generation than you have had in 100 years. Yes, the playing field is different for the mostly white movement but it's a powerful record, even with white privilege factored in. How can you possibly not be studying everything they have done? LGBTQIA+ people. My fabulous, delightful LGBTQIA+ people. People have been organizing for Black liberation than any of you have been alive. How can you not be examining their movement history to understand its continued engagement and longevity? And white straight folks. Welcome to the conversation. If you are having meetings, conferences, classes, or discussions without explicitly, specifically and thoroughly delving into Black AND Queer organizing, you are failing to serve yourselves. What works? Working together.



original art by Quinha MF

Put People First Goes to Brazil

Put People First members Roger Swartz and Eboni Taggart went to Brazil in June, along with Erica Williams of the Poor People's Campaign. While in Brazil, they connected with local organizers in Bahia, met with (now former) President Dilma Rousseff and showed support for the democratic process in Brasilia, and attended a youth conference in Marica, in the state of Rio. In Roger's words, "Brazil is not only rich in culture but in natural resources, it's the world's fifth largest economy and has the third largest oil reserve in the world. The leaders of Brazil have their eyes on the future, a future that leaves most of its 220 million people out." Read short reflections from Roger and Eboni below, and check out their full accounts of their trip at PutPeopleFirstPA.org/blog



Roger and Eboni with the delegation at Rocinha in Rio

Reflections from Roger Swartz

We started our journey in the city of Salvador, in the state of Bahia which has the largest population of people of African descent outside of Nigeria. Salvador was the original capital of Brazil and its African ancestry is very apparent. We met with the Bahia branch of the MST (the landless workers movement) whose work in that state helps to establish agricultural settlements in rural areas.

In the blink of an eye, we went to the capital of the country – Brasilia, the landscape is arid with red clay like dirt and sprawling. During our meeting with President Dilma Rousseff, Danny Glover, and Dr. Elaine Glover, Rousseff spoke about the political climate in both Brazil and the U.S. and how they intersect.

Back to the coast, in a beautiful small town called Marica on the Atlantic Ocean in the state of Rio, we joined the youth

in struggle conference which was apart of the Utopia festival. The overall Utopia festival was designed to bring together the poor and dispossessed from all over the globe to meet and discuss what a future would look like without poverty, racism, sexism, gender inequality, classism, and all of the other oppressions that we face.

On our last full day in Brazil we went to Rocinha which is the largest favela or slum in the country, in the city of Rio de Janeiro. Rocinha is not recognized by the city of Rio as a neighborhood and has no political representation. It is home to an unofficial estimate of 200,000 people. Rocinha rests on the side of a mountain and rises to the summit where the poorest people live, located in the south zone of Rio. The residents fight to keep basic utilities. All of the plumbing and electrical wiring

are laid and maintained by the residents, creating an amazing intricate infrastructure. Thousands of overhead wires known as "cats" connect electricity to each property, the ingenuity of their system is incredible. We were fortunate to get to see the view from the top of Rocinha. A breathtaking sight that shows poverty at its highest level, as well as height of wealth – at the base of the mountain near the coast is one of the most affluent areas of the city. So close in space but miles apart economically.

In Brazil I found struggle, but more importantly I found beauty, friendship, spirituality and a true love for humanity.

Reflections from Eboni Taggart

In Salvador, we met with Landless Workers staff and others involved in movement work. Bahia was colored with a pro-black sentiment. I could go into any space and feel like I belonged. In Philadelphia, I often have to prepare myself to overcome people's projections about me, being a poor black single mom, as I navigate in and out of various spaces. I am often permanently injured by these projections, often rooted in white supremacist ideologies and carried out by blacks and whites alike, whether conscious or not. I never get a chance to heal.

I was quickly reminded by Brazilians' attempts at conversation with me, of how much I missed black people back home. This surprised me considering that I'd never had a chance to realize that I had something to miss. Our histories nearly identical our journeys distinct evidenced by language, music, and culture. We have much to learn from each other but this experience definitely sparked a newfound curiosity and appreciation for the nuances and idiosyncrasies that is African American culture. After all, it is mine and I yearn to fall in love.

For four days, we stayed at a small local school where a youth conference was being held. It was hard to follow what was going on and to engage with non-English speaking comrades (90% of attendees). We slept on the floor, ate on the floor and had to use deplorable bathrooms. Despite my physical and material discomfort, I learned that common people from all over the world had similar struggles from educational inequality, unemployment, poverty, street and police violence, etc.

Having an adverse reaction to inequality is as natural as breathing in air, the human spirit is ever striving. This reality seems ever lost on the most powerful among us.

Put People First

PPF Calls for Accountability and Transparency from IBX During DNC

Patients and medical students took action outside the Independence Blue Cross/Blue Shield building during the Democratic National Convention demand accountability for predatory insurance practices in the midst of a healthcare crisis, where everyday people are struggling to afford basic care. Pennsylvania residents shared their healthcare stories, and people directly impacted by IBX negligence and misconduct delivered a letter seeking resolution to their cases. which Put People First! PA is a member) are models for how movements can change what's politically possible by strategically organizing people in their communities who are directly impacted by the healthcare crisis, poverty, racism and other ills.

Healthcare is a moral issue, and one that resonates deeply with people's values across party identification, race, age, and other lines of division. If you ask people to share their healthcare stories, genuinely listen, and

help people connect their own experiences to the experiences of others and to a larger political and economic analysis, people are able to overcome the narratives that push each of us into private suffering, and they get angry. Then if you enable people to work together, support each other in taking on leadership roles, and engender a sense of solidarity and commitment to a common cause, you can channel that anger into powerful political action. This is long, hard work, but this is how movements grow.

Make no mistake: this is not just a fight about healthcare. It's a fight that's connected with workers' struggles, because healthcare is a fundamental right that should never depend on where we work, whether we're full-time or part-time, or who signs our employment contract. It's connected to our struggles for our rights to education, safe air and water, transportation, and participatory budgeting, because our public budgets are how we, as a society, collectively meet our shared

needs. It's connected to the liberation of people of color, immigrants, women and transgender people, because inequitable access to healthcare is mutually reinforced by racial and gender inequities across every other sector of society. From these connections, opportunity grows: all social justice movements can include universal, publicly financed healthcare within their visions and their strategies. By building deep strategic partnerships with other movements, healthcare organizers can turn the tide.



Put People First! PA member, Tammy Murphy, was directly impacted by IBX's predatory policies and poor customer service. Tammy was left with thousands of dollars of debt, mistakenly assigned to her when IBX opened multiple accounts under her name. "The stress on our family is really extreme. We have lived in fear without adequate coverage for our family, under constant threat of collection agencies."

Farrah Samuels has experienced similar predatory insurance practices from IBX when trying to get coverage for critical cancer treatments.

Senior Life, Not Senior Strife: Action in Johnstown



On Saturday, 6/18, the family of Marie Funk as well as community members and extended family from Put People First! PA gathered to pay her tribute and call attention to the negligence in her care perpetrated at the end of her life by Senior LIFE, a local healthcare provider for low-income seniors. Senior LIFE repeatedly denied and/or delayed Marie's

care, despite being paid by both Medicaid and Medicare to treat her. Marie Funk's daughter, Danelle Morrow, lead the vigil and spoke out about the mistreatment Marie and her family received at the hands of Senior LIFE. Members of PPF-PA, from Pittsburgh, York, and Philadelphia, joined Marie's family and other local residents.

2016 Summer of Action

PPF Wins Insurance Department Hearing on ACA Premium Hikes

Dozens from across Pennsylvania travel hundreds of miles to attend the first ever public informational hearing on proposed rate increases for individual health plans held on Wednesday, July 27 at the Keystone Building in Harrisburg. The Pennsylvania Insurance Department (PID) held the first ever public hearing on individual and small group healthcare plans. The hearing was prompted by the calls, letters, petition signatures stories, and tenacity of hundreds



PPF members turned out to support those testifying

of everyday people and organizations across the state who over the course of 8 months demanded a public forum to air concerns about skyrocketing premiums, deductibles and co-pays.

In the morning, the PID and the assembled residents heard from insurance companies across the state, all of which requested double-digit rate increases. The increased costs would impact nearly 500,000 people in PA who purchase insurance through the marketplace. Commissioner Teresa Miller and her team asked some pointed questions such as why Highmark hasn't used a \$3.7 billion surplus to offset rate increases for customers. Companies justified their requests by citing high prescription drug costs, market uncertainties and unexpectedly large numbers of sick people.

In the afternoon, for three hours community members delivered over 25 heart wrenching personal testimonies detailing the challenges they face trying to get care under the current healthcare system. Stories of physical and mental healthcare struggles exacerbated by the stress of premiums that cost more than rent, a complete lack of access to dental care, and forgoing medications and therapies due to costs, among others.

Put People First! PA thanks the PID for its commitment to greater public participation in the rate review process and will continue to assert that healthcare is a human right, Pennsylvanians cannot afford rising premiums and they demand that the insurance department reject premium increases and put people first.

“I heard a lot about forces that were made to seem like they’re natural forces, like they’re not within human control. ‘There’s market uncertainties,’ ‘costs are rising’ - almost like tides or hurricanes. ... I heard a lot of language that was making it seem as though what’s going on in the health care system is like an act of God. But these are really acts of human beings. So everything that we’re dealing with in our healthcare system, from how drug prices are set to how insurance companies set rates, are all things that human beings are doing. And as such, we have the opportunity to, as human beings, share what are the impacts of those decisions that human beings are making about health care and our health care system.”

- Nijmie Dzurinko, Philadelphia

Thanks to everyone who partnered with PPF Oct. 2015–Sept. 2016

Our members and staff!!

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PA Coalition on Oral Health

Pennsylvania Head Start Association

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Women's Medical Fund

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Reproductive Health Specialists

New Voices for Reproductive Justice

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Philly Queer Brunch

Social Impact Studios

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Ben Day and Healthcare Now

The University of the Poor

Nathaniel Gadsden's Writers Workshop in Harrisburg

Heidelberg UCC in York

Kingsessing Recreation Center in Southwest Philadelphia

Kingsessing branch of the Philadelphia Public Library

Glenna Livingston at Cambria County Community Action Partnership

Healthcare 4 All PA

Bread and Roses Community Fund

Resist Foundation

DentaQuest Foundation

A Firsthand Account From Inside SCI Fayette

By Nicholas Morrissey

I was incarcerated at SCI Fayette for eight years. I arrived at Fayette in early spring 2008 and at first, everything seemed fine. After a couple of months of being there, I started noticing giant dump trucks going up a large hill directly across from the jail. Sometimes I could see dust flying off of the trucks. Little did I know that it was toxic fly ash coming off the trucks. A little after that, I started noticing a fine dust on the weights in the yard in the morning. My friends and I didn't know what it was, but we knew it was coming from the hill across from the jail. Most of the time, we would just brush the dust off and work out.

In 2013, I started noticing a lot of people in the jail were getting sick with all kinds of sicknesses. People were diagnosed with different kinds of cancers, tumors, lung problems, and thyroid disease. In the spring of 2013, I started experiencing some odd symptoms myself. I started having problems with my balance, blurry vision, my legs weren't working right, and I lost about 40 pounds in a 60-day period. This went on for weeks until things got worse.

My symptoms intensified and I started having extreme fatigue, non-stop muscle spasms, severe dizziness, trouble walking, hair loss, confusion, memory loss, severe shaking, and trouble walking. One day, I woke up and I couldn't move my legs and I could barely see. I was taken to the infirmary and met with the doctor and after him looking at me with confusion, he said that I probably was suffering from anxiety. I couldn't believe my ears – it was very easy to see that something was really wrong with me. I asked him how could this be anxiety? My legs weren't working. He then told me everybody reacts differently to stress. I didn't get any medical treatment and was sent back to my cell. I knew I wasn't suffering from anxiety and things just got worse.

After weeks of going to medical and begging the staff to help me, finally I met with a woman who took mercy on me and ran a panel of blood tests on me. A few days later, I was called back to medical, and the same woman who took mercy on me told me that my thyroid levels were extremely bad and I need

to start treatment ASAP. I finally met with the same doctor that told me I was suffering from anxiety and he told me I had Graves disease, an autoimmune disorder that affects the thyroid. I remember him saying he had never seen thyroid levels so bad and he was surprised that I could move. So I reminded him a few weeks earlier I couldn't walk and he told me I had anxiety. After that, I started treatment and after a few months of treatment, my thyroid levels went back to normal, but nothing changed. My symptoms got worse. Around this time is when everything started coming out about the jail being built across from the toxic fly ash dump and that's why everyone was getting sick. At this point, there were hundreds of inmates getting sick along with staff and guards.

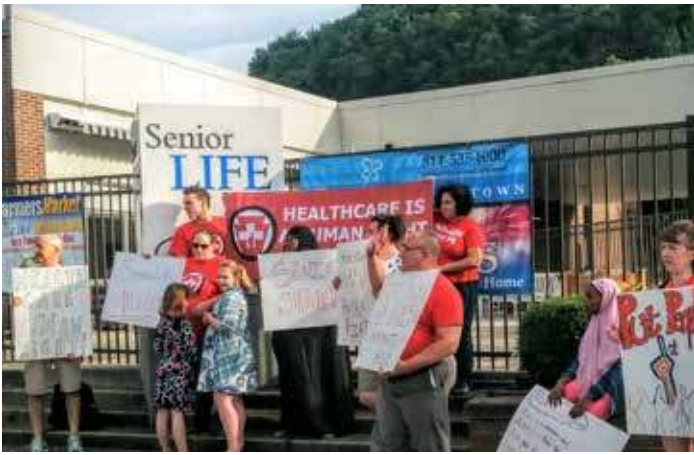
Enough was enough and I started having small meetings in the gym with other sick inmates. Some of the people I met with were diagnosed with cancer and other serious diseases. The medical department didn't want to help us. They just wanted it all to go away. My symptoms continued for years and the

medical department didn't help. I'll never forget when my mother came to see me and as soon as she saw me, she burst into tears because I looked so sick.

A few months ago, I was transferred to a different facility, but most of my symptoms continue. I'm afraid it's never gonna go away. The inmates in SCI Fayette need help. They are being forced to live in a toxic environment and it's killing them. It makes me angry when I think about it I will never stop fighting to get Fayette closed. I will never stop fighting for the sick inmates there. The medical treatment is terrible and the administration refuse to even acknowledge there is a problem. I now the toxic environment made me sick. Something has to happen there before it is too late for everybody. It has to stop now.

Interested in getting involved with the Fayette Health Justice Campaign to stop more people from having experiences like Nick's?

Contact the Southwest PA organizer Ben Fiorillo at ben@putpeoplefirstpa.org



Danelle Morrow, family, and other PPF members gathered outside Senior LIFE to honor Marie Funk and demand accountability.

“Healthcare is a right, it shouldn’t be a privilege.”

- SHANE, YORK

“Healthcare is like air and water – we don’t consume it, we need it,”

- Kim Altland, York

How We Love Each Other

By Danelle Morrow

The philosophy of love goes back as far as time. Love is never-ending, and stronger than the flow of a river roaring down the mountain rushing toward the ocean.

There are many types of love, and though everybody perceives it differently, the philosophy remains the same. The term eros (Greek erasthai) is used to refer to that part of love constituting a passionate, intense desire for something; often thought to be referred to as a sexual desire, bringing the common day term “erotic.”

On the other hand, the Greek word philia expresses a fondness and appreciation for one another, either because the friendship is useful, or because the character and values of another are pleasing. Objectively it can be seen as those who share our dispositions, who hold no grudges, who are likeminded, who are temperate and just, or who admire us as we admire them.

Still though, my personal favorite philosophical view is called Agape, it refers to the paternal love of God for man and of man for God, but is extended to include a brotherly love for all humanity. Agape draws from elements from both eros and philia in that it seeks a perfect kind of love that is at once a fondness and a passion without the necessity of reciprocity.

The concept is expanded on in the Judaic-Christian tradition of loving God: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deuteronomy 6:5) and loving “thy neighbour as thyself” (Leviticus 19:18). The love of God requires absolute devotion that is reminiscent of Plato’s love of Beauty, which involves an erotic passion, awe, and desire that transcends earthly cares and obstacles.

You may ask yourself, How does this tie into Put People First? I will gladly explain. Right now we are focused on universal healthcare, but once that is accomplished, we will be moving on to bigger and better things. We fight back against oppression and poverty through grassroots organizing, and those grassroots we created began with love for one another, without regard for color, religion, social status, or disability.

In Put People First, I have come to know some amazing people, and we are invested in each other’s well-being. Members and field organizers of Put People First have the ability to love, not just those who they know or who are familiar, but to love all people as human beings. I am proud to be apart of this organization and proud to watch the growth take place as we begin to build our way to a new revolution for the people, by the people.



Danelle releases a paper lantern at the vigil in Johnstown, PA on June 18.

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