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Jeanine: So, my name is Jeanine Santacruz Hernandez. today's May 19, 2021 (mumbling).

But whatever they'll get it and I'm interviewing Paloma Aguirre, umm through zoom for the UCSD Race and Oral History project.

For the purpose of this project, do you agree to grant the university permission to archive and publish this interview for educational purposes?

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Paloma Aguirre (She/Her/Ella): Yes.

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Jeanine: Okay, so let's start off with me asking you how you are doing today, this morning?

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Paloma: I'm doing okay. (giggles) I've been better.

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Jeanine: Yeah (smiles).

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Paloma Aguirre (She/Her/Ella): Yeah, I'm doing great.

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Jeanine: that's understandable.

(Paloma proceeds to giggle).

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Jeanine: Could you give us a brief introduction as to who you are?

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Paloma Aguirre (She/Her/Ella): Sure, um so I'm Paloma Aguirre, I am currently... um I wear two hats two major hats I wear many others, but my primary hats are--

My day job is a Senior Program Officer for the environment at the International Community Foundation, where, I oversee a portfolio of about \$15 million dollars that we, --You know, help manage for variety of different donors that are interested in conservation; environmental conservation, either in Mexico and Latin America. And you know I moonlight as a City Council Member for the city of Imperial Beach, which is a city, primarily Hispanic. You know, working class, community of color of about 27,000 residents. -- Um I'm also the first Latina to be elected to office in this City.

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Jeanine: Very cool (mumbling).

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Paloma Aguirre (She/Her/Ella): that's it in a nutshell.

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Jeanine: I mean that's good, that's good to know. I didn't even know, um, quite frankly that I didn't know that you existed -- in City Council here in Imperial Beach. So, I mean like to see that, you know that you're representing in some way your community. Which, you know, when I looked at the city council for Imperial Beach, it's largely white men.

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Paloma Aguirre (She/Her/Ella): Yeah! it's been white men for a very, very long time, despite the fact that we're 50% Hispanic, over 50% Hispanic and we're a border town. So, that was a huge motivator for me to run for office, I-I thought I was well qualified and that I could give a different voice to our community. And it's not been easy. No, because whenever you challenge powers that be right or...

That have had it for a long time it's a very difficult thing to process in many different-- and it shows in very different ways and sometimes very vile ways, but... I don't mind. I'll keep doing it [this work as a City Council member], as long as I can, and as long as my community wants me to because that's why I'm here for to fight for my community.

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Jeanine: Right, So a different approach.

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Paloma: yeah, [laughs].

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Jeanine: So, could you tell me about your community, where you live and grew up in?

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Paloma Aguirre (She/Her/Ella): Well, I didn't grow up here, um which is very you know um...

I guess it's a different type of --of life story for many who are from here and have lived here their whole life. So, I was born in San Francisco to Mexican immigrant parents who waited tables for a living, they originally were from Jalisco and Nayarit, um...

When I was about eight, they decided to move us back to be raised with our family. I guess, here we call it extended family but for us it's just family, right? Your uncles', cousins, abuelitos, abuelitas.

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Paloma Aguirre (She/Her/Ella): So, I moved back to Mexico pretty much lived there till I was in my early 20s, I kept wanting to come back to college. Because I could... I am a citizen, and my parents didn't really want me to [leave]. I had an opportunity to move to San Diego because I had a couple of [friends], I'm a surfer and I wanted to compete in surfing here, so they were competing here, they were going to Community College here so they're like "why don't you just come in move in with us?"

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Paloma Aguirre (She/Her/Ella): So, I took a one-way flight to Tijuana, which I had never been to, and I had like \$500 to my name and not the blessing of my parents whatsoever and I moved here.

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Jeanine: [laughs]

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Paloma Aguirre (She/Her/Ella): [laughs] And it was kind of a culture shock!

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Paloma Aguirre (She/Her/Ella): Both in Tijuana and in San Diego but... You know they took me to surf in Imperial Beach, and I just fell in love with the waves. And, so, anyway long story short, I... You know I got a job, I applied to college, I got in.

You know I had to work two jobs, and you know still go to school full time. So it was challenging but, I didn't want to give up because you know-- I knew I could make it, so I graduated college in 2005 with an undergrad from USD (University of San Diego).

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Paloma Aguirre (She/Her/Ella): And I became very involved with the Community in Imperial Beach as far as like... You know I started volunteering with a nonprofit that worked to reduce cross border pollution. That's how I became a conservationist, it was because of my surfing experience and surfing and polluted water and trying to understand why the water is polluted and...

Through that organization, I became a volunteer and then eventually got a full-time position there and started fighting for a clean environment here in Imperial Beach, since then basically and that's when-

Later much later, 10 years later I I thought I needed to go back [to school] --because I got an undergrad in psychology which was not related at all, I thought that's what I wanted to do.

Jeanine: [laughs]

Yeah, but I realized what I really love, [Jeanine laughs] yeah, I know it's always like that right?

I realized; I spent all my time doing environmental conservation that's where I was really passionate about, so I just decided to go back to Grad School getting my master's in Marine Conservation.

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Paloma Aguirre (She/Her/Ella): And, then that led me to apply to a fellowship; So, I got selected for a fellowship to go work in Congress in DC, so I did that, for a year.

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Paloma Aguirre (She/Her/Ella): And that's when I understood I-- how I fully (!) understood how everything works with government. I'm like "Well, I can do it?" So, I came back [to San Diego] and ran for office to fight for my community from a different standpoint I guess you can say, right? Instead of an activist or an advocate, as an elected official.

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Paloma Aguirre (She/Her/Ella): And yeah--Then people believed in me enough to put me where I'm at, and here we are that's the short version of my story with IB [Imperial Beach].

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Jeanine: Yeah, uh, I know that's good; I mean the way you-- like came to you know, know your positionality and then also like understanding like your passion kind of coincided with what's kind of going on in the world, you know? Like in this case it's pollution, you know when it came to surfing.

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Jeanine: I think it's like something very crucial that needs to be addressed you know? Especially, you know you, you mentioned Imperial Beach which is like largely Hispanic/Latino. So, you know those communities are largely affected. So, like nothing was being done before you know I guess [unclear] you got into City Council. But like I guess that's what motivated you to, you know, do something about it in a sense.

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Paloma Aguirre (She/Her/Ella): Yeah, yeah and, as you know, I mean...

South Bay has been-- For many decades, I would say severely um-- Underrepresented, ignored, disenfranchised, --You know they're communities of concern where we always get the short end of the stick, if you will, right as far as air pollution, water pollution, environmental degradation. We have the least amount of green spaces per person in the entire county. The least amount of resources and the bottom line is because we haven't had, in my opinion, appropriate representation.

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Paloma Aguirre (She/Her/Ella): From the from the local level, all the way you know, to the county level and things are changing now we're seeing a very, very contrasting makeup of our government representation. You know, like at the county we just elected the first Latina to office, Lorena Vargas, who's done more for us in the first hundred days of her administration —than--

The predecessors, right? So, and same with me, I remember as an activist, I would you know, bring the media and try to highlight how bad the water quality, was here. Kids were getting sick, severely sick!

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Paloma Aguirre (She/Her/Ella): And you know -- had back then, you know 10-15 years ago a Council where they did not want you talking about it, because it could devalue, you know-- I don't know, real estate in our city. So, it's been it's been um, it's been a-- it's been a long running fight to get where we are now and there's a lot still to be done. But that's exciting, because now, I feel like we have the proper representation, who, and not just myself, you know I'm thinking about regionally; you look at National City Council, look at Chula Vista City Council , San Diego City Council, the Board of Directors at the county like, --

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Paloma Aguirre (She/Her/Ella): You know, really not just addressing these environmental challenges, but, social justice, racial justice, economic justice, immigration justice. So, it's really, it's really exciting.

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Jeanine: yeah, um, something that like -- You know, kind of segwaying a bit, but something that interested me about like your background and your work is that um, you have this framework of like social justice work, where, you know, through your positionality, being a woman of color you know, and then you know your hobby being surfing, you know I mean in the immediate you know, for me, because I'm from Logan Heights, --

Like the nearest beach, or I should say, Bay? For me is literally where the Navy ships are at. Basically, and like that water is nasty! You just know you shouldn't go in there, like you know? We don't have access to beaches.

I mean it's the nearest thing that we have, or like highways and stuff, but I think that's like very it's very telling how you know, race and geography are like-- intertwined in our cities, you know.

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Paloma Aguirre (She/Her/Ella): Yeah, the red lining is real, you know and-- You know, real estate evaluation & speculation, all of that is related to how the freeways were built and communities were segregated and, and you know investments in industrial like- industry, you know, like Navy industry or, or, maritime industry, you know.

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Paloma Aguirre (She/Her/Ella): it's been historically that way where you know "Oh well, these communities of color you know won't express their concerns or may not have the appropriate representation to fight for them?" right and so yeah you don't have access to pristine beautiful beaches and Barrio logan, right? but you do have access to all the air pollution being emitted by all the cargo ships coming in, right? So, again, like that's why I feel like it's so important to have appropriate people representing and advocating and fighting for you right? Like at MTS (Metropolitan Transit System of San Diego) I'm a board member at Metropolitan Transit System.

And um, a bunch of us have been asking that the zero mission buses, that we need to roll out to meet our state, um, mandate to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. We're even you know pushing to have those rolled out in the communities of concern that for that decades haven't had priority, -- prioritization, right? instead of rolling them out in La Jolla or something, right? So, you know um and that's great, it's great to have colleagues that are all like on the same page and fighting for that; just as a quick example you know.

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Jeanine: mm hmm.

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So, as a question, could you describe to me more about how you see yourself, you know your positionality, your identity, in relation to the community? You know, that you're now serving in?

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Paloma Aguirre (She/Her/Ella): Yeah, well I think um you know, as far as the makeup, you know of the people that I represent, I think I'm pretty spot on, right? like IB (Imperial Beach) is a surfer town, I'm a surfer. Like I mentioned earlier, you know, I'm primarily Hispanic. Like -- I'm Latina, you know, binational, bicultural background, I mean -- that's more than half of our folks here in Imperial Beach.

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Paloma Aguirre (She/Her/Ella): I think that you know, since we're also a workforce Community like I know what that is so my lived experiences reflect that as well right? like I know what it is to go work at the mall for eight hours. Get a 2 to 10 shift, get off at 10pm, have to go walk to the trolley station on H street. Take the trolley, wait for the bus at midnight and have to come home on the 11th street and Imperial Beach at midnight, or one, right? And come home at one in the morning and still hit the books, because you had a classroom exam the next day while you're going to college, right? So, my experiences isn't that unique it's just--

What is unique, I think again coming back to representation, is that I don't think anybody, on the Council, has had that same experience or what you know can say that they've undergone that hardship, right? Knowing what it is to be completely broke and not have enough money.

To I-- I know I'm trying to I remember in 2008 when the-- with the crisis, you know, like, I remember not even having enough money to go buy \$1 burger at McDonalds you know? Like, and I know what that feels like.

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Paloma Aguirre (She/Her/Ella): You know, for whatever reasons, you know. It doesn't matter the "why" is just I know what that feels like, so I think, for me, bringing that to the table when it comes to making decisions big decisions right, for example, right now.

We-- tonight actually we have Council, we're going to be talking about approving our city's budget and those are all things that I keep in mind anytime we're talking about allocation of resources, and you know what is important and for our residents right? So--

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Paloma Aguirre (She/Her/Ella): Anyway, that's kind of how I see my relationship with the community, I feel like you know-- I'm pretty representative of what the community looks like in [unclear].

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Jeanine: mm hmm Okay, so another question would be like, how does, your like your position in City Council allowed you to like serve-- underserved people in your community? Like, how do you meet them where they're at?

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Paloma Aguirre (She/Her/Ella): Well...I'm constantly meeting them where they're at! You know, especially now with Covid. The systemic inequities have been so clearly revealed.

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Paloma Aguirre (She/Her/Ella): (Jeanine: yeah!) The digital divide, right? Kids that don't have access to wi-fi or seniors who don't understand how to you know... operate a computer, if you will. Getting the resources that we were being able to provide to our residents during Covid; it was incredibly challenging because of that, for example.

Another challenge that--

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Paloma Aguirre (She/Her/Ella): continues to keep me up at night, is the fact that so many were—we—we're 70% renter -occupied city so--

Thousands of people fell behind on their rent because they lost their jobs because of Covid.

(Jeanine: Right) Or they got sick, they had to prioritize family members. you have people owning 10-12 months of back- rent that even with the moratoriums that we were able to pass here in the city, which I actually proposed, and I was very thankful to my colleagues that they-- voted in favor of them.

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Paloma Aguirre (She/Her/Ella): You know, we were able to prevent people from being kicked out on the street, but still there, they still owe a ton of money! So, how are we going to get them the resources, right? So, thankfully, now there's assistance from the County, from the State, from the from the Federal Government to kind of make these folks whole again. Either their landlords or whatever mechanism that is so-- but I'm very proud of the fact that I was able to advocate for a lot of that.

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Paloma Aguirre (She/Her/Ella): And to bring relief, whether it was financial relief or through policies to prevent them being thrown out on the street. And that's just another example, like housing, you know, obviously food relief, has been a huge priority for me. So, I partnered with a number of different organizations and labor unions to bring food relief to Imperial Beach. We've had two major food drives so far-- in Imperial Beach bringing over 80,000 pounds of food, fresh food, meats, canned goods for our residents.

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Paloma Aguirre (She/Her/Ella): So, for me its meeting—meeting them, back to your question meeting-- “Where do I meet them where they're at?” is I'm constantly you know monitoring[laughs] and-- and speaking to members within the Community of where the-- “where are those needs, where are the greatest needs?”.

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Paloma Aguirre (She/Her/Ella): And then using my platform, and my voice, and my network to bring them solutions or resources that are desperately needed.

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Jeanine: Right.

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Paloma Aguirre (She/Her/Ella): That's how I operate. Oh man my personal motivation everyday is, am I doing the most that I can for those who least...

Can voice their concerns you know? The-- the voiceless the disenfranchised, the underrepresented. I represent all but, for me, you know that's the fire that sparks, you know my motivation is--

helping those with greatest need.

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Jeanine: Yeah, um that's great. It's like keeping a finger on the pulse, and like seeing like where there's--

You know-- [seeing] Where problems arise and --Yeah, like-- definitely with this like pandemic it's like really revealed like how ubiquitous--

You know race and class are you know intertwined but also how ingrained they are in affecting you know the most vulnerable.

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Paloma/Jeanine: Yes.

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Jeanine: With that said um-- I guess you know we already mentioned the challenges you're facing and meeting the demands of that community, you know, but how are you like personally handling the pandemic, you know?

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Paloma Aguirre (She/Her/Ella): There we go um; sorry I wasn't unmuted. It's been challenging you know it's--

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Paloma Aguirre (She/Her/Ella): We were talking about this yesterday with, my staff team, you know. Like the first couple of months were terrifying! Really we didn't know...

Like was this going to become a Mad Max situation? Where the-- you know our core systems that keep our country together gonna stay glued? Like the food supplies, like you know...

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Paloma Aguirre (She/Her/Ella): I don't know. Anyway, um as we entered the pandemic like-- You know, we started understand how the virus was transmitted and you know how things continue; the structure of where-- the framework of our country stayed in place...

It turned more into like "Okay, what are we going to do here locally and how and what capacity can we do the work that needs to be done?" So yeah, it was very scary at first, then it became like "Okay, we can survive this we can do this," so we figured it out and we stayed afloat, you know--

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Paloma Aguirre (She/Her/Ella): But, personally for me, working you know for a foundation, our work ramped up! Like we were working overtime! Like whereas I normally would work 40-45 hours a week, I was like [now] working 50-60 hours a week.

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Paloma Aguirre (She/Her/Ella): Constantly on zoom calls, issuing grants, you know? So emotionally, it became pretty tough, you know it was-- was challenging to be working so many hours, plus...The city work, plus the Covid-related efforts that you know you, had this task force; I was in charge of the high-risk population needs. You know, Seniors, [the] homeless, housing, food security. So, I gotta say I am surprised I'm still here and sane! [giggles]

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Paloma Aguirre (She/Her/Ella): You know, in the sense that it was-- it was very stressful but thankfully, I have a pretty strong, family structure-- My husband and my two dogs and we've stayed healthy, my family thankfully has stayed healthy. So, yeah I'm just grateful that, we're coming out of it and we're still whole.

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Paloma Aguirre (She/Her/Ella): We're banged up but, we're still whole. [giggles]

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Jeanine: that's good hear.

[crosstalk]

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Paloma Aguirre (She/Her/Ella): Only that means you know, [both] emotionally or mentally but, you know, who wouldn't? We just went through something horrific, and I think we're still processing that

right? Like over half a million lives-- lives lost. I know people that have passed it's been challenging, but thankfully we've been resilient as a people, and you know we're still here.

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Jeanine: And what were -- like those you know, programs, or like plans that you were you know going through as a city council Member, in order to aid Imperial Beach, you know? Not citizens, but like... just like your people?

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Jeanine and Paloma: The residents!

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Paloma Aguirre (She/Her/Ella): So, like so, I'm sorry I couldn't hear the what-- "what were the plans?"

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Jeanine: Yeah, like any plans that you were working on, you know with regards to like public health but also like social justice?

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Paloma Aguirre (She/Her/Ella): Oh yeah! I mean constantly advocating to get first, like, get more testing and Imperial Beach to get more resources; we're working on getting more information out there. And then eventually when the vaccine started to be rolled out, like advocating for, "Okay, how are we going to reach our community now having gone through the experience "of like-- I was mentioning earlier seniors not being tech savvy and the only requirements being you know, "Oh making your appointment online." Well, how do get through that?" How do we, you know get them to make appointments.

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Paloma Aguirre (She/Her/Ella): So, you know, and also, how do we help spread the word? Like, they're [seniors] not on social media, "So do we need to print you know flyers and go to like mobile parks and homes?" Where you know --making sure that nobody falls through the cracks. So that took a lot of effort right. And I did a lot of partnering with organizations and local leaders, but also we did a lot of online, you know those who are a were able to get online... bringing them resources, you know, like tenants' rights forum, you know, legal aid society, how to deal with--

You know, I don't know landlord harassment, partner with the ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union) to bring up immigrant resources, "How do you access funds or financial relief if you're not a citizen what funds are out there, that you can tap into to help feed your family or keep a roof over your head?"

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Paloma Aguirre (She/Her/Ella): I mean you name it we did it, I think... I mean you name it we did it, I think— haha and that was just you know... I don't know if you know this, but at the city-- in this city of Imperial Beach we're not like full time paid employees. We're volunteer basically. So, we don't have as many resources as like the bigger cities that have a full-time staff, and you know 10-12 people who are able to help them implement their work. You just basically like work 8 hours and try to get everything done on your free time when you're not working on City council [crosstalk].

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Paloma Aguirre (She/Her/Ella): Anyway, so it's a lot about people power and tapping into your--your colleagues and friends and network to help uplift your community. You know, and there was a lot of that. I can't even tell you how many people I reached out to they were like "Yeah yeah, what do you need? Yes, etc," you know? And that's something beautiful, I think that um --That, I want to like just to mention, because--

And I don't know? I don't know if that's just a minority thing? I don't know? I just know that we are a collective-type people we help each other when we can and I think that was very evident during Covid, but yeah.

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Jeanine: Yeah I think that's very interesting That you bring that up because, like--

If you didn't mention that it's like experience that you've had for the past, you know year and a half, with this pandemic of like how you've been-- you mentioned that, like you, don't have like a full time staff and stuff, So like in a way you kind of-- You know, struggling/struggled[unclear] a bit, but you have a network there in order to like reach out to people. And, like see where you know you can assist in any way you can. Like those stories aren't going to get mentioned unless someone brings them up, or like unless like I'm [there to record]--

You know there's other people like me kind of doing this, where you go like "Hey like what was it like you know? What type of assistance or plans were you giving?" You know? Which reminds me a bit of like when-- I'm getting off track of bit but--I read somewhere that like, Hurricane Katrina when it hit you know--When the government wasn't there to assist the people you know, especially you know, the Black population there, it was mostly you know, within the community members who were doing that type of mutual aid work, you know?

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Paloma Aguirre (She/Her/Ella): that's a really good point yeah you know I hadn't even thought about that these kind of like side stories are, kind of lost if they're not witnessed. You know my husband can probably tell you everything I told you, you know and then some, but other than him like, I don't think you know you just go out [unclear]--

So that's a really good point and that's I think an important part of history, right?

it's not published in the news or in the in the newspapers. Or so that's a really good point. And yes, and Hurricane Katrina is I remember when that happened, it was again people power, right? Like it-- government there's a huge fail there let's not, you know, not acknowledge that. I remember 2-3 days like people just watching the news got so desperate that they just drove out there and started bringing water and food relief right, to people way faster than the government actually did or ever did [unclear].

And that would have not been known, had we not had the stories told right? So right, yeah, that's a really good point I'm glad you're doing this [laughs].

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Jeanine: Yeah. I guess that's kind of it for us. We ended really well. We like went full circle. Thank you for this.

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Paloma Aguirre (She/Her/Ella): Yeah no, thank you for this opportunity to share this! You know -- I know I mentioned, I haven't done things like this, but I don't think exactly like this. This is really cool. Yeah, I just I'm thankful that you thought of me and that my community has been able to have a little piece in this big book of history, right? These stories can be told of --struggle, but also have unity in a community like IB [Imperial Beach] that's a lot of times forgotten about. Yeah, it's really cool, yeah.

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Jeanine: With that said I'm going to stop recording.

END