

Jessica Pires-Jancose



April 11, 2022



54:47

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Abortion, Activism, Avow Texas, Boston (Massachusetts), Capitalism, Catholicism, Community, Conservatism, Culture, Culture shock, Dallas (Texas), Diversity and inclusivity, Education, First-generation Americans, Goans, Greek life, Healthcare, Houston (Texas), India, Indian-Americans, Intersectionality, LGBTQ+, Moving, Multi-ethnic, Non-binary, Prejudice, Progressivism, Racism, Reproductive health, Organizers, Othering, St. Louis (Missouri), Southern Methodist University, Trump era

SPEAKERS

Jessica Pires-Jancose, Rimsha Syed



Rimsha Syed 00:00

Hi, this is Rimsha Syed with the Institute for Diversity and Civic Life. The date is April 11, 2022, and I'm here on a Zoom call with Jessica Pires-Jancose for the Voices of Change oral history project. How are you today, Jessica?



Jessica Pires-Jancose 00:17

I'm good, Rimsha. Thank you so much for asking me to be a part of this project.



Rimsha Syed 00:21

Yes. I'm so excited to hear more about you today, as well as your work. And for starters, can you introduce yourself and also tell us where you're joining the call from?



Jessica Pires-Jancose 00:34

Oh yeah, of course. So yeah, my name is Jessica Pires-Jancose. I use they and she pronouns. I'm joining the call today from Dallas, Texas, where I work as an organizer around abortion rights and abortion advocacy. And a little bit about me, I'm a cancer, I love plants, I love queer young adult fantasy, fiction, science education, skincare, and because I'm a cancer, I love having deep and meaningful conversations with strangers, loved ones, and anyone who wants to talk to me.



Rimsha Syed 01:16

Love that, thank you for sharing. Going off of that, can you tell me where you grew up and a little bit about your childhood?



Jessica Pires-Jancose 01:26

Yeah, so I grew up in different places. I was born in Fort Wayne, Indiana, and then my mom and I moved to Louisville, Kentucky, where I lived for a couple of years. And then my mom and I moved to Boston, Massachusetts, and we were there for a couple of years. And then I went to high school in St. Louis, Missouri, and during that time, my dad lived in Indianapolis, Indiana for a while, and so I would visit him. And then when I was in elementary school, he moved to Houston, Texas. So I would go back and forth between my mom's place and Houston for a long time. And then he moved to Fort Worth along with my stepmom and my younger sibling. And then they moved to the Dallas area, which is why I ended up applying for college in Dallas, and what brought me here now. So [I] grew up spread out in different places, between the Midwest and the South.



Rimsha Syed 02:36

Right, so do you have a favorite city or any specific fond memories or attachments to any of the places that you've lived so far?



Jessica Pires-Jancose 02:47

I really loved Boston. I think it was a great place to grow up as an adolescent, when you want a ton of independence. It was my first experience living somewhere where I could be completely independent with my time. I didn't have to rely on my mom to drive me anywhere. Pretty much after school, me and my friends would just ride the subway and go wherever we wanted. And having that degree of independence and ability to learn more about myself and make decisions on my own, I think was a big part of me developing myself as a person, as a pretty independent person. So I really loved Boston. And I also really loved St. Louis, too. I think it has a really different feel from Dallas. Dallas is very new growth, new buildings, new development, whereas St. Louis feels very old. St. Louis had its heyday, I don't know, sometime in the 1900s, back when railroad transportation was the main form of transportation. So I love the older feel of it though. It feels like a small, big city, and each neighborhood has so much history, which is true for Dallas, of course. Dallas has a long history as well, but it's just a different feel. So I really love both Boston and St. Louis, they're probably my two favorite places that I've lived.



Rimsha Syed 04:23

Right, and what were your initial impressions of Texas with the culture, the community, the lifestyle? Was there any sort of culture shock that you experienced when you moved here?



Jessica Pires-Jancose 04:36

I think growing up with my dad when I would visit him, the culture shock felt very intense, because my dad was living in the suburbs, and my dad's family still lives in the suburbs. And I think that experience of living somewhere where the cities are so sprawling that, once you're in one area without a car, it's basically impossible to get anywhere else. That was a huge culture shock for me. And then I think moving to Dallas for college, I was in an area where

transportation was easier, so we didn't necessarily have that same sprawling feeling. I mean, living on a college campus, your community is kind of insular, right, you can get wherever you need to go on campus. I think I was culture shocked by how conservative the campus was, because I'd grown up—well, I had gone to high school in a very progressive area of St. Louis. That being said, over time, I began to realize that, while yes, being at SMU [Southern Methodist University], was a significantly more conservative college campus than I might have experienced if I had gone to, say, Washington University in St. Louis, being in St. Louis wasn't as progressive as I thought when I was in high school. I think a lot of it was performative progressivism or maybe being progressive to a certain extent, like, "I have progressive values, and I'm proud of being a Democrat, but I'm still gonna hoard wealth." Or, "I'm proud of my values, but I still want to keep my community majority White and wealthy." I think it was an initial culture shock of being in Dallas and realizing how conservative my new environment was. But over time, I realized that actually, maybe I hadn't been in as progressive a community as I had originally thought before that.



Rimsha Syed 07:04

Yeah, so hearing about how you've moved around so much throughout your childhood, I'm curious about how your experience within grade school was, or making friends as a very transient person, and all of those challenges that might come with moving a lot?



Jessica Pires-Jancose 07:26

That's a great question. I think that one thing I really appreciated about moving is that I got exposure to so many different people and was able to make friends who kind of reflected my values at many different points in my life. And I think today, that ability to move easily from place to place is still something that I really value. I'm not necessarily seeking a place where I can be for a long time. I love that freedom of movement. And I think I had really different—I would say, there was some culture shock in terms of moving especially from Kentucky to Massachusetts. When I was in elementary school in Louisville, Kentucky, I went to a Catholic school where I think it was me and one or two other students were the only non-White students in the elementary school. So I think there was some racism and experiences of being othered that I experienced when I was there that I didn't necessarily realize in the moment, because I was just a kid.



Jessica Pires-Jancose 08:51

But going from that environment that was very discipline-heavy, where every problem or quote-unquote "problem" or behavioral issue was met with a detention, and so I was frequently disciplined, because I was a pretty anti-authoritarian kid, I would say, which still holds true to me today. Going from that environment to going to a really progressive school in Boston, that gave students a ton of freedom throughout the day, was a huge culture shock. But in that respect, I'm really happy that my mom and I were transient and moved around, because if I had stayed in Kentucky, I wouldn't have known that there was a different way for a school system to operate. And moving to Boston, my school district was so much more diverse and

progressive. So I was able to meet kids and hang out with kids who looked like me, or who came from other cultures and ethnicities, and I got to learn more about other ways of living, which was really amazing. So I'm really grateful that I was able to move around a lot.



Rimsha Syed 10:06

Yeah, thanks for answering that. And going back to what you said earlier, I was wondering if you could elaborate on some of the more conservative things that you experienced at SMU?



Jessica Pires-Jancose 10:21

Oh man, I mean, I think the thing that first struck me when I came to campus was the different life experiences that so many SMU students had had compared to experiences that I had had and thought were normal. It felt like every person I met had been to boarding school, every person I met was already aiming for a certain sorority or fraternity. And as a non-White student on campus, the initial feeling you're hit with is invisibility. People just don't notice that you're there. And I think that was shocking, to feel like I wasn't seen by other students around me, or that I just didn't matter as much. That was tough. But eventually, I joined a multicultural sorority, and so I found my community at SMU a lot more, I would say, between my multicultural sorority and my scholarship group. But even interacting within that community, you can't escape the larger waters that you're swimming in.



Jessica Pires-Jancose 11:58

So I remember certain moments that were really shocking were after Trump was elected my sophomore year, I remember one of the fraternities hung up, a "Make America Great Again" banner the next day. And just really terrible things happened. I remember one person in my sorority wore a Mexico jersey the next day, and they were spit at on campus. We had a multicultural Greek house on campus, and we hung up this banner that said, "We're gonna be all right," and in the middle of the night, someone came by and tore it down and shredded it. So there were experiences like that, too. And I remember actually that same week that Trump was elected, it happened to fall on this rally against sexual assault. And I remember we were having a rally through campus, and we walked by the row of fraternity houses. I remember so many fraternity members came out of the houses and drove by us, and they assumed it was an anti-Trump rally. And so they were honking at us and shouting, "Trump 2020," whatever the next election year was, I forget. And so it was a really hostile environment at times, and other times, you just felt that it was beneath the surface.



Rimsha Syed 13:47

Yeah, thanks for sharing that. This really takes me back to some experiences that I had at UT as well, also a pretty conservative campus, and things happened here and there. But I wanted to ask, do you see yourself living in Dallas long-term, or I know that you mentioned that you really enjoy moving around a lot, so did you have a specific place in mind that you wanted to move to down the line?



Jessica Pires-Jancose 14:20

I feel like I want to live everywhere. I would love to live in New York. I would love to live in New Mexico at some point. Pacific Northwest sounds amazing. I would love to live in Latin America. I think my time in Dallas and in Texas generally has really changed my opinions of Texas. Before moving here full time, I felt like, "Oh, Texas is so sprawling. There's no sense of community." And my time as a student and definitely as a community organizer has taught me that that is not true at all. And especially when we're talking about organizing around progressive issues like abortion access, there is such a tight-knit community of activists and communities who are providing mutual aid to each other in the absence of state support and state intervention. And yeah, this sense of Texan pride and Texan community is so, so strong in the state. And so I think whenever I do move away, it won't be out of this sense—I think a lot of people who are not from Texas are like, "Oh, you just need to move away, because it's so conservative." And my feeling is, no, Texas is more progressive than anyone gives us credit for. And I think when I do move away, it won't be out of a sense of, "I need to leave Texas," it's more out of a sense of, "I would love to experience other parts of the world and other ways of being, but I would also love to come back to Texas at some point." I think definitely a part of my heart lives here.



Rimsha Syed 16:14

Yeah, I think I definitely agree with you. There are so many great organizers and movements here in Texas, and you can always find that community, but they are so under-represented, which, I think part of the reason why we're doing this Voices of Change collection in the first place is to highlight all of the great aspects of Texas that are just not talked about enough.



Jessica Pires-Jancose 16:38

Yes, definitely.



Rimsha Syed 16:40


Yeah. So I also wanted to hear more about your cultural identity. Do you speak any other languages? What sort of traditions did your family have growing up and all of that?



Jessica Pires-Jancose 16:54

So my mom immigrated from India when she was in college. So she came to the US for graduate school, and that's where she met my father. And my dad's family is, in his generation, from Indiana, and I think in his grandparents generation had immigrated here from Poland and the Czech Republic. So growing up, I would say, it was a mix between very White American culture with my dad and stepmom and younger sibling, and then a form of, I would say, immigrant culture with my mom. My mom, I think, when she was growing up in India has described herself to me as a little bit of a black sheep. She has always had very progressive values that put her at odds with a lot of the more traditional cultural expectations of the

communities that she grew up in. She tells me the story of how when she was a teenager, she had this little moped she would ride around her village, and she had a female gender sign that she painted on the back of the spare tire, and she had this bleached rat tail.

 Jessica Pires-Jancose 18:30

So growing up in our household, it was a pretty American upbringing. I would say with some exceptions, like never throwing anything away. We have the cabinet full of empty glass jars. And saving every possible thing to reuse it in a different way, because immigrants are definitely the OG eco-friendly advocates without even getting recognition for that. But I would say even though my mom is from India, I don't know that I necessarily grew up with very strong Indian culture in our household, and I think now as an adult, I'm trying to learn more about Goan culture because my mom's from Goa, and about Indian culture, South Indian culture more generally.



Rimsha Syed 19:34

Right, yeah. Thanks for sharing that. And I also wanted to ask, how many siblings do you have and what is your relationship like with them?



Jessica Pires-Jancose 19:43

With my mom, I'm an only child. And then with my dad and my stepmom, they have a child, who is technically my half sibling. And they're younger than me, they're about eighteen. Or well, now they are exactly eighteen. And we're really close, we have a really great relationship. We always got along really well growing up. And they came out around the same time that I did, and so I think now as they're entering adulthood, being able to connect with them about queerness has been such a wonderful, just heartwarming, soul-filling experience. They also came out as non-binary around the same time, and so I've learned a lot from them, or they've taught me a lot about gender. And they're kind of the reason why I now identify as non-binary as well. So with my mom, I think I very much got raised with the only child culture. My mom and I love to travel together and hang out and we do everything together. And then on my dad's side, I'm really, really close to my younger sibling.



Rimsha Syed 21:12

I really love that. That's amazing.



Jessica Pires-Jancose 21:14

Yeah.



Rimsha Syed 21:15

Okay, so transitioning a little bit, can you tell me about what your spiritual upbringing was like, and if that plays a role in any capacity in your life?



Jessica Pires-Jancose 21:28

So with my mom, I was raised Catholic, going to Catholic school. But I think as we've both gotten older, my mom has reflected that she put me in Catholic school because that was something that was done when she was younger, and she just thought it was the thing to do, but without necessarily interrogating her beliefs about Catholicism before doing so. And then when I moved to Boston, it was the first time that I'd gone to public school and was confronted with this idea of maybe God doesn't exist. And I remember that being a really shocking realization for me as a young person, because I'd always been in environments where it was just assumed that God was a constant presence in our lives. And once my mom and I both had a chance to step away from the Catholic Church, I think we both identified a lot of values within the Catholic church that we disagree with. I love the idea of there being a higher moral code and a higher connection that brings us all together. I don't like the fact that the Catholic Church exists so much to control.



Jessica Pires-Jancose 23:14

I mean, obviously, working in abortion access, it's really hard for me to continue to identify as Catholic, because I think that people twist so many of the Church's teachings to fit their own definitions. And I think a lot of people's definitions include homophobia, include controlling the bodies of other people, and it's just not something that I agree with. And particularly with all of these cases of pedophilia coming out of the Church, the fact that they continue to double down on abortion restrictions and homophobia in some cases, rather than actually interrogating the problems that exist within the church is really reprehensible to me, so I don't see myself ever going back to Catholicism. That being said, I think having a sense of spirituality in my childhood has definitely informed my belief that there is energy within the universe that connects all of us. And I think that definitely informs my work as an organizer and my desire to bring people together and community, because I believe that yeah, we are united by a common energy in the universe. I don't know that for me that necessarily takes the form of a higher power, but I do think that we're certainly all united in a way.



Rimsha Syed 25:04

I think that was very well put.



Jessica Pires-Jancose 25:05

Thank you.



Rimsha Syed 25:09



Yes, of course. So what are some of your hobbies or things that you enjoy doing in your free time?



Jessica Pires-Jancose 25:16

Ooh, what a fun question. I love reading. I really love reading fantasy fiction. I really love to exercise and go on walks. I feel like, as a very anxious person, those kinds of embodiment practices that help me get situated within my body are really, really helpful for me to practice on a daily basis. During the pandemic, I've been trying to cook more. I've been trying to make more Indian food as part of that journey that I was telling you about of trying to learn more about my culture. I like exploring. I love to go to a new place and have a new experience. And yeah, so many different things. I've been consuming a lot of media during the pandemic. So I've been listening to a ton of podcasts, watching a ton of shows. Right now, my life is revolving around this Dungeons and Dragons podcast that I was telling you about last time we spoke. So pretty much all my waking hours are spent when I'm not working or doing something productive, listening to that podcast, and then playing Legend of Zelda.



Rimsha Syed 26:44

That's a great way to pass the time.



Jessica Pires-Jancose 26:46

Yeah, it feels good.



Rimsha Syed 26:49

Yeah. How's cooking Indian food going? That sounds like a lot of fun.



Jessica Pires-Jancose 26:53

It's fun. Sometimes it's a struggle, because I don't really have much to compare it to. I think a lot of folks, when they cook food that sort of aligns with their cultural identities, it's like, "Oh yeah, I know that this tastes right, because this is how my mom or my dad or my grandparents would make it." And because growing up, my mom didn't really make Indian food, I cook, and I have my own idea of what tastes good and what tastes bad, but sometimes there's a feeling of, I think, insecurity around, I don't actually know whether this tastes like it's quote-unquote, "supposed to" taste like. I'm actually going to India this December though, to visit my grandma and my aunt for the first time in many, many years. So I'm really looking forward to cooking with my grandma. She's an amazing cook, and hopefully learning some more from her.



Rimsha Syed 27:59

Oh well, I'm excited for you.



Jessica Pires-Jancose 28:01

Aw thanks.



Rimsha Syed 28:02

When was the last time you were in India?



Jessica Pires-Jancose 28:06

I think I was maybe eight or nine, something like that.



Rimsha Syed 28:11

Do you remember much about it?



Jessica Pires-Jancose 28:15

I have this really distinct memory of looking out my grandma's window and seeing cows next door. And then I know that my grandma's house has a view of the beach from the balcony. But I don't really remember much. I remember visiting a lot of random people's houses who are relatives or family friends and just being introduced to person after person after person. So yeah, but not a lot other than that.



Rimsha Syed 28:54

Yeah, sounds about right.



Jessica Pires-Jancose 28:55

Yeah, exactly. Eating so many sweets and all these random people's houses.



Rimsha Syed 29:02

Yeah. Okay, so I want to transition a little bit into, I guess, the second part of this interview about your work and your advocacy. So broadly speaking, I guess tell me a little bit about how you got involved in the reproductive rights movement and what it means to you personally.



Jessica Pires-Jancose 29:25

I have always had an interest in health and health care and healing work. And I think in college, [I] started to form some really important feminist beliefs as well. And so in college, I did a lot of work around sex education, around menstrual health care, talking about surviving sexual assault as a public health issue. And so when I graduated, I did a fellowship with the SMU Human Rights Program for a year. And then after that, I really wanted to find work in reproductive health care of some kind. And that's when someone sent me an opening with Avow, which is the organization that I work for now doing abortion advocacy work. And so while abortion advocacy wasn't the initial reproductive health issue that I gravitated towards, I am so happy to be here now. I think some of the most progressive organizing work happens in abortion advocacy, and I'm learning so much.



Rimsha Syed 30:45

Right, yeah. So going off of that, what are some of those key lessons that you've learned so far?



Jessica Pires-Jancose 30:51

Oh my god. Every person is the expert in their own lives. No one has the right or even the knowledge to make life decisions for you except for you. And I think abortion is such an interesting and profound topic. Because when we talk about abortion, we're not just talking about abortion. We're talking about control. Who has the right to exercise control over your own body? No one, except for you. But in practice, so many different factors are exercising control over your body, not just the government in terms of abortion restrictions, but capitalism more broadly. Our bodies are controlled in some way or fashion by the fact that we have to work in order to live. In the world we live in today, we have to make money in order to pay bills, in order to have a place to live, have water, have food on the table. Talking about parenting, if you do choose to parent, you have to be able to raise those children in safe and sustainable environments. And under capitalism, that means working. So there's so many forces in the world that are exerting control over our bodies.



Jessica Pires-Jancose 32:21

Talking about abortion is a conversation around gender, class, race, age. Asking these questions of who has access to reproductive health care. Talking about expanding the conversation to include trans, queer, non-binary, and gender non-conforming folks in our conversations around abortion and other forms of reproductive health care. When we talk about abortion access, and pregnancy, and parenting, those conversations don't look the same if you're talking to a community of White people, versus if you're talking to a community of Black people or other folks of color. The state has exercised control over Black people, indigenous people, and other folks of color in so many ways. Whereas for White women, the prerogative for a lot of American history has been encouraging them to have more children and fighting against their access to birth control. For Black communities, indigenous communities, Latin communities, the state has either forcibly enforced birth through enslavement, or later on in American history, forced sterilizations without consent.



Jessica Pires-Jancose 33:48

So I mean, our country is so rich with this terrible history of reproductive control, and all of that comes out when we're talking about abortion access. And when you look at the people who are making laws about abortion, a lot of them are White men who are the same people who, for all of American history, have been making these decisions around who gets the right to be pregnant in the first place, who has the right to make decisions around birth and around parenting. And I mean, even looking at abortion restrictions, even if abortion is fully restricted, White wealthy people will always have access to safe abortion. So really when we pass abortion restrictions, those bans are falling hardest on young people, on Black and Brown people, on low income people. So talking about abortion brings in all of these huge concepts that really are talking about the way that American society functions in general, and forces us to examine capitalism, White supremacy, and just all of our preconceived notions about what our lives should, quote-unquote, "look like."



Rimsha Syed 35:11

Yeah, definitely. And last time we talked, I remember you mentioning this reoccurring guiding principle in your life right now, which is unlearning urgency culture, and I would love to hear a little bit more about that.



Jessica Pires-Jancose 35:29

Yeah, I think the abortion ban that passed last year, SB8, which criminalizes abortion after a fetal heartbeat is detected, which usually comes after six weeks of pregnancy, so before most people even know that they're pregnant. It was an extremely chaotic time within abortion advocacy, because suddenly SB8 passed, and everyone wants an interview. Everyone from all corners of the US is pouring in saying, "How can we help? What can we do? Where can we go? What efforts can we plug into?" And as organizers it felt like everything was on fire, not only dealing with the limitations of the abortion ban, but also all of these asks that are suddenly coming in from different people, all of these different national organizations who want you to host a protest, host a rally. And it was an exhausting time to be an abortion advocate. And that experience helped me realize that everything is always on fire in a way. And the real work of advocacy is staying consistent. Because it's impossible, no one has the bandwidth to respond to that level of emergency status on a regular basis, which, within abortion advocacy, we're having emergencies all the time.



Jessica Pires-Jancose 36:59

And so for a lot of advocates on the ground, having that additional support come in during SB8 was great. It was great for people to be looking at Texas and what's happening here. And at the same time, it was this feeling of frustration of like, "We've been doing this work for years, y'all. We've been asking you to support our work. We've been asking you reporters to report on these stories. We've been asking reporters to report on SB8 before it went into effect." But a lot of people only wanted to report once it was in effect. So it was a chaotic time and a good reminder that responding to urgency culture is a surefire way to burn out. And our work as organizers is to create community. And so I'm now organizing around community care. I'm

organizing around community building and the things that bring us joy in community. Because it's important that I stay sustained in the work too. I need to find joy in the work. And I'm not finding joy by having to organize a rally every time something awful happens. I'm not finding joy in doomsday reporting. I'm finding joy in my community, in the organizers who are doing this work alongside me, in the community members who are trying to show up every day or every week to make sure that we can support people in getting the care that they need. So I'm very much trying to shift my organizing away from urgency culture and towards joy and pleasure and community building.



Rimsha Syed 38:48

Wow, yes. So as someone who might not know much about on-the-ground organizing, can you explain what that process of community building and centering pleasure and enjoyment looks like?



Jessica Pires-Jancose 39:03

Yeah, it definitely has looked different with the pandemic. And we're two or two and a half years into the pandemic, and I just now feel like I'm starting to get my feet under me with organizing, with pandemic organizing. And I think one week that I had recently that's a good example, is I hosted a drawing class with an artist who's been donating a lot of the proceeds of her work to Avow. So I reached out to her and asked if she wanted to give a drawing class with us. And we titled it "Drawing New Worlds: Art for Abortion Access," because tapping into that inherent creativity that we all have, and radical imagination, is the way that we build new worlds, and is the way that we move towards a world that we are envisioning for ourselves. So that week, I hosted a drawing class.



Jessica Pires-Jancose 40:05

And then, at the same time that week, I had been working with the Repro Power Dallas coalition, which is a coalition of Avow, the Texas Equal Access Fund, ACLU of Texas, and Fund Texas Choice. We were working together to collect love letters to abortion providers, because that week was Abortion Provider Appreciation Day. So that week, we were collecting love letters. And that Thursday, on Abortion Provider Appreciation Day, we got together and did an Instagram Live, where we read out some of the love letters that people had written. And then a member from our team designed a zine with all of the letters that we printed and are mailing out to clinics all over Texas, so that clinic staff and abortion providers can see how loved and appreciated they are.



Jessica Pires-Jancose 40:59

And then later that night, I coordinated a catch-up call with the cohort of abortion advocates that I had trained through Avow's advocacy program last year. So it was a really busy week full of events, definitely not every week looks like that. But to me, it was a beautiful week of community building around joy. We communed around drawing, something that is just fun. It's not talking about what is the fallout of this Roe decision going to be this summer, it's not

talking about SB8, it's literally just coming together and doing something that can bring all of us joy, and help us tap into some imagination, which organizing is all about imagination. So hosting that event, and then just being able to read the love letters that people sent to clinic staff and abortion providers. It was a wonderful week. And that's what I would like every week to look like in my organizing work: building community, communing around joy, and just generally celebrating each other.



Rimsha Syed 42:11

Wow, I love that, very wholesome.



Jessica Pires-Jancose 42:15

Very much.



Rimsha Syed 42:17

And much needed, definitely. So what are some of Avows shorter and long-term goals?



Jessica Pires-Jancose 42:28

Avow is working towards a world where every person is trusted, thriving, and free to pursue the life that they want. So our long-term vision is a world where people are able to make the pregnancy and parenting decisions that are right for them. But a world where people are thriving involves so much more than that. We're a reproductive rights organization, but our work is informed very much by the work of Black women who have developed [and sustained] a reproductive justice framework. And so reproductive justice is the practice of advocating for people to be able to choose whether or not they want to be pregnant. And if they do want to be pregnant, to parent the children that they do have and that they will have in safe and sustainable environments. So working towards a world where every person is thriving also means working towards a world where we have paid sick leave, and where we earn living wages, and where we're able to take time off of work, where we have disability accommodations. I mean, it involves so much more than just literal abortion access. And then short-term I mean, we're trying to get more pro-abortion candidates elected into office, more candidates and elected officials who are going to be unapologetic and unwavering in their support of abortion access, because oftentimes, abortion is put on the chopping block. It's like the issue that no one is willing to really firmly stand in support of, because it feels controversial. In reality, the majority of Texans support legal access to abortion. So we need our elected officials to stand proudly in support of that and stand firmly. So I'd say our short term goals are around electing more pro-abortion candidates and elected officials.



Rimsha Syed 44:41

Right. So are there any historical figures or organizers that you personally look up to or have learned from?



Jessica Pires-Jancose 44:54

Two of my biggest role models and guiding stars in my work are adrienne maree brown, who's the author of *Pleasure Activism* and *Emergent Strategy*, just a badass, amazing movement organizer, whose work literally has changed my life. I think about *Pleasure Activism* on a daily basis. And definitely a lot of what I was saying earlier, around wanting to orient my organizing work around pleasure and around community building is a hundred percent adrienne maree brown and her teachings. And another movement leader who I really, really admire is Tricia Hersey who's the founder of The Nap Ministry, which is essentially a movement that teaches that rest is resistance. And both of their teachings around rest as a radical practice and an active practice and organizing as something that should bring us joy have really changed my life and my organizing work.



Rimsha Syed 46:03

Yeah. So one thing I like asking in these interviews is, what do you find healing? Obviously, seeing challenges throughout your day-to-day, or feeling people's pain, what do you do when things get overwhelming?



Jessica Pires-Jancose 46:24

I find time off to be incredibly healing. In my ideal world, I would not be working. I mean, obviously, you have to work to a certain extent to keep yourself alive. Meaning preparing food is work, going grocery shopping is working. But in my ideal world, I would not be working to live. And so when I have time off, whether that's at the end of my work day, on weekends, when I'm able to take a larger break, I find that to be really healing, because burnout in advocacy culture is real. It's really intense. And honestly, I think all of us are really burnt out from life under capitalism. And we don't get enough time to rest. We don't get enough time to step away from it. And I think something that I've learned from The Nap Ministry is that process of grieving the life that we could have had without capitalism, and resting from that is a lifelong process. But I find I feel the most rested when I can just take time off and not have to think about work, not have to think about bills. And I can just zone out and tap into another world through maybe a show or book or a game.



Rimsha Syed 48:01

Yeah, couldn't agree more. So this might have been something you've briefly touched on already, but what are some of the biggest challenges in this work?



Jessica Pires-Jancose 48:11

I mean, there are the obvious challengers like lawmakers and anti-abortion advocates who are staunchly anti-abortion and who introduce legislation like the death penalty for seeking abortion, or bans like SB8. And then there are also the challenges, like quote-unquote,

"progressive" or "Democratic" lawmakers who don't act to protect abortion, and who won't even say the word abortion. That is really the biggest challenge that we have, because obviously, we're not going to move the needle on people who are staunchly anti-abortion extremists. But we can move the needle on people who maybe just need education on how to actually talk about abortion, or on how to actually just use the word abortion. But that is a huge challenge, is Democrats and progressive candidates and elected officials not wanting to be bold in their support of abortion access, because they think it's going to put them at risk of not getting re-elected. When in reality, as I mentioned before, the majority of Texans support access to safe and legal abortion. That is a huge challenge.



Jessica Pires-Jancose 48:26

And even outdated tactics within the reproductive rights organization are a huge challenge. There's definitely a lot of racism within the movement. I mean, the reproductive rights movement as a whole is largely founded by White women, and throughout its history has actively excluded Black and indigenous and other women and organizers of color. That's a challenge within the movement. Organizations who refuse to use gender inclusive language is a challenge. So you'll see a lot of organizations that still cling to very woman-centered language, when in reality, we know that all people need access to abortion and reproductive health care. So that includes trans people, that includes non-binary people. And it's not hard to make a shift to gender neutral language. So when you see reproductive rights and advocacy and health organizations still using women-only-centered language, that is an active choice that they're making, to actively exclude trans and non-binary people from their language. So there are challenges from the outside, but there are plenty of challenges within the inside of the movement, too.



Rimsha Syed 51:02

Thanks for sharing that. And I did want to say thank you for your labor. I have one more question today. It's a bit more open-ended, but seeing as this oral history interview will be archived, and hopefully people will be listening to it several years down the line, maybe people have changed by then, maybe they won't. We can always hope. But do you have any advice or any words of wisdom to share to people, especially as someone who's so entrenched within this movement, and broadly, someone who has experience in community building?



Jessica Pires-Jancose 51:42

Hmm, my biggest piece of advice is set your boundaries. Set and respect your boundaries in the work that you're doing. You don't owe anybody this work. I think, especially if you're doing organizing and movement building work, I cannot stress enough how important it is that you stay fresh and refreshed and healthy in order to do this work. The world does not benefit when you are running yourself ragged, or when you feel like you have nothing else to give. Your health and your well-being are so important, and you can rest in the knowledge that this movement is

sustained by many. No successful movement is one person alone. And so when you take time to rest, trust that other people are continuing this work in your absence while you're resting. No one movement is entirely on your shoulders.

 Jessica Pires-Jancose 52:55

And I just would love to encourage people, one of the biggest lessons I've learned from adrienne maree brown in *Pleasure Activism* is that organizing is science fiction work. We're creating new possibilities for new futures that don't even exist yet. And so as much as possible in your organizing, tap into your imagination, tap into your sense of joy and radical wonder, almost this childlike wonder of the world around you, and imagining what it could look like, and what you hope for it to look like. And just know that, yeah, our work is the work of generations. So you might not see that in your lifetime, but we're doing this work so that our ancestors can enjoy it. And we're doing this work so that the people who came before us can see what we're doing, and the changes that we've made, and hopefully find peace where they are to.



Rimsha Syed 53:53

Yeah, that was beautifully said, thank you so much for your time today, Jessica.



Jessica Pires-Jancose 53:58

Of course. Thank you for asking me to be a part of this.



Rimsha Syed 54:01

Of course. I will go ahead and stop the recording now.



Jessica Pires-Jancose 54:04

Okay.