

Rafael Aguilar

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SPEAKERS

Rafael Aguilar, Rimsha Syed



Rimsha Syed 00:03

Hi, this is Rimsha Syed. I am the program coordinator with the Institute for Diversity and Civic Life. The date is June 16, 2021. I am currently in Austin, Texas on a Zoom call with Rafael for the Voices of Change oral history project. How are you today Rafael?



Rafael Aguilar 00:24

I'm doing well. Thank you for having me Rimsha.



Rimsha Syed 00:27

Yeah, thanks so much for being part of this collection. As I said before we started recording, this is the first voices of change interview that I am doing, so I'm really excited to hear about your involvement with activism today. Could you introduce yourself and tell us where you're joining the call from today?



Rafael Aguilar 00:49

Yes, my name is Rafael Aguilar. I'm based here in Austin, Texas, and I am a school teacher, as well as a community organizer in various community grassroots groups here in the city.



Rimsha Syed 01:01

Lovely. To start, I was wondering if you could tell me a bit about your childhood and family dynamic?



Rafael Aguilar 01:10

Yes, of course. I am actually the son of two immigrants from the central Mexican state of Querétaro, which is located in the mountains close to the Gulf of Mexico. As I've become older, I've learned my family was part of two small villages that did not have access to sewage and electricity that you see in various parts of campesino, rural parts of Mexico, not too dissimilar from what you see in Chiapas. As you know, the EZLN [Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional] sprung up there. But obviously, my parents are not indigenous, but Mestizo.



Rafael Aguilar 01:56

I am the first, the oldest child on both my mother's and father's side, so I've kind of been the child that's had to grow up in the American system, the language, the different cultural norms, and then all the way up to the university system and whatever this adulthood life is. So, [I had] a very different upbringing than my parents. Neither of them are educated past the eighth grade, due to a lot of things that we can go into in this interview. My family was raised very much by my mom. [I] have three other siblings, all of them younger sisters. From the very beginning, my entire household was led and influenced mostly by my mother, although I loved my father very much. It was her influence that has propelled me into the person I've become.



Rimsha Syed 02:55

Thanks for sharing. Can you tell me a little bit more about the process of you relocating to America? I'm not too sure if you're the only one here or if your family also relocated.



Rafael Aguilar 03:10

Yeah, of course. Like I said, my parents immigrated here in the early 90s, or late 80s. Then over the last two or three decades, at this point, most of my family on both sides, including all of my grandparents - who are, thank God, still alive - either live here or are visiting here quite often. That includes all of their [children], except for maybe two of their sons and daughters - and that's like seven or eight on each side. Due to what my parents always called the "economic conditions of Mexico," which involves NAFTA [North

American Free Trade Agreement], among other things, and the scarcity of employment in the central villages, which had no infrastructure at the time, all of my extended family, even friends of family, have moved here and taken jobs in construction or landscaping. Some of them have been quite successful and started their own businesses. But to this day, my mother is a housekeeper and my father is in construction and has done construction all of his life. All of my sisters who are younger than I am are either graduating high school this next year or have finished college and are, thank God, school teachers as well or the latest one, Laura is a registered nurse up in North Texas.



Rafael Aguilar 04:39

But as far as the experience itself, I will say, I won't lie - the experience of having to pick up a language is one thing and all of that - but for someone as a child who loved to read and learn about the world, becoming aware of some of the darker shades of this country, I think is what really set the stage for me eventually participating actively and being vocal about several of the causes that I support.



Rimsha Syed 05:11

Right, so how long exactly have you lived in Texas as of now?



Rafael Aguilar 05:18

Continuously, I think it's been most of my life, really. I was born in Dallas. There was a brief moment where I was in Mexico, in my mother's village, but I would say most of it. I am twenty-nine years old. So I would say, at least since age four, pretty consistently.



Rimsha Syed 05:40

I see. Earlier you mentioned becoming aware of the harsh realities of this country as you were growing up. I was curious if you had an initial experience or first experience that really made you realize that.



Rafael Aguilar 06:04

Yes, I can think of one thing that really sticks out to my memory is - this is an open question I still ask myself today. I grew up in a trailer park home in the suburbs of Dallas in North Texas and went to the local school, which I can find records and look back, most of the school was Title One and had a large population of students of color. I ask myself to

this very day, "Where did everybody end up?" Because due to some circumstance, my parents were able to move to a different city, which looking back, is mostly White, had a large suburban school. But I asked myself, "Where are all of those students?"

R

Rafael Aguilar 07:01

Because it was through school that I first began to notice, first of all, the tracking system, which was alien to me. I can give you an example, when I was maybe eight or nine, I took some English proficiency exam, and it was so - I guess it meant certain brackets of performance. From then on, I never really saw my classmates who I spoke Spanish with, my first language ever again in that school, and then we moved. That was jarring to look back and think about that as a kid of eight or nine years old, like, "Where are all these other students? Did they get the same treatment, the same classroom, the same resources that I did?" I'm a teacher now, close to thirty years old, the answer is probably, definitely not. That's just the beginning of it.

R

Rafael Aguilar 07:51

Later, this manifested in high school. I was a musician. I played clarinet most of my upbringing, through college even, at UT. But even then, I noticed that at the highest levels of competition and music, naively thinking myself, "Oh, it's just a matter of practice and it's a matter of dedication," which is part of it, I also realized there's a very high class dynamic to the fine arts, that you cannot divorce the fine arts from class position in the U.S. Sure enough, statistically, a lot of the students who happen to have the access to these lessons, to these instruments, to these support systems at their school by virtue of their zip code, ended up being the ones who are the top performers. That was probably a big revelation to seventeen-year-old me who really hadn't grappled with class dynamics until at age. Obviously, it hits harder when your social life is based around your extracurriculars at a high school level. It feels like your whole world starts to fall apart. That was probably the strongest reaction I can recall from grade school, apart from the tracking, the discipline, etc.



Rimsha Syed 09:11

Yeah, I hear you. Do you still play the clarinet or any other instruments?

R

Rafael Aguilar 09:18

Yes, I do. Sadly this is not even uncommon. I had a band director who was quite harmful

and made me turn away from music for a few years, but I've come back. And yes, I do still play the clarinet, although, in later life, I've learned to play the percussion, specifically from Brazil, and in other parts of the world at this point. I play in a couple of groups here in town. Both of them are Brazilian. But as I meet people in some of my organizing who are Arab, for example, I'm picking up hand drums and all sorts of dance moves from them. There is life, there is value in music, and I'm happy that that part of my life was not shut down, either by admittedly a racist system, which bans people into into categories through the school system or by certain teachers who just approach student discipline in a pretty harmful way. I'm happy to say at the end of it all that there's hope for everybody who aspires to be a musician.



Rimsha Syed 10:33

Right. Can you tell me a little bit about how you ended up becoming a teacher? Did that decision manifest based on experiences you had in the education system?



Rafael Aguilar 10:49

I would say so. One thing I didn't mention about that seven to eight-year-old experience when I transitioned from bilingual programs to English was part of that came with these standardized tests. At that point, George Bush was still president, and we had No Child Left Behind. We had to take these tests, and I took it at the time, whatever it was called. I remember being greeted in a very strange way in the hallways the day that the test results came in [and] I didn't understand why. Everybody said congratulations. Only then when I came home, and my mother had a new bicycle for me, which knowing our budget must have been extremely expensive and ludicrous to spend that much money on it - I think it was because whatever tests I had to take for all subjects were all perfect scores in the English language.



Rafael Aguilar 11:49

That stuck with me, not because I thought I was great, but because - there's a bunch of reasons for that - my mother being one of them, who promoted reading. I realized, as I got older, went through high school, still thinking about these other students who I never got to see again, some of them were close friends, "Did everybody get this? Why did I end up here?" Knowing myself that most of this was luck - because of teachers who either noticed something in me and then pushed me into whatever program, or because my parents had the means to move - however modest those means may have been - or just meeting the right friend who had a connection to something, and then their parents - like in music, my

piano teacher was the mother of my friend - introduced me to something else which later helped me. That's always been in my head.

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Rafael Aguilar 12:43

When I got to university, doing physics and astronomy, I never really gave up on that question. I was sitting in the research lab with another student. I still remember the exchange to this day, even though I was maybe nineteen or twenty at the time. I just said, "What's the point of all this? What am I doing? Why do we do these programs? I understand the concept, that it has to do with stars, and it has to do with the potential of a planet orbiting this, and all the mathematical routines are kind of over my head at this point. But I have to ask, what's the aim?" And his response was really, "Well, when you do research, you really benefit everybody." But that didn't sit right with me. It still doesn't sit right with me, knowing, again, much later, that not everybody can read all these research papers for a number of reason - be it paywalls, the level, the learning curve that you have to have to be able to read the kind of stuff that people write about this - and the absence of qualified teachers at the high school level, or middle school level working to really bring this stuff down and make it accessible and exciting and new to students.

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Rafael Aguilar 14:05

With that, I went to become an undergrad researcher at the McDonald Observatory in West Texas, actually giving interviews very similar to this one and operating the big telescopes that you see on the famous portraits of the city. But surprisingly, it's not that that stuck with me the most, it was actually being there, and knowing that they have a visitor center, and us, as the young nineteen to twenty-three year olds, we were part of the staff, really volunteers, leading the star parties. People would come from all over the state, really all over the neighboring states, to visit what is to this day, I think, still the darkest place in the continental US, and being responsible for operating much smaller telescopes, not research grade, and just talking to people and being a human with people and asking them what they see, what they think about them, and if they shoot a question at you that you don't know, you can model for them the learning process by asking somebody who does and just having the human connection. That's what set the spark in me that this is way more enjoyable and way more impactful to the community. It gives back to the community for all the things that I don't think I really deserved because of the circumstances I've lived. Surely enough, eventually I decided to add the teaching program to my degrees, I never gave up my degrees. I just kind of added them, and here I am, still doing that to this day.



Rimsha Syed 15:39

Can I ask where you teach?



Rafael Aguilar 15:44

Yes, I teach at a public charter school here. It is not a chain of schools. It's just one independent school with two campuses. One is pre-K through third grade, and the other one is fourth to twelve grade. But as of this coming year, we will just be on one campus. But it's a standalone, tiny public school, which prides itself on civic engagement, at least the mission statement does. - small classroom sizes. I can speak about later, or now if you wish. I think is significant for anybody who's interested in grassroots organizing and really wants to practice what they call critical pedagogy in the field.



Rimsha Syed 16:41

Yeah, I think now it'd be a great time to hear a little bit more about that.



Rafael Aguilar 16:48

Yeah, so the words "critical pedagogy" refer to quite a lot of things, but maybe your listeners are familiar with the very famous Brazilian educator Paulo Freire from the city of Recife in Brazil, who is the author of many books. His most famous book is *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. [There are] other thinkers as well, like Stanley Aronowitz from the United States, Henry Giroux, I believe teaches in Canada, and the famous Bell Hooks. Those are just four names - Peter McLaren and others - who have taken the traditions, you can call them whatever you wish. The critical traditions, from Gramsci, from Marx, but not just European Marxism, also the Black Radical Tradition and other traditions of thought, including continental philosophy really put education discourse and thought into a different lens instead of just saying, "What's the best way to get students to pass the test?" - you think about the material so that they can get the skills to get a job.



Rafael Aguilar 17:58

Instead of seeing education in that sense, clinical pedagogy in a broad sense asks, "What is the actual situation of education?" Given that the society in which it happens - and they write for both, what they call the "global north" or the "imperial core," and in the case of Paulo Freire, really for people who are subject to colonialism or neocolonialism, What are the zones of resistance? How do we enter into dialogue with our students [and] at the

same time educate them on things that they should know like algebra. But also to ask and inquire about the knowledge itself and how it's situated in a social context, right? What are the sources of inequality in the society in which you live, and how can what you do in school lead you to act, or to think, at the very minimum to think into critique, and to resist in such a way to change things for the better? Those are the kinds of questions you're going to find in critical pedagogy.

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Rafael Aguilar 19:17

As a teacher, I'm trying to do that. I'm not a scholar. I'm not a professor. I don't have any of these these high degrees. But I do my fair share of reading and I try very hard. I'll just give you an example from this morning. I teach a summer school astronomy class, and as I can speak about later, I'm very involved in Palestinian solidarity work here in the city of Austin, and I have been for the past several months as things escalate. I don't think your audience would disagree that Islamophobia is a rampant problem in this country, specifically the United States. My role is to teach a certain set of skills to students, including, for example, being aware of the sky and the patterns of the moon. Very straightforward thing, right? Teach the phases of the moon, and how that's connected to solar eclipses, etc. What I chose to do this morning, and my students - there's only a few of them, but they really enjoyed it - is to combine both. What stops me from taking that and then combining it with, "I want to respond to this problem."

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Rafael Aguilar 20:30

Most people don't even know, for example, the calendar system in the Islamic calendar. So that's what we did. I designed a lesson in which we explored the sky, just the sky itself, nothing political about it. Notice the patterns with the simulation, we can skip years, honestly and then just see for yourself how things aligned and why they align and when they do. We derived the concept of a lunar month just from the simulation, and then asked questions [like] when is the next time this will happen? I just asked them, "Okay, well tell me in this new calendar system, can you tell me when the next month is going to happen?" And surprise, this calendar system is not unique to Islam, but it has a name.

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Rafael Aguilar 21:17

Now we can talk about we're in the penultimate month, next month is the last month of this calendar system - there's a pilgrimage, Hajj - and yeah, just an open discourse. We watched a very short video about the history of the Islamic calendar. I've never seen them that engaged to learn about math, yes, on one side, but also, recognizing that the Qur'an has inspired so much mathematics and science development in the history of astronomy.

And here we are 1,422 years later, doing the same thing, and just celebrating it for what it is, even if none of us are Muslim. At the end of the day, I hope that that's one small drop - you can never predict, as a teacher, where this will go - one small drop toward students engaging with Islam and recognizing it as a very vibrant and alive part of our community and just hoping to bring small parts of this to challenge the greater problem, which is ignorance or outright bigotry against Muslims.



Rimsha Syed 22:35

Wow. Yeah, I wanted to say that sounds like a really amazing lesson. I don't remember taking any sort of astronomy classes in grade school, so that sounds really awesome. I was gonna ask, do your students ever form their own social justice groups based on things that you've taught them?



Rafael Aguilar 23:00

Yes, that's a very interesting question. I will say the short answer is yes. In the language of Paolo Freire, who I referenced earlier, I would say less so of me teaching them certainly. I try to avoid this as much as possible, even though there are people who obviously disagree with everything that I have to think, who might claim I try to indoctrinate, but that's not at all critical pedagogy, that's dogmatism. I don't think it has a place anywhere really if you're a genuine teacher. But through this way of questioning, yes. One example is leading up, before this pandemic, there is no surprise that the administration at the time, the former president, had made several foreign policy - not to speak of even domestic policy - decisions, and when the first of 2020 came around, we saw within a day an escalation between Iran and the United States. All over the country people mobilized for these anti-war demonstrations.



Rafael Aguilar 24:10

Several of my students - I teach high school - several of them showed up to multiple events that were happening at the time. Because they understood that their existence as people here in the United States is inseparable from oppressed people, from people suffering under sanctions elsewhere in the world. Another example happened just a few months later. I didn't say anything, but the people that they met at these events - on their own accord, had nothing to do with it. They went and canvassed themselves, political canvassing. I think it was Bernie Sanders. I can't remember who it was, but several other progressive candidates in Texas as well. That was on them. They felt inspired to join meetings from the Sunrise Austin Movement, a climate change activist group here in the

city, and just stayed plugged into the movement as long as we could before the pandemic really shut things down.

R

Rafael Aguilar 25:11

But that didn't stop. I think the influence I had the most was my role in the uprisings of last year. Without going into all the details, I was just very supportive of our medical teams as they protected people who were sadly injured in some of the most horrific ways I think we've ever seen. I was part of that and students came together at my school over the summer, multiple students, even former students, drafted a very cohesive, but very firm letter to our school board administration, which was abolitionist in its tone. Certainly abolitionist, indicating and listing demands such as a demand for no police on our school. We don't have a police officer at our school, but this was a letter demanding that there should be no police officers as we grow to a bigger campus, as I mentioned. Calling for greater accountability, indicting the school for saying this is complicit in the school to prison pipeline, the fact that we don't collect data on dress code citations, for example, is connected to - and this is their words - connected to transphobia, it is connected to misogyny, it disproportionately targets Black women. And if you don't have any data tracking this, how do we know that we're not exacerbating the problem by over-disciplining a population of students that we should be protecting?

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Rafael Aguilar 26:42

There was a line about surveillance. By law [and] statutes of the state of Texas, we have to have software that tracks students' internet activity. That's a statute. However, there was mention in some meetings of possibly expanding that power, granting parents basically full access to their child's internet activity, whether or not they're on campus. Obviously, that seems harmful to LGBTQ students navigating identities and all sorts of parts of themselves, so the letter addressed that. It also addressed a demand for teaching about White supremacy, teaching about anti-Blackness, and supporting our newfound Black Studies Program at the school. Those were the types of things that students were writing, delivered [and] spoken to at a school board meeting, which is an ongoing struggle, you're always going to face resistance. That's probably the most significant project. Now since several have graduated, many of them are listening and paying attention to Palestine for the first time, being aware of the genocidal reality that is living under a colonial settler state in Palestine. After they graduate, they have access to follow me on social media. So, those are some examples.



Rimsha Syed 28:13

Thanks so much for sharing that. You touched on ongoing resistance a little bit earlier, but I was curious about if the educators around you are similarly minded in the way they see their role as an educator, or has there been more tension regarding your activism?



Rafael Aguilar 28:39

That's a great question. It's sometimes a lonely fight. There are certainly a lot of coworkers who are very sympathetic and like-minded. For example, anti-racism is a very shared common value. So is defending - at all costs, really - defending and speaking out in defense of student mental health and social-emotional well being, be it by speaking out against repressive policies, or challenging teachers who refuse to. The pandemic, as you know, was extraordinarily difficult for all students from grade school up to PhD students, extremely awful for students who receive accommodations especially. Speaking out against that, we all share that in common. There's a famous line in Marx that sometimes the educator needs to be educated. I think that's the relationship I have with a lot of my colleagues, the ones that I am close to, that it's often the case that they are learning - through what I'm doing, and what I'm posting, what I'm saying, what I'm citing - themselves at the same time as they try to teach about some of these topics.



Rafael Aguilar 29:58

For example, critical race theory, which is the latest buzzword in the state of Texas and other places like Florida unfortunately, passing what I would consider repressive bills, censoring teachers exactly like me who all we want to do is just name history, honestly and accurately as it has actually played out. Some of my colleagues did not know what that was. So it's through these things that we become better educators. Palestine is another one, right? I mentioned that a couple of times now. But yes, you're always going to face resistance. As it turns out, naming fascism and then stating that you are opposed to fascism - I wouldn't want to draw too much time on it, but because of the way our news media presents things in sound bites, people associate you with Antifa, whatever that means to them. Certainly, I've faced hostile resistance because of that, to the point of people going up to our school board and trying to ultimately castigate me, to get me disciplined, whatever that means.



Rafael Aguilar 31:12

But you will be surprised, so many students show up in my defense, parents write to the principal and back me up. Because I think whatever I've written resonates with them in a

way that is really, at the end of the day, just saying, "Please don't feel alone, because no matter how bad things look, there are always people who want a better world, who think a better world that doesn't have these things in it." So that's happened, obviously with Palestine, and I have to be careful as I record this. People have - despite me being in the Jewish community, people have already tried to accuse me of all sorts of things, of calling for violence against Jewish people, which is nonsense. But it happens, it happens. I think as somebody committed to these principles, I think you can't back down. Part of that is being aware of history, right? There are people who have lived their entire lives, who have been assassinated for just basic beliefs in equality, or liberation. None of that leaves me and I think that's what encourages me to stay as resolute as I happen.



Rimsha Syed 32:38

Yeah, I'm so glad to hear that you have all that support, both from parents and students. I'm sure that plays some sort of role in your motivation to keep doing what you do. So that's great. You mentioned a few times now that you're pretty heavily involved in organizing for the liberation of Palestine, but we haven't actually talked about what your role is in that. From our organizing together, I know that you are a part of PSC [Palestine Solidarity Committee], but I also believe that you've organized with Dallas. Can you share a little bit about what specific groups you're involved with and what you do with them?



Rafael Aguilar 33:21

Yeah, that's a really interesting question. I am formally not part of, for example, Jewish Voice for Peace is one of the groups that I think is really answering the call. As I mentioned, I'm part of the Jewish community here in the city of Austin. I'm involved with with them in San Antonio, even though things have been remote for more than a year due to the pandemic. Sometimes that looks like joining all of their teach-ins, at least the ones I can make, participating in their actions, whether it's a phone zap to a local representative, or, as I'm hoping to do for the second time this weekend, drive down there and be present, support their actual in-person demonstration. That's one aspect. The Dallas team I was invited to earlier this year. I do a lot of visual stuff like flyers that you may have seen floating around the internet. I helped out at the beginning of the protests for Palestine with with that team.



Rafael Aguilar 34:27

I'm connected to the Lawyers Guild, to legal observers in the state of Texas. So when things get rough, I try to make that happen as soon as possible so that people are

protected and that people know their rights. I'm connected to people who do support for political prisoners. As you know, we have for example, a great group in town named Red Aid that supports with that. Then medics, I mentioned earlier I was connected to the groups that really were on the front lines honestly, protecting people from all of the damage done to them by the police. I have a lot of experience in working with them. I try to use that network as much as possible so that in the worst case scenario, people are protected. Thank God, up to this point, things have not been so violent. Yeah, the other side of that really - this is international at this point.

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Rafael Aguilar 35:21

I run my personal accounts, I've kind of just sacrificed it, and it's just become a full time twenty-four hour stream of news out of occupied Palestine, whether it's local news, or Palestinian voices and Palestinian mutual friends that I have on the internet. Consistent flow of information, because, as you know, things have [been] and continue to be censored in the occupied territories. I just checked my archive before this call, and yeah, during the last so-called flags march of Jerusalem, all of the stories I was posting, during the height of that, the repression that we saw, the genocidal chance against Palestinians, they were all deleted by whatever algorithm the Instagram/Facebook machine uses. So it's very real. I have direct messages from people in Gaza, from Ramallah, from Jerusalem, who have consistently asked, like, "We ask that people do this, because when we do it, we then get repressed, or we are jailed. The more people that see this, the easier it is for this narrative to shift. Hopefully, one day we will see a liberated Palestine, but it starts with listening to Palestinians, and every step of the way, being guided by their leadership, those are just some of the ways I've been involved.



Rimsha Syed 36:59

Right. You mentioned doing graphic design, driving to various direct actions, attending virtual teach-ins, amongst a whole list of other things. But I was actually hoping that you could share either what a day in the life of an organizer looks like for you coupled with being an educator, or if you want to share a particularly difficult or challenging or even a particularly amazing day organizing, whatever comes to mind.

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Rafael Aguilar 37:37

Oh sure. I think both of those two things you've mentioned, organizing and teaching, have a lot in common in that every day, it's different. To be a teacher, you have to be kind of a method actor, you have to be able to respond to changes on the spot, to be creative, to

be patient, and to step up really, when you need to, when things start going in the wrong direction, or just a direction you didn't anticipate. I think I bring a lot of that into the spaces that I am welcomed to. I'm trying to be careful not to disclose too much about them, to protect the people involved in them.

R

Rafael Aguilar 38:15

But I can give you a more recent example without giving too much information. This past weekend, I was organizing something totally different. Juneteenth is the holiday that celebrates - in Texas, in the south, but now nationally - the annunciation of the Emancipation Proclamation in the south. June 19. I was planning on organizing that with anti-Zionist Jews and Black Jews and Black organizers. Then all of a sudden we started getting calls. I just finished an agenda, so that's part of it, writing an agenda, making sure people know what the meeting is about, making the announcement, reminding people, following up, coordinating people is part all of this. And using social media and whatever communication system is appropriate. When all of a sudden we hear about an escalation with our ongoing pro-homelessness rights activists in the city. They've been occupying City Hall as a result of a pretty reactionary law, Prop B, that went into place in Austin, at least the vote went into place in May. They needed help. They needed people present to document, to support, to help move things, to be there in case police repression is imminent, to film.

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Rafael Aguilar 39:47

The first meeting, even though I had spent an hour preparing for a meeting about a totally different topic, and being ready to take on responsibilities shifted, and then it became about securing, alerting people about the danger of this. Contacting people that I knew, I mentioned legal representation, placing them on alert. Letting all of my networks know that there's something important, and if they're available, that we need more people and blasting it to the world really, if they're in my social media circle, to come down and support us. Then the next day, sure enough, things did unfortunately go down. It's always thinking on your feet, let me just put it that way. It's always thinking on your feet and thinking of, if you can't do something, if you don't have the capacity to do it, there's somebody that you know that probably can. Even though it might take a second, it's worth reaching out to people and trying to place people into communication.

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Rafael Aguilar 40:51

At the end of the day, after all of that, one of the nice things that happened is people are obviously interested in continuing work for the rights of the homeless. I was able to speak

with somebody, even though my initial meeting was cancelled, to talk with him about how I can support them in their next organizing project. That includes the things I've mentioned, medical assistance, legal representation, etc. In short, it is never the same. Sometimes you're editing a nice graphic that you're going to use to promote and give to businesses like I did today. I went to like ten different businesses and smile and give it to people. Other days you are documenting and filming the police and making sure people can see exactly what's happening, so that your community can show up when they're needed.



Rimsha Syed 41:52

Yeah, I hear you. I wanted to ask, in your opinion, what are some of the biggest challenges to being an organizer?



Rafael Aguilar 42:04

Living in the state of Texas and keeping the details I've shared about my life, I think one of the biggest challenges right now is the state really - I've mentioned this recent bill that aims to really target teachers who speak too loudly about certain things like basic things that should be taught, such as how racism is embedded in the history of this country and its legal systems. Others are this law that went famous in Texas, for the speech pathologist a couple of years ago who refused this law that says if you're a contractor for the state you are not allowed to boycott Israeli products or BDS [Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions], as they call it.



Rafael Aguilar 43:02

What I'm trying to say is, it's difficult to live in a state - and this is due to a bunch of factors, as you know, like redlining and gerrymandering - but it's difficult to live in a state when sometimes you're faced with a lot of defeats. From paid sick days, which happened through a coalition here a couple of years ago that was eventually struck down, or at least postponed enough so that it didn't happen; to this defeat from the right against homelessness, which was previously victory; to the governor using his platform constantly to advocate and support the police and really fear mongering among voters who may not have access or may not have the time or opportunity or who honestly might just be themselves bigoted, not thinking twice for voting in favor of more police and more brutality. It's difficult to face all of those things, consistently, I would say, in Texas.



Rafael Aguilar 44:11

You know about the power grid system. My neighbors and myself have been affected effectively constantly since then. My apartment was not fixed until the beginning of this month - completely fixed, even though the storm was in February. And yet, I'm finding out, "Oh, now the energy grid is cautioning us residents of Texas against using it for AC even though we're facing close to a hundred degrees now." It's difficult to know all that and at the same time, see your representatives, whether it's Lloyd Doggett or Ted Cruz, defend an overseas state committing horrific war crimes and genocide against Palestinian people. Nowhere near Texas, they have time to go over there and do propaganda or whatever it is. Yet my neighbors, they're Black, they're trans, they are immigrants, have to endure all of this. So facing that back to back to back to back in Texas, in the south, is definitely one of the biggest challenges, I would say. At least in my experience.



Rimsha Syed 45:26

I couldn't agree more. You mentioned that you are part of the Jewish community here in Austin. I'm curious if religion or spirituality sort of guide the work that you do, whether that's within teaching, or whether that's within the various organizing spaces you're part of. Does it guide your sense of ethics or social justice in any way?



Rafael Aguilar 45:56

Yeah, I'm happy to answer that. I said earlier, I try to do my reading as best as I can. There are certain thinkers, at least in the Western continental philosophy tradition as they call it, but also the so-called Western Marxist tradition, that I really take a page from. Your audience probably knows about the Frankfurt School, which has a ton of people in it loosely affiliated, but some of the central figures of that group include Theodor Adorno, as well as Walter Benjamin and Max Horkheimer, and others, right. But these three figures all happened to also be not only brilliant thinkers and philosophers, which is what I read from them, but also happened to be themselves Jewish, writing and thinking at a time right before the Shoah, the Holocaust, during and after. Unfortunately, Walter Benjamin took his own life facing imminent capture by the Nazis.



Rafael Aguilar 47:01

So, yes, in a sense, but also no, in the fact that I tend to be very private about Judaism, but I am comfortable saying here that yes, it is definitely there, there's definitely ethics that one can read. What I love about Judaism is it's so massive of an ocean that is much bigger than I am, than my rabbi, than any single person who has ever lived, who

happened to be Jewish. That makes it limitless, really. That makes it so that anybody has an ocean to drink from and can take Judaism and have taken it in very different directions. So my practice, if you will call it that, has a personal dimension to it, obviously. Commemorating certain holidays, commemorating certain rituals. Those are all private things, of course.

R

Rafael Aguilar 48:04

But I'm staring here at my copy of Adorno's collection of writings, it's called *Can One Live after Auschwitz?* So Adorno, massive thinker who has basically influenced everything there is to influence in philosophy. I have always in my head one of the basic first sentences of one of his essays, which is called "Education after Auschwitz." So this is a German-born, German-educated philosopher, an expert in things like Kant and other people, who at the same time witnessed the rise of fascism throughout his childhood. Not unlike a lot of Palestinians, had to kind of be separated, detached entirely from that childhood, and be cast basically an exile for the rest of his life. It's not a surprise that his work and the Frankfurt School - honestly, the entire school - is responding to this question. How did this happen? How could fascism have occurred in this way? Then after the war, reckon with what happened. The first line of this essay is really, I'm paraphrasing, but it's basically saying the basic premise of education today is that Auschwitz should never happen again. This is the guiding principle, that this should never happen again.

R

Rafael Aguilar 49:28

I am not a Zionist, obviously, I fully support Palestinian liberation. However, I sit with this every single day because I often challenge the writings themselves, but it is a philosophical work that grapples with the past. In fact, that's the name of another title of the essays. It's always reckoning with the past. These philosophers who happened to be Jewish, Walter Benjamin is probably a better example, somehow blend together Marxism, historical materialism, Jewish mysticism, Kabbalah, and their own readings of 19th century literature - you'd be surprised - all together at once, to address questions that I think all of us could ask ourselves even today. How can society even today, to this very day, how can it tolerate such injustices? How can it let such suffering in the world, be it the homeless here in Austin or in Palestine, how can it let this happen? How could it have let the the massive unmarked mass graves that were discovered in Canada, in the residential schools, how could we have a society that in one face professes liberty and equality and celebration of the human rights on one side, while uplifting all of these things, and funding things that commit unspeakable atrocities? This is Adorno speaking: to make sense of these things, these atrocities, you can't, you just cannot. This is how he wrote about the Holocaust.



Rafael Aguilar 51:20

It weighs on me like a brick. But at the end of the day, I don't forget that these people happen to also be Jewish, and recognizing and criticizing really often the traditions in which they were raised, and criticizing even reason itself, is one of the premises of one of the books. I know that's not a true answer, but yes. The scriptures themselves, specifically the prophets, Isaiah, resonate with me because if you read him, he doesn't mince words, sometimes. My favorite lines are from the first chapter, the seventeenth verse - again, paraphrasing - which say things like stop doing evil, learn to do good, really basic things, defend the cause of the orphan, the widow, stand up for the oppressed, defend the cause of these people. I think, to me, if you're going to take this tradition seriously, and this goes for any Jewish listeners who are listening today, this is binding. This is so central to the ethics of what Judaism ought to be, that I just cannot square Zionism with this anywhere in a moral compass. If anyone wants to claim one, I just don't see this, whether it's the Frankfurt School, or any other tradition in Judaism. So does that help? I know, that's a lot.



Rimsha Syed 52:55

Yeah, definitely. That was a great answer. I'm really glad that you shared that with me. Transitioning just a little bit, I was wondering, what sort of short term and long term goals that you see when you're organizing with either PSC or Jewish Voice for Peace?



Rafael Aguilar 53:21

Yeah, there's a few, honestly. I think short term it would be to - let me just limit myself to Palestine and to Black liberation, because that's kind of where I've made some commitments to the most recently. I think a short term goal would just be if I could succeed in getting at least honestly, just two, three, even one more person to inquire about history, to inquire about current events, to pay attention to current events, to learn more, if one more person reads, let's say, *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine* by Professor Khalidi, or one more person reads *Black Marxism* by Cedric Robinson or even just looked up something about those books. If one more person asks themselves what is a society of respect, it doesn't matter, even if it's just one more person who is genuinely and honestly committed to asking these questions, really for a lifetime. That's a success, in my view. Just one more person, or just one more person shows up to the next protest. That would have been enough, as we say in the Jewish Passover Seder. That would have been enough.



Rafael Aguilar 54:43

Long term, obviously, the work I do is primarily geared to my students, and trying to set a good example. If I can be replaced - I'm not going to live forever - but if one more person takes up that mantle and continues the work, no matter what the conditions are like, be it tomorrow or several years, if one more person can continue, then I think that's a life well lived.



Rimsha Syed 55:20

Righ. So Raphael, I'm looking at the clock, and I want to be mindful of our time today. I do have one last question for you, and it's a little bit more open-ended, so feel free to take your time if you need to think for a bit. But if it were up to you, how would you hope to create a more inclusive Texas, or in other words, how would you make Texas a better place for everyone? Including Palestinians, including Black people, people of color, the queer and trans community.



Rafael Aguilar 56:08

Yeah, that's definitely the question of the day. If I have to answer honestly, which I think I have to, in my understanding of the world as it currently exists, I don't understand another way to do it except to dismantle everything there is about the current. This is very abstract, but also very real. By dismantling everything about the current order of things, which by its very nature sustains the daily violence I witness, I document, I post about, I see firsthand myself against all of the groups that you just mentioned and more. With an undying love for people, as people, I think comes also the necessity to have a profound personal hatred for even the smallest trace of suffering. That's another line from *Negative Dialectics*, one of Adorno's books. The smallest trace of suffering reveals that there is a myth somewhere and in the United States, in Texas, in Austin, the smallest race of suffering of the people that I talk to on the streets or the Black trans people whose surgeries I try to get funded or my Iraqi friends who are just trying to find somebody to get their home rebuilt, that belies everything about the American project, the Israeli project, the education project that I'm complicit in, am upholding myself. All of that, it shows that there's something more.



Rafael Aguilar 57:58

As Che Guevara put it, or at least Michael Löwy writing about Che Guevara said, people who pay attention to the world and really take this stuff personally, especially with with ant-Blackness in the United States, as we've witnessed in the last year, no amount of conviction will bring justice to those we have lost. No amount of reform will bring justice to

the hundreds of children that were discovered in these mass graves. No amount of negotiations will bring justice to the people who have - as of this morning, I witnessed a doctor get killed in Palestine. It's not enough. Although this is abstract, and maybe unsatisfactory to the listeners, it is by dismantling everything about the current world that sustains violence and ending it that we might actually have the vantage point of seeing a redemptive vision of the future.



Rimsha Syed 59:05

That was powerful. Very well put. Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me today.



Rafael Aguilar 59:14

Of course, thank you so much for having me.



Rimsha Syed 59:16

Yeah, I'm gonna go ahead and stop the recording now.