

Iliana Dominguez Franco

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SPEAKERS

De'Wayne Drummond, Iliana Dominguez Franco, Leon Robinson

 De'Wayne Drummond 00:10
Hey y'all, it's De'Wayne Drummond here.

 Leon Robinson 00:12
And Leon Robinson!

 De'Wayne Drummond 00:13
And thanks for tuning into Iron Sharpens Iron. We're talking about gentrification and displacement, which we know is a huge issue facing community organizers today.

 Leon Robinson 00:25
Same here, I live right across the street from Temple University. So this conversation is right on time for me. Today's guest is Iliana Dominguez-Franco, who is the Director of Sustainable Community Initiatives at APM. A Los Angeles native, she is a salvadorian American who was the first in her family to receive a bachelor's degree. And she's now working on a Master's of education with a focus on policy at Temple University. Iliana believes that knowledge and accessible educational tools are catalysts to sustainable organizing and change. She believes in the power of having access to information and

developing a collective understanding on how systems are working against communities to develop strategies that are simultaneously addressing a history of systematic and justice and prioritizing how communities choose to move forward?

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De'Wayne Drummond 01:23

Weee! I'm glad I didn't have to read today's bio. Iliana, we are recording this December 14. So we have about two weeks left in 2020. Tell us how are you doing right now?

I

Iliana Dominguez Franco 01:42

I'm okay, right now, I'm focusing a lot on the things that I'm looking forward to when things get better. You know, I think about being able to hug my mom again, it's been about a year, and neither of us are happy about that. You know, I think about being able to invite my neighbors over for some food and conversation. I missed that, you know, we used to we got used to yelling at each other from across the porches but closing that distance would be great.

L

Leon Robinson 02:10

Okay. Thanks for joining us again Iliana - I'm gonna pronounce your name correctly. Okay. So why don't you tell start the conversation by telling us your story? How did you get started in community organizing?

I

Iliana Dominguez Franco 02:25

Um, you know, it's, it's personal for me, it's my life experiences, I grew up in a low income, mixed status family in South Central Los Angeles. So life was complicated. It was poverty, you know, was immigration, it was all sorts of things growing up. And, you know, I, I got so used to like hearing how people would talk about the issues that affect us and the things that I've lived through. And I've lived through a lot. So, you know, I would find myself just thinking that, you know, even at the worst outcomes that people would think about, right from poverty and inequity. And these are folks that maybe can only imagine what the consequences of inequities are, for us, would barely still scratch the surface of what actually plays out, you know, and even then they still wouldn't understand why it's so personal for us. Because the reality is that we have a lot of people in fields, you know, that are dedicated to quote, unquote, solving inequality, who have, you know, kind of broken our lives down into like a science, right, these outcomes, these deliverables, something that a method that they can understand that, you know, a lot of the time really relies on academic theory and assumptions. So for years, the voices of people that actually have

been affected have not been given the legitimacy that they should have when, you know, policies are being drafted. And programs are being created. So for me, at the end of it, it's about representation. It's about people. It's about the reality of the circumstances they're living in. Like and, and it's about doing the work, right. Okay.



Leon Robinson 04:16

When you say it was personal, a lot of times, community organizing people from the grassroots level, it is personal its a problem that they may have that they were seeking help on and nobody couldn't answer them. So it gave them the courage to go out there and step on their own to find out that information and to share that information. Do you could you share what what kind of personal entity that really made you step up to the plate and say, Hey, listen, I want to speak for these people. Blah, blah, blah. Is anything that comes to mind?



Iliana Dominguez Franco 04:47

Yes, yeah. I think for me, it was it was dealing with displacement myself. Mm hmm. So you know, we were renting this house in LA, and didn't come to find out until, you know, the sheriff showed up at our door that the house had been foreclosed. And we had to go. And no one had bothered to tell us, you know, we were paying the rent. My family was terrified, you know, they weren't documented. So any kind of law enforcement showing up at our door was, you know, it was - it shook us, it shook us in more ways than, you know, at that moment, I was like, I didn't think I was gonna lose my home, I was I thought my parents were gonna go away forever, I thought was never gonna see them. And then I found out, well, no, we're here together, but you know, what, we're together, but we have, we have to go now. And, you know, we were able to get a couple of days to get our things together. But it was this thing of just rushing, and my parents were, you know, losing their minds. And it was throw everything in a bag. And even some of the bags didn't make it onto the, the trunk of the car. And so things were left, you know, things were left behind that there was there was no way of getting them back. Um, and so, and then after that, you know, we bounced around so much, it was like, different iterations of homelessness, you know, we lived in a shady motel for some time, you know, my parents were like, don't go outside, don't look out the window. Like, don't, don't look, don't look at what's happening up there. So we lived in a garage, we lived in, you know, so many different things. And it was the reality of how long it took us to get out of that situation. It was like four years of this, you know, four years, until we finally got to a place where we had some kind of space. And, you know, by that time, my parents were no longer together after that, like, you know, it had destroyed our sense of home in a sense like, that, I think it was, it was hard to build that trust, with this place. Like, we were constantly just like, looking around, like, Is this

real? You know, is this for us, you know? So, when I see the families come into my office now, you know, it brings that up, and I'm like, I know, I have to fight and I know, I have to fight really hard. And I have to make these phone calls with some conviction, you know, because this is what's standing between them, and how the next four or five years of their life could be defined, you know, so for me, it was that it was how that was defining in my life. And, like, my sense of home and place was completely distorted, you know,

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Leon Robinson 07:50

Okay, and out of that came a superwoman. Okay. Yeah,

D

De'Wayne Drummond 07:55

I mean, that right there was a powerful, powerful testimony. I want to know a little bit more about your journey from LA to Philadelphia.

I

Iliana Dominguez Franco 08:05

Yeah, so it was education. So I first came to Pennsylvania, closer to the like, right outside the Philadelphia area for college. It was a huge step. And it was, you know, kind of difficult for my folks to understand what was happening at the time, they were like, What do you mean, there's a college here, there's a college across the street! What do you need to go over there for, and I was like, you know, I need, I need some space, I need some space I need, I need to do this thing. And so I came here, and it was like, you know, one of the first times you know, you grow up in a place and you go through so much, there's no time to go out and see what else is out there. So you just don't know what to expect. And when I came here, one of the first things I did was get involved in undocumented rights organizing organizations, right. So that was really important to me, it still is, that was a big part of as well of my life, that was also a really defining factor. So I said, You know, I want to get involved in this, you know, to to help people out there. So I did, and that's kind of how I started venturing out into Philly, you know, the organizations were in north in North Philly and in South Philly, so I was able to get a broad range of like, what was happening. And just being able to talk to people and just feeling this, like familiarity, right, of the city that I had grown up in, and now the city that was currently in it was this familiar sense of community and the way that people were willing to open up and talk and relate, right? And it was that beautiful place of people willing to find an intersection of Where how we meet, how we relate to each other. And how we define this this moment. And I really appreciated that. And it felt so familiar. And you know, I was out here by myself. So it was great. It felt like, just so welcoming.



De'Wayne Drummond 10:17

You said something about community. Iliana. I know that you are the Director of Sustainable Community Initiatives at APM. Can you tell us about APM? And your role there? And are you a part of the NAC (Neighborhood Advisory Committee) staff?



Iliana Dominguez Franco 10:44

Yeah, so APM, or Asociación Puertorriqueños en Marcha is a nonprofit in North Philadelphia, offering a wide range of services, like you know, behavioral health, early education, social services, and affordable housing. Many more as well. It was first founded in 1970, by a group of Puerto Rican veterans who, you know, saw the consequences of their community being ignored and decided to intervene. And as the Director of Sustainable Community Initiatives, I get to work on implementation of our neighborhood plans with by far the best group of people - APM's Community Connectors, they have a very special place in my heart. And I get to work very closely with them just out in the neighborhood, talking with folks and figuring out what our next step is.



De'Wayne Drummond 11:31

Thank you. Thank you.



Leon Robinson 11:34

Are you part of the NAC staff?



Iliana Dominguez Franco 11:36

Oh, I'm so the NAC, the NAC coordinator, and so the NAC coordinator Victoria, we work very closely on a lot of initiative. So a lot of our work, you know, overlaps. Obviously, the NAC is, does a lot of like service delivery for the city and connections there and referrals. So a lot of the things that I see out on the ground, you know, the NAC is also seeing on the ground. So we converge those experiences to develop some other projects to address them. Okay.



Leon Robinson 12:05

We want to talk more, talk to you more specifically about gentrification and neighborhood change. Now, before COVID gentrification was the talk of the town, but it seems like since COVID, it has disappeared. How's that playing a part in your

neighborhood right now in your area of work right now?

I Iliana Dominguez Franco 12:24

Um, it's still happening. That's like, you know, the one piece that those effects that we associate with gentrification never really stopped. You know, the RCO development is still happening, the RCOs are still firing away setting up meetings, as per usual. Um, uh, yeah, so we've, we're still seeing evictions, especially the more difficult evictions where people don't have leases. So it's that it's that, you know, gray area that

L Leon Robinson 12:57

That people need help on.

I Iliana Dominguez Franco 12:59

Yep. Yeah. So we're seeing a lot of that stuff and just advocating for them. I mean, you know, just a big shout out to Victoria, actually, who has, since day one, when this pandemic started, she has been keeping up with every single policy change, you know, federal, state, local level of how, and what resources can help community members. And I think that's what all of the NACs are doing right now. So I really do shout it out to them for staying on that and making sure that our communities are housed, you know, and that they're having a safe place to be during this time.

D De'Wayne Drummond 13:37

As you know, COVID has really impacted the city of Philadelphia, when it comes down to inequalities, how have newcomers and existing residents related to one another this year?

I Iliana Dominguez Franco 13:54

You know, I, I can't speak for everyone. But I think that in the communities, you know, where, you know, the newcomers didn't leave for, you know, greener suburbs, or some countryside view to work from home. Um, you know, it really has strengthen those relationships between old and new residents. Because of what we're seeing with the mutual aid networks that have formed around the city around housing and food, I think that is a really a true display of what is possible when we are investing our technical capacity into our neighborhoods, right. So I think like sometimes, like younger people see the places that they're living in right now, as just moments in time, you know, so they don't try to build roots here. And yeah, and I think that it's, I don't know what it is really, but

there are no downsides to building community with people. You know, there's nothing negative that can happen from just opening up a little bit, you know let people in and embracing what's around you. And I think that the only downside that you can say to that is a little bit of heartbreak, right? That happens when you have to move and you have to say goodbye, you know, and even then, we have cell phones now you can keep in touch, I have neighbors that, you know, when I've had to leave, it's, I still keep in touch with them. And it's wonderful. They still hear about my life. And I love it. I love that sense of feeling like I have family everywhere, you know, and that's, is that really a downside. So.



Leon Robinson 15:35

Okay, so speaking of keeping in touch, what's community engagement like?



Iliana Dominguez Franco 15:41

it's, it's been difficult, I think. I think this time has really stretched thin, right? Like, what? What we can all handle? Yeah. So it's, it's been incredibly difficult. I mean, we're talking about a digital divide as well, that is there. Yeah. You know, people who used to rely on like, the library and stuff to get access to internet that's no longer there. You know, how some people are like, choosing which month to pay their cell phone bills, that's what it's come down to. And their cell phone is like, their only Lifeline sometimes. And, you know, they're like, I can't I can't do April, I'm gonna do June. So it's, you know, that's that's sort of the the feelings that we're getting here. And that's happening across age demographics, you know, that's happening with seniors, that's happening with youth. You know, we because we we have a really large, like intergenerational reach. So we hear from people of all ages, and one of our youth programs right now, it's, it's very touching go because sometimes the youth that rely on their cell phones for data to join the program, they can't log on, because they don't have data, they couldn't pay their cell phone bills. And it's hard, it's a hardship, because sometimes these programs are the very few things that are keeping them connected and distracted. Right. And engaged with something and that's the same goes for seniors, you know. So it's, it's been difficult it has.



Leon Robinson 17:14

So does that apply also to getting members to join your RCOs?



Iliana Dominguez Franco 17:21

Absolutely. That's, I mean, that's probably where it's the worst, because, you know, RCOs, the RCO process is supposed to be a process where communities give their feedback,

right? That's sort of a appropriate avenue for you to engage. Right? Right! That's the avenue for you to engage with a development in your neighborhood. Exactly. And when you can't do that, but development is still pushing forward. And it's still happening. I mean, what, how is that process, actually, for communities during this time? You know, it's, and it's not gonna stop? I mean, we've been told to keep going, you're gonna have to do it regardless, you're gonna have to figure it out. And so it's hard. It's hard, because we know that these this isn't the opinion of the community.



Leon Robinson 18:19

Exactly. And those same people that you want to have an opinion, they are the ones who you hear after the work is done, the developers say, Hey, we planned this here. And now we tried to get you folks who are complaining about this here to get a part of a you know, the decision process, but I hear you, I hear you. Okay, De'Wayne.



De'Wayne Drummond 18:41

So Iliana. I have a question. You said something about mutual aid network. Can you elaborate on that for people who don't know what a mutual aid network is for?



Iliana Dominguez Franco 18:55

Um, yeah, so I'm gonna try to define this the the best way that I can to all my mutual aid folks out there, just, you know, just, I don't have the right definition down probably. But the work that they do is so important. So these are, you know, networks of neighbors, networks of local community activists, you know, just regular folks that have come together during this time to try to meet the basic needs of their community, you know, through just fundraising amongst themselves, you know, fundraising on social media, raising donations, getting in kind donations, engaging local stakeholders. I mean, you have so many iterations of mutual aid now it's you got the community fridges, right, that have popped out in so many neighborhoods, just wonderful work that is built with communities for communities by communities. It's it's really an incredible movement. Yeah, so, so mutual aid networks, you know, it's everything they I've seen people do like rent payments for families that they know are struggling, you know, they'll fundraise for rent payments, you know? Yeah. And it's like, Hey, everyone in the neighborhood, especially the new people, let's pitch in, oh, let's put our money in our neighborhood. Oh, it's those type of calls? And I'm like, Yes, yes, it's the call out. It's, it's the calling you in, right. And you get to be a part of this, right? You get to keep folks in the neighborhood. And you just- food. A lot of the parks have become sites for donation distributions. But yeah, that's the wonderful thing that happens when people with that sort of technical experience that,

you know, even just like social media, right, some people are just really good at social media, they're really good at it. They're like influencers, or like all the followers, it's, they're excellent, and they're applying that to helping their neighborhood. And I think that that's the place where we should be thinking about, everyone has a technical capacity of some sort, to help out in their neighborhood to contribute to their neighborhoods. And mutual aid networks are absolutely that. It's the ability for you to build networks, to work with your neighbor networks that you have to help the community that you're in. And I think, I think that's incredible. You know, it's not money that is, like sanctioned by anything, you don't need any contract or anything to give people this money. It's just this is community money, it's going for you to pay your rent, to feed your children to buy you a new bed, you know, to get you your cell phone bill paid, whatever. And it's, I love that. I love that. That's, that's the beauty of it, you know?



Leon Robinson 21:50

What is a successful community meeting to you? And what is some of the main ingredients that a community organizer needs to have in order to have a successful community meeting?



Iliana Dominguez Franco 22:04

Oh, man, I think a good community meeting is when people like show up, but not like, show up, like, you know, like a large group of people. Sometimes you don't get anything done at those. And sometimes it's the it's the meetings with like, six or 10 people that you're like, you get so much substance out of that, right. I think it's when people show up, they're present, right? They're engaged. They're curious. You know, they're asking questions. Like, you can see the wheels turning a bit, and they're like, okay, like, they're connecting things, you know, and I think I think those are the best meetings. And in order to have that you really need to, you really need to know... oh my god, so many things.



Leon Robinson 22:57

The reason why I asked you that is because this is this is kind of information that community organizers, they want to know from each other. Now, what do you do to have a successful community meeting? One of the things that come up in my community is that we have willing people to volunteer at a community meeting. Not only do you have participation at the meeting, but you have participation after the meeting with assignments that you have in community meeting. I like to ask that question to every community organizer that I've run across. What is your ideal successful community meeting? And what is what is one of the main ingredients to have a successful community

meeting.



Iliana Dominguez Franco 23:35

You know, this is where I feel like it is so important to build, build up to those moments, right? When you invite people to a community meeting, okay? It's so important to, to build up to that moment with people because you, you spend this time, you know, getting to know people, getting to know what they're worried about, what they're interested in, what they consider to be the biggest issues in the neighborhood. And I think about that, sometimes we're like, oh, you know, like, Miss so and so she said something about this, I'm gonna call her and ask her specifically to come to this meeting, okay? Because I'm like, I remember the story that she told me, or I remember this incident or this concern that she brought up, and I'm like, this is the person that needs to be at this meeting. So I will you know, and then it's a very like personal call, like, Hey, you remember when you told me this story about this and this and that, huh? Guess what, we're gonna do something about it. Come on over. It's those moments and it's, you know, that's we're just like, the relationship building is so important. It's so important to be on the ground, you know?



Leon Robinson 24:42

Yeah, yeah, yeah.



Iliana Dominguez Franco 24:43

Man it's the best part too. Like, y'all know how many little like cafecitos I get like, from like, the little ladies around the neighborhood like you need a coffee? I could do that, yeah!



De'Wayne Drummond 25:00

So this summer APM participated in North Philly Community Coalition, Anti-Displacement and Healing parade. Tell us what led to this parade? And what do you hope to accomplish from that parade?



Iliana Dominguez Franco 25:18

So, previously - leading up to the parade was just kind of this little, like, experiment that we did. So, you know, we've been talking about gentrification for a long time, just talking about it. And, you know, at RCO meetings, which, as we know, there's a lot, a lot of frustrations that come out of RCO meetings, there's a lot of emotions, there's a lot, it's very tense. And just individually, so you know, we were like, you know, we have a lot of

feelings about this, we should talk about this. And we should get informed, we should, we should know how to talk about this, all the time, all of us the whole neighborhood. So we were like, let's get together. Let's just start out by seeing what people want to learn about, you know, what are we interested in, because I feel like our scope, sometimes we're just looking at this development that's happening in our neighborhoods, and we're like, this is the problem, this is it, this is the only thing that we need to tackle. And it's we still don't know how exactly to tackle that. So we were like, let's, let's learn about what other people are doing. You know, and let's, let's bring that information here. And De'Wayne was actually one of our guest speakers. So, yeah. Um, so, you know, we were like, let's bring the practitioners here to talk to us directly about this, you know, because I feel like, you know, we get so many opportunities as people who are like, you know, professionals in the field, we get so many opportunities to do that. And those opportunities don't come to the neighborhood like that. And there's no reason why, you know, that's when we're talking about just equity. And what comes next, that's a huge part of it, we need to distribute the information, right? We're talking about like, just like that institutional knowledge that everyone needs to have, so that everyone has the capacity to organize, right? And to have an opinion and to express themselves. And that's often the the intimidating part about being at an RCO meeting is that you have these people who have law degrees, and whatever, right? They just have all these big words and blah, blah, blah, and they talk to you like, you don't know anything? Um, well, let's carry that let's let's, you know, let's talk about that. Let's give people the words this give people the language. Because if some of us have it, then all of us should, because it doesn't make any sense for me. If I'm not at a meeting, then this doesn't get said, No, if anyone is at the meeting, it should get said. And so we were like, let's, let's learn about this. Let's learn how to talk about this. Let's learn how to replicate it in our neighborhood. So we were you know, let's talk about rezoning. You know, let's understand rezoning How does rezoning happen from the community? You know, we're so used to this happening to us, how does that actually turn into a process that comes from us? Yes. So, you know, we were like, let's, how do we learn to flip the script in our neighborhood, together. And so that's where all of this came out of. So we started having these community teachings, we started developing, like little comics, or whatever that would break down the processes from what we talked about in the meetings, so that whoever didn't come to the meetings, would still be able to look at this one pager infographic. And it would be broken down in a way that, you know, anybody can learn it. And it would be mass distributed, you know, we would go out and flyer hundreds of these things to houses. We don't know if people were interested. But they might be once they read this, and they see it and they're like, Oh, I kind of get it now. Like, okay, cool. Let me go, let's go have a conversation about it. You know, let's build that comfort level up. So the parade, you know, we were planning a large community event to engage people with all the things that we had been doing leading up to it, but unfortunately, because of COVID, that was all cut short, our meetings, our final

engagement event, everything. And so in that time, we were actually able to work on a predatory homebuying bill with CLS - Community Legal Services - which was a great win. But we were also like, we have to bring it back down to the community level. So we, you know, we work with Spiral Q and Spiral Q was like, we can do a parade and I was like, I don't know, are you sure? They're like, No, we can do it. Let's do it. So you know, we had developed this community poster that the neighbors that had attended these meetings had drawn out this community poster that they wanted to distribute this window poster to get their neighbors sort of curious about displacement development in a way that was less about the frustrations, right. And the tensions and more about coming together, and learning and organizing together, you know, like, Let's all be on the same field here. And let's organize from that point. So it was it was meant to incite that curiosity. So we wanted to get that out. And we did, we put together this parade that at the same time, got out every single infographic that we had drawn out, and the poster, and also like 30 City resources, you know, about evictions, about food access, about basic systems repairs, you know, we know that people are home all the time. But if you have issues in your home that need to be fixed is your home, actually, the safe haven it needs to be for you during this pandemic, you know, so we got out all these services that were put together by our stuff like collectively. And we synthesize that we put it in these giant bags that we drove out throughout the thing, like across neighborhoods in North Philly, and just handed it out to everybody that we could find everybody that we could see, we put together play packs for the children as well, you know, put a couple jump rope, some like long term kind of play things, get them active. You know, art materials, things like that. So we handed those out too. So we try to hit out just every demographic possible. In that one, go. And I you know, we were pretty successful, it was a lot of fun. We were able to sort of have a culminating, like, like engagement event for our campaign, and then also address the critical needs in our neighborhood on housing and food insecurity.



Leon Robinson 32:05

Okay. Iliana, congratulations on your Emerging City Champion recognition that you received from the Knight Foundation.



Iliana Dominguez Franco 32:13

thank you.



Leon Robinson 32:15

Okay, North Philly, you work with an organization called North Philly Envisioning Brick and Mortar - Did I say that right? Did I say that right? North Philly Envisioning Brick and

Mortar?

I Iliana Dominguez Franco 32:27
Yes, yeah.

L Leon Robinson 32:29
Tell us about that. What's going on with that?

I Iliana Dominguez Franco 32:32
Yeah, so Envisioning Brick and Mortar is, you know, the second year of this same organizing process, we realized how successful it was, people had a really great time learning together and engaging together. And we're really happy with some of the results. So we were like this is we can keep doing this, you know, this is a good thing. So it's the second year of this educational engagement process around development and displacement in North Philadelphia. And, you know, we're gonna continue to do the teach-ins, we're still tinkering out the sort of digital issues with that. And we're still going to continue to engage people on the ground, we're still going to continue to create broken down sort of processes, from the community level, the city level, things like that. So what is an RCO? What is how does, how does, how did things work? So we're gonna continue to create those things, because, you know, we can still get out there and do some canvassing in the morning with social distance and everything, so we can still get out these materials to folks and still keep, keep doing the education process.

L Leon Robinson 33:49
Cool. Cool.

D De'Wayne Drummond 33:51
What are some tips for educating community members about complicated issues facing their neighborhoods?

I Iliana Dominguez Franco 33:59
I mean, I think that the way that we've done it, which was to engage people throughout the whole process, right. I think you have to discover with people, you know, you have to sit there with them and, and learn yourself, cuz I know, you know, when you were there, I

learned so much. It was so good. And I was I was, you know, we were looking at what folks were reacting to, right? What parts of learning about this topic? Are folks reacting to the most? Right, what is like really important to them? And those are the points that stuck with us as we're making these infographics. Right, what are the points that stick with people? What are the points that maybe they need a little more hashing out, you know, what didn't we understand so much? And, yeah, and then that's how you create the education pieces right with people and then you the whole time you're like, presenter, you're like, what do you guys think this is? Makes sense, you know, before you mass distribute just like pass it through a solid editing process, you know? So that's, that's how it works with everything, you know, you get it vetted. So have the community say this makes sense. This piece? I don't know. Okay, back, let's go rework it. And then that's how we were able to develop materials that people liked and made sense. And, you know, they're they're, like, passed around sometimes, like, I remember the RCO. One, someone was like, Can you believe someone try to take this RCO thing and make copies of it? And I was like, that's good. That's the point. Print it out. Let's do what we have to do, you know? And I was like, No, like, no, but they should contact you. And I'm like, No, no, no, no, no, it's out there. It's belongs to the community. You know, this is our resource. There's no trademark on it. It's, yeah, it's so yeah, that's how things serve that purpose. You make it with community, you go through the whole process with community.

L

Leon Robinson 36:12

With, I want to ask a question. And there's about contractors or developers coming to the community to build rental properties, as opposed to buying properties with folks can buy properties, and have that investment in the community. That's where the investment, and the community comes in it. And I know apart a great big part of North Philly, especially around the Temple area is rentals, developers are coming in with big rental buildings or whatever, what is being done in the community to get folks to I don't know, if the developers are buying up building properties that folks can buy, and what is the process? Or what is the like to getting people to get mortgages and buy a property to invest in it? Can you speak on that?

I

Iliana Dominguez Franco 37:05

Yeah, so some of the larger properties, I mean, even some of the, you know, like infill housing that like that's happening in the middle of, you know, single family homes, you know, that's also apartments. Yeah, and it's not affordable. And according to our, you know, policies or citywide policies, there's not a lot that community groups can do to enforce that affordability. You know, even when it comes to community benefits agreements. I mean, what's the enforcement on that? You know, what's, where are the

resources to make sure that that's enforced? It's difficult, it's it's difficult. Communities often don't have a voice in that we would love to have some affordable units, right? We would love to have that ability. And I mean, homeownership. Yeah, that would be great. You know, for a lot of us homeownership is like, the only source of capital that we can think of that is achievable for low income people. Right. Like when I thought about, like, what it would mean for me to, to have something to my name, you know have something? It's a house. It's a home, you know? Yeah.



Leon Robinson 38:24

Yeah, yeah mortar and brick. Mortar and brick.



Iliana Dominguez Franco 38:25

Yeah, yes. It's a piece of the neighborhood. It's the brick and mortar and say, like, I'm here, you know, like, I'm here. I'm a part of the fabric of this, that, you know, I'm a part of this. The culture. I'm a part of the community. You know, I'm seen. Just visibility. And, yeah, with rentals, it's hard. I mean, we're rentals is where a lot of this displacement has happened, you know, because prices go up. There are very often not a lot of leases, to and to help people stay in their homes. There's also not a lot of rights there. In general, outside of a pandemic, I mean, how much was there that you could do to help someone fight and eviction? Yeah, it was there was a lot of challenges. And, yeah, we need communities that have options for everyone. And, you know, have options for folks here to be able to get to homeownership. I mean, we have the we have housing counseling at APM. And so, you know, there are resources in the neighborhood that are preparing folks for that next step. Whether there is a an actual housing stuck there for them. No, no. Okay. No. So we have folks in our neighborhood that are ready for homeownership. They are prepared. They're there. They have everything and they can't afford a house here. They cannot buy a house here. Right? So they have to go outside of the neighborhood to achieve that dream. And that's the part right? That there has to there has to be some kind of solution there. Yeah, there has to be options there.



Leon Robinson 40:18

It's like a dog chasing its tail. Its like a dog chasing its tail.



Iliana Dominguez Franco 40:22

Yeah, yeah, you get to a point you stay in your neighborhood, you work hard, you get to a point, right where you can buy a home and then you can't. So yeah, you know, let's let's

talk about, you know, is that actual equity? You know, what's, what else is needed?

L Leon Robinson 40:40

Yeah. When you talk about equity in the community talking about investment. And if you have a large number of rental properties, do you have transient people, they have no investment in that community. You have people who have long term generations of people with this. And now you have these out of pocket rental properties is coming and taxing them out. You know, it's just where do you Where do these people come to invest back into the community? When? And what and the stock? Where's the stock?

D De'Wayne Drummond 41:13

Yeah, yeah. So as you know, community organizing has its ups and downs. We all know that. Can you tell us a success story that you can share? Not just with us, but with other community organizers out here that might be listening to this podcast?

L Leon Robinson 41:38

You had to think about that one huh [laughs] You got so much to choose from, huh?

I Iliana Dominguez Franco 41:53

You I think one of the one of the there's so many, there's so many, there's just like so many different areas, right? I know, right? It's, it's a blessing, it's a blessing to have options, right? To say like, Yeah, when we tackling what worked, you know, um, but I think one of the, the ones that I found more impactful actually happened in the RCO process, just because, you know, you you take so many hits, in the RCO process, like, our seals are not funded. They're not, you know, there's so many you take so many hits, you see so many things, you get so many things said to you, you know, by developers, and yeah, and parties. And so, you take so many hits, so many losses, you know, where you fight so hard, and you organize people, you bring them to the meeting, and you even manage to drive of caravan down to the Zba. And then you still lose, you still lose. So it's tough. So when you do when one if it sticks, next and out. Yeah, and I'll never forget, it was a, um, so there's a community playground on Fifth Street, between like York and Dauphin, right. And so there was a garage across the street that was applying for an RCO permit. And, you know, we were already getting these sort of call saying, like, Hey, I don't, I don't think good things are gonna happen here. So we really want to stop this. You know, there are children, their communities here, we work so hard to stabilize this neighborhood, like neighbors, you know, they organize for over a decade, just to get this playground up. And then to keep it

up to keep that programming up. It's all grandmas, and children, just keeping the neighborhood there. And so they were like, you know, we really need to do something about this. I was like, okay, like, let's go, let's go find out what's going on. And I remember like, the initial RCO meeting was so like, I guess like, the the person arrived there with a petition, right? And she was like, I'm representing this client, here's a petition from the neighbors. Like, we already have support. We don't even need to be here. This is like a, you know, a favor, like, whatever. And I'd like I was like, Well, can I see that petition? And they would do this thing where it's like, you know, like, kind of letting me see and so I stopped, but I was like, yo, yo, like, distract this person. Let me get a picture of this petition. So we got a picture of the petition. And we were like, well, let's go around and let's ask, you know, because let's go ask the neighbors of these houses. Let's go ask them. What What happened here? What they were told, let's, let's find out if our neighborhood really wants this. If they do, then you know, okay. That's our job is to remain neutral. Our job is to go by what the neighborhood says. If the neighborhood wants it, then that's what they want. We're not going to tell you what you know. What to do, but let me just go find out, something doesn't sit right here. So we go out into the neighborhood, and we start just like knocking on doors and asking questions. And people are like, Oh, yeah, I do remember that kind of, but I don't remember what it was about. And then so we're like, okay, okay. And then as we go further along, we noticed that some of the signed addresses are also empty lots. So, you know, we started wondering, we started like, do you own this lot too? Did you sign for it? They're like, no, it's been empty for years. I don't know who owns that. Okay. So then we keep going, and we get to this this lot. And we're looking at the law. And then Lamont, like, knocks on the door next door, and he's like, I know this person, let me ask. And so you're not sitting there. He's like, hey, do you know, like, we have this signature from this person? And she was like, who signed it? And she looks at the petition, and she's, like, starts laughing. And she was like, no way. Like, she's like, that's my uncle. And we're like, oh, is he - can we talk to him? And he's like, well, I don't know how you would do that. Because he passed away, like 10 years ago. She's like its news to me. If you can find him, we might all want to have a conversation with him. We're like, in shock, right? We're like, Oh, my God, no way. So you know, so we're like, Okay, so we're, you know, we're getting ready with everything. We have all this, like, all these complaints to like, L&I that were made by residents about stuff that was kind of already happening. They're like, past, you know, past, past the appropriate time to be at an establishment. So, um, we show up to the ZBA meeting with like, neighbors and everything. And, and so then the lawyers there, and he's they, I guess they showed up with some people too. And so then we were like, Okay, well, we'll see what happens. So then I bring up the list. And I'm like, so they bring up the petition. Right. And I'm like, yeah, you know, it's funny that you brought up that petition. down to about 911. That person is deceased. I kid you not, that lawyer lost his mind. Oh, my God. I mean, the whole composure was like, I demand that that is stricken off the record. And I was like, I was standing there. Like, I should have looked up some

legal rebuttals before this. I was like, Well, no. So we got it's like, he's like, this is this was not lovable. And then the, the person, you know, one of the ZBA, folks, he's like, Okay, you know what, he just pulls out his cell phone, right? Just in the middle of it just calls one of the numbers, and he starts calling like two of the numbers like, Who is this? What's your name? And then he's like, no, that's not that's not who you are. He dials and he picks up again and he's just calling these numbers, right? Oh, and then he's like, you know what, this is clearly all fake. Okay, like, I can't believe you all went through the trouble. And he's like, we are not gonna approve this. And you know, before that we had, you know, we had gone to our, we had not only gotten support letters from our council person, we had gotten support letters from like, our state representative. And like, another level beyond that. Like all the neighbors brought together these letters from the award leader from everybody. I mean, this was just community organizing. They were like, who do we know? Where do we know them? They can write us a letter, you know, and we presented all these letters were like, these are like several levels of, you know, representatives here that opposes. Yeah. And coupled with the deceased person who came up just to sign this petition, I mean, come on, you know, but we did that was a win. And it's a funny story. And I think it's one of my more favorite wins, because it's just, it's just really out of out of the realm of what I ever thought I was gonna be dealing with, right?



De'Wayne Drummond 49:36

And it was successful too. So it was just more than a win. It was a successful win.



Leon Robinson 49:41

Okay, Iliana. We want to ask you a few final questions. And one of the questions is the organization that you work for what do you think if there wasn't an APM?



Iliana Dominguez Franco 49:54

Yeah, so I i do think about this a lot. Right. My own impending unemployment.



Leon Robinson 50:08

Okay, good. Now. Okay, good.



Iliana Dominguez Franco 50:14

So, um, yeah, so, um, yeah, so I do I do think about that, you know, because that has a lot to do with how I try to hold my work to a standard of like, you know, what does it mean

for you not to be here anymore? Right? That's very possible. I mean, people lose their jobs all the time things happen, you know. Yeah, an organization falls, man, oh, boy, have I seen it just like in the distance like, Man, that could be us tomorrow, like, you know, it could happen, anything could happen. And so I think about, you know, a community where people have all their basic needs met, like we're talking about housing, we're talking about food insecurity, right? They have access to food, they have options for housing. Because a lot of the times, like the reason why folks who live in poverty can organize, it's not because you don't want to, it is because we literally can't, we cannot, because all of our time is taken up by our circumstances, you know, there are our literal lives, our children's lives, right? We got to take care of our families. And so no, we don't have time to get to that meeting. No, we don't have time to learn about this thing to dedicate to this, this issue. So yeah, it's it's a community where everyone's basic needs are met. So much, so that they have the capacity to show up for each other, you know, to go down to City Hall, you know, they have jobs where they have benefits, and they have job security so that they can maybe ask for some time off to go in the middle of the day, for some bizarre reason to these ZBA meetings, right? That we then get told, oh, well, no one showed up here, how it's 130 in the afternoon. How is anybody gonna get here. Children are about to leave school. Now it's between picking up my child, or coming over here. I mean, I know which decision I'm making. And so, you know, we're talking about all these resources that are lined up, for people to be able to have the choice to do these things that they do want to do, you know, to invest to have time to invest. You know, like, it's, it's such a beautiful thing to have surplus time. No, I never thought about it like that until I got to this point in my life where I was like, I get out of work. And I sit and I look at my dog, and I'm like, you want to go for a walk? Lets go talk to people come on, I have time to do that now, you know, and it's just asking for that surplus time to be able to do these things, that you have the energy to do these things. Because everyone wants to know, everyone cares. Everyone has a desire to do that. Everyone has an opinion. You know, we're Americans, we love for everyone to hear our opinion, you know, the whole fabric of this country here.



Leon Robinson 53:26

Yes, when you say you have an extra time, that's like having extra money. You know?



Iliana Dominguez Franco 53:33

Yes, yes. And it's worth it. You know, you get to invest so much. And so yeah, like, a world without APM is a community that has all their basic needs met, is able to participate is able to take control, right, is able to have developed networks to communicate all on their own, you know, and so that's right there. That's that concentrated power, that knowledge that can be passed down. That's all of that you increase the capacity of one member of

the family that increases the capacity of everyone else. It's a ripple effect, you know? So it's Yeah, yeah.



De'Wayne Drummond 54:17

So, everyone this question, but when you hear these words, iron sharpens iron, what does that mean to you?



Iliana Dominguez Franco 54:31

It's like, innovation and knowledge, building on lessons learned. Right? That's the best way to do it. You have to know what happened before and to move forward a little better. Because oftentimes, I feel like we find ourselves in the same exact predicament. I'm like, I really like history, right? You look back and you're like, come on. It has already happened. Through this, yeah, but he lived through this, like three times we already tried that approach, right? Like policies, for example, on so many levels is always the same policy with a different name and a different party backing it, but it's the same, it's the same approach. So I think, you know, we look at the lessons we learn, and we say, we can say this didn't work, you know, no pride hurt, we can say this didn't work. And someone else could come in and say, I have this idea. And I'm going to use what you learned. And I'm gonna keep going. Okay, you know, it's sustaining, sustaining the work.



Leon Robinson 55:43

Well, first of all, I want to say this, this has been a real good, interesting conversation on so many levels. And even your enthusiasm. Again, in your voice, you hear such enthusiasm for the work as a community organizer, because nobody appoints you to this. You can't be appointed to talk. But you have to have what you can be but I mean, you have a heart for it. You have a heart for it, and there's nothing that you and as always this, I want again, I want to thank you for your enthusiasm. And for this real good conversation.



Iliana Dominguez Franco 56:22

Thank you, Leon. I really appreciate the opportunity. It's been wonderful to spend the, you know, evening here with y'all just talking about this stuff. You know, like, I could go on for days and probably do it.



Leon Robinson 56:40

There'll be another time I'm sure.

I Iliana Dominguez Franco 56:42
Of course, of course, definitely.

D De'Wayne Drummond 56:45
Most definitely, Iliana. We just want to thank you for joining us here at Iron Sharpens Iron. We appreciate you telling your your grassroot experience and about your journey from LA to Philly and you are really, really impacting the city of Philadelphia when it comes down to community organizing so thank you, and be safe out there.

I Iliana Dominguez Franco 57:11
Thank you. Thank you so much. Thank you for having me. I really appreciate it. Yeah, it's it's been wonderful. Thank you.