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Ten Lessons for Creating Safety Without Police

Tasha Amezcua, Ejeris Dixon & Che J. Rene Long,

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truthout.org

This piece includes contributions from Eugene Carrington, Taina Crespo, Danielle Ehsanipour, Yvonne Fly Onakame Etaghene, Lisa Feliciano, Susanna Hernandez, TK Lambert, India McKnight, Sal Munoz, Joseph Reaves, Noah Richard, Mj Santiago, Adaku Utah and YaliniDream.

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How can we create safety collectively? How can we challenge hate and police violence by using community-based strategies rather than relying on the police?

For the past 10 years, the Safe OUTside the System (SOS) Collective — an anti-violence program led by and for lesbian, gay, bisexual, two spirit, trans and gender non-conforming (LGBTST-GNC) people of color (POC) in Central Brooklyn, New York, specifically Bed-Stuy, Crown Heights and Bushwick neighborhoods — has been working to answer these questions. After a decade of organizing, the three SOS Coordinators, founding coordinator Ejeris Dixon (2005–2010), the second coordinator Che J. Rene Long (2010–2014), and the current coordinator Tasha Amezcua (2014–present) co-wrote this piece to share the lessons we’ve learned over the years. We also asked SOS members from the past 10 years about their reflections on our successes, struggles and our hopes for the future. We write these lessons for all the people seeking to address violence and envision safer communities.

1. Cultural work is a crucial organizing strategy. From its onset our members have included activists, organizers, artists and cultural workers (i.e. dancers, musicians, playwrights, actors, singers, poets, performers, artists, healers, etc.) and many people who see themselves at the intersections of these identities. However, it took us time to integrate people's passions, fully utilize each other's skills, and create a collective culture and value system that allowed us all to be seen and heard. We knew that cultural work was necessary to build community, create our vision of safety and make space for healing. Yet we struggled with the question of what our priorities were – and where cultural work fit into those priorities. SOS members who identified as artists and cultural workers refused to let organizers deprioritize art and healing, and consistently reminded us that cultural work is not a footnote or an addition to make an event more interesting. Instead, these members showed us all that art and cultural work can allow us to vision, strategize, educate, heal and organize with our full selves. Organizing that integrates cultural work transforms people's perspectives in a way that is often deeper and longer lasting than organizing alone. After many meetings and challenging conversations we began to build cultural work into our organizing strategies, events and community-based curriculum. We created a step team to engage and excite new members as an outreach strategy. Our annual Bed-Stuy Pride includes visual artists, performers, healers and vendors to bring our full communities together. This conversation still continues today and not without tension, but we keep growing and learning new ways to communicate across our perspectives and passions.

2. Organizing for community safety must include an analysis of gentrification. The Safe Neighborhood Campaign began at a time when Bed-Stuy was still a mostly low-income Black community. Our campaign relied on small businesses agreeing to become safe spaces that would open their doors to people fleeing from violence, and uphold our principles of using transformative

justice strategies to address and reduce violence. As the campaign progressed and built relationships with more community-based businesses, the neighborhood also changed in less subtle, more abrupt ways. Soon the question of gentrification took center stage in our campaign development as well as in our outreach and base building. Gentrification and increased policing of LGBTSTGNC POC disrupted our existing community safety networks, pushing out our safe spaces. We met this strong socio-economic force with study and research, developing a timeline for the average lifespan of a small business and finding new ways to engage locally owned small businesses. We began to invest in longstanding institutions such as schools and churches and explored ways to engage them in the campaign. This work continues today. As a mixed collective of people born and raised in Bed-Stuy and transplants, we have honest conversations internally about how to support the local community together with our money, energy and time.

3. Our work exists within a legacy and we are just a small part. Over time we've noticed that safety exists in relationships. And wellness exists in culture. In this moment of rapid displacement, we continue to identify LGBTSTGNC/POC cultural workers, and support them in strengthening, deepening and intermingling roots with LGBTSTGNC/POC in our neighborhoods.

4. Are we a "real" collective? The struggle to create a practical and visionary structure. The SOS Collective is structured as a collective of intergenerational lesbian, gay, bisexual, two spirit, trans and gender non-conforming people of color. Members lead the Collective's organizing, political analysis, strategy and a staff person coordinates the collective — ensuring resources, coordinating logistics, maintaining structure, and supporting members leadership development and political education. There is a hierarchy inherent to this structure, as staff is paid and members are not. And while at times we had the resources to temporarily hire members, we still weren't able to fully compensate their labor or address the power dynamics between members and staff. Since its

founding, SOS staff and members constantly assessed whether decisions were informed, collective, not coercive and held true to the values of member leadership, transformation, community accountability and collectivity. We also had conversations where members discussed and defined which roles the staff member should hold, and how those roles were in service of the collective's progress. The power of collective is that there's been no burden on any one person or a few people to have an answer. When we have all contributed, prioritizing survivors and most-impacted folks, we have learned about and from each other, we have learned to talk to each other, and we have had the remarkable opportunity to grow, heal and transform together. This way, we built safety and wellness in our communities that was more robust, dynamic and informed than any single one of us could create.

5. Internal accountability must be a foundation for community safety. We believed that we must internally model our own values of addressing violence and harm without relying on the police or disposing of community members (aka transformative justice) in order to achieve our vision in the community. However, this definitely was a challenge and a journey. When SOS started, we were all working with limited resources, the staff was part time and often volunteering 15 hours a week of unpaid time, and many of the members were volunteering 5 to 10 hours a week of their time. Our community is made up of survivors and they need us to be consistent to maintain trust. To ensure that we were as accountable as possible to our own communities we developed agreements around how we would share responsibilities, and had rotating members who would check in on our tasks. Through these ever-evolving structures we were able to collectively work towards internal accountability. At times internal accountability has been harder and more painful than just navigating our tasks and commitments. We've had experiences of members who've harmed other members, or the collective as a whole. We've had conflicts and disagreements so deep that we permanently lost crucial members. Yet,

Over these last 10 years, we have learned the hard way that building community safety is complex. The experience of collectively creating safety has forever changed us. We still believe that our communities can address violence without the police, and that LGBTSTGNC POC communities have long histories of doing this work. But we still have so much to learn, skills that need to be transferred and supported. Our overall takeaway is that people who work to create community safety need to be willing to grow, change and sometimes be wrong. Our ability to be flexible enough to grow with the changing conditions of the neighborhood, and the needs of our community, keeps our work relevant, vibrant and useful. Our lessons are not unique, but we hope that you will find them useful to create safety within your own communities — that you feel empowered to challenge violence within your community, and that our movements will continue to reduce state control over our bodies.

through having transparent and challenging conversations, we've built some structures for addressing harm internally, and keep revising and adjusting them to ensure they stay useful and relevant. We continue to build internal accountability processes that center and are led by those most impacted to support the boundary, safety and wellness needs of all folks involved, including those who have caused harm. We also encourage and support our members in holding community accountability processes outside of nonprofit structures due to the limitations of nonprofits and legal liability for mandated reporting.

6. Grappling with cultural capital, fame and ego. Ego and fame often get in the way of community accountability and transformation, privileging people with more status or capital in the community, allowing folks with more power to avoid accountability. Early on we knew that building community-wide transformation required humility, and that our work was ineffective and useless if it was only built by one of us. We actively worked to build safety, trust and love in our collective so folks felt safe enough to leave their egos at the door, which helped maintain access for everyone. One way we disrupted the impact of ego and cultural capital was to encourage and support our most-impacted and newer members — Black, Indigenous, youth, elder, disabled, homeless, femme, fat, trans, gender non-conforming and long-term resident members — to take leadership and visible roles. We also worked to use our collective fame and visibility as a resource. While we started out as a relatively unknown project, over time we began to receive a great deal of praise for our work. We were not in movement work to become QTPOC (queer and trans people of color) famous. And we always knew that on the ground in our neighborhoods, “QTPOC famous” wasn't neighborhood famous. Over time we learned to use fame as a resource to strategically leverage our work, and to give momentum to our political vision. At times we did this well. At times our humility or desire to get visibility as a collective as opposed to individuals meant that we

were left out of critical movement conversations, or that other organizations took credit from the work we created. Out of these experiences and our values, we have learned how to use cultural capital in a different way. Those of us who have a lot of cultural capital now work to use, redistribute, disrupt and ask questions about the use of these resources, for the service of the entire collective and community.

7. Base building and relationship building are the cornerstone of all our work. Base building, outreach, relationship building, whatever you call it — you gotta do it! In the beginning, we spent the majority of our time actively building relationships with LGBTSTGNC people of color in Central Brooklyn. We recognized early on that the only way we would ensure that we had the support we needed to build lasting community safety strategies was to have deeply connected networks of SOS members and allies. Base building was a unifying factor for our collective members, it was the skill that everyone learned and worked on together. It was the project that we never de-prioritized. It's still the glue that keeps us connected and accountable to our communities.

8. Beyond winning or losing, we have each other. The thing about doing this kind of anti-violence organizing is that it was sometimes difficult to identify moments of victory. There was often not a picture perfect moment of the contract being signed or the “person in power” conceding to the community’s demands. What was more prevalent was prevention. On a good day, we prevented a community member from being harassed, and on a bad day we comforted a mother who lost her gay son to hate violence. We did a lot of celebrating when the good days came, sat in the joy of altering the story, wrote down what conditions and strategies contributed to our victory. Of course, loss was also prevalent. On the bad days, we did a lot of sitting with one another, sometimes in silence, sometimes with music in the background and let ourselves just feel sad without needing to immediately “fix it.” And it was ok as long as we were feeling sad together.

9. Clear, simple language builds trust and community. The Collective began at a time when terms like “Community Accountability” and “Transformative Justice” were newer terms and most people were still figuring out what they meant. We didn’t entirely know what they meant but we knew that violence was happening and that we couldn’t rely on the cops to intervene. We spoke to people in the community with the language we knew would be most understandable and relatable, and saved the more complicated terms for the panels. It was important that anyone who was affected by hate violence in the community could explain what we did to others. Over time, as these terms grew in popularity, many people would name our work saying, “Oh what you’re doing is Transformative Justice.” And that was fine with us as long as we continued to use language that makes sense to the people in the community.

10. We must show up hard for each other, all of us, including ourselves. We need to build a revolution, a movement that fits all of us. For us this meant that if we were making ourselves unwell so that the community could be well, or if we were sacrificing our personal relationships so that we could nurture community, or if we were not ensuring that our movement spaces were accessible, then we were not building a sustainable movement. In SOS, we worked to celebrate when members needed to take space or assert boundaries. When we celebrated and supported each other practicing sustainability, we were building a liberation we can each survive. In her poem, “Who Said it Was Simple,” Audre Lorde asked, “But I who am bound by my mirror, as well as my bed, see causes in colour, as well as sex, and sit here wondering, which me will survive all these liberations.” Lorde, here, pointed directly to the intersection of disability, race and gender that prevented her from participation in movement spaces. The question of “which me will survive” reminds us to build movements that are inclusive of folks at the periphery of the margins we already occupy.