Jordan Garcia – Activist and Ally

Jordan Garcia, Immigrant Ally Organizing Director with AFSC in Colorado, recently talked about his life and work with Jon Krieg of AFSC’s Central Regional Office.

JON KRIEG: How did you get involved in social change work?

JORDAN GARCIA: That’s a good question. Probably when I got into college [at Colorado College] is when my social change work started. I was a bit of a joiner in high school, did a lot of stuff with theater and things like that, but the social change work, increasing political awareness, pretty much came out in my freshman year. I started going to a group called Concerned Citizens. My political awareness grew out of that group and also the Queer students group called EQUAL – Empowered Queers United for Absolute Liberation – definitely a politicized Queer student group.

I also started going to MECHa on campus, as well. MECHa is a long-standing Mexicana/o student organization, which stands for national Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán; they were the ones behind making sure that Chicano studies happen on campuses. MECHa is a pretty political organization, and it was so on our campus, but it was very much about Mexican students.
But we had a number of students on our campus from other parts of Latin America, so we started another group that was a little more inclusive, called OLAS, the Organization of Latin American Students. MECHA got upset because everyone was going to OLAS instead, and so MECHA came to us and said, “Why don’t we combine our groups?” And so we did. And then the Latin@ student group was called “Somos,” which means “we are.” All that happened in one year, and it was very dramatic.

JON: What was your role in these groups on campus?

JORDAN: Well, I’m a nine on the enneagram, so I acted like a peacekeeper the majority of the time. Definitely trying to inspire some kind of collaboration and compromise. I acted as somewhat of a connector. Both the Queer student group and the Latino student group wanted to be “siloed,” kind of just be on their own. A couple of other people and I began to feel empty about that, and essentially what we did was try to bring multi-issue organizing to our campus. We did that through saying, “Look, there are Latino folks in the Queer student group, and Queer folks in the Latino student group.” So we needed to work at that intersection and broaden all of our horizons.

When we did that it made a big difference. Not only did we do some really cool things at that intersection – have certain speakers come to campus and work on a couple different campaigns – but because there were more of us working collaboratively, we got more things done than we would have in the silos that people were comfortable in. So we asked people to get a little uncomfortable to learn a little and get some work done.

JON: What sort of social change work were you involved with after college?

JORDAN: I studied International Political Economy at Colorado College, which is a bunch of big words for “globalization.” And learning as much as I did really made it interesting for me to work on migration in particular. When I was in college, I studied with the Associated Colleges of the Midwest’s Urban Studies Program in Chicago for a semester. I took a class there called “Immigration in America: The Journey to Becoming an American.” What we talked a lot about in that class was immigration and migration, the roots of migration in particular, which was interesting to me and probably inspired me to change my major to International Political Economy.

And so I held on to that and loved it, and it eventually led me to AFSC. But before that, after I graduated, I did some organizing in the arts with LadyFest Out West, which is a past, present and future women’s music festival. That was in 2003, and
we had a five-day festival in Denver full of workshops and music from past, present and future women.

**JON:** Your role in that was...?

**JORDAN:** As an organizer and fundraiser. This five-day festival brought in over 250 people from the Rocky Mountain region, which was pretty cool. Five days of workshops and music.

Then I worked for Urban Peak Denver, a youth homeless shelter. At Urban Peak, I did participate in writing an article for a national child welfare magazine; it was all about LGBT homeless youth. We did a study and then released a paper about it: *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning Homeless Youth: A Six City Public Health Perspective*, published in the *Child Welfare League of America Journal of Public Health*. The paper had some best practices for how to serve homeless people and people who are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered. So that was very cool—first time I was ever published.

Not long after that, I joined the staff at AFSC as an immigrant rights organizer and later the immigrant allies organizing director.

**JON:** We’ll come back to your work with AFSC in a moment. What other work have you been doing outside AFSC?

**JORDAN:** I was on the founding board of the Latina Safe House Initiative, which is trying to provide culturally and linguistically appropriate services for victims of domestic violence of Latino origin. That was really interesting and fun. Then I was on the Denver Mayor’s LGBTQ Commission. I was on the board of the Colorado Anti-Violence Program for six years, which works to end violence within and against the LGBTQ community. They’re a thriving organization right now, which makes me feel really great about sticking with them for so long.

I’m also on the board of the Grassroots Institute for Fundraising Training, also known as GIFT. They’re the publishers of a monthly grassroots fundraising journal. What we do is work to involve more people of color in fundraising, in the field of development. A long time ago, I was the recipient of the Cesar Chavez Peace and Justice Committee Award, here in Denver.

**JON:** That honored your work in what way?

**JORDAN:** Primarily for my work with the Colorado Anti-Violence Program. One of the things I continue to do with them, as part of their training and education group, is going into homeless shelters and talking with staff and program participants or clients about transgender issues and how to appropriately provide
services for transgendered folks and facilitate conversations among program participants about what it means to be transgendered. That’s something I still do, and I love doing it. It’s really rewarding to go in places and train teams.

I’m a street medic with the Colorado Street Medics. What we do is provide a safe environment for people to demonstrate their First Amendment rights. We provide a safe environment and then emergency response.

I’m on the board of the Chinook Fund, and I’ve been involved with them for eight years. The Chinook Fund is a progressive community foundation that’s one of the members of the Funding Exchange. The Chinook Fund provides seed and general operating funds for non-profits in Colorado that are social justice-oriented groups. The grant-making committee is made up all of activists, and so activists from all around Colorado do the decision-making for the grants. I co-chaired the grant-making committee for two and half years. The entire committee does everything through consensus, which is challenging but also really rewarding, too.

**JON:** What have you done since starting at AFSC?

**JORDAN:** When I came to AFSC in 2006, the program, Coloradoans for Immigrant Rights (CFIR), was a small group of citizens who really wanted to work on immigration and wanted to use their citizenship privilege for good and not evil. But then also, we struggled with not being immigrants and not wanting to speak for immigrants.

So what we did at the beginning and continue to do today is really examine citizenship privilege and really “unpack it” with people several steps of the way. We’re constantly and intentionally analyzing our allyship and being pretty aware that you never really “arrive” at the perfect point, but that it’s a constant process of self-reflection. So we really do a lot of that self-reflection with a lot of people, and try to meet them wherever they are in that process.

Then what we do is build the skills of our members to be the best allies they can be, given their position in the world, the position in their lives, and their resources – how they can use the power they have to make positive change for all people in our community, with particular attention to immigrants. So in that skill-building, some of the things we’ve done over the years include working with people to have a deeper understanding of how they can influence policymakers.

We have an emphasis for both immigrants and non-immigrants who are part of our group. We have an “Adopt a Policymaker Campaign,” in which we’ve taught people how to do a legislative visit, how to write a letter to a legislator, how to
engage in a relationship to where their policymakers will see our members as resources on the topic of immigration, as real assets to them.

Other things we do include working with our members, both immigrant and non-immigrant, to improve their abilities to speak publicly. I’ll start with media. We do training and skill-building to help our members do a really good job of being concise and giving the right sound bites.

We never speak on behalf of immigrants; immigrants always speak on behalf of themselves. Our members are really good at speaking to their experience doing immigrant rights work and the reasons they’re called to do it. Both print and broadcast media, as well.

Another way we build skills with our membership, which has been really successful, is they’re really good at conducting workshops now. As a result of our work, they’re really good at engaging materials and they don’t monologue at people, which is a huge feat. They’ve done a great job of creating popular education-based workshops. We as a group have developed a workshop called “What’s immigration got to do with Queer liberation?” It’s a popular education workshop that really examines that intersection, and uses the wisdom of the group to come to some pretty interesting realizations.

We do another workshop on globalization and migration, not so different than the one which Josefina Castillo does. [Josefina Castillo is director of Austin Tan Cerca de la Frontera, a program devolved from AFSC.] Our members are really good at explaining to the layperson the impacts of globalization on migration, which is pretty cool.

When I first got to AFSC, the biggest march we’ve seen to date for immigration in Colorado occurred on March 26, 2006. The police said 80,000 people, and we said 110,000 people in the streets of Denver. It was the largest march we’ve seen. The night before we were still making copies of flyers, and we were thinking, “Oh, maybe this will be big. Maybe there’ll be 2,000-3,000 people there.” Another guy said, “No, it’s going to be huge, there’s going to be 10,000 people there.” And we were like, “No, don’t get your hopes up.” And it ended up being at least 80,000 people there. It was huge, it was great. And of course our sound system was not nearly big enough.

**JON:** One of your first tasks at AFSC, then, was helping to organize this event?

**JORDAN:** Yes, we did the line-up for the speakers, who were all really good, we did the translation, the messaging, and we got balloons for it.
Some other accomplishments of our group…. Through the work of AFSC, the Colorado Immigrant Rights Coalition, which is the statewide coalition, is significantly stronger. They have their own funding, their own executive director now, all in the last few years. They even have a lobbyist, which is kind of a big deal.

AFSC’s been organizing vigils at the immigrant detention center in Aurora, Colorado for over a year now.

**JON:** You helped found an educators group for immigrant rights, correct? Teachers who were concerned about the plight of immigrants in schools came together to get active on the issue?

**JORDAN:** Yes. It got started by a member of ours. It’s going really well. Educators for Immigrant Rights was founded for a couple reasons. One was to try to address the isolation which pro-immigrant teachers feel in their schools, to bring people together so they don’t feel quite so alone. And to provide teachers with resources so they can teach about the topic of immigration in more comprehensive ways, resources they can use to help their students and their students’ families. Giving teachers a way to brainstorm with their colleagues about how to address administrative wrongdoings and problems facing immigrants.

**JON:** I’ve noticed throughout our conversation – and I know this is part of how you work and how AFSC works – that you’ve used “we” and “our” a lot more than you use “my” and “mine.” And I appreciate the challenge involved in answering the question, “What did you do, what did you accomplish?” versus what the group has done. I think that’s an accomplishment in and of itself, it’s not just you doing things. Still, from my view, it’s your leadership which propels things along.

**JORDAN:** That’s great. It definitely feels like, would things have gone differently if I hadn’t been there? And that’s definitely true, a lot of things would have gone differently. Not to say they wouldn’t have been successful, but they would have looked different.

**JON:** Could you talk some about the growth of Coloradoans for Immigrant Rights? I know it was very small when you started. How many people are involved now?

**JORDAN:** We have about a dozen people at our weekly meetings, about 30-40 people who are part of our core membership, and now we have nearly 600 people on our extended list.

**JON:** You mentioned earlier your work on behalf of transgendered people and Latin@ transgendered people. Can you speak about your own experience and
how that might impact your perspective and thoughts on working as an ally for immigrants?

**JORDAN:** I’ll say a couple things, which we’ve also talked about in our workshops around the intersection between LGBTQ liberation and immigration. My identity as a Queer person, or a person of color, or a transgendered person really gives me a perspective that’s a little bit about coming out. The similarities between coming out as Queer or transgendered are vast when compared to the experiences of people coming out as undocumented or as immigrants. That’s been a really interesting experience for me seeing that played out.

**JON:** Similarities such as?

**JORDAN:** The threat of violence. There’s a fear of judgment, of being seen differently. There are similarities in that transgendered people and undocumented immigrants do not have rights, they’re not protected by the law. It’s easy to get fired, it’s difficult to find work, for Queer folks and for immigrants. Your morals are questioned if you’re transgendered or Queer. Because of the stigma of legality, you’re also questioned if you’re undocumented.

There are certainly lots of differences, too. Transgendered folks, unless they’re also immigrants, don’t have the threat of deportation, although similarly there is a fear of arrest and detainment. Your immigrant status can change, you can sometimes adjust your status. No matter how many things you try to adjust when you’re transgendered, you’re still who you are.

So there are some similarities.

I do think that for myself, being in a position of “allyship” is huge. There are a lot of things for allies to do. It’s difficult for people, sometimes, because they don’t actually want to claim their power. There are things immigrants can do to be allies to the transgendered community, and there are things the Queer community and transgendered folks can do to be allies of the immigrant community. Sometimes they just need a little bit of pushing to get them to the place where they can do that.

Then, of course, there are transgendered immigrants out there who can see all sorts of things. One thing I said in a workshop was that, in a lot of ways, when you’re transgendered, you’ve given up on the idea of simple answers and binaries. It makes it so that you can really look at the nuances and complexities of things without hesitation.
JON: A greater comfort with ambiguity, perhaps, whereas our society really likes things black and white. Legal/illega, male/female, etc.

JORDAN: Even when looking at the DREAM Act [a proposal before Congress to provide a pathway to citizenship for undocumented youth who go to college or the military], there are immigrant advocates who insist that we either support it or we don’t. In or out. But I’m like, sometimes that’s not a helpful frame. The frame has to be a little different than that.

JON: As you look ahead, where do you see yourself going in your work for social change?

JORDAN: I’m not sure what my goals are, other than to say I’d really like to see some systemic change happen in my lifetime around a great deal of things.

I would like to continue to build community, I’d like to do more popular education and more theater of the oppressed work because I feel like it’s really transformational work that doesn’t happen everywhere. And I think a lot of people think their work will be transformational, but it’s only a fraction of what’s possible with popular education and theater of the oppressed.

I would say that even about the work I’m doing right now. The work is only doing so much. With a different kind of lens, I think we could do a lot more. I’d like to be more skilled around that. I’m doing more workshops on theater of the oppressed. I’d love to do that in Spanish.

JON: What’s your experience been with theater of the oppressed and how to do you see it affecting social change?

JORDAN: Theater of the oppressed is pretty amazing. It was invented by Agosto Boal, who was really good friends with Paulo Freire. So Agosto developed theater of the oppressed as a way to manifest the ideals Freire put forward, that is, that people know things, they just don’t know that they know things. You need to utilize the wisdom of the group to make decisions which will benefit everyone, and the wisdom of group is greater than that of one person telling people what they need to know.

There’s actually a group out of the Northwest called the Mandala Center for Change, and one of the things they do is train people in how to use theater of the oppressed in organizing. I would love to go study with them, that would definitely be a dream of mine.

Specifically in using theater of the oppressed to bring about internal transformation, I think you can work through a lot of your internalized
oppression. But there are also ways to use theater of the oppressed where you form invisible theater, where you do theater in public places and people don’t even know it’s theater.

JON: Kind of like a flash mob?

JORDAN: Only you can tell what a flash mob is at some point. The example I use is there’s a couple of homeless youth on a bus who are getting picked on by other youth. Then a bystander steps in and says that’s not OK, we don’t treat people that way. And it’s totally set up, it’s been rehearsed. And the young people affected, the homeless youth create the dialogue and how it will go down. But then they get off the bus and nobody knows it was a piece of theater.

Agosto Boal believes that if you do invisible theater in one geographic area 500 times in a year, then you will see a cultural shift, so that no longer would you need an actor to step in and say, “That’s not the way to treat people.” So the “spect-actors” would become the actors unknowingly and will act differently. Imagine doing that around immigration, it would be very powerful.

JON: How many generations has your family been in this country?

JORDAN: On my mom’s side, the border moved across them. My dad’s parents were part of the bracero program [which brought Mexican farm workers to the U.S. beginning in the 1940s].

JON: Thanks for your time and good work, Jordan. Good luck.