

ITP Interview Kelly x Lyrica/Uplift Climate

Kelly: Ok, so first of all, thanks for making the time. Again, all of these questions are really just to learn more about your past experience, how working with ITP supported your work in the last year, and especially also how in light of the pandemic, your work changed. So the first question is what was happening in your team or your organization that made you apply for the pause grant? And how did you have to innovate with covid, to come together in light of things that changed after you got the grant?

Lyrica: So we were experiencing Uplift as a youth led group here in the Four Corners and Greater Southwest and our team in our young organizers. We're just experiencing quite a lot of burnout within our work. And I think that this is fairly normal for climate activists, really, any political activists or folks who are involved in social movements. Sort of a real barrier for us, I think, because, you know, folks will burn out so bad that they never come back into the work. And so it's really important that we are not getting to that point within our within our organization, within our activism and the transition out of our parent non-profits. 2020 was our first year as a fully youth led group so there is a lot of labor that went into that transition out of our parent nonprofit. And so I think it was just a really timely need for us having both this sort of sustained experience of burnout and also having completed a pretty large task of leaving our two parent organizations. I think within the movements that we're a part of for climate justice, any justice movements; again, burnout is a real problem. But I think climate in particular is sort of even more dangerous or treacherous, because we're also dealing with a lot of what we call eco anxiety or climate anxiety, especially as young people.

Lyrica: Every day. It's just getting worse, and that's a very real experience that young climate organizers feel because we're sort of in this race against time. So I think, there is this sort of context of burnout, both within the movement and also within our organization, and then also having just completed a pretty intense and laborious task. And so, of course, that kind of threw a curveball. I think the challenge was how do we create pauses digitally and remotely. As we were brainstorming this sort of problem of burnout within our work, we wanted to find ways that would make our work sustainable and particularly regenerative. Regenerative has kind of become, I've noticed, a buzzword in a lot of spaces. And I think we kind of stumbled upon that concept maybe a bit before it became more popular within social movement spaces where we essentially wanted to find ways that our work would be sustainable. So we could sustain our work for the long haul and for our lifetimes. Originally the idea was that the pause would take form in a physical retreat somewhere in the Four Corners Southwest region where our core staff and our volunteer network would come together and do some visioning around regenerative organizing structures.

Lyrica: And because it was no longer possible due to covid, we sort of pivoted that. We're still looking at regenerative spaces and regenerative organizing. And we contracted with two facilitators from Salt Lake City who are part of a wider community and who are part of the climate movement in Utah and in the southwest. One of the chief facilitators that we contracted with, I have to say, are probably the most skilled and powerful facilitators I've

ever sat through a meeting with. Their attention to time and just being really powerful spaces for the group was pretty impressive. And so we spent a handful of Saturdays throughout fall and winter of last year, both with our core team and also our long term Uplift community and Uplift network and our leadership committee at the time. We came together and pretty much each meeting was focused on different elements of regenerative, both looking at the self and wider systemic ideas of regeneration. And there was a lot of brainstorming. There is a lot of personal sharing. And our team also sort of lowered our programmatic work so that we could have time to focus on these. We call it a regenerative organizing practice.

Kelly: Well, that's wonderful, too, because you sort of answered my next question, which was not only about how you adapted, but how it changed or what made it feel special or unique in light of that. And you're talking about the eco-anxiety. And while the anxiety of covid isn't exactly the same, it's sort of piling one on top of the other. And so I can imagine the relief of having a couple really skilled facilitators come in and kind of create an opening and create a different way of doing things in this time when it's obvious that we need to even more be thinking of different ways of doing things and approaching our problems. So that's great. Are there any key moments or highlights from the process, from some of those Saturdays that you spent together that stick out for you in your mind?

Lyrica: Yeah, there's a couple and I guess so sort of going back to what you just named like this was I mean, all of our 2020 was a time of pretty intense grief and death. But I think during that time, there were quite a few of our team members who lost close family members to covid. And it was during this time that a community member who lives in Salt Lake City, who is or who was very close in community and friendship with Salt Lake City organizers passed from covid. And I didn't know this person or was never really in communication with them. But I think within the community in Salt Lake, that loss was felt really deeply. There is a sort of this collective grief in the same room. Someone was present who read a poem in honor of this person, and we took time to think about this person's memory and life. It was hard for us to proceed into that meeting and into that agenda as planned, because the facilitators had planned this kind of intellectually or mentally involved process looking at our principles. I think the facilitators could tell that we just weren't feeling it like we didn't have the energy for it. And so, again, this really speaks to them and their in their experience, they pivoted. The facilitators completely scrapped what they had come up with. A lot of applause to them because they clearly would spend hours on their agendas coming up with all these interactive ways of thinking, thinking with each other and whatnot.

Lyrica: And we ended up playing this game on Zoom that was kind of silly and that made us laugh and then kind of just released the tension in the room. I think I bring that up because I think it showcases that it was an experience. It was a time of a lot of grief in our communities and in sort of the wider community. But there was also a lot of laughter. We did this stream of consciousness activity in the group that I was in and we were just laughing so hard. And so I think this basically provided us time to both grieve and share the losses that we were feeling. And it also was like a time for us to laugh and to sort of let go and break tension. That was a really important and poignant experience, and I learned a lot about the different folks. This is maybe on a little tangent, but I think it was particularly

timely for our organization because the folks who are participating in that practice, some of them were sort of long term seasoned Uplift organizers - folks in their late 20s who were actually sort of beginning to transition out of Uplift. And we also had younger folks who were part of our summer fellowship who were kind of just now coming in to Uplift. And so we were able to bring all of them together and have this shared experience before know the older Uplifts organizers left and our younger and newer organizers came in.

Kelly: So you had kind of like a good crossing well, in different phases of their relationship with organization. That's beautiful, too, that you were able to feel that there was some real ability to process the grief, but also to have the laughter element. I think it's such a hard medium to have those authentic things sometimes. It sounds like it really speaks to the skill of the facilitators, but also to you guys of being in community and being connected to be able to get there, because I know a lot of us want to have Zoom's that don't suck and that are different. But actually being able to do that in that space can be tough. So I'm really I'm really happy to hear that.

Lyrice: Yeah. I think at that time in the pandemic, we weren't quite as burnt out on Zooms as we are now, and I do think planning something like that now would be difficult and asking people to show up consistently would be difficult. But I think it was early enough in the pandemic that we weren't completely fatigued and burnt out on Zoom. I think overall it also really just gave us a chance to get to know each other on a really, interpersonal level and in a way that now helps me better understand how our team works interpersonally and also just as individuals. And you just build a really much stronger team when you have that team building experience together. I feel like that that's often repeated in workspaces and is maybe kind of misunderstood at times. We are having a sort of vulnerable moments with folks. And being able to laugh and to play alongside all the vulnerability, I think has really strengthened the team as a whole.

Kelly: And along with that, are there examples or changes that you've noticed in the aftermath of that, like how it shows up in your relationships or maybe even ways that you have shifted the way that you collaborate based on having that sort of experience that you went through together in the fall and winter.

Lyrice: Yeah, I think so. I think we're much more relaxed in meetings. I think there is a big emphasis of our regenerative organizing practice that really lent itself to laughter and to play. And I think as a youth organization, we really try and hone in on the people and characteristics of young people, because that's important to us and to our values. And so I'd say that the dynamic of our meetings have changed where they're a lot more laid back and relaxed. I think in some ways that's not necessarily what you're trying to get in an organization, but I think for us and in the way that we function in our values, that does help us get more work done. I think another thing that I've taken away from the practice has been really tangible. Ways of building community and building accountability and also a building like. Trust within each other like that, throughout the practice, we establish this sort of protocol is that when we were in breakout rooms, the facilitators wouldn't pull us back into a main room from breakout rooms. We were given the chance to come back on our own. This is a really simple change in working zoom and being in a meeting, but having the ability to leave your breakout room and go back to the main group is really powerful

because I've been in breakout rooms having a really good conversation, maybe having a sensitive conversation with someone, and then it just ends because you're like yanked back into the main room. And so it's just sort of reinforces that, oh, we're not actually in person. This is on Zoom and we can't have real authentic connections that resume. So being able to decide, OK, we're all done sharing, let's go back to the main room was really nice and really, really lent itself to sort of building trust and building full vulnerability. We also did other like things such as building community agreements at the very beginning of the practice. And then every single meeting we would look back upon those agreements and sort of reflect on them. And I think in the work that we do, we talk a lot about community agreements and setting norms, but in my experience, we set those norms and then we never look back on them and we don't talk about how do we actually implement them. So I think there is a real tangible takeaway is that we now practice.

Lyrice: They have really strengthened our accountability to each other that has strengthened our digital work. We did an exercise that was, what do you do, like when you need to recharge yourself? Do you go be by yourself? Do you go spend time with your friends? Like, what do you need to take care of yourself? And I know what my team members do to take care of themselves. I know that if they're having a bad day and it seems like they're grumpy they just have to take care of themselves. It doesn't have to do with me or even really the work. And so I think when you know what your team member or your friend needs to feel good, you can better support them. And I think a powerful experience was knowing that not only was I getting to know this community and our team, I was watching my team get to know each other. And I think we're talking about community. It's important to strengthen not only your connection with an individual, but to see those connections forming in front of you with other people.

Kelly: I love that because you're giving really good, tangible examples and especially the one about the zoom rooms. It's the kind of thing that reinforces that we're not in control. It's like we wonder why Zoom is awkward, but it's like if you're at a party or if you're hanging out in a workplace, you don't have this element that just sucks you out of it like that. It's like no wonder it becomes awkward and we feel stilted. I really appreciate you getting concrete about the ways that you noticed that and worked with it and kind of adapted to it, because I'm definitely going to take that forward. I have a food business and I do a lot of virtual pickling workshops and teaching food preservation. And when I do those breakout rooms, I love it. But I always, hesitate to set the timer or push the button because it feels so controlling.

Lyrice: I think of trust between the facilitator and the folks in the breakout room because if you don't give them back, they can just stay in there forever gossiping. And, you know, having a good time doing.

Kelly: And just back to what you've been talking about to kind of take building those relationships in that community, you know, over several periods of time as opposed to just one meeting. So we've pretty much gone through most of the questions, I think the final two pieces, one is just looking forward where we're uplift is hoping to go from here or what you see coming next on the horizon for you, if you could speak to that a little bit.

Lyrice: Now, this has been super exciting for us. We are really small, so to say that we doubled paid staff isn't quite as exciting as it sounds, but for us it is. So we've hired on quite a few more folks during 2021 and have added a lot of capacity to our team.

And a quickly approaching project for us is our summer fellowship, where we hire, this year, nine young people from our region to essentially receive political education and public education, skills and training throughout the summer. And also they support us in planning our annual convergence. So starts at the very end of May. And that's where a lot of our energies are going towards right now. And then we also have some media projects and webinars that we're planning that we're getting off the ground. But I think more long term,

You know, we're out the door from our parent non-profits, and I think it was just I think we've described it as like. If we were in a boat, like if I was a boat, some things in our boat didn't work. And so we were just kind of really just focused on that maintenance. And I think in 2021, our boat is good. We feel pretty solid. And I think we're just really excited to grow as a youth led group and really imagine like sustained and long term internal infrastructure for us. Revamping of media work, growing our fellowship program. I think some sort of more long term visioning that feels exciting and not long term in the sense of so far away in future that we can't imagine it on the long term bridge, but that really speaks to us in the presence. I can talk more about the media projects and webinars if you'd like.

Kelly: I assume you have materials and some other things that you've already put together. So, you know, you don't need to get into a ton of detail of it now. But, I think just that's the kind of thing that we really are excited to hear, too, is that you're feeling like foundationally you kind of know your little boat is sturdy and you plug the holes and got some new equipment and all that, because that's really how we see our role. Even though our grants are really small, being seed grants that support growth that isn't tied to one specific project or like project outcome, but just kind of your overall health. And, you know, that's really where the pause comes in, is that everybody needs to pull back and pause and take a break from the normal way of operating. And we see that as a way of kind of putting in a little bit more of the infrastructure and building up your team, shoring up your team and all of that. We're just really glad to have been able to support some of that, too.