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Survivors Changing the World for Ourselves

Kabzuag Vaj, Freedom Inc.

April 19, 2017

>> hello everyone. Thank you for joining us. It looks like we are at the top of the hour. We will get started with our presentation.

>> Thank you. Hello everyone. On behalf of Praxis and office of violence against women I welcome all of you to today's keynote address. As a part of the course the keynote is a structure to explore thought-provoking subject matters. In the past we have learned from academics, activists and organizers are working in different areas of social to bring about social change. Today we are very lucky to have an activist and community organizer. An immigrant who founded and continues to lead a unique organization. That brings together different voices of change in our society. We have with us today and Mac. The founder of freedom Inc. and organization that is working to end violence against women in a very particular way. Freedom Inc. organizers across ethnic communities, age, issues, and many other boundaries that seem to separate us. That she will make us understand these boundaries separate unnecessarily. Before we go into that I would like to ask Liz if she could take us through the technical part of this presentation.

>> Certainly. Hello everyone. I will touch upon the webinar details that we want to call to your attention specifically. Reminder that we want to remind you that you have the option to adjust the text size and color settings of the Q&A box that you see in the middle of your screen towards the top. The icon for the restaurant is on the far right so feel free to utilize that option. Also your questions and comments will come to us in the Q&A box and they will be viewable we will do our best to do our comments interjected into the presentation. Finally this session

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is being recorded and will be posted to the ALC class webpage. You can look for it by the end of your weekend. Feel free to either to private message me in the webinar platform. If you have a question or problem, or you could also email me.

>> I just want to take 30 seconds to talk a little bit about the keynote address program and how to address their speaker today. Let me go over the keynote program. The keynote address occupies an important place in the curriculum of the advocacy learning center. It is designed to inspire our thinking and provide us with information about social change that is going on all around us. Allows us to stretch our imagination, exercise our analytical muscles and sharpen advocacy skills. The keynote address motivates us to take a critical look at the way we advocate and shape our work. In fact we learned from organizers and activists who challenge us to do better in our work. Kabzuag . Kabzuag Vaj is an amazing organizer. I remember meeting her when she was just starting out very young. I did not get fooled by her young age. She was firebrand. She is the founder and co-executor director of freedom Inc. and is dedicated your test her life to ending gender-based violence. In the past 20 years Kabzuag spent her life working to the collective power and social change. What is amazing to me as she branches out another areas. Kabzuag is a co-owner and founder of green reverse a social enterprise that works with artisan makers most of whom are women and girls from a region in southeast Asia. Without much ado Kabzuag take this over. Let me remind everyone please do write your question indicated a box and we will present it to Kabzuag.

>> Welcome and thank you for having me. I'm delighted to be back delighted to have this conversation with you all. Today I'm hoping to share a little bit of my work with freedom Inc.. And our model as well as sharing some of the lessons we have learned in creating this multiracial and multi-gendered multigenerational work. As we all know the work of gender justice or domestic bound sexual assault movement has become so professionalized. For me my beginnings in this work is

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quite personal. Is quite personal but has become very professional. Is to connect all of my work to my beginnings and my personal life experiences. Welcome and let's have a conversation. I would like to start with a little bit about myself. How I came into this work. I was born in Laos at the end of the American war in Southeast Asia. Here in the US you all call it the Vietnam War. Both of us who are -- those of us who are refugees Colette the American war in Southeast Asia. Was born in 1974 at the end of the war. And my mother was severely malnutrition's. When she had me I was very sick and I was not to survive. Therefore my mother had to take me across the border into a hospital and that is where she witnessed many children dying from the war. And one day she witnessed that this child was pretty healthy. And she saw through the room nurses drawing blood from this child literally killing this child. My mother took it upon herself to lead -- leave the hospital saving my life. Went to go back to the village my father was very upset with her and he was going to beat her and it wasn't until another man had said, your wife just saved your daughter's life. My mother has always told me the story as far as I can remember even one I was young. The purpose of telling the story is that I was not supposed to do survived but because I survived. I always made it a point to never forget where I came from and that is the title of this conversation. So that survivors are in fact the ones leading the way and we have the tools and skills that to do so. That is my first beginning of how I survived. And then when we came to the United States in 1981 as refugees, we landed for Southeast Asian refugees, there was no infrastructure in the US to make sure we were successful. When we came to the US, that was after about four years of living in the refugee camp. In the refugee camp my mother also told stories of how I was very sickly and malnutrition's. And how she would hide food from the rest of my siblings so that I could survive. So these were stories that were constantly told to me. When we arrived to the United States we were placed into some of the poorest neighborhoods throughout the US. And these neighborhoods were predominantly black neighborhoods. And I remember landing and being in Philadelphia and

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being in a predominantly all-black neighborhood and went to school and being one out of two. My cousin and I who were in this elementary class and everybody was black. My image of what the United States was, was a black community or black US. When we left Philadelphia we also came to Madison Wisconsin after finding our relatives had been resettled here. Were also placed and lived in predominantly poor black communities and growing up my introduction to the black community was -- my mother and I never spoke to each other but I remember that we didn't know how to prepare meals for ourselves. So the black grandmothers in the neighborhood would come and teach us how to prepare meals that wouldn't require cooking when our parents were at work. And I remember mother's trading vegetables with black grandmothers for these types of things and leaving each other guest at each other's doorsteps. This was an introduction to my America. The reason that I tell you that story is later on it helps me to understand race and oppression in America. After I graduated one of the stories that I always told about how I came to this work in my first awareness of gender justice was when I was 14 years old I remember in the 80s when we had just arrived. We were very traditional. Many communities are very traditional and patriarchal. And I remember my mother's and aunt's ancestors preparing meals at family gatherings and having to repair and set the table and the men would eat first and the women and children would eat second. For me I remember specifically one day going into the kitchen and eating before everybody creating my own justice in my mind and understanding that I didn't have terminology or understanding what justice meant, had an analysis of justice but that I could feel what justice meant. At a young age I started doing work. When we first met I started doing professional gender justice work. Prior to that had already been helping at the age of 17 I was already housing teens in my college dorms and college apartments. Housing teens would run away from home. My work in the gender justice field started when I was very young out of necessity. In 1999 when I started this work it was my first paid job to do this work and I remember coming

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into the organization that had a domestic fund advocate for the past two years and they had no clients. I came in the first day and had my first claim to 1999. Remember very specifically. And after that I started thinking about spaces and trying to fill a niche in my community. And that nest was to provide services and support for women and girls. So -- and children which there were none at the time. And thus creating and organizing people for two years until I incorporated and found freedom Inc. as a nonprofit organization. That is a little story about how I came into this work. The story of freedom Inc. today is a black and Cambodian collective of young, clear elders. Anyone from ages 6 all the way to 74 years old. We do artwork -- we believe that we have to create an organization where we can show up as our full selves. Therefore we created, when I created freedom Inc. I created this in mind. Creating a role that I wanted to live and. But also creating an organization where people wanted to work in and also wanted to invest in. Freedom Inc. today is black, HMONG, and Cambodian. We did not start that way. We started out as a HMONG organization for women and girls. I remember specifically when we used to do this work and we used to have programs for girls they were HMONG boys in the neighborhood who are saying, what about us. We want organization and a place to learn. So I started the boy's program, which was called free men, we said to these boys, you can come and join us to get political education and be a part of this movement, but you would have to be able to be okay with clear leadership, feminine leadership, and be okay to start dismantling your old patriarchal practices. These were teen boys. They said they would do that. We started having a team boys group. After that we would also go into medicine the way the communities are situated there are pockets of poor people throughout the city. We would go into these communities and we would facilitate and have our weekly mongrels groups. There were a group of black also basically said I want to come to this and what about me. Akamai can I have a girls group 2. When we first started we had them come we quickly realized there was such a difference between the black girls and tanning

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girls we had to separate them at the start of the black programming at freedom Inc. After that we figured out that we always had been a clear friendly had never hired a clear person to work. Even though we were friendly we could not create queer spaces without hiring a person. My codirector now the executive director was hired Ed I joke about this but when I'm -- Em came into the organization there was the only one that was queer. By the end of the first year many people identified as being a queer or LGBTQ. Even though we were friendly we were not prepared and did not invest in queer leadership and therefore we were not a Shamita -- queer agency. Left component of freedom Inc.'s work we started -- we knew that the queer community also struggled with being refugees and resettlement. But there is a small Community of Cambodian folks in Madison and the surrounding cities that were not getting the tougher services. I also know through my work that they were in extreme poverty and needed a lot of services. We created the Cambodian component of freedom Inc. That is how we got here today to being Hmong, Cambodian, and black organization. A little bit about our work and approach. We really do believe in services. We believe in empowering those who come to our programs. If you all know the way that we do our work especially around elders is the majority of the elders who used to come for services would continue to come for services, but they would stay with us. Unlike mainstream organizations, or perhaps they would used to have this model of if you are out and about and you see somebody you do not talk to them. Our motto is very different in that if you don't know them, they will not get help from you and after they are done with you they will not speak to you. Was very important for us in serving 10 elders that we established relationship with them through the traditional Hmong system will we started to create new families with them. That we would host them every week but we knew that the attorney elders would stay with us for a long time. The majority of the elders that we serve today have an average of 10 years of being with freedom Inc.

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>> Kabzuag I'm going to jump in and emphasize one issue that you brought up. Everything is good. But two things that I wanted to mention and get you to speak about. Your leadership structure. And how that is -- one of the things that you said that even though you are queer friendly people were coming in was other leadership. Meaningful leadership -- meaningful participation is important. And I just wanted you to talk about that a little bit and also the second thing I just heard, moving away from the more common practice of, of keeping confidentiality, most of us would not talk to somebody that we worked with when we see them in a grocery store, but you do not do that. You do speak with everybody and make relationships. If you could just address both of those issues a little bit more. That would be really great because that has always been a contention and kind of a debate. Within our communities. How do we do that. And I also want to invite the participants to send in your questions or comments. Will pass it on to Kabzuag. If you could please do that.

>> Sure. Our lesson that we learned in doing this work in a domestic violence field or movement, is that anytime there is a layoff. Anytime someone is going to get fired or anytime someone it needs to leave the organization do to budgetary restraints, it has always been women of color. One of the things that I know when we created this black component is that I need to figure out how to invest in the leadership to sustain that program. I remember specifically when the funding ended had to figure out, finding black a specific funding in the state of Wisconsin was nearly impossible. When that ended a literally shifted and created and asked people to take a pay cut so that we could keep the black and clear. We started if we were to invest in this piece if we are truly about black liberation tied that if it came down to it we wouldn't move one of our funding sources to keep Em around. That is one of the things that I always share what I talk about if you are you serious investing in the leadership of those most impacted. Are you serious about investing in the leadership of people that you do work for. So what you did

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was literally just shifted funding. Of running specifically among Community's for having this person help us in whatever capacity this was. That was one thing I was able to do. The other thing I learned about really truly creating not only in a but in practice, a queer , black, antennae organization was that we basically would every year survive we are having process this problems with our leaders that we need to invest and we would literally set aside training resources to do just that. Think that is one of the ways we have been very intentional about understanding the barriers and challenges that comes with all of that being black. Being LGBTQ and being a poor. Putting resources where they say they are doing the work. That is one example of what we did. The other thing is within a year 80 percent are now identifying was until you visibly have somebody who isn't afraid and is out and straight folks or Denver Post cannot create spaces safe enough for people to come out. I say that to say that for eight years in creating a safe space for Hmong queer folks was not as important as the one year that Em came to the agency and wholly created a different kind of environment. So I cannot express how important it is that to invest in who you serve. Spike I was asking -- you are really going against the confidential. Recognizing people on the street. Going gets what is considered the common practice. We do have --

>> we do have cases where people were people they do not contact me. The tenant community is so small. But we did a very similar.. If you do not know them then how can they trust your work. The community knew as. They knew what freedom Inc. did. They know if their wives are talking to me that it is already understood in the community that is happening. But at the other and because we are such a small community we are already family anyway and many instances. When we are out in public we do not shy away from talking to the people we serve because there could be other reasons why we are in communication with them. Despite -- we do not establish relationships even outside of the office with a lot of these women they do not trust you to even start telling your stories. So

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this is a great example of how we have been able to work among elders. Many of them because they stay with you for years, some of them have been with us for 15 years. I don't know if there is a slide in here that will allow me to talk about this but we really believe that when people stay with you for that long, how do you work with people who come in for services and then really turned them in to social justice advocates. And even if they do not become a social justice advocates for the community that they come and advocate for themselves. That is like this relationship that is ongoing. Transcending justice service. Think that it claims a little bit about how we do our work. For example, an advocate goes into the temple. Everyone knows this advocate does domestic violence and sexual assault work. The men know and the monks know. Everybody knows. And that we we talked to the women outside of that but nowhere do we see them in the community and not acknowledging their existence. In a way there is no safety for them. But because we know there is no safety for them either by knowing us or not knowing us, there is also a piece that people do not understand. For us being domestic violence advocates it is not a heroic thing. It is still frowned upon and we still get death threats. Weeks to get people who show up. Because we already know that everybody knows, there is nowhere to hide so we just kind of Leo openly do our work. The other piece is in the 15 years that I have been here have never had to publicize our work. All of our work is through word-of-mouth. Hope that explains a little bit.

>> It does. Think you. -- Thank you.

>> The grassroots justice community organizing. I wanted to say a little bit about the community organizing and across lifespan services. We have elders we provide and have it leadership training for. We do political education with them. And I will talk a little bit later about some of the campaigns these folks who have come in as victims and women looking for services. Elders looking for services who are now community social justice advocates advocating for social change. In

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Madison. That is also a model that we would like to share with you all. How do you get them from victims or people seeking services to social change agents. This model that I'm going to share with you all actually came out of lessons learned conversation that we had with about 28 Hmong domestic violence advocates in the state of Wisconsin. This is a combination of their work for 15 years will be learned from the conversation with them -- and I will tell you what we were able to do with that. We learned was that we needed a space so that people would come in for services and support and safety and we would provide that. But knowing that our community. Many social justice agents or organizations do not do the service providing piece because it is not social justice. Many service providers do not do the organizing piece because of the service organizations. But one of the things I learned is when you are working with extremely poor communities. Communities actually need services, before we can politicize them the actually needed medicine. They needed shoes and school supplies. We found a good balance between providing them the basic necessities to function and have a better quality of life and creating a pathway for them to become their own advocates and their life. We do that through mobilizing and organizing. One of the things that we also learned that it wasn't enough for the women to come in for services. Mainstream providers may have support groups and I think we tried that. Sitting together to have a conversation wasn't something our people show up every week for. Basically took it to where they were located. For example we would go to the temples when they are having services for the tranny elders they loved to garden so we started going to the garden and creating a way for for them to garden together to build sisterhood. The other thing that we learned and this model comes from the no model. For patriarchy to survive in domestic balance to thrive we have to figure out who the main communicator was. We learned this you are international marriage work which is kind of similar to trafficking, but a different. That we had this phenomenal desk phenomenon where men were going overseas and still married to women in America but they were going

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overseas and having a new families and bringing yoga brides here. He was abusive because of the age difference often times between the men and the new wife would be anywhere from 50 to 70 years. It was horrendous. We started having this conversation and said, how could this be happening. What we learned that the young lives overseas were saying your man are coming over because you are not good to them and you are old and ugly. Are not supportive. The woman here were learning that the young women overseas were easy and fast and cared about money and would sleep with anybody. We learned was to make me nuclear between all of this was the man. Without if we could take the conversation out and allow the women to have conversations with each other, would it change. This conversation of sisterhood and building sisterhood. Having women have direct communication with each other versus having a through the mail component of their family. This start of conversation of not only are you going to come to group, but you are going to learn skills and tools to being a sisters and being a friend. One thing that was evident for turning women who are not blood related or by marriage related. We learned that we started building sisterhood within each of our programs intentionally. Not just support groups but intentionally building and helping them build sisterhood into the communities. The other thing we learned as it is not enough to build super -- sisterhood of good about themselves but they actually need a political education we felt like survivors stories. We were always told this is what the survivor wants. But sometimes what the survivor want is what the survivor wants. But it isn't good for movement or isn't the right analysis. We were saying, if we want to be victim centered and we want to listen to survivors, then we also have to give our survivors political education. Something they have never had access to for the majority of the women we are working with. We started these freedom schools. We started leadership training. We started every opportunity we had for the people coming for services and turning them into these social justice advocates. Even if those who didn't use it, we would still teach them. We would have 2 to 3

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days we would have take these elders and women and just talk to them about patriarchy. We would talk to them about racial oppression and poverty. We said that was our way to building their self determination and leadership. But then we said that is not enough either. When somebody is with you for 10 to 15 years, can we turn them into social change agents where they can start to do work for the community. So the Hmong women and others were great examples of this. And I will talk a little bit about that. This is basically our model -- model for the state of Wisconsin for a lot of the Hmong advocates. And I am also trying to implement this with our black program and my program. --

>> This is so fascinating. But when you're talking about talking to elders are bringing in older women to talk to each other. Older and younger women to talk to each other one of the things that happens and particularly end Asian amenities is there is this tremendous age a hierarchy that your people do not know and they need to be respectful of the elders and they're not the teachers. The others of the teachers or that type of thing. Is this anything like that they faced for their freedom Inc. faced. I'm assuming many of you are young women who started this work. And are now doing this work. Is when you're talking about politicization and political education, how did that work out.

>> I think one of the things we learned early on which doesn't -- we learned early on about mobilizing very different multigenerational and multiracial, multicultural groups was that we learned early on with our black a program. When the black girls wanted to start a program and we joined them with the tranny girls what we learned is that there is such a cultural difference that it wasn't possible and that they were counterproductive. Very early on we said, we will have very gender specific spaces. We will have linguistically specific spaces. We will have generational specific spaces. Linguistically specific spaces and people in this work do not typically do that. Would likely want to do a pan- Asian group multiracial group or we just think all Hmong people can come together. What we learned is

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the more specific that we were the easier it was. For example, we had these elders in one group and we had these attorney youth in another group. Where we were able to use them to show up for each other was when we had these campaigns. For example the elders, they did this community garden campaign were basically it was this campaign in the middle of the parking they were trying to get this garden. We used black, and clear young of both -- folks and to advocate and educate getting the elders. We kind of used them to support each other without telling them that is what they were doing. We showed them that they could stand up for each other and not stand on top of each other. I think that is one way that we have been instrumental. We separated the groups and learning spaces. And then we create spaces where they can show up for each other without being in conflict. I hope that makes sense. Spike with the politicization when you're talking about freedom classes and people coming in and actually doing sit down learning, something that happened.

>> That happened, but it happened separately. We will have today's just for Hmong kids. We will have today's just for turning others or [Indiscernible] elders. And that we have the Community event and elders where we all come together. And that I would say to you that we also believe in hiring folks who represent those who they are serving. For example our elders program. We have just by limitation of language and access to Emmett -- Accam the academic issues we hired maybe middle age Hmong women to serve the women. If you're not considered youth you cannot run the youth program. I think we are very specific in our leadership and how it reflects the people we are serving. Psych are there any questions. I want to remind everyone to send in your questions or comments. As you are listening to Kabzuag. We will pass it on. I'm assuming you are taking care of it. You're going to say a couple of words Liz?

>> I will keep an eye out. We welcome your thoughts. So far there has not been anything to share from the group.

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>> So maybe we have 15 minutes? Spec we have about 45 minutes left.

>> Than I can talk slower. I wanted to bring up what our weekly groups look like. Our weekly groups can look like sewing groups or gardening groups. On an average we see about 300 people unduplicated. These are just people who come through and they are not necessarily there for services about people who just come through to our office for anything. These are support groups. We have a black and queer group. Southeast Asian queer user group. We have a can badly and -- Cambodian women's group a Cambodian youth group. We have a Hmong fine arts or the dance and cultural groups for Hmong teens. We have spoken word groups for black queer folks. We also have regular women and elders support groups. So on any given day we are seeing the whole community. A lot of people sometimes, -- at the reason why we are able to keep this amount of activity within our agency is we actually hire from within the community. So if you are not a reflection of the community, than most of the time the people that will work for us are people that volunteered for us. People who have been around for a while. That is how we have been able to keep this close-knit relationship with all of the people that we serve.

>> Here is the photo of the freedom school. We have freedom school for every component of our agency. And the people that we serve. This is what freedom schools look like. Basically this is a multiracial. All of the youth at freedom Inc. went into this. It was led by them. The keynote speakers are young people and teens. They organize everything. The topics can range from getting police out of schools to surviving sexual violence and incest. This is what freedom schools typically look like.

>> Before we leave the site about freedom schools, we did have a question. One of our listeners is wondering if you would share more about how your freedom

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schools were organized. And elements that you thought were critical to creating the freedom schools and how you decided on agenda and so forth.

>> The freedom schools, this is taken straight out of the idea in the civil rights movement. 1960 freedom schools. We came up with this idea and we needed to politicize the people coming for services. The other piece that people should know is that a lot of the children that come through to our groups and services with our agency, their mothers are in our elders program. Or grandmothers are in the elders program or the mothers are receiving services and support from us. The agenda for freedom school. We leave it up to the participant. We literally teach them about gender throughout the year because they come in throughout the year. Freedom school is mostly during the summertime or we actually do a retreat where we take them somewhere. But these are topics that we have been trying to teach them throughout the year. And then we allow them to say, we want to learn more about this. Or we want to do a youth summit on the sort we want this. They crafted the agenda themselves and then we bring in speakers or people who can do teachings around the issues. Sometimes the freedom schools become youth summit where the women are actually teaching other women and in this case this picture in particular was a youth summit where these folks we had been teaching all year long became the workshop presenters. That is how we have modeled each of the freedom schools. With the elders it is a little bit different. We kind of take topics that we hear they are interested in. And then we take them to a retreat site and for two days we go in and have them build relationships with each other and really have the conversations. One of the success stories of our freedom schools with our elders was that we were able to teach them about black lives matter and why that was important for them as training elders to care about that. That is one of the things. When Mike Brown came -- the shooting of Mack Brown and the black liberation movement. We didn't hear our elders or victim blaming. We didn't hear them talk about at I

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blackness as much because we had been working with us on these issues. It is an ongoing process. I think it is very specific to each group. Also in these freedom schools we teach them about their own history. We will sometimes bring in trainers when we don't have the right trainers within our groups. But a lot of it is also based on hearing. And really building community with each other. Spike The community guarding campaign is an important campaign to talk about how folks came in to freedom Inc. as elders looking for services and then they became survivors. Five or six years into it they are still with us and still coming every week. And they don't necessarily need services anymore. Or acute domestic violence services but they just became a Community national leaders that we would lean towards sometimes they would come in and hang out. What we said is, how can we take those that invested their leadership when they are continuing to invest in us by volunteering and showing up. We started this, we went around and asked them about things they cared about. One of the things we learned is that the elders we love getting access to their own culture he -- culturally specific vegetables and food. Many of them are impoverished. So they were not necessarily using the public transportation. They cannot get their own food and did not have the means to do that. They said we would like more gardening a space. We would like a place where we would could just walk to. So this is a Community that we had been working with for 10 years and these elders said they lived across the street and there was a beautiful park next to a beautiful lake in the center part of town. And they said we would like to garden there. Now there was so many wealthy white folks in that area and they were saying all sorts of racist things like these people wanted to garden they should find their own house or people garden in their backyard and a and a local park. How dare folks want a public piece of land for private use. All of these things were coming out. In these elders basically got together and we did political education with them and came out with the campaign that said food is a human right. Food is medicine. And gardening is a way of life and gardening is exercising for them. They also said

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nowhere else in the city of Madison. We are nowhere else. We do not use anything else. Your museums or bus routes. Nothing else in the city of Madison. We would like to use this spot. We politicized them. We taught them to show up at hearings. We would use where the elders did not feel comfortable in educating and showing up, we would use the young people. We would use the queer black folks and learn from each other. They were able to win this potted of land in the middle of Madison one of the most beautiful parks to garden. And then they prioritize the gardening to folks with a disability and elders. Today as you come into our city, the whole city uses this garden as an example of how gardens are better than grass. But it was one by the attorney elders where the survivors -- or the survivors. This is a good example of how we were able to do our work and providing services to them and creating social change agents at the end. For this picture you see this is the first year that they were able to garden. That is my mother in the middle teaching all of these young people how to garden and grow their own food.

>> Another campaign we were able to work on. And this again is taking the young people who come through for our services and these are survivors and the children who have witnessed domestic violence and survivors of incest and sexual violence. Hmong and black youth. And when Mike Brown was shot and killed we started mobilizing, we were able to mobilize those kids and give them political education to being just people who came for services and support services from us and really taking on our campaign where they said this matters to me and we were able to teach young 's to care and really figure out how their liberation was tied to black liberation. So this was a campaign that we all work done. The city of Madison was trying to build a new jail because they felt the old jail was falling apart and this is \$160 million product that we were able to stop. In fact we took these kids who came in for services and made them into social change agents and organizers. Spike that is a photo of us doing our work. At the capital of Madison

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and Madison can Wisconsin. -- Madison Wisconsin. These were the same kids. Part of our work and how we were able to do multi-racial work was that we were able to show within our leadership one of the things that Em and I acknowledged from the start was that we knew that we could not create a black and Southeast Asian organization if we ourselves didn't consciously make a decision that we were going to build family with each other and we knew that our staff, if our relationship between Em and I as a black and attorney person was not genuine that we would create in organization that was basically the Hmong folks and black folks were coexisting and we didn't want that. We really believed that our liberation was tied to each other and actually that in order to liberate one, we had to liberate the other. So this started the conversation. But I say that comment to say that during the black lives matter movement one of the things that freedom Inc. was able to do -- we started as a domestic violence agency and we have become a social justice agency. We have become a clear justice agency. We were able to create agents or Southeast Asian folks who knew how to show up for the black a component of freedom Inc. in a way that it wasn't about ally ship but in a way that it was about supporting family. And I say that to say that a lot of people in the time of crisis show up and ask, what can I do and how can I help you. One of the things that we learned is because of that we try to build family between black and Hmong people, or in our organization, when the moment came in the black a component of freedom Inc. needed us to be there, we didn't ask questions about how we should work. We just showed up and new if it was meant to carry water we did that. Meant using our bodies are putting them on the run we did that. People were learning. A lot of Asian folks were learning how to be good allies. And looks towards us to say, how were you able to do that. To show up for each other in a very natural and organic way. We were able to say to them it is because of for 10 years we have been trying to figure out how to be family and not just allies.

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>> We have community events for everybody comes.

>> I am sorry. I find that to be very interesting that when you are saying that we did not want to be allies because that is the main narrative that people do talk about, I want to be a good ally. Any group that is different or separate from yours. But I think part of that is because you don't want to take over the leadership, will or you want to make sure the voices are heard, or those issues are highlighted. So we say that yes we just showed up for each other and because we were making families or it was one family and we were all there. That is an interesting concept. I cannot quite visualize that how that would be. And how did you develop or how did you identify people in your community and the Hmong community? To say, no questions asked if -- or if the black Community needs as we are going to be there. How did you do that? What was the preliminary work that you did?

>> One of the things that we learned early on was that freedom Inc. was a Southeast Asian organization or tenant organization. One thing we learned early on was that not everybody was going to accept that we were going to become a Southeast Asian or tranny and black. The reason why I said that we had to intentionally say we are going to create a family was that when we became tiny and black, a lot of the Hmong folks who used to work and volunteer, and come to freedom Inc., they left. They said, this is not for us. This is not where we wanted to go and we do not want to work with black people. And then there were black folks who came in and said I do not like the Southeast Asian component of this and I would rather be black. And I can tell you that because of that we were able -- we made an intentional decision to say we are going to lose family. We lost people who we consider family who have been with freedom Inc. for eight years and just decided they were done. So Em and I said we are losing family and we have to grapple with that so that we can create a new family. So Shamita, it was that we let go of those who did not want to come along. And those that do not have a choice, that we were providing services for, like the

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elders, we slowly did political education and started to teach them. I can tell you, like in the part where I talk about lessons learned, I think people think this is beautiful, and thank God we have done this but I can tell you that there are so many lessons learned about how we have done it wrong and how we are striving. The one thing that I can say is that we have some stuff that we have done really right and some things we have done really wrong. But the one thing that I can say that we are continuing is that we continue to struggle and stay in the fight. This whole creating family was because we are losing people that we consider family because we wanted to add to our family.

>> Thank you.

>> Ice kept a whole bunch of slides. This is just one of our Community events for everybody eats together. And we were in Ferguson doing work. This is just to show you all the range of what kind of work that we do at freedom Inc. and that indeed you can be service provider agency and and organizing agency. You can be queer. You can be elders. You can be refugees and you can be young. You can be old. We also have a way that we work. We have a few people volunteer and work with us who have wellness challenges and if we have time I can talk about how we were able to figure that out also. A lot of these elders have been with us from 15 years or five years. They really stay.

>> Here is an interesting question. She is interesting in hearing more about the political education survivors and advocating the challenge of engaging and mobilizing survivors with different political or social views.

>> Yes. I think that not all survivors stay with freedom Inc. Some people come in for services and they leave. We have a wide range of people who we engage with. And there are people who just come in for services one time and leave. There are people who continue to support us and will show up for community events and there are core people with our program. They are core to our agency. When we

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talk about political education for survivors we are really talking about the core because we realize that not everybody is interested in political education and not everybody can be a social change agent. There are many elders have come and gone. But is just a the core that continues to stay. There are many other people. We service somewhere around 500 to 800 people. Our core is maybe 100. To answer Diane's question we have chosen those who stayed with us in our court leadership to continue to invest in them because they continue to invest in office. That is how we are able to at least have some sort of smaller group of people who actually have similar political and social views. And then with the Hmong folks -- with the elders, these are people who have never had opportunities for political education. So I think that we kind of play with that when they come for services or when they come in for support groups. We give it to them anyways. And whether they agree or disagree, we are having conversations. I think it is an opportunity for many communities who have never had the privilege of having that kind of conversation..

>> This is another campaign that we did. Similar to this question on what about people with varying political and social views. Queer or LGBT issues and many of our community still have still have traditional beliefs.'s we did a visibility campaign around queer justice. This is just one of those campaigns. We were able to really help our elders shift their mind and also the people who come to services to really start to think about what type of agency that we are. This campaign, we have several other photos. But I will tell you one of the success stories of the campaign was a, when you can get a 74-year-old tranny grandmother to see the humanity in a 17-year-old transgender black teen and when I say see the humanity when they can say I understand you and support you and be with whoever you are. I think that is amazing that we were able to do that and that is one of our success stories. Is a, how were able to get this grandmother to say, regardless, I support you and who you are. And that has a lot to do with

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these campaigns where we say the elders are too afraid to educate and to shop and ask for what they want appear we would have black community organizers who are often queer who would come in and go to city Council meetings and give it the elders at their garden. And what is the problem. I think because we were able to do these campaigns where they showed up for each other, or when there was asking for number policing and the predominantly black neighborhoods. Number prison or number jail, we were able to bring in Hmong folks to also help speak out against that when we knew it would not be taken in the same light as a black component speaking those words. So we have been able to use each other's strengths to advocate for each other.

>> I want to share -- like I was saying, I think it sounds really nice. It sounds a beautiful. And sometimes I think when I talk about how freedom Inc. is a -- multi generational and multi-gendered, a multiracial group, people say, how are you able to do that ? This is something that people are striving and many social justice agencies to do. On top of that, and agency led by people who were most impacted. Some of the challenges that we have come to an all of these components of our mission and vision, I can tell you that these are hard earned -- hard learned lessons. For example, where Southeast -- Southeast Asian and black but every day we struggle because there are misconceptions about what Asians are and how they should act, and what type of leadership. Our leadership styles looked different. But I will give you the example of how Southeast Asian -- our daily struggle -- struggles with anti-blackness. We have to photographers. This is an example of some of the daily struggles we go through. We have to photographers that do our event. There are both Southeast Asian or both Hmong. They would go to a garden gathering and take 1000 photos. And they would take the most beautiful photos of the grandmothers and the children and flowers. Everything. And then they would go to a black lead action and have maybe 10 good photos. So we had to come back and sit and say what is the problem? This

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has been an ongoing issue. One of the things that we have had to have a heart-to-heart conversation about is it, what about black culture or black events. What is it that you cannot see the beauty in this event? What is it that you cannot take photos that we can use. What is it that you only take 10 photos versus 1000 photos? These are things we have to talk to the Southeast Asian staff about. What is antiblack about this and why that continuously happening that you cannot see beauty in the people. The black folks that are working for freedom Inc. and you cannot take one good photo. These are the kind of things that we struggle with all of the time. We struggle with our leadership styles that are very different. And our leadership styles may show up very different. We communicate. Our direct communication is very different. And sometimes just because you're able to speak your mind it doesn't necessarily mean that you are speaking directly. And 40 Hmong folks, just because you are kind doesn't mean you are saying the right things. I say that to say that we have a lot of problems with the way that we communicate and the way that we are. This is a daily struggle that we have to try to figure out. So Em and I, Em is very well spoken and thoughtful. Everybody in town sees Em as our leader. But my style is equally that but I am a person who, if people do not ask you than you do not tell them. That is how I was trained going up. Even if I know the answer if you do not ask me, I will not say anything. People look at our leadership style as a Em is a leader and I am the follower. But I could be the mastermind. These are things that we continuously struggle with.

>> The multi-gender piece. I think one of the things that we have had to teach the different generations. Who understands the multi-gender stuff? Transgender. We have gender nonconforming stop and transgender folks. How do you work with the population that might say that is a western thing. We didn't have that in our country. We consistently have people who are transit will be a or homophobic that, for services that are part of our group. We always have to do political education around that and that is an everyday struggle. Did a piece is different

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abled folks. We work with people who come from a lot of trauma and survivors. Surviving war and surviving abusive homes or relationships. And also people who just have workplace challenges. Whether it be differently abled or mental wellness challenges. We hire them. We consult with him. We contact them for work. One of the hard learned lessons that we had was a, when we first started doing this work we would hire them as part time staff or full-time staff. Some of them would show up and do great work for two months and then for weeks we would not hear from them. Have first we were saying, this person is so irresponsible. We need to fire this person. And then they would leave our agency. They would electively leave. And then they would come back because we are family to them. And then they would do great work with us again for a couple of months. Then they would leave again or not be able to show up. What we learned from that is that we also had to structure our hiring practices and we had to structure our HR in the way that we were able to meet the needs of our folks. Our employees were contracted folks who may be struggling with mental wellness challenges. These are also things that we work with on a daily. We have a focus may come in for two months and then leave for two months. They may leave for a couple of weeks and then come back. Em and I have really had to work and shifting the culture at freedom Inc. to say -- to figure out who is actually having mental wellness challenges. Whereas we didn't know before we were basically labeling them as bad workers. These are some of the things that we have learned in working in these multi-gender, multi generational and multicultural spaces.

>> I have been talking a lot. Other questions?

>> I have a couple. One is to go back and ask you. You mentioned the transnational space. And woman to women talk where men are going in and marrying in Southeast Asia. And women are really hating them. How did that get resolved? Hasn't been resolved? Or is it a continuous struggle still?

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>> That campaign, when I spoke to you all in 2013 we were in the midst of that campaign. The campaign started for those of us were on the call who may not be familiar with that, the abuse international marriage campaign or issue came when we saw in 2006 that there was a trend. The trend it was we were working with victims and coming and. The victims were saying, my husband has disappeared or I see these phone cards. He has not been giving me money. I think he has gone overseas. This was happening throughout the state of Wisconsin. What we found out was, there was a domestic violence but in addition to that there was a new component. These men were going back or having these relationships overseas. From figuring out how to name it and come up with analysis of what is happening to protecting and creating an environment when the community was ready to have this conversation. Is as you know there are a lot of components to the national merit issue that could be criminal. And could really have a huge backlash on the Community that is already struggling. So as advocates we were taking all of that into consideration. For the past 10 years it has evolved to connecting the first wives here in America to the second wives and allows. To serving the women. The first wives here in the US, to now serving the second wives who have come to the US. And we really made this public push in 2013 and 2014. And we went overseas and spoke to the women. We have really -- the success has been that there is less of Hmong men traveling overseas and involving international marriage is. And it has changed. Now what we are seeing is that we were able -- we always knew that it wasn't just through services that it was going to change the hearts and minds of our community and that we actually had to have a campaign that was about changing hearts and minds of our community. Through that work, we have been able to shift was happening in our community. But now the new issue is the one child rule in China that has created a shortage of women in China. So there has been a lot of trafficking and a lot of trafficking of Southeast Asian women. Primarily tribes and training folks into China. As wives or just to meet the needs of these men in China. The issues have transformed. But I feel like we have made a

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deep impact. One of the successes of that campaign was that we were able to create green rivers which you talked a little bit about. While we were traveling overseas we figured, if women in small communities could earn and could support their own lives and families, with a engage in abusive international marriage is with these older men overseas? With a go into trafficking and go into the sex industry. We said, if we can create and market and help create and if they could make their own money with that change how they lived their life.'s we saw -- started red and green rivers and that is how we individually picked young women and girls who are artisans throughout the South East Asia region. And help them create new products and create things. And then market to the folks in the US.

>> How is that going?

>> It is excellent. I think the folks who -- I think we were able to change in their lives. This one young girl who had never been to a bank and she make the bracelets of for us. We were able to basically change her life and just living in a village to opening up her own bank account in a bank. She said, I never understood. I never was able to go into a bank and you guys taught me that. And she also bought herself a cow and started her own legacy within her family and she helped her brothers attend school. I think that was a really successful social enterprise that we thought of as part of the solution to this issue.

>> Grades. There's a question. Liz can you articulate the question?

>> Kabzuag, could you say a little bit more about how it is when you have employees that are facing challenges, mentally, emotionally. How is it that you find out about them and how is it that you are able to support those things?

>> A couple of things. One is that many of the employees that we hire are people that have been coming for services. -- Not services but that we already know in

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the community. And if we do not know them, we have been working because we didn't know. We had a to learn. And we actually work on a daily basis with mental health service providers. So we get training from them. One of our grants contact us to help them and the people who work with them and the people who work with us. That is been one of the ways that we have been able to create solutions on how we actually deal with issues around mental wellness challenges. We asked questions. Is this something because a staff person doesn't to do quality work a, or is it because the staff person is actually having a mental honest crisis? So we use expert in the field to help us feel things out. Because at first we didn't know. We thought they were bad workers. That is one of the things that I can suggest. Work with folks who actually know and have a disability justice lens to add that there are some employees that need extra time. There are employees who can only do work for two weeks and have to take off. So they may be contractors with us. So we have a contractor who works with us on and off. And they do political education and stuff for us. They do place. They do parts of our projects and grant initiatives. But they do not do the whole project. And then we are also training the rest of our full-time staff who may not have mental wellness challenges or different mental wellness challenges to step in when the other person has to leave.'s what has been really shifting our whole mindset around to is a good worker and who isn't a good worker and what that terminology means when you are dealing with people with mental wellness. But that is something we have been struggling with for the last eight years and I can tell you the first of four years were really hard. We didn't do it right. And we would label people as not good worker's aunt we we were going through depression or going through manic stages of bipolar folks and we didn't know how to respond to that and we were mislabeling people. But what we knew was that folks would still come back to us and still good -- do good work once they felt better. We just started crafting a way that we work with people. Our policies have changed. It is okay if somebody who

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is a contractor says they can only do this product and nothing else. Then we adjust according to what they can give us.

>> That is fantastic. Thank you.

>> I am sorry we are over -- all over the place. It is so much to talk about. Suck I don't think you are all over the place. I think you are learning. So much from this. The one question that I have, and that has been my difficulty because I have always worked in the community based organization also. But the problem that comes in with being dependent in the community is the community has not done well by the women. And that is where the abuse starts and the traditions of abuse within the community is so high. That is one of the reasons our organization started. We wanted to do something where women were not getting support within the community or there is a high amount of abusers in the community. So I am curious as to how you do that. I'm getting that you are preparing the community or already working in the community preparing and politicizing through the political education. With the has to be a constant struggle.

>> Yes. A constant struggle to do political education.

>> More than that. To prepare the community to support women. Because in my community there is so much resistance towards women standing up for themselves or saying no to violence. It is almost like, it is not a good thing for violence, but it is not good to talk about it either. So there are a lot of these kind of back-and-forth issues that we have to deal with. And I am wondering how you work with that. I feel that we cannot totally trust our communities in terms of supporting women.

>> I agree. I totally agree. I think in the Cambodian community or the tenant community we are similar in the way that women are valued or treated. I think it looks slightly different in the black community. It is the same but it looks

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different. I can only speak for my work in the tenant community. And that is only hard to get to Sprint their mothers or grandmothers. They women are the mothers and grandmothers for the ants and the sisters. And that there is this investment to keeping us in our place even though there is no such thing as our place anymore because our communities are so displaced in this country. I think that is one of the challenges. And because we work with people of all ages. We have grandmothers that still need our services. They are still demonizing that we serve including themselves. And victim blaming. And one of the things that we have learned is that because we have been around for 15 years, one of the things that we have been able to say to our community members is, you may hate our services and hate what we do and you may not want me to service these women but what I have been able to say is, today it is your daughter-in-law and you do not want me to server but tomorrow it is your daughter. So I think it is a struggle for us. We don't have it figured out. And we continue to struggle. But one of the things that I remember within our community, we have this clan structure. Your last name, we only have a few select last names. About 19 major last names in the training community. And your last names are your family ties. One of the things that we learned is the 18 clan which is a member of each of the different clans are pretty much this hobbit that holds the leadership and tells attorney people what to do next. So one of the elders, the female others we have been working with had been going for both services of from us but she was also seeking services from the traditional clan system. And she finally came to us and said, it has been 100 years and nothing has changed for us. She said a, I am done with the traditional system. That tells you. This was -- I think she was about 70. And for her to say that, I can no longer trust the leadership of these men to hold my interest to prioritize my interest and my health as a woman. I must look towards other people for leadership and how I move it forward. I thought that was very interesting hearing that from her as a someone who is 70 years old.

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>> I think there is one more question.

>> One of our participants is wondering if you use a community champions to further your artwork towards your mission? If so how do you foster that relationship to get buy-in? Especially if your champion is a member of a distinct community that you don't belong to?

>> I think to answer -- we have -- I don't know how to answer that without saying. We actually believe that there are people who champion social justice and social change who may not be from within our communities. But we believe that those who are best champions are those within the community. There are two answers to that. Do we work with allies outside of our agency to champion our cost? We have allies who donate. Who have a special skill to help us. Can speak on our behalf when needed. But we don't utilize them as much. We are more interested, and as you can see our model of our community is our campaign. We are more interested in building leadership and champions within the community to champion our own. That may take longer. It may take years. But like I said, that is what I leaved 15 years ago. So that is what I have been creating and that is what I am investing in. I don't know if that answers, but I guess I just have to say that I am a true believer that the best champion for the cause for our cause are those who are going through it and those who are most impacted. So yes we use other champions who are doing other work to be allies and support our work, but we don't as much and we don't really invest in that type of allies and support. We invest most of our resources and time with people who had -- who were survivors. These are the ones that know the best in the communities.

>> Thank you so much. We are coming to an end. You really have taken us into the amazing work that freedom Inc. is doing and how you are organizing across barriers. Thank you for sharing your work. Revision, and your passion with us. Thank you all for joining us today for this keynote address. The next keynote

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address will be -- it is scheduled for July 19. We will have another exciting speaker for you. Thank you all. I hope that you have a wonderful spring and moving towards summer. Liz?

>> Thank you Shamita. I wanted to remind you all that you will see that there is an option for you to download today's PowerPoint in the lower left-hand portion of your screen. I also wanted to let you know that the evaluation link is contained in the web link box at the bottom of your screen. You also receive constant contact publicity that will provide the evaluation link for today. And at Shamita said , Kabzuag, take you so much for sharing your stories and enlightening us with your experience. Shamita, thank you for hosting and articulation. We will talk to you all again soon. Thank you everyone.

>> Thank you. Goodbye.

>> [Event Concluded]