

By Moira Bowman
Western States Center
Trainer/Organizer

MEET THE TRAINERS



Lee Flinn has been an organizer for the Idaho Women's Network for five years. Current issues include: extending the state minimum wage to Idaho farmworkers, preserving reproductive freedom for all women, winning state funding for breast and cervical cancer treatment for low-income women, and fighting homophobic attacks.

The Dismantling Racism Project:

Organizations Making Change

dis-man-tle

1. to take apart
2. to deprive or strip of apparatus, trappings, equipment, etc.

racism

1. a system of advantage for white people
2. the systematic oppression of people of color
3. a belief in the supremacy of white people and the institutional power to enforce that belief

Mention Idaho and many outside the region will picture potatoes, wilderness, and the Aryan Nations. But those familiar with the progressive forces within the state also know it as a place where several predominantly-white organizations are working hard to become anti-racist. The result: a stronger progressive movement.

"This region is changing — and in disconcerting ways," says Lee Flinn, Idaho Women's Network organizer and Dismantling Racism trainer for Western States Center. "Idaho is the fourth fastest growing state in the country, which might lead some to think that we're becoming less conservative. Actually we seem to be attracting more conservative people, some moving to Idaho from more populated and diverse areas specifically because they want to live in mostly white communities."

The Idaho Women's Network (IWN) — along with other partners in United Vision for Idaho — reject the "white flight" agenda for their communities. Now in their fifth year of intensive anti-racism organizational change work, IWN looks markedly different than it did before they committed to a Dismantling Racism (DR) approach.

IWN has established a Change Team to help guide their transformation to an anti-racist organization. The Change Team developed and implemented a range of concrete steps to shift power and remove barriers internally, including revisions in policies, changes in meeting formats, and development of new partnerships and program work.

"We're doing better analysis in our program work by discussing issues in terms of how they affect women of color, low-income women, lesbians and bisexual women, and women with disabilities. We can't just ask, 'How does this affect women?' because we're not a monolithic group with the same experiences," says Lee.

As one example, IWN's Women's Health Project — designed to increase access to reproductive health care, particularly among Latinas and low-income women in southern Idaho — is discovering the need to tackle language and cultural barriers, along with transportation and other needs.

The IWN Board is now one-third women of color. Organizers are careful to point to this as one positive outcome of their DR work; it's neither the starting nor the ending point of their efforts.

"The process takes a huge commitment," says IWN director and Western States Center board member Jen Ray. "It's about struggle and transformation — and that requires support. We couldn't do it without the continued partnership of Western States Center."

The Dismantling Racism Project

The Center created the Dismantling Racism Project to provide that support. Part of Western States' RACE (Research and Action for Change and Equity) Program, the DR Project is one strategy intended to increase the breadth and depth of racial justice work in the region through supporting organizations to build a shared analysis of race and racism. The DR Project strengthens the capacity of individuals and organizations doing racial justice work in the West by developing DR trainers; providing training and support to organizations, coalitions and individuals; and creating educational materials.

"Dismantling racism work is integral to social change in this region," says Yvonne Paul, an organizer for Californians for Justice and another of the Center's DR Program trainers. "If we are building a movement, it has to be cohesive to be viable. We can and must hold organizations accountable for racist structures, processes and culture."

The DR Project offers tools to assist organizations in meeting this challenge. Tools may include training, caucus development, organizational assessment and strategic planning. No two organizations, coalitions or states are alike — so the DR Project's toolbox is constantly expanding to meet the needs of communities in our region.

In addition to strengthening organizations, the DR Project supports people of color by building relationships between them within organizations and throughout the region, to break down isolation and provide opportunities to heal from racism.

Before moving to California, Yvonne lived in Utah where she worked on welfare and economic issues, and organized against anti-immigrant attacks. As an organizer of color, she believes that "the healing aspect for people of color is a training challenge that indicates the overall need to heal our movement to sustain real social change." She reports that participants in an Internalized Racist Oppression training for women of color called the experience "life-altering."

Yvonne and Lee, both graduates of the Center's Western Institute for Organizing and Leadership Development (WILD), became trainers with the Western States through a Training for Trainers conducted by Tema Okum and Kenneth Jones of *changework*. The program included an initial training session and opportunities to co-train in multiple DR workshops, providing new trainers with increasing on-the-ground experience working alongside veteran trainers.

Their experiences as trainers mirror the thoughts and feelings of many who participate in the DR process. Lee, even after five years of involvement in the IWN effort, says "Though I've learned a lot about racism and white supremacy, I am really concerned by how much I don't know — how ignorant I, as a white person, still am." Yvonne says, "Personally, I've been challenged both to understand and to claim my own experiences as a person of color and as an organizer of color, and to share those experiences with others in the context of the DR work."

Both agree that the work, while challenging, is necessary and rewarding. By developing an organization-wide racial justice analysis and practice, DR reduces the effectiveness of divisive right-wing organizing, while strengthening the power and base of progressive organizations. Yvonne summarizes it like this: "Having a strong oppression analysis is as vital as having a budget if you want your organization to be effective and have integrity."

The Idaho Women's Network and United Vision for Idaho, along with the Progressive Leadership Alliance of Nevada, have served as training grounds for the development of the of the Dismantling Racism Project. Each coalition has made significant commitments to integrating an anti-racist analysis in their work and has contributed to the Center's capacity to advance this work throughout the region.

"Working with Western States Center forced us to think more clearly about the effect of racism on our work and the need for predominantly white organizations to become meaningfully anti-racist," says Roger Sherman of United Vision for Idaho. As a result, UVI has invested resources in building relationships with Latino and other people of color organizations, and jumped into the fray, along with IWN, on a campaign to include farmworkers in the state minimum wage law.

As a catalyst for learning and growth, the DR Project has affected trainers, the individual participants attending DR trainings, the organizations and coalitions struggling to transform themselves — and the Western States Center as a whole. The Center recently hired additional staff to increase the capacity of the DR Project and looks forward to working with organizations throughout the region in this crucial social justice work. Continued development of the DR Project includes new curricula — Building Alliances Across Race, Challenging Racist Moments, and Developing a Race Cut in our Organizing — continued recruitment and development of DR trainers, and creation of new resources for multi-cultural people of color organizations.

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Yvonne Paul is an organizer for Californians for Justice who has worked against school vouchers, anti-youth and anti-gay initiatives on the California ballot, where race continues to be used as a prominent wedge. After receiving her M.S.W. from the University of Utah (and organizing against racial oppression within the graduate school), she worked on welfare and economic issues with J.E.D.I. for Women in Salt Lake City, and organized on anti-immigrant issues in Utah.

