

S x SWE Youth Organizers Speak Out

The South by Southwest Experiment (SxSWE) is strengthened by its youth leadership, which includes Lizdebeth Carrasco (SWOP), Monica Ramos (SWU) and Kameisha Smith (Southern Echo). Both Liz and Mónica have been organizing since their sophomore year in high school. Kameisha began organizing way back in the fifth grade. The three young women talked recently with Lori Villarosa about their experience with SxSWE.

Lori Villarosa: *What were some of your initial reactions or observations when connecting with the peer organizations that are part of the South by Southwest Experiment?*

Kameisha: I asked myself, "What are we going to have in common?" But once the discussion started, I realized we shared the same history. We're fighting for the same things. It was an eye opener to me because, before South by Southwest, I never interacted with people of races other than Caucasians.



Mónica: My first experience was back in 2009. It was my first time leaving San Antonio, and in Jackson (Miss.) there were only African Americans. I was not used to that, but it was great because they took us all in like family.

Liz: We did the People's Freedom Caravan to the U.S. Social Forum in Detroit in 2010, and those of us from New Mexico and Texas met up with the people from Mississippi and received them by chanting. This celebration of being together created a feeling of solidarity between us.

LV: *Was there a particular "a-ha!" moment for you, something that made a difference in how you thought about this work?*

Kameisha: For me, it was during the People's Freedom Caravan in 2010. One night we stopped in Louisville to spend the night and the hotel staff was, I'd say, racist. The New Mexico and San Antonio groups checked in first and had no problems. But then the hotel made the Mississippi youth sign forms saying that we would not cause any trouble. The service was just hostile. The next morning we all joined in a protest in the lobby and it was so amazing because I had never protested before. We worked together. I found that it didn't matter if we were Black or Brown. We stuck together. That's when I learned how connected we are.



Liz: One of the principles that South by Southwest goes by is trying to create bridges between communities of color. I had always heard that, but I never really understood it. Engaging in that protest was really exciting because I realized that we were doing it in solidarity with other peoples' struggles, not just our own.

Mónica: That was the first time in my own experience where everyone was all together. We stood united as a family to show the hotel service the way they received our comrades was wrong and we were not going to take it. That incident made us stronger and strengthened our bonds.

LV: *What have you found most valuable about your experience with South by Southwest?*

Liz: Learning how to share best practices. SWOP has good communications and facilitation skills. The people in Texas mobilize well and know how to put on a protest. In Mississippi they have good skills around the census and areas of work like that. It is just a really good balance, so we learn a lot from each other. And we have actually been listened to and not just tokenized for being young.

Mónica: The whole reason for the South by Southwest Experiment is not because we organize in the same way, but because we are all different and we all bring something to the table. That's how you learn new things. We learn about each other, which is how you keep a connection going. You're not just focused on the organizing; you're working on the relationship too.



Kameisha: There are times we work extremely hard and get things done; but we take time to reflect on our work, our accomplishments and our history, not just as SxSWE but as a people. I think what I have learned more than anything else from this experience is that it's really important for us to be in a space where we are not just local, but we are doing something regional – something huge.

Lizdebeth Carrasco is a youth organizer at the Southwest Organizing Project, a youth intern with SxSWE, and sits on the SxSWE Steering Committee.

Mónica Ramos is a youth organizer at the Southwest Workers Union in San Antonio, a youth intern with SxSWE, and sits on the SxSWE Steering Committee.

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