



TJFP 2019 Fellows Sammie Ablaza Wills and Sharyn Grayson (onscreen, left) with facilitator Glo Ross (onscreen, right)

## Reflections from the Table

### Thoughts from the 2019 Grantmaking Fellows

**That is what matters to us. You got here; you're alive:**

#### **A conversation with 2019 Fellow Sammie Ablaza Wills**

Transcribed and lightly edited from a conversation in August, 2019

*"For trans folks, sometimes the best thing that can happen is that people are in a room together, and sometimes the impact is that those people in that room are still alive."*

#### **Stepping into Power**

Before I said yes to becoming a TJFP Community Grantmaking Fellow, I had to really think about it. *What would it mean for me to step into this position of power?*

I questioned if it was appropriate for me and if I was the right person to really be doing this.

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**The trans movement is in a crucial moment, where our rights and our people are being visibilized in a way we have never been before, and in a very mainstream way. How are others experiencing this moment?**

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After finding out who the Fellows were for this year's grantmaking panel, who past Fellows had been, and learning more about the intentions of the grantmaking process, it instilled a feeling of trust and reassured me that saying yes was the right decision!

**I thought: if TJFP thinks I would be a good fit as a decision-maker, I should trust that.**

Signing up to review hundreds of



TJFP 2019 Fellows Micky Bradford, Zakia McKensey, and Úmi Vera

applications seemed like a really concrete opportunity to hear directly from groups around the country about what they're doing and thinking, and to complicate and nuance my own understanding of what our movement needs and where we are at this time.

My own organizing experience has been mostly in trans communities and in the Bay Area, a place with a multitude of groups and resources. What's it like for folks in other areas? Also, the trans movement is in a crucial moment, where our rights and our people are being visibilized in a way we have never been before, and in a very mainstream way. How are others experiencing this moment?

I wanted an accurate understanding of what's happening for trans people all around this country, in all sorts of circumstances—what are they going through, working on, and organizing towards? So I could learn from them to have a grounded assessment of what a “trans movement” needs to be or should be thinking about.

**“Wherever we are, there is a need.” -Sharyn Grayson**

A big part of how trust was built within the grantmaking panel was because of Ms. Sharyn Grayson. Having our trans elder in the room, sharing her true wisdom and vulnerability with us, made it more possible to do this hard thing together. Ms. Sharyn brought a longevity of experience, as well as her overflowing generosity, which made people be in that value of abundance, seeing every application as an opportunity.

There was a moment during the weekend when we were discussing whether or not to fund a group. It seemed like all of the other Fellows were in alignment about one decision, but I had a really strong feelings about funding another organization. I thought to myself, “Well, I'm disappointed, but everyone else thinks we should do this, so let's just do it.” But Micky B, another panelist, told me, “No—if you have a feeling about it, you have to fight for your people! Tell me what you think!”

No one tells me to do that! Very rarely do people actually want to hear what I think, or put up with me fighting for my people. Micky B encouraged it—in fact, would accept me doing no less.

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**I felt empowered in my voice in a room of people who I deeply respect, with so many amazing experiences, knowing they trust in me.**

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In the end, we found a way to fund the group I wanted, at the level I wanted. And that was amazing!

I felt empowered in my voice in a room of people who I deeply respect, with so many amazing experiences, knowing they trust in me. Not only to feel like people wanted to hear what I said, but to share my opinion and have it lead to very material consequences for an organization or the larger movement—that really meant the world to me.

### **Lessons for Philanthropy**

Wouldn't it be helpful if applications, if they still have to exist, would just ask "why is this impressive, why is this important, why is this impactful, or what's dope about this?" So I can say, "This has never happened before," or "I get to see people's lives transformed all the time," or "Here's some things that my own members say about why this was fucking dope."

I would hope that groups and organizations don't have to write essays to be funded, but on the other hand, sometimes funders expect us to state what we do in a tweet's worth of content. "Tell us about your programs in 240 characters"—and then we're told we don't do enough. Having ample time and space to answer questions is important. If grantmakers are not doing the work ahead of time to learn about where I come from, it feels insensitive to ask me to explain my community in 240 characters or less.

On the opposite extreme, some funders ask us to explain all of our context, appropriately brag about it, and talk to them about impact. But it's likely that we're speaking different languages about what counts as exceptional. Unfortunately for us, some funders are reading for what's impressive in a way that doesn't center or even understand the experiences of the people doing the work.

For instance, I am impressed by the person who, despite having some shitty job and having a hard time paying rent, brings a potluck item to my potluck! They have no money and they still brought something to share. They drove two and a half hours to come to an event that lasts two hours. I am impressed by that. If I say an average of 50 people might show up if we host a potluck, a lot of people might think that's nothing—that's just a normal event, what people do on the weekends. But I'm like, you do not understand! When I say we host a potluck, I see people are coming here and changing in the bathroom because they can't be trans anywhere else.

We need a fundamental shift in understanding of the impact of an organization's work when we're talking about funding trans organizing. So many people in positions of power still see impact—positive, amazing impact—as being like, "This policy was changed!" or "This new program was started!" or "Some big and kind of flashy thing was launched!" **But for trans folks, sometimes the best thing that can happen is that people are in a room together and sometimes the impact is that those people in that room are still alive.**

I want funders to understand that while we should have high expectations of ourselves and each other, the expectations need to be properly calibrated to the context in which people are living. Sometimes just getting together and being in a room and eating food, learning about your ancestral

foods—that is an amazing thing when people are conditioned to never leave the house. When someone is too scared to leave their house, getting them to come to an event is an amazing feat. That needs to be celebrated as something worth investing in.

## What is Trans Justice?

**“When I’m able to be trans in the fullness of who I am, that feels like the small justice that’s going to get us to that bigger liberation.”**

To be trans—to do it, to be it, faithfully and in a way that feels empowering; that is justice. To feel like you can be your full ass trans self and not feel scared, to feel excited and experimental about it, that’s what trans justice is.

Justice is the ability to love being who you are and be loved by others. To struggle through the hardness of being a human but not feel like that part of you is going to be the reason you die or you can’t do certain things.

I feel lucky to love that I’m trans and I feel lucky that other people love that about me. But it’s not an easy road. I’ve also lost a lot of people in my life for that very reason. They refuse to love that part of me and they refuse to understand it.

I want everyone to have access to trans justice personally, interpersonally, and systemically. I think that’s what the liberation looks like. It’s the practice of being all of who we are, claiming our power and not participating in systems that fuck us over, while having the safety, joy, and imagination to just be in this world, in our genders, identities, experiences, and our differences. I feel like that’s possible.

## Organizing for Trans Justice

Sometimes, we’re not dealing with policies or other important things like wages, we’re

talking about people’s will to live. In some regions across the country, the work trans justice groups do is that they get people together—that’s life-saving work, it really is.

**“We’re talking about people’s will to live.”**

There are concrete things that trans folks are trying to establish for ourselves, not necessarily in a direct service type of way, but in the sense that people just need each other, and sometimes organizing is about bringing us together in community.

**To the trans justice activists and organizers out there reading this report: thank you for doing what you do.**

This work is not seen by many, and for that I am sorry. Thank you for all the things you are doing. It matters. As you’re doing this really hard work, there are people who are actively trying to see you, to let you know that you are not alone, and are fighting for you.

When you submit that grant application, or you tell someone about your work, or you stand up at that rally, you’re not only advocating for yourself, you’re advocating for whole communities that will come after you. There are so many folks around this country and around the world that are doing that and impacting one another. For all the folks submitting applications: you’re part of that. You’re part of this big big wave and this big movement, and I feel so appreciative that you have shared so abundantly about the work that you’re doing. I hope you know that while you fight, folks are fighting for you too.