



SOCIAL ACTION 164

SAN JOSE STATE UNIVERSITY STUDENT REFLECTIONS

LEILA MCCABE, enrolled in Social Action in fall of 2010, graduated BA in Sociology from SJSU in 2012 with a Community Change Concentration.

Organization: *Campus Alliance for Economic Justice (CAFÉ J)*

Occupation: Currently, works for a national civil rights organization building up their community engagement platform. Previously, worked on multiple campaigns in San José, including running the field operations for a mayoral candidate in 2014. After this campaign, Leila worked as a community organizer for Sacred Heart Community Service, where she founded a local chapter of Standing Up For Racial Justice (SURJ).

Impact of Social Action: “In the Spring of 2011, I enrolled in a social action class at San José State University. I already knew that I wanted to get involved and make a difference in the world and this class seemed to be a good place to get plugged in. When I walked into the class, I recognized the professor right away. He owned a retreat center where I had helped organize social justice retreats at my community college. I knew immediately that I was in the right place! What I didn’t know was how much this class would actually change my life.

It was during this class that myself and three other students founded the San José minimum wage campaign. A campaign that went on to not only change the lives of so many in San José, but also the lives of many around the nation. Just this week, the House and Senate were voting on a bill that included a national \$15 minimum wage. The work we did in that classroom was historic and is still rippling out. It also was not enough then and is still not enough now.

The work I am doing now is rooted in transformative movement building and although the approach is a bit different from traditional organizing, I still use the skills I learned in that classroom over a decade ago. Of all the classes I have taken in my life, there are two that I can say absolutely changed the trajectory of my life. Social Action was the second and I am forever grateful for what I learned in that class and more importantly for the lifelong relationships I built because of it.”

Soci. 164: Social Action Alumni Questions:

1. What did you learn from working on your issue? What did you learn about social change? about power? leadership? yourself? community, etc.

The first thing I learned about working on the minimum wage campaign was that we have much more power than we are made to believe, and when people come together to work on an issue, real change can happen. I learned to believe again in a system I had major doubts about, and

although there are still major issues, I can see that we can make change within the existing system. I have always been motivated by the idea of social change since I was a child, however for years it was just that, an Idea. It was not until I was in my mid-twenties that I learned how to actually go about making change and applying what I learned to my life. In the process of doing this, I realized that social action was my calling. It was what I wanted to dedicate my life to. I also realized that it had always been what I wanted to do; I just had ignored it. On this path I learned about leadership. I learned about leadership skills and qualities, the different types of leaders and what leaders look like and do. Most importantly, I learned that it takes a lot of self-reflection and self-work to be an effective leader. This is where it gets hard, but also rewarding. While working on the minimum wage campaign, I have definitely done a lot of self-reflection, life balancing, communication skills and relationship building.

2. How did your background research help prepare you?

Background research for the minimum wage campaign was necessary in moving it forward. It is the backbone for a campaign and without it we would not have gotten far. We knew that we had a great idea with the minimum wage, and at a gut level knew it was the right thing to do, but without the facts we never would have built a coalition. People will not take you seriously if you do not have the research and knowledge of what you are doing. Raising the minimum wage is not a new idea. It has been done before and there was no reason for us to try and recreate the wheel. Researching places that had raised the wage like San Francisco was a jumping off place for us.

3. How did you recruit people for your campaign? What worked?

We recruited people through outreach, and we capitalized on resources we came with as students and existing relationships we each had. As individuals we have a certain amount of power through the relationships that we have built. When we come together we have even more power. We spoke in classrooms and recruited other students.

For me, I had a lot of relationships at De Anza College with students and professors. I did many classroom presentations there. De Anza became instrumental in the passing of the minimum wage. Dr. Myers-Lipton had relationships with Cindy Chavez and the labor council which also were instrumental in passing the minimum wage. We were able to build a coalition with community and faith organizations through relationship building and inviting people to our meetings. A lot of recruiting people was phone class, meetings and classroom presentations. Basic organizing and relationship building.

4. How many leaders were in your group? Working members? General members? Paper members? Did you have enough of each to do "the work"?

Our group started with four people. We were all leaders equally in the beginning. We all brought different leadership skills to the table. Marisela brought the vision, Heather the research, and I brought relationship building skills. We all played parts in doing all the work, but these were definitely some of our strengths. This first semester we focused mainly on the research and strategy. We did do some outreach and coalition building as well and starting getting the general and paper members to join. Unfortunately, after that first semester, we lost some of the core leaders; however, we were able to recruit some people the following semester that went on to become core leaders in the campaign. This is pretty normal especially with a two-year campaign.

Things happen in people's lives and the key to leading a successful campaign is not having one person take on the majority of the work load. If this happens they are likely to crash. If they do crash there needs to be enough core leaders in the group that it will not affect the campaign or the group's moral.

5. How did your group make decisions? How did your group work together? What was your group dynamic? What did your group do to work together better?

We had a lot of discussions on what we wanted our group to look like and how we wanted to run it. There was talk about either a hierarchical top down leadership or a more horizontal leadership. In the beginning we definitely worked more horizontally. We all made decisions together and no one was named as the leader of the group. We even rotated facilitators at meetings so that no one person led the group all the time. This became more and more challenging especially when we started to grow our coalition. It also becomes a bit more confusing with the more attention a group gets. We are used to working in a top down environment and people want to know who the leader of a group is. This is especially true when it comes to framing the story. In the end, there were definitely a few people that stood out as the leaders and were put in that role by press and other groups in the coalition. CAFÉ J, however, never really decided on a specific type of leadership for the group. This worked well in many ways but also got confusing in many ways. Accountability can become an issue in a horizontally-led group.

6. Who was your target, and what strategies did you use to get him/her/them to meet your demands? Were you successful in meeting your substantive and/or procedural demands?

With this campaign we did not have one specific target. Because we knew we wanted to go the ballot route we knew that we had to convince people to vote on the measure. We did need to fundraise money and get people to endorse us, so we met and spoke to specific people like City Council members. The San José City Council also had the opportunity to pass the minimum wage without sending it to the ballot. Here we did target the few members that were on the fence to see if we could get the vote. But this was not our primary strategy or target, it was secondary. Our strategy was telling personal stories in these meetings to illustrate that raising the minimum wage was the ethical thing to do. We were successful in meeting both our substantive and procedural demands. We did not move the council to vote on passing the minimum wage, however the outcome was the same and we were successful in passing the initiative at the ballot in San Jose.

7. Did your group develop allies? What was your media strategy?

Our group was successful in building a broad coalition of labor, community and faith-based organizations. We were pretty strategic in dealing with the media throughout our campaign. In the beginning, we framed the story as a student-led effort. Once we had all of our signatures to qualify for the ballot, we held a press conference and named the different members of the coalition. This worked in our favor and was a good strategy. We also developed our message and stayed on it every time we spoke to the media.

8. What was your favorite "action" that your group did?

I really loved the press conference that we held after gathering all of the signatures. It was a huge

accomplishment and a milestone for the campaign. My favorite part about that day was honoring Tommy Smith and John Carlos by taking off our shoes as a symbol of fighting poverty just as they had. We then marched over to city hall barefoot to submit the petitions.

9. Did your group use technology? If so, please explain.

We used technology in many different ways. First we used the computer for research. We created a Facebook page and had a website made. The media covered our campaign many times as well. We were able to blast out all of the interviews on Facebook and our website. In the earlier stages of the campaign, we took a scientific poll and used the technology of phone banking. We again phone-banked at the end of the campaign to turnout voters to vote yes on Measure D.

10. What advice would you give current Soci. 164 Social Action students?

First of all, you have to believe in what you are doing. Do not just pick a project for the class because you have to do something. Choose something you are passionate about and use the class as a tool to learn about it and implement it instead of using that as a tool to pass the class.

Second, know that you are smart and have the power and intelligence to make a difference.

Third, do the readings and actually follow the advice in the books! It helps!

Fourth, commit to what you are doing and stick with it. Any real change that you want to make will more than likely take longer than one semester

Fifth, build real relationships

Finally, have fun!