

Podcast: Nina Simon – building more inclusive community organisations

TRANSCRIPT

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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SPEAKERS

Hannah Mason, Nina Simon, Jake Young

Jake Young 00:05

Today Hannah Mason is joined by Nina Simon, founder and CEO of Of/By/For All, a movement to build more inclusive community organisations. Nina and Hannah discuss a free tool called a framework for action in response to moments of outrage and crisis that Of/By/For All put together in the wake of the murder of George Floyd. They discuss the need for both short and long term actions and how without meaningful long term action, short term action can be called out as being performative. They also chat about the potential for the creative redeployment of an organisation's assets, sharing with your community. And another great free tool called the Five Steps to Reimagine your Organization. This one is a long distance chat. Nina joins us from her home in the woods of Santa Cruz, California. So you might hear the occasional glitch. So now let's bridge the Atlantic across the continent to hear from Hannah and Nina, as they discussed making your organisation Of By and For your diverse community.

Hannah Mason 01:03

Hi, Nina. It's really lovely to have you here today. And to have you as part of this series of podcasts, we're going to talk a little bit about making your organisation Of, By and For your diverse community. But before we get into that, can I just ask you to introduce yourself to the listeners?

Nina Simon 01:20

Yeah, absolutely. My name is Nina Simon. And I'm calling you from Santa Cruz, California. And I am the founder of a nonprofit organisation called Of/By/For All. And we work with cultural and civic organisations around the world that are striving to become more inclusive, more equitable and more relevant to their communities.

Hannah Mason 01:44

I'm going to kick off with a question about the murder of George Floyd. So in response to the murder of George Floyd, Of/By/For All developed and shared a framework to support organisations to take action

in moments of crisis and outrage, can you tell us how you develop the framework and how it supports organisations to take immediate and longer term action?

Nina Simon 02:09

Yeah, so the framework? Well, okay, we developed the framework as a team, and our team is small, but powerful. And we have five people on our staff who are all in different parts of the United States, and all have different intersectional identities. So our head of programme is a black Caribbean woman named Raquel Thompson. We have staff members with immigrant backgrounds, we have staff members, who identify as LGBT, and really the end myself as the founder, CEO, you know, as a white woman.

And I think one of the things that has really happened for us this summer, and I think, for many organisations, is a more focused reckoning with the role that white supremacy and racial injustice and racial violence might play in our organisation. And I think that, as an organisation that serves other organisations, we knew that we wanted to support our members and our partners in taking an action oriented, proactive approach to really engaging these issues wholeheartedly. And we also knew that we had a lot of that work to do ourselves.

And so the framework was developed as a team effort really led by Raquel Thompson, and with support from myself from Lauren Benetua, from Mateo Mossey and from Vanessa Ramalho. And we, as an organisation are really focused on action. We think that it's incredible and important for organisations to be thinking about how we can learn more, how can we reflect more? How can we do training around some of these issues. But we also feel like, particularly if you're in a dominantly, white organisation, if you do a lot of learning and training on your own, but it doesn't translate into action or change in how you engage in the world, then you're not demonstrating your intent in any way that is likely to have really meaningful impact. And so we always feel like our kind of core offering into the world has to be something that gets people reflecting in a way that can be quite action oriented.

And so this framework while it was created in response to the murder of George Floyd, we really do see it as one that can be used in quite different situations. And so it can be used in situations like when there is a protest or an uprising, but it can also be used in situations like when there's a huge wildfire, which is something for example, that you know, I've experienced in the last few months living here in California.

And so the way the framework works is there are two axes of it. Um, one is about internal action versus external action. And then the other is about short term versus long term. So we feel like there are actions you can take in the short term, both internally with your team and externally with your publics, and their actions you can take on the long term internally and externally. And I think what we saw quite quickly after the murder of George Floyd was many organisations focused on immediate external action.

So maybe making a public statement, maybe in the case of some theatres, opening their lobbies, to protesters as a place of respite and safety, and maybe even making some commitments to put financial resources or other resources into supporting black artists and black communities. What we saw less of

immediately, but in many ways can be even more important, are internal actions. So thinking about what does safety and healing look like for black and brown staff members? How might we think internally about the actions we need to take next, to be able as teams to move forward in this work? You know, now we're in November, it's about six months on from when some of this political activity really started. And I think that one of the things that becomes even more important is what's in those long term buckets, both internal and external. And I think there were a lot of organisations that went quite quickly to a short term action, but with no long term follow through, and those are the ones that are really, I think, being called out as being performative. And then there are other organisations that might have been slow to take immediate action, might even have had some people with some hearts broken about the inability for the organisation to take immediate action. But organisations that are setting themselves up to take longer term action and make longer commitments. And I really believe that both matter, but the longer term commitments are what are going to change your organisation.

And I'll just say, for us, you know, Of/By/For All, our primary program we offer is a program called the Change Network, where organisations spend a year reflecting and making concrete changes to move closer to their communities. And we certainly saw a huge increase in interest in the program, the cohort that came in in September of 2020, was our largest cohort ever, with 34 new organisations. And I really see each of those organisations making good on a longer term commitment, both to internal and to external action. And those longer term commitments, I think, are what are most important. And they're also quite messy, and quite evolving, as you get to know your own starting points, and also your starting points and opportunities with your community.

Hannah Mason 07:56

I think you're right, I think that the longer term action is the really, really important work. But I think sometimes that's either the idea of a longer term action or it being so hard, such hard work to do, can make organisations almost, you know, really reticent to actually start anything. And they're almost afraid to make that commitment. Is there anything sort of any tips or encouragement that you'd be able to give to say, you know, it's, you know, is there something you can people can do to get over that, that fear that risk?

Nina Simon 08:35

Yeah, I think that that's very common, particularly among white dominant organisations. And I think one of the things I think about is that that comes from a really a good place in terms of feeling like I don't want to contribute to harm, I don't want to screw up, some people are really centering themselves on like, I don't want to say something wrong. But some people are really centering others and saying, I, as I'm realising my own or my organisation's complicity with causing harm. I don't want to exacerbate that harm, particularly during a time of pandemic and so many crises. But I would actually flip that, and I would suggest that we all cause harm to others, you know, it's a fact of life. And what matters most is not, whether by going out, we may cause harm inadvertently. And some other ways we probably certainly will.

What matters is how we receive the feedback and what we listen and learn from and do with the fact that we realise or we're told we've done harm, and I think that particularly, I think this is happening a little less in the UK. But certainly if you're looking at what's happening in the States, there are a lot of

arts organisations being quite visibly and publicly called out. And I think there's a real sense that organisations are being forced, whether it's by activists, whether it's by staff members, or whether it's by partner artists, to reckon with their own complicity with white supremacy and I think that, that reckoning should not be one that electrocutes us so that we're on the floor and can't do anything, it should be something that electrifies us to take action.

And I think that also, even outside of the intensity of this moment, one thing I've always thought about in my own work, to open up arts organisations, to be more equitable and inclusive spaces, is that the fear you have, you have to balance that fear or that discomfort, with the real exclusion, and oppression that others are experiencing. And I think that I always think about this kind of balance of your discomfort or in some cases, it might be the discomfort of your longtime patrons or your board members, your discomfort versus somebody else's lived experience of being excluded, or oppressed, or having incorrect stories told about them in our art spaces. That harm and that trauma, we should be attending to it, at least as seriously. And I would argue more seriously than our own discomfort and our own fear.

And if we got that fired up, about writing those wrongs, and shifting from exclusion to inclusion, we would probably be quite willing to sacrifice our own discomfort, or our own comfort to be able to take those steps. So I always say like, how can you centre, that person who hasn't felt included? Instead of centring your own fear that you might make a mistake and reaching out?

Hannah Mason 11:38

Are there any organisations that are doing this work that you feel happy to share with us on the in the podcast? Is there anybody that is a good example?

Nina Simon 11:48

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, we're, we're so honored to work with arts organisations all over the world, in the Of/By/For All program, and maybe, you know, a couple I think about one that is been very impressive to me, and I think very inspiring to others in our network, during this year of pandemic is a small contemporary art centre in Panama City, Panama called Casa Santa Ana, and their contemporary art center that is quite young, and was founded by contemporary art lovers, really to bring to connect international artists with Panamanian artists, and so quite an elite contemporary space.

But it's plunked right in the middle of this neighborhood called Santa Ana, which is very working class, very family oriented. And they've just been, you know, building this space. And they really joined Of/By/For All because they said, we can't be an elite art space that just plumped in this neighborhood, we need to be in relationship with this neighborhood. And one of the things they actually really saw through COVID was an opportunity to focus on this community of interest for them, the local neighbours, in a way they never had before.

So previously, you know, they'd had a school program, they had a neighbours program, but they were always kind of on the periphery. And when COVID hit, they said, we are going to focus on really building relationships in our community. And they became the primary provider of food distribution. And with food distribution, they were distributing art supplies, they are getting guerilla art project started in

the neighbourhood. And they also turned over their social media platforms to feature illustrators from the neighbourhood.

And so they actually started to using this time, as a time not to centre their longtime patrons, or themselves, but really to centre these people in their neighborhood who they'd always said they wanted to move towards. And so they're really using this time quite powerfully. So that I believe when they're able to reopen on the other side, their neighbours are going to be part of and connected to and in relationship with that centre, in a way they never were before.

The other groups I would call out that have been very interesting for us to work with who've just joined us this fall. We've had five gay and lesbian choruses from across the US join us. And these are really interesting groups because they were founded, you know, in the last, somewhere between 20 to 50 years, really to create a place of community for people who maybe didn't feel welcome in other community spaces, and particularly other singing spaces like church choirs. And I think that now these five, who we're working with, you know, are all organisations who've looked around and said, Hmm, we're creating a beautiful community space, but we're mostly white here. And what's that about? Because we know that gay people aren't mostly white necessarily. And I think that we're seeing many organisations that have been predominantly white ask themselves that question. We're a botanical garden. Why would that mean that we're mostly white? We're a children's museum? Why would that mean we're mostly white? And I think that it's been quite powerful to work with organisations that are able to hold pride in what they've created. And also to ask themselves questions about if we really want to be a place of community, and welcome for all LGBT singers in our city.

Or if we really want to be a place of natural refuge in connection with the outdoors, for all people in our city. What does that mean, we have to unlearn about what we've done? Which of the things are we doing because they're crucial? And they're central to who we are, and which are the things that just happened to work for people like us, but maybe keeping others out? And so I think I've been very inspired to see so many predominantly white organisations ask themselves, what here is core to the heart? And what here is a predilection? Or a tradition that may be steeped in whiteness?

Hannah Mason 16:08

Yeah, that's, that's brilliant. I think it's really, really pertinent to what's happening in the UK as well. Absolutely. Because similarly, with COVID, a lot of organisations here are looking to find ways to really connect with the communities in which they are, find themselves, you know, like you say, sometimes they are kind of plunked in the middle of a community. And sometimes the community grows around them, but it's finding those connections, being able to work with them. And being able to work honestly, with your with yourselves as a group to ask yourselves, you know, who are the group made up of? What can we do to find ways to, to be to connect with everybody else around us and bring more people in? And I think it really ties in nicely with the work you've been doing around being more relevant. So with this podcast, we're going to share a little link to your TED talk about being relevant. And I just wondered if you could give us some tips on how to have relevance when you're competing with so much noise and such disparate sort of environment or world? I think, traditionally, we've competed? How do we come together?

Nina Simon 17:19

You know, I always think about the fact that relevance is not something that an institution can define. It's something that's in the hearts of people who are choosing every day, do I think this is relevant to me or not? And I think one of the maybe quite odd things about arts organisations is that to what you're saying about competition, there's been a real emphasis on differentiation in a way that might limit the extent to which people might universalise the relevance of arts organisations to them.

And here's what I mean by that. Most of us know, when we're walking down the street, what a restaurant is, and there are a lot of cues, we can pick up quite quickly by what it looks like, what's on the menu, how much the what the prices are like to be able to pretty quickly in our brain filter, will this be relevant to me? Is this a good choice for me? But if, for example, you are kind of curious about the loved narrative, and you're kind of curious about theatre, and you were to walk down the metaphorical street of websites of theatres in your area, you might be quite confused, because potentially, each one of them is trumpeting, how unique they are. And you may not be able to identify that these all fall in the same category. And and so I think that on the one hand, I can really understand that differentiation. You know, I used to run a museum. And we always, we were working so hard to make it a museum that really could be relevant and welcoming to people who'd never felt welcome inside a museum before.

And there were some people said you should change the name. You shouldn't call this a museum. It's too fun. It's too this, it's to that. And they were saying that both. I mean, there were some people who said that who were negative or like, this isn't a museum anymore. But a lot of people who loved what we were doing said you should change the name. This name isn't helping you. But I always felt like it was our responsibility to be a museum that opened up and expanded people's ideas of what a museum could be. So that the next time they saw the sign that said museum somewhere, they might imagine that might also be for them. And, and I feel mixed about that, because it's possible that people could have at our museum had an experience that was extremely inclusive, whether that was because of the community members co-creating all the exhibitions and programs or the all gender bathrooms or just the super friendly staff and the fact that you could bring your dog in this kind of thing. They could have formed incorrect assumptions about what might be available somewhere else with that sign that said museum.

But I felt like as somebody who loves and wants museums to be relevant, I want to do work that changes people's expectations and their hopes, and potentially also their sense of institutional trauma that they might hold around an institution that says museum or theatre or park, or whatever it might be. So I think that we can do differentiation. But if it was more like, we were all excitedly racing, to one up each other on how welcoming could we be, such that every patron or every visitor came to the next one of us and said, well, over there, I got to, you know, be part of I got to give my feedback on this. Can I do that here? Oh, over here, I got to be on the stage. Can I do that here? You know, I think that starting to get more competitive, not on who's getting reviews, you know, in The Times, but instead on, you know, who's welcoming the preponderance of their community. I think that that kind of competition could actually be quite healthy in terms of both promoting innovative practice, but also in terms of expanding the number of people who might see any of our organisations as potentially relevant and valuable to them.

Hannah Mason 21:26

Yeah, I love that idea. I love the idea that we're all kind of working together to, to bring, bring up the everyone together. So bring up cultural heritage organisations bring up museums and art galleries, so that more people feel like, Oh, yeah, you know, I had this wonderful positive experience here. I'll try over there.

Nina Simon 21:45

Yeah. And I think even to that, you know, I think about, there have been pushes at different times in different decades for professionalism, right? There was at some point in argument, for example, you know, when you think about the difference between community theatre and professional theatre, or when you think about what it means to be an accredited museum, there have been times when our industries have actually invested quite a lot in saying, hey, let's all get to this standard of a certain kind of professional excellence. And I think that if we took that same kind of energy, and said, hey, let's all get to a similar standard of welcome and inclusion and relevance, and let's hold ourselves accountable to that. I think that will be a game changer for the industry.

Hannah Mason 22:30

Me too. Definitely. I have one more question. I think that I need to ask you quickly, you've developed another great free tool called the Five Steps to Reimagine your Organization. And I wondered if you could just quickly sort of tell us what the five steps are, how you developed that tool, and how well it's going. I mean, it looks amazing on the on the site.

Nina Simon 22:50

Yeah. So this is the revision tool. And actually, if you go to the homepage of byforall.org, the very first thing you'll see is this five minute quiz, this assessment to help you think about how you might revise your and reimagine your organisation. And we really think that being able to reimagine your organisation requires two things, you have to have the energy and the urgency to do it. And you need capacity, which really comes down to some extent to power, you know, you need to know that you can be able to move change through the organisation. So there's that five-minute assessment just to look at, what is your appetite or your urgency, and what is your capacity to do so. And then if you have those things in place, we're offering these five steps to start first, by unlearning, we mentioned this earlier. But this idea of often, before we imagine something new, we actually have to clear the weeds of some of the things that we've been doing for a long time that may no longer be relevant, that may be unjust, that may be holding us back from seeing the range of what's possible. So starting by unlearning practices that are irrelevant or unjust. Then the second step is really defining and identifying who is the community we want to move towards. So just as we're talking about Casa Santa Ana and in Panama City, that they wanted to move towards the neighbors in the Santa Ana neighborhood. So we're getting quite specific about who we want to move towards, and it can't just be everybody. But really, who do we see as critical to building our strongest organisation? Then thinking about values and what core values are rooting your path forward? I think one of the things that often happens when we talk about reimagining is people get quite nervous that like, Are we going to throw out everything we've ever done, just to satisfy what that group might want? And I like to say, you know, no, not necessarily, but what you're going to do is figure out what do you what's at the heart that you need? To hold tight to? And what are those things that are okay to unlearn? And often what's at the heart is a value, maybe that's

expressed in your mission statement, maybe it's expressed somewhere else. The fourth step then is to kind of connect the dots of the communities of interest, greatest interest for you, your values and your assets. And so really looking at what does it look like to share or redeploy your assets during this time, and we've seen lots of organisations, you know, we talked about, for example, this idea of theatres that opened up their lobbies during protests, you know, there those lobbies were kind of asset that was that can be creatively redeployed, or we've seen organisations, you know, in the UK, there are organisations like Slung Low, that have really redeployed the asset of their ability to bring people together to put on a show to bring people together to put on an aid effort. And I think that, particularly when we think about assets, now, it's quite a powerful time in this world to be thinking about asset sharing, and not this idea that the organisation has the assets, and the community has the needs, but instead to say we all have assets to bring here. And we've seen such beautiful examples of mutual aid during this time. And that's a way of sharing assets. And then the fifth step is actually quite practical. And that's about figuring out who are the stakeholders who need to be involved to make this vision real. And for you, that might be about power, it might be about your board, or it might be about your chief exec, it might be about money, it might be about saying to funders, hey, we want to go in a new direction with this community. And we'd like your support for it. It might be about community leaders who might be skeptical, or might be unsure of whether they can trust that you're actually going to move in this direction. But we've really seen that if you can take these steps, to unlearn to figure out very clearly and specifically who's a community of interest, to get to hold tight to your values, but get open on what you might do, to share assets, and then to engage stakeholders around this transformation, you can be quite successful. And one of the things I always think about, and this has come up in a different in a few different ways in this conversation, I'm reconstructionist Jew. And one of the kind of phrases that my Rabbi often says is that tradition gets a vote, but not a veto. And I think that a lot of the work of reimagining is about saying we're not throwing tradition out. Tradition is at the table. But these new communities are at the table, these new emerging, you know, demands and opportunities are at the table, and they all get a vote. And nobody here has a veto. We're working together to imagine how our organisations can come to their greatest potential and their greatest purpose in this extraordinary time.

Hannah Mason 27:55

That was a superb answer. Thank you. I just want to get up and do the work now.

Nina Simon 28:00

Let's do the work. Absolutely. Yes,

Hannah Mason 28:01

Everyone listening also was just want to get up and work.

Nina Simon 28:04

Absolutely.

Hannah Mason 28:05

I want to ask you if there was anything that you want me to talk about, or ask you that I haven't asked you yet. Is there any? Is there a topic that that is, is a burning issue that we should be chatting about in the in this podcast?

Nina Simon 28:20

I don't think so. I think what you said is exactly right, let's do the work. And you know, look, a lot of people, sometimes, especially after a conference, or I know you're putting together a lot for this festival, there can be so much we learn so much we're inspired by. And a lot of times, you know, the conference organisers, or the speakers will get thanks from the audience. And I always feel like the greatest things is when you go do the work, when you take the energy and the inspiration and you go take action with it. Because that's really how that inspiration is manifest in the world, and how we help make a better world. So I hope we can all go out and do that.

Hannah Mason 28:59

I think we should in there because that's just superb. Let's all go out and do the work. Thank you so much, Nina, for talking to us today. That's just been brilliant. Thank you.

Nina Simon 29:08

Okay, thank you. All right. Have a wonderful day. Well,

Hannah Mason 29:20

I feel very, very happy now. You've got time for a cup of tea before your next phone.

Nina Simon 29:26

Yeah, very much. All right. Have a good day and good luck to your dog.