Forward Together:
Breaking Through with Bold Vision

Love With Power:
Practicing Transformation for Social Justice
Story Series No. 4
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7 pm, Election Night, November, 2016, and Strong Families New Mexico and Respect ABQ Women coalition just accomplished the unthinkable. After less than 12 weeks of organizing they defeated a massively funded Operation Rescue-backed measure to significantly restrict abortion in the city of Albuquerque, NM. Albuquerque voters not only said no, they said no by a whopping 10 percentage points.¹

By all measures, this win was a remarkable upset in a socially conservative “purple” state. On the heels of successful state abortion restrictions sweeping the country, the measure seemed destined for passage. Early polls showed likely voters favored the ban by a wide margin. The Right funneled money into the measure as part of a national fight against reproductive rights and expected little opposition.

For Strong Families New Mexico and Respect ABQ Women, making the case to voters in fewer than 12 weeks felt nearly impossible. No one even imagined defeating the measure by a landslide.

Adriann Barboa, Director of Strong Families New Mexico and a 16th generation New Mexican, believes the win reflects the coalition’s commitment to leading a deeply New Mexican campaign, as well as an unprecedented coming together of people of color-led groups with other state-wide advocacy organizations.² Barboa is proud of how the campaign authentically reflected Albuquerque values and culture, centering women of color leadership and communities of color. The campaign message emphasized women and families making decisions for themselves. In Barboa’s words, “We are parents, tías, ninos, brothers and sisters. We are neighbors, friends, people of faith—we are New Mexican families.”

2. The Steering Committee included Young Women United, Forward Together, ACLU of New Mexico, New Mexico NOW, New Mexico Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, and Planned Parenthood of New Mexico.

Collective Practice: Forward Stance

Forward Stance is a mind-body practice that helps activists step fully into leadership, build powerful organizations and align movements. Forward Stance cultivates four core elements in groups: Stance, Awareness, Energy and Rhythm. Forward Stance was created because the visionary and innovative work of building a strong and vibrant Reproductive Justice Movement requires people and institutions to move physically (not just “in our heads”) to change the way the world works.

“When we first started practicing Forward Stance it helped us make a bold leap. We knew we were saying YES to a bold vision but we did not know how we would get there. There was no easy or clear path. We used Forward Stance to step into power and move with who was ready.”
— Eveline Shen, Forward Together Executive Director
Barboa believes these diverse groups were able to align quickly with clarity and strength largely because of a transformative movement building effort led by Young Women United with the support of Forward Together, the home organization of Strong Families New Mexico. In 2011 Forward Together and Young Women United facilitated a series of day-long retreats that engaged everyone in the mind-body practice of Forward Stance. Young Women United intentionally invited groups that had not necessarily worked together, including grassroots people of color-led groups and large statewide advocacy organizations. Together the groups named and practiced removing barriers that historically kept them apart and created a strategic vision rooted in shared values. They practiced moving together in different formations – such as a wedge, a circle, and others – to see which would be the most powerful form for the coalition to take when they faced legislators. They also used physical practice to experiment with different people leading under different circumstances and then used the insights they gained in their strategy development. From there, the new coalition flexed its political muscle and began to win changes at the local and state levels.

Forward Together’s contribution to these retreats and what they achieved reflect the long history of Forward Stance practice within the organization, as well as the wisdom Forward Together gained from its own history of organizational crisis.
First Steps: Confronting Crisis

Eveline Shen was a young organizer when she first joined Forward Together (then called Asian Pacific Islanders for Reproductive Health). Just out of college, she wanted to work with a social justice organization that empowered young women of color and created a culture where its staff and members could thrive, something “different from what happens in so much of the world.” Eveline saw this possibility in Forward Together.

When Eveline came to Forward Together, the organization was going through a period of rapid expansion and change. Internally they were making a programmatic shift from research to organizing, navigating offices in two different regions of California and expanding their staff.

Externally, the organization was waging multiple battles for their communities. They were working to defeat the first of three parental notification ballot initiatives in California, pressuring Bay Area school districts to provide comprehensive sex education, and working alongside environmental justice groups to remove a medical waste incinerator in East Oakland.

Like so many organizations struggling to manage exponential growth while fighting for change on multiple fronts, the staff and board felt extremely challenged. Internal conflict and physical and mental exhaustion were tearing their relationships apart and crippling their ability to have impact in the world.

At one point when the morale was extremely low, the staff made a clear and conscious decision to find another way to do the work. Supporting each other they looked for underlying reasons for the crisis. “We did everything possible to figure out how we got into this mess and what we could do to get out,” says Eveline. The organization decided to use talking circles to explore how the conflict was impacting them. They also sought out coaching in non-violent communication. They interviewed a dozen of the organization’s women of color leaders about their experiences and held six focus groups with young women of color to understand the bigger patterns at play in the organization. They discovered that the conflicts they were experiencing were pervasive, and that very few had the tools or resources to address disagreements effectively. They also learned about relational aggression and how girls and women are socialized to deal with conflict indirectly – by forming cliques, bullying, lacking trust, and gossiping.

About Forward Together and Strong Families

**Strong Families** is a home for the four out of five people in the United States who do not live behind the proverbial picket fence – whose lives fall outside the outdated notion that a family consists of a mom at home and a dad at work. While that life has never been the reality for most of our families, too many of the policies that affect us are based on this fantasy. From a lack of affordable childcare and afterschool programs, to immigration policy and marriage equality, the way we make policy and allocate resources needs to catch up to the way we live.

**Forward Together**, the organization behind Strong Families, is a multi-racial organization that works with community leaders and organizations to transform culture and policy to catalyze social change. Our mission is to ensure that women, youth and families have the power and resources they need to reach their full potential. By developing strong leaders, building networks across communities, and implementing innovative campaigns, we are making our mission a reality.
The organization concluded that the culture of progressive activism and conventional nonprofits pushes activists to sacrifice their health, their families and their well-being. They also realized that many activists operate within a polarizing culture of “you are either with us or you are against us; we are the victims and they are the oppressors.” Says Shen, “Too often we transfer this language and approach to addressing disagreements with each other and we demonize our allies.”

Seeing the problems clearly, the staff was determined to shift these deeply held habits and embody a new way of making change. They would need to radically depart from a defensive/reactive stance towards an offensive/proactive one.

Creating Another Way: Forward Stance

Shen and others in the core team knew the solutions they were seeking would not come from standard organizational development practitioners. They needed some out of the box doers and thinkers who could help them figure out a new path. They decided to reach up and out for support.

When Eveline heard about Norma Wong, a Zen priest, former state senator and political strategist from Hawaii – she was immediately intrigued and met with her.

“I still remember our first conversation where she talked about leadership and how to hold yourself when you are in conflict,” Eveline said. “It was a match for what we were looking for.”

Bringing in surprising props such as water bottles, spoons, and bamboo swords, Norma used interpersonal mind-body practice to help each person awaken to how they related to conflict. For example, in a simulated sword battle, each person was asked to face a trainer who was advancing towards them and their job was to hold their ground in an open and centered way. Dana Ginn Paredes remembers,

When it was my turn...my body started shaking uncontrollably. Norma said to me. ‘That is how you are in conflict right now. You can try to out argue and out debate the other side, but this is how you are. Now that you know that, you have choices.’
Forward Stance

The visionary and innovative work of building strong, vibrant Social Movements require us to physically move people, move institutions, and change the way the world works. Too often we are “in our heads,” focusing on conceptual ideas and frameworks while ignoring the physics of social change work. Forward Stance provides us with a powerful way to learn and gain new insight through physical movement and by reconnecting our bodies with our minds. Forward Stance cultivates four key elements through practice: Stance, Energy, Rhythm and Awareness.

**Stance** is how we move through the world. When we are standing or sitting in a forward stance we are in a state of readiness and are able to take action.

**Energy** gives life to stance. The energy of a forward stance is deep, strong, and rising and can be sustained over time and through challenging circumstances.

**Rhythm** is the pace of our actions. Individuals, organizations and the world around us have an inherent rhythm and pace. In a forward stance we have an awareness of rhythm and we are intentional about our pace.

**Awareness** is a clear, broad sense of what is happening around us. The awareness of a forward stance provides context and ability to see what is actually happening around us.
Over time, as the organization emerged from crisis and developed core strength, the staff continued to work with Norma. They experienced how this mind-body technology helped them act and see with clarity even amidst chaos. It also helped them come together in strength.

After two years of applying this mind-body technology towards organizing and movement building, the staff gave it a name: Forward Stance. Amanda Wake, former youth organizing director for Forward Together and Strong Families, reflected:

*Forward stance has shown me the power I have inside of me. Whenever I feel doubt or scared or unsure I use Forward Stance to connect to my breath and broaden my awareness. It reminds me I can trust my gut.*

Over time they found that the practice helped each person have agency within the whole and that it helped the whole be stronger than its parts.
“Sometimes the work calls you to do more than you thought you could do. I am grateful for Forward Stance and how it helps you stay grounded and balanced even amidst chaos.”

— Alicia Walters

Before the crisis, Forward Together had been a local organizing group working primarily with Asian women and girls on reproductive health and justice in Oakland, California. As the organization grew stronger, Eveline and her staff released a “New Visions” paper to share their vision for a powerful reproductive justice movement.6 “The paper immediately resonated with a lot of people,” says Eveline. “We suddenly found ourselves in a national leadership position.” They made a deliberate decision to utilize their strengths and expand their work with a national reach.

Over the next five years, as they transformed themselves they called on Forward Stance to help them step powerfully into their new position and apply a highly strategic lens to their work. They integrated Forward Stance practice deeply across the organization including weekly sessions before each staff meeting and before quarterly strategic organizational discussions. By practicing Forward Stance together, they were able to sharpen their awareness of opportunities, identify new ways to position themselves, and clarify where they needed to focus.

They were also better able to face new challenges when they arose. “For example, during the recession some of our allies got the message from funders to “hunker down” until the economy got better,” says

Shen. “We created an exercise to physically simulate the impact of the recession and find strategies to move through the downturn. Some of us represented the attacks our communities were experiencing while others were leaders moving through those attacks. By physically experimenting with these conditions we realized that the organizations that “hunkered down” were swallowed by the recession, while those who moved together and kept growing their work emerged stronger.”

When they launched a national alliance to strengthen the reproductive justice movement they relied on Forward Stance and other mind-body techniques to help members understand the “physics of movement building” on a visceral level. In physical practice, using a form of tai ji and other physical movement, they experimented with knowing when to move, how to pace themselves, and how to galvanize allies towards a unifying direction.

In 2010, ten reproductive justice leaders from across the country met at the First Unitarian Church in Oakland for a two and a half day convening organized by Forward Together. For three years, these leaders had been practicing Forward Stance and other mind-body practices to move, act and breath together and to get aligned and clear on how to unify their work for greater impact. Through these practices they experienced fully embodying their power as a multi-racial, cross-sector movement and they sharpened their shared values and purpose.

“We used Forward Stance to identify the central theme that unites all of our struggles,” explains Shen. “And then that ‘aha’ moment struck: Family was the common value, it was what we advocate for across movements. Whether women, LGBTQ or people of color, if we have a strong family, each member can thrive. A strong family can address so many lines of oppression and so many issues.” This also gave groups working on the local, state and national levels insight into how their respective strategies and issue-area foci were complementary towards a long-term vision.
External Impact: Strong Families

Emboldened, Forward Together began to imagine a 10-year strategy to regain the family frame from the right and change the way people think, feel, act and support families in the United States. Strong Families was born as a way to connect and build movement with everyday people - beyond the limitations of one sector or issue. Kalpana Krishnamurthy, Forward Together’s Policy Director says:

*The Right has defined family as their turf, and it’s not their turf, it’s our turf. We take care of our families, of each other’s families. When we cede the ground of family we cede a whole lot about who we are. We need to proactively talk about and act for our families in ways that bring us together.*

It was this bold new commitment that ultimately led Forward Together to take a deep look at the impact of mass incarceration and state violence on families as well as other big, crosscutting issues. In 2015 in partnership with Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, Research Action Design and 20 other organizations, they launched a community-engaged research project *Who Pays* to uncover the deep and complex costs of incarceration on families, especially the women holding those families together. (See side story for more detail). Forward Stance practice enabled this research team to stay grounded and breathe together when surrounded by thousands of stories of trauma that also tapped into trauma within the team. By having practices to breathe and move through this intensity they were able to emerge stronger together, as leaders who could tell a new, untold story about the cost of incarceration on generations of families.

As a project and a report, *Who Pays* broke new ground says Alicia Walters, Forward Together:

*Our report was the first time we had seen families in a headline about incarceration. Journalists and editors glommed onto the family angle. It signaled to me that we are ready to talk about the most fundamental aspects of our social fabric. And we are talking about it in a way that everyone can relate to. Its not just compelling, it’s moving.*

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Who Pays? The True Cost of Incarceration on Families

In March 2014, Forward Together, the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, and Research Action Design launched *Who Pays*, a collaborative participatory research project with 20 community-based organizations across the country. The project proved that the costs of locking up millions of people are much deeper than we think and that locking up individuals also breaks apart their families and communities, saddles them with overwhelming debt, and leads to mental and physical ailments.

Trained community researchers went directly into communities in 14 states, to probe the financial costs faced when a family member goes to jail or prison, the effects on physical and mental health, and the challenges and barriers encountered by all when an individual returns home.

One of Forward Together’s goals for the project was to expand the gender awareness of organizations traditionally working with and from the perspective of men dealing with incarceration. The research team conducted over 1,000 hour-long surveys and 34 focus groups and captured the experiences of families impacted by incarceration. By the time they gathered in Oakland to analyze their data, the researchers had listened to thousands of hours of stories about the hardships of incarceration. Looking at those stories, trying to quantify the devastation, sent the room into a spiral of despair. These weren’t random stories; these were the lived experiences of the researchers in the room, some of who had recently gotten out of prison, others whose families were suffering on both sides of the bars.

In such an environment, when one’s trauma is activated, there is little capacity to hear another’s perspective. And yet, it was exactly this capacity the researchers needed to achieve their shared purpose. Alicia Walters says “This is where Forward Stance practice is so critical." Walters and other Forward Together staff led sessions to help people breathe and get in touch with what was going on inside themselves. “So often, we cope by distancing ourselves; becoming disembodied because being present feels too overwhelming. In doing so, we lose touch with our own experience and can have a hard time relating to others – the very thing that’s crucial for building movements that encompass multiple experiences.” By creating space to acknowledge and breathe through the pain folks realized they were not alone and created space for all the truths in the room. The truths of women who suffered financially, emotionally, and physically on the outside while their loved ones languished behind bars became evident. The truths of children left without parents, and mothers without children, bubbled to the surface.

By the end of the project, the same individuals who had focused solely on the experiences of men were leading with the stories of women and trans people. Says Walters “I truly believe that this happened because we began with breathing together, seeing each other, and truly hearing each other’s stories.”

For the full report and more information on *Who Pays* go to: whopaysreport.org.
To Shen focusing their efforts on mass incarceration was a clear choice:

It is about transforming the culture that dictates whose families are deserving or not, whose families are locked up and whose are honored. It is about seeing our interconnectedness and fully embracing that what happens to my neighbor also impacts me.

Walters and Shen are excited about the new policy initiatives that have already been catalyzed by the report. In California a series of legislative hearings in 2016 will look at all aspects of incarceration from visitation, to housing, to custody and how intersecting policies keep families down. In tandem they will work to advance proactive solutions that support the economic, physical, and community health of families.

Beyond the Who Pays project, Strong Families has generated a tremendous amount of success in a very short amount of time. “The message is clearly speaking to peoples’ hearts,” reflects Shen, “In less than six years, we have over 150 organizations who have signed on.” Strong Families is now the largest national cross-sector strategic initiative focusing on gender, sexuality and racial equality and we are shifting the political landscape.

One of the most vibrant examples of this is Forward Together’s work in New Mexico. In just a few years Strong Families New Mexico has aligned state progressives in a powerful proactive stance that is advancing an agenda that unites diverse sectors.
Building upon the 2013 victory in Albuquerque, Strong Families New Mexico began to move proactive policies at the 2015 legislative session by bringing an unprecedented coalition of youth, environmental, LGBT, reproductive justice, education and immigrant rights groups “to increase the minimum wage, protect drivers license access for undocumented immigrants, promote LGBTQ rights, protect access to abortion and work to end gender-based violence” under the uniting vision of strengthening New Mexican families.9

It was this strong network of relationships that enabled Strong Family New Mexico to take on the issue of police and state violence in 2015 following the murder of James Boyd outside of Albuquerque.10 Albuquerque has the highest rate of police homicides in the country. Strong Families New Mexico joined with the MLK Foundation and the ACLU, to call for a federal investigation by the Department of Justice.11 They used the investigation to bring a family and community lens to the question of state violence and engaged many community members and organizations. Now they are launching a youth community action research project to develop recommendations following the investigation. Barboa credits Forward Stance practice with their ability to act clearly and quickly by “staying grounded in the middle of chaos and see when there were opportunities to act coming our way.”

New Mexico is just one hub of the growing national movement working to change how we think, feel, and act in support of all families. “I am so thankful for each and every person who helped to build this movement,” says Shen. “Together, we are developing a culture of working across issue, geography and constituency. We are making Strong Families a home for everyone who believes in a better world for all families.”