



Reflections

An Interview with Sara Jorgensen of Rosie's Place

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Sara Jorgensen is a longtime adult educator and community activist who started her career in New Orleans organizing residents against toxic chemicals being stored along the Mississippi River in their communities in the late 1970s. Currently Sara is the Director of the Women's Education Center at Rosie's Place, <http://www.rosiesplace.org/>, a nonprofit organization serving poor and homeless women in the Greater Boston area. She has taught in the classroom for many years and was the former director of adult education at the Haitian Multi-Service Center of Catholic Charities in Dorchester, MA. For over 30 years, she has been a social activist and adult educator, and recently received a Proclamation from the State of New York for her community organizing and founding of Turning Point Brooklyn, Inc. which offers services such as the shower project, permanent and temporary housing, counseling, substance abuse treatment, English language classes, High School Equivalency preparation, and job and life skills training. The program, in Red Hook and Sunset Park, Brooklyn, seeks to treat the complete person by fostering pride and dignity. <http://www.tpbk.org/>



Sara Jorgensen of
Rosie's Place

Sara received a BA degree from Tulane University and an MS degree in Adult Education from Fordham University. She is a co-author of "Continuing the legacy: Democracy & education practice," an article that describes her work with the Boston State House Project and adult education activism. <http://connection.ebscohost.com/c/articles/87524572/continuing-legacy-democracy-education-practice>

Why did you enter the field of adult education? When and where did you study?

In my early twenties, I wanted to be a social worker but then became a community organizer both in New Orleans and in Brooklyn, New York because I wanted to do something meaningful that brought change. In Brooklyn, I co-founded a para-church organization and ministry. I saw social work as parallel work with the church ministry, as "chips off the same block." It was then

that I fell in love with the kids in my Brooklyn neighborhood who wanted to stay in school; some did but many were so far behind, dropped out and desperately needed literacy and GED preparation. This was adult education and we stumbled upon it by accident as the youth we worked with grew up. Raised with two disabled siblings myself, I gravitated to adult education, a place of justice. I was always and continue to be concerned about dismantling stigmas and stereotypes surrounding marginalized adults. This was Brooklyn in the 1980's. I worked with those who didn't have a fighting chance, and I fought with them as a teacher, a tutor, and their neighbor, co-founding an organization at the time called Discipleship Inc. (today Turning Point Brooklyn, Inc.), which was a grassroots, community-based and a government-funded organization in Sunset Park, Brooklyn. This was a convergence of my youthful vigor, faith, and action to create a world where no one is left out. Even if it was a teeny little corner of the world, I felt we made a difference.

Tell us about the scholars and writings that have influenced your thinking.

While at Fordham University pursuing a MS in adult education, I was most influenced by Paulo Freire and his book, *A Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. I was impressed with building lessons and teaching on themes and words of importance to students' lives and creating an entire literacy campaign in this way. He did not deposit knowledge into his students as if the students had nothing to offer or to exchange in the learning environment. He culled their knowledge and used it as a foundation for the lessons. *The Quiet Rebels: The Story of the Quakers in America* by (https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/71809.Margaret_Hope_Bacon) was monumental for me. I discovered White people of faith like myself who took a stand. It was the first book I read about how people risked their lives to change the injustices they benefitted from as White Americans. This brave account of women like Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton and others who were leaders in antislavery and women's rights movements gave me renewed thread of hope in my country's sordid history.

Speak to the intersection of social justice and adult education, if you will.

Social justice and adult education are connected every day. In 2016, people still go to school hungry. Adults not learning to read is a social justice issue for me. In a civilized society, everyone deserves the right to read and write and know their rights whether they are documented or undocumented. But beyond reading and writing, I have always taught adult students how to fight for their rights whether it is community organizing against toxic waste in New Orleans, the State House Project in Boston, or issues of equality in taxation throughout Massachusetts. I do my best to train the teachers, publish student writing, and provide services to the materially poor knowing that I am learning some of my best lessons from students about caring for one another in community and about the persistence of the human spirit.

In our current social and political situation, do you see adult educators' and educators' role?

Adult Literacy funding is becoming increasingly scarce because of the stringent Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) federal guidelines focusing on next step outcomes. It seems to me this is a social justice issue, because under these WIOA guidelines adult literacy students are less likely to be served. At Rosie's place we do not receive government funding; we

have an open door policy and can serve everyone. We address “bread and butter” issues like: food, shelter, the cycle of poverty and larger issues of poverty that circle homeless people like predators: the gender gap in pay, the need for a progressive taxes so everyone pays their fair share and attention to the development of low cost housing. The role of adult educator is to teach with all their heart and hopefully in an environment like Rosie’s Place with an array of comprehensive services and unconditional love to reinforce women who have been diminished in their lives.

In addition to providing meals and shelter, as well as wide-ranging support, housing and education services *for 12,000 women a year*, Rosie’s Place is involved with other Massachusetts programs. In the annual State House Project, students and tutors join with adult education students all over Massachusetts to lobby for the state’s adult education budget, a small allocation for low income adults to go back to school. We fight for it every year so it remains in the State budget.

Also, this year we raised awareness in Massachusetts on two fronts. We fought for the Common Application, making headway on this overlooked issue that will help people seeking services deal with the red tape of programs. The common application assists the poor seeking services and support to cut through bureaucracy and government obstacles to receiving assistance of all kinds. Instead of having to fill out a myriad of applications and papers that are often extremely confusing, there needs to be one common application. For the homeless and the poor, this will make a difference and is a social justice triumph.

A second success was fighting for a raise in the minimum wage, and currently the “Raise Up” campaign which demanded that the wealthy pay their fair share by being taxed a surtax of 4 percent on any annual income exceeding \$1 million. The additional revenue generated would be earmarked for education and transportation. Again, we were successful in bringing this issue to the forefront in preparation for a vote on it next year. A final focus, which I look at as a social justice issue and role of adult education, is access to art, music, trips, and celebrations that other citizens are privileged to afford. Rosie’s Place has many collaborative relationships in Boston with museums and universities to provide opportunities that materially poor women do not have. Equality of opportunity and access are adult education values and adult educators are creative and vigilant in seeing that doors are open to all – this is social justice.



Joni Schwartz is Professor and Social Activist Scholar in the Department of Humanities, City University of New York - LaGuardia Community College, New York City. Her new co-edited book, “Race, Education, and Reintegrating Formerly Incarcerated Citizens” will be published this summer by Lexington Books, Rowman & Littlefield, Publishers.