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Oral History: Interview with Sabrina Miller

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[00:00:01.280] - Sabrina Miller

Okay. Alright. So do you want me to just start talking, or do you want to, like, prompt with question or anything?

[00:00:10.800] - Taylor Powert

You can just start talking but before we do. Lets state, the date, the time, and our names.

[00:00:19.420] - Taylor Powert

It is currently 9:08 on Monday, July 26, 2020. I'm Taylor Powert, a History intern with HSU. and I am talking with Sabrina Miller. Now you can go ahead and introduce your role and what organization you work for.

[00:00:32.630] - Sabrina Miller

Totally. My name is Sabrina Miller. I work for Cooperation Humboldt. I have many roles in the organization, but the one that specifically brings me here today is my position as the program coordinator of the Disaster Response and Community Resilience team.

[00:00:57.270] - Sabrina Miller

The team and the program area is relatively new. It did come out of last year's string of happenings. I join Cooperation Humboldt in 2019. I think around that time I was just starting off as a volunteer and was just kind of getting my foot in the organization and learning how to, you know, just lead projects, and be a social change advocate. So then when COVID happened, there was the organization came together and started to discuss the ways that they could respond to the pandemic in the early stages too, before it was really as big as it got.

[00:01:56.120] - Sabrina Miller

And yeah, they ended up organizing like a coalition. So they started reaching out to organizations in the community that we're dealing with, vulnerable communities or just kind of like very people oriented organizations or organizations that were providing support for the community or planning to and kind of brought everyone together to start having a conversation around how the community was going to respond. And some of those organizations being like the American Red Cross which was a big one that ended up developing a pretty strong relationship. I wasn't too involved in the early stages of the response because I was feeling pretty I was still at that time, like not super confident in myself as a worker or whatever.

[00:03:04.060] - Sabrina Miller

But I kind of came in later. And so this had all kind of happened before I really got involved, but I was kind of on the peripheral watching it happen. I think there were some people from, like the county there in the government. And basically what had happened is, have you ever heard of a co-ad community organizations active in disaster? So it's like the idea of a co-ad is that, like a well developed co-ad is going to be consistent of organizations within the community as well as, like emergency response organizations such as the Office of Emergency Services Search. Any organizations that are really active during disasters, basically.

[00:03:53.100] - Sabrina Miller

And so Humble doesn't have an active co-ad. They're in the process of trying to put one together now, but they didn't have one at the time. And so what Cooperation Humboldt essentially did was not even really knowing about what co-ad was is they kind of unintentionally formed that by bringing all these organizations together to start. Like I said, having these conversations, connecting, what are you doing? What do you need? Things like that. And so that happened.

[00:04:23.480] - Sabrina Miller

And that was really great. Through that effort, Cooperation, Humboldt was able to organize a bunch of services, and you can see more on our website. It's not super developed, to be honest. It needs some work, but they kind of organized like a bunch of response effort. So the main one was the needs request. So basically what happened was people could go online and submit their needs, and it went to, like, a form. And then we had a network of volunteers that, you know, that through Cooperation

Humboldt outreach, we're able to mobilize.

[00:05:20.030] - Sabrina Miller

And the volunteers would then go into these spreadsheets and check the needs and then do things like grocery deliveries, prescription pickups. There was just some past mowing the lawn. They were just a vast array of different things that volunteers were able to respond to. And they were organized by area and it was a really amazing thing. We were able to develop some pretty good connections with the community through that. People were really excited to be able to respond and help. I think a lot of people, too, who are not working anymore were able to do that.

[00:06:02.090] - Sabrina Miller

And obviously, it was really helpful for the people whose needs were met. And there was several teams. So there was the volunteer needs request. There was mask making. So there was an individual named Kate Angus in our group who really organized a large scale mask making and we were able to get masks out. This was again in the early stages when masks were like, no one could get them. And so we were able to get masks to a bunch of organizations who could provide them to people who needed them.

[00:06:37.630] - Sabrina Miller

In all the while, we had a team making these masks, and they had a really good set up there. There was a sanitation making team. So people were making, like, DIY hand sanitizer and able to distribute that. There was a mental health team that was able to kind of, like, answer phone calls or respond to people who are really struggling with the whole sheltering in place situation. What else? We were able to kind of create each area that had volunteers. So there was like the Arcata Eureka, mainly those, two.

[00:07:16.290] - Sabrina Miller

But there was also, like, McKinleyville, Southern Humboldt. We were able to identify, like, a distribution hub. And we ordered, like, bulk food that we were then able to connect to people. So for people who were struggling financially, we had food that we could deliver them for free. We were allocated funds to invest in this project and buy food to distribute it, things like that. So that happened. And that was the coalition kind of continued for a bit until all the organizations started kind of getting a handle on things and figuring out what their role was in this disaster, because this is something that no one really anticipated and no one really knew how to properly respond.

[00:08:14.100] - Sabrina Miller

But I think that, like, with time and continuously showing up, everyone kind of found, like, what their role was and what they had to offer. And we were able to meet the needs of organizations as well and connect organizations to each other. So that was really successful and also a really huge learning opportunity or, like, learning experience, because this is all just like, we all just kind of were like, what do we do? And then just threw this together. It definitely tested everyone's capacity and, like, emotional state.

[00:08:54.440] - Sabrina Miller

There was some heightened emotions throughout the process, but I think that we all kind of experienced that. But it was interesting being, like, a lot of people saw COVID as a time to, like, suddenly there was nothing going on in their lives. And for a lot of people involved in this response work, it was the opposite. It was like, suddenly everything that we've been talking about for so long became extremely relevant. And we were like, go, go, go, go, go. So that was that. And then after that, after Covid kind of reached, like, a plateau of sort.

[00:09:36.870] - Sabrina Miller

Then the wildfire started happening last year. And so Andrew Bogart, he's the disaster program manager for this area. He works with the Red Cross. He came to Cooperation Humboldt and was like, hey, you were so great at mobilizing volunteers. Like, we need help.

[00:10:00.000] - Sabrina Miller

We have evacuees that are not able to stay at traditional Red Cross shelter. So they had to put them in hotels and we need to feed them. And so we had to again mobilize a bunch of volunteers and these volunteers were able to deliver meals. It was like three times daily meals to these evacuees that were sheltering throughout the area, in the hotels. And so after that Cooperation Humboldt was like, hey, disasters are going to keep happening. Like, especially with the state of our world and the climate crisis as it continues.

[00:10:42.250] - Sabrina Miller

This is something that we need to really put focus and energy into. And so through that, the Disaster Responsive Community Resilience team came into fruition. And our main focus has been wildfires for the past year or so. But we've also been meeting regularly and just discussing, like, what else this team could do. And also the importance of, like, a huge, huge thing we talk about is the importance of community resilience as a form of disaster response. So as we kind of saw last year during Covid, during the wildfires, like, the community stepped up.

[00:11:20.020] - Sabrina Miller

We put out a call of like, hey, there's a need. But the community is what came together and made all of this possible with the help of all the organizations that supported the process. And so we are really wanting to, like, explore and and bring to light the power of community and how having a resilient community who is trained and ready to respond and cares enough about each other to want to respond, that is such a strong indicator of how well a community is going to come out on the other end of a disaster.

[00:12:03.790] - Sabrina Miller

And so we're trying to find ways to build that community resilience and to make this something that people are thinking about more because people don't really want to talk about disasters because it's scary and it's not fun and it's not happening right now. So they don't really care about it or not. You know what I mean? But when a disaster happens it's the most important thing in everyone's life. And it is the most collectively shared experience. And, you know, it's like in those moments, nothing else matters except that and everyone's thinking about the same thing.

[00:12:36.460] - Sabrina Miller

But we want to make sure that it's in those moments, we are prepared and ready to respond. And we're not just all, like, running around so filled with anxiety and stress that we can't think clearly about what to do. And so we want to be able to have systems in place that can effectively mobilize people and connect people the resources and make sure that the people who have the highest needs are being checked in on and being cared for, and that those who are able and available, they can act as a support for the community and whatever way works for them and that everyone's protected through this process.

[00:13:16.120] - Sabrina Miller

And also that we're coordinating with the larger organizations like the American Red Cross, Office of Emergency Services and the response organizations such as the Fire Department, the Police Department, things like that and hopefully have the process flow more seamlessly. And that way, there's not that huge gap between disaster and people actually getting their needs met and in connected to services, because that's kind of what we saw last year is that there was a big waiting period for a lot of people. And for some people, that can mean life or death depending on the vulnerability of that community, which is another thing that we're really trying to connect with Cooperation Humboldt. The organization

[00:14:02.420] - Sabrina Miller

has pretty strong relationships with marginalized, vulnerable communities as we try to focus our work on that. And so a lot of these communities, they don't trust, like, a worry about traditional response services. And like the police or even American Red Cross. We work with a group from the Mung community who, as you might know right now, there's a lot going on with the community and the Wildfires. And the police Department, there was a shooting where a Mung individual was killed by a police officer.

[00:14:42.490] - Sabrina Miller

And so we were trying to connect the Mung community to resources for wildfire through the American Red Cross. And one of our advocates of the Mung community reached out to their community was like, hey, how would you feel about someone from the Red Cross coming in and, like, giving presentation about wildfire? And they were like, no, we don't feel comfortable with that. And so this is important because a lot of these communities feel similarly not just about the Red Cross, but police, emergency response services, those sorts of things, that have the badge and the shiny vast.

[00:15:13.410] - Sabrina Miller

It's like they see that. And it's a trigger of of lack of safety, which is the opposite of what they are supposed to be, you know. And so how do we connect these communities that are the most vulnerable during disasters? How do we connect them to the services that they need to support themselves? So that's another thing that we're exploring to trying to bridge those gaps and ensuring that those communities get what they need without having to put themselves in a situation where they feel unsafe or, you know, are met with services that aren't culturally appropriate or sensitive to their specific needs.

[00:15:46.740] - Sabrina Miller

So that's kind of my little rundown of that I kind of said a lot, so I want to create space now for you to reflect or respond and ask any questions that you might have.

[00:15:59.520] - Taylor Powert

It sounds like you guys are really on the scene. First responders. You know, you guys totally took action in a time where nobody really knew what to do, which is super awesome. You mentioned that Humboldt didn't have the co-ad before the pandemic that its kind of something that's coming about because of it. So would you say that COVID made these things possible, or did you see these kind of coming together with or without it?

[00:16:31.500] - Sabrina Miller

So I would say there was a co-ad before COVID, but it wasn't very active and it wasn't organized and it didn't mobilized during COVID, just because it was not getting any attention or probably wasn't being prioritized. I would definitely say that I don't know if COVID made it possible. I think the people that are engaging in the process make it possible. But I would say COVID brought to light how important it is to have an active and organized co-ad or something similar to that.

[00:17:07.800] - Sabrina Miller

And that because of COVID, there are now resources available to make it happen. But I would say that the people organizing it and the organizations that are part of it are what make the co-ad possible.

[00:17:20.880] - Taylor Powert

I would agree. I definitely think that was an awesome way to, you know, really give credit where it's due. So do you think as a community, we could reframe this moment as an opportunity? Do you see it as something that really brought everyone together and helped create a better response?

[00:17:46.060] - Sabrina Miller

Oh, definitely. The term disaster has a very negative connotation, but really what a disaster is, is a it's a widespread event, like I said, affects everyone and impacts everyone in some way. But disasters aren't inherently bad. There are a lot of negative consequences when a community isn't prepared to respond to it or responds to it inappropriately or ineffectively. But really what it is, is it's an opportunity for community and people to come together and respond and then transform and become stronger after the fact and become more resilient.

[00:18:34.110] - Sabrina Miller

And that's how we want this community, our community, to see and relate to disasters. We want them to see it as, you know, they're inevitable. You can't control them. So there's no use in fearing them or trying to avoid them, necessarily. But coming together during them and recognizing that, like, okay, at

this point in time, nothing, your beliefs, my beliefs are differences. They don't matter. The only thing that matters is that we come together and come out of this, you know, hopefully stronger and then learn from that and transform ourselves so that we can be, you know, more ready to respond in the future or more capable of preventing those things from happening in the first place.

[00:19:21.340] - Sabrina Miller

I had a very enlightening conversation with some individuals from Two Feathers, the organization, and we were using the term disaster, and they had said we don't actually see wildfires as disasters because they're natural occurrences and they have a lot of purpose. But the way that we handle them has resulted. Historically, we, as in the white man settlers, has turned wild fires into a disaster. But, you know, before the settlers had colonized this area. The wildfires were sacred to the land. And so we want to get back to that relationship with disasters as seeing them as something that is inevitable and can be utilize to grow and become a stronger version of ourselves.

[00:20:19.040] - Taylor Powert

That's a really awesome viewpoint. It's definitely putting myself into perspective as well. Your'e totally right. I never saw it that way. I think I had a very negative point of view for a while, but that's definitely making me reconsider and question how I looked at. That's super awesome.

[00:20:40.510] - Sabrina Miller

A lot of people do have negative feelings about it, but even think about, like, on a personal scale, like when you're going through a personal crisis or a personal disaster in the moment, it's like the world is ending. I'm dying. But if you get back up and, you know, keep fighting and you keep going, you come out stronger. And then when you look back, you're like, that sucked but I'm really thankful that that happened because it made me a stronger version of myself. But you did have to face it, accept it, come to terms with it, and then put in the work necessary in order to overcome it.

[00:21:14.080] - Sabrina Miller

And the more you do that, the stronger you get. And then you start to get into a flow where when you embrace it, when hardship comes your way, because, you know, that you're going to come out stronger because of it, and that it is an opportunity for transformation. And so if we can get to that level on a community scale, then the next hundred years or so, which are going to be extremely trying and very testing and very disastrous with the state of the world as it is, then our community can hopefully whether that storm and withstand whatever comes our way and hopefully come out stronger in the end.

[00:21:56.940] - Taylor Powert

I think using that personal analogy would help a lot of people wrap their heads around all this and probably help keep people a little bit more positive.

[00:22:14.170] - Sabrina Miller

Yeah. We're really trying to change this narrative and find creative ways to get people thinking about disasters as something that's not scary or not something to avoid, but something to embrace. And that's a hard thing to do, even, you know, there's just so much negative feelings around it. But if we can find ways to to get this message out into the community, and I think people could come together around us around this thing.

[00:22:44.540] - Taylor Powert

When you say people and you talk about all the volunteers and all of the organizations that came together during this time to create a resilient community, it has me thinking that there was a lot of talk of essential and essential workers. It sounds to me and I think it's very evident that the work you guys put into it was extremely essential and you were essential parts of the community's response. But what what does essential mean to you? Who would you define as essential?

[00:23:32.040] - Sabrina Miller

Yeah. I mean, I would say everyone is essential in some way.

[00:23:42.240] - Sabrina Miller
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[00:23:45.330] - Sabrina Miller

Think that's a good question. I think the we see essential as the people that are meeting the most. We typically see essential as the people that are, like meeting the most needs or meeting the most critical needs, like our health care workers, food providers, first responders. But what about, you know, what about the people who are creating art? One thing that we really focused on was the impact that this has on artists and the arts community in the arts and culture sector, which was hit very hard by COVID because art is seen as a luxury or, you know, something that isn't needed.

[00:24:36.900] - Sabrina Miller

But a lot of people suffer because of that. A lot of people suffer because of that, you know, and there's not a lot of emphasis on the value that art has in typical society, but we see that as essential at Cooperation Humboldt, definitely. Which has actually resulted in another project that I'm working on with a team called the Performing Arts Readiness, which focuses on creating disaster preparedness for arts and culture workers and organizations so that they can be supported during times of disaster, but also so that they can be involved in response services during times of disaster because their role is so overlooked.

[00:25:26.290] - Sabrina Miller

But so essential in keeping the soul alive, you know, keeping the fire going during these times where it's most at risk, keeping the hope and stilled in people so that people do keep fighting another day. That, to me, is very essential and very overlooked. I would consider, you know, everyone plays an essential role, whether it's, you know, simply just doing your part by wearing your mask and not contaminating other people with the virus or the people who are just looking for a way to help in any way they can.

[00:26:11.020] - Speaker 1

Yeah. I see that there is a possibility for everyone to have an essential role in these times, but definitely want to give thanks and gratitude for those that were on the front lines through all of this. Our volunteers. Yeah. The organizers of this amazing work, all of us.

[00:26:43.760] - Taylor Powert

I think you make some good points. A lot of the times it's portrayed in the media that the essential workers are, you know, the people working at the grocery stores and the hardware stores and the ones working minimum wage jobs that don't have the option to not go to work and the individuals are essential. But, I think that definitely takes away or there's a lack of recognition for the ones that aren't completely visible because there are I mean, I would have never known just how much these organizations were really doing if I didn't talk to David because I wasn't around it.

[00:27:25.730] - Taylor Powert

You know, I was in Idaho and locked in my own little shell. But I definitely think a lot of people really had essential roles to play, and nobody really talks about those people. And without them, I think we'd be a hot mess right now.

[00:27:45.030] - Sabrina Miller

Yeah. I also want to emphasize that the in these current times, the essential workers are mostly essential in a capitalist society, grocery stores, you know, thinking about stuff like that, because really, there's also the essential workers that you're not seeing. And those are the people that are trying to create new systems that allow us to have our needs met without having to depend on these, you know, corporate chains or outside entities to feed us or give us health care, medicine. And so there's a lot of work going on behind these, behind the capitalist framework of, like, trying to transform society.

[00:28:34.170] - Sabrina Miller

And this is what Cooperation Humboldt's main mission and goal is recognizing that in the system of capitalism, there will always be people who aren't getting their needs met. There will always be labor

that's being exploited, and there will always be people suffering. And so how can we continue to build more interdependent systems with each other as community members where we are able to during disasters, outside of disasters, we are able to meet our needs, and we don't have to depend on these larger entities to survive.

[00:29:16.980] - Sabrina Miller

And so I consider that to be very essential because it's creating infrastructure for the future, because eventually these systems will collapse and they will not be dependable anymore. And I don't know how long that will be, but it will come the way that our world exploits the resources of the Earth faster than it can replenish itself and exploits the labor of people. And then pretty much just tosses them aside once they're health has deteriorated, to the point of them not being able to engage in labor anymore.

[00:29:55.520] - Sabrina Miller

So, yeah, that's essential.

[00:30:24.240] - Taylor Powert

I think we discussed a lot about what you have learned, what organizations have learned, and what the community has kind of learned as a whole during this time. But to generalize it, what is it that you want people to take away from this time period? And what is it that you have learned that is most important to share with people in the future?

[00:30:52.690] - Sabrina Miller

So much, there's so much. But I would say the main thing around this topic and the work that I'm currently doing is that I want people to recognize just everything that I just kind of laid out about the state of capitalism and how it's destroying our planet and our world. And if we don't come together to create new systems, our species will go extinct. And how I really want people to understand that disasters and emergencies are inevitable and will only continue to increase. And I want people to understand that kind of again.

[00:31:30.790] - Sabrina Miller

What I laid out earlier is that it is an opportunity for us to come together and transform and become stronger. But it does require the effort. It does require people to show up and be consistent and put in the work and getting to know their neighbors and open themselves up to the fact that everything that we do impact the people around us and everything that the people around us do impacts us. And we need to break out of this mentality of like, your business is your business, and my business is my business, and I don't want to cross that boundary.

[00:32:08.740] - Sabrina Miller

That boundary has already been crossed. We all live together and we need to see ourselves as part of a larger system and recognize that we have to work together. We have to be in sync for our super organism of a community to be able to continue to exist and continue to live. And the more that we can see ourselves as connected and see ourselves as one instead of all these individuals, hopefully we can build compassion for each other and for our community and see this is a priority and something that is necessary for us to continue to exist as a species and as a community and as an individual too.

[00:33:05.120] - Taylor Powert

I think that was a great way to summarize the conversation we had, and I'm really excited to go back and listen to it again because we made a lot of good points. Before I wrap up, is there anything you want to highlight, or is there any last piece of information you want to share about your own experience? Somebody else's?

[00:33:37.600] - Sabrina Miller

I will say there's a statement that is running through my head all the time as I do this work. And if it's not soulful, then it's not strategic. This doesn't have to be a scary, boring, daunting thing. It can be fun. It can be artistic. It can be soulful. We can come together to support one another and develop our

skills, to grow together, to laugh together and dance together and cry together and grieve together. And it can be artistic and it can be soulful and it can be fun.

[00:34:22.060] - Sabrina Miller

And if we approach it this way, then we'll have the most success because we'll be coming at it from a place of the heart instead of just a place of the mind. And in our society, we're also ruled by the mind that we forget about the heart and the soul. And so how can we bring that into this work and see it as like I said, time and time again, just an opportunity to come together and transform collectively into something more powerful, more interconnected, and more self sustainable.

[00:34:56.760] - Sabrina Miller

And how we can create art through this process and document it and create beauty out of all of this chaos and make it something like a dance for a show and enjoy it, enjoy the process and come out the other end. This is beautiful metamorphose being of collectivized people.

[00:35:28.610] - Taylor Powert

It's really inspirational. We're going to look at it 50 years, 100 years from now and you're going to be able to say " We warned you", so that's very cool to look at. But I also think people who look into the archive are going to benefit from the positive mindset that you brought forward during this time even though it was very tragic in a lot of ways.

[00:36:09.430] - Taylor Powert

I think your perspective makes it more human and ties in emotions. You really highlighted just how much it affected the community more than on an economic level, which is I feel like what most people talk about or all I ever hear about. I really appreciate having this conversation with you today. Thank you for being around and willing to talk because I know it's 09:00 a.m. On a Monday morning and probably not the first thing somebody wants to do and they wake up.

[00:36:53.190] - Sabrina Miller

For me it is, I'll talk about this stuff all day. The first thing I think about when I wake up is alright, community resilience. I could talk about this forever. This is literally like my pedestal, you know what I mean? Reaching out to the world. So I appreciate opportunities like this to be able to connect with community members and share this perspective and this outlook. And we're trying to explore larger platforms on how to do that, because if we could have everybody thinking this way, then I think it would be really transformative about how we approach this sort of work.

[00:37:31.360] - Taylor Powert

I definitely agree. Thank you. Next, you have to get on TV with a microphone in the Plaza and start preaching.

[00:37:43.360] - Sabrina Miller

Yeah, definitely. You'll see you'll see me soon.

[00:37:47.830] - Taylor Powert

I'll be in the crowd. Again, thank you so much.