

Ditra Edwards (she/her)

[SISTA Fire](#)



What brings you to work at your current organization? What are the passions, interests and experiences that led you to where you are now?

What brought me to my current organization is that I am a co-founder of SISTA Fire, and SISTA Fire grew out of a time in my life when I had been living in Providence, caring for my mom because she was given her last six months. After she passed, I took time to reflect on what I was doing in life, and to imagine and think about what was next. I was regularly meeting with a good friend of mine – her name is Chanravy Proeung. She is a Cambodian sister who grew up in Rhode Island. I was reflecting on my mom. She was always asking me to return to Rhode Island and work here, and I couldn't wrap my mind around it. But this moment called me home. I didn't know what that would look like. Chanravy suggested doing one-on-ones, so I did. I talked to about 40 different women to hear what they had to say about their lives and what they

were doing, and I asked them what it was like to be a woman of color here in Rhode Island and what their vision was for what they were doing. The question of women of color challenged some. They would say “What do you mean?” And they would tell me their ethnicity and cultural heritage. They would tell me all these different things about who they were. *I shared that the “women of color” phrase is more about a political destination. It’s about how we, across races, build solidarity with each other to build power and create change.* I shared that I learned the origins of the phrase from Loretta Ross’s talk. In short, she explained that in 1977, a group of Black women attended a women’s conference, and they brought with them a Black women’s agenda to replace a minority women’s agenda at the meeting. At the conference, all the other “minority women” wanted to join the Black women’s agenda. They started working together, but it could no longer be a Black women’s agenda – together, they arrived at a Women of Color agenda.



And so, with that, and with my commitment to my mom, Chanravy and I decided to set off to build SISTA Fire together. *The question of passion is about my commitment to Rhode Island.* The place where I grew up. The place that nurtured me in the context of there was a collective group of women who looked out for me my whole life. Chanravy and I talked a lot about the fact that in Rhode Island, there were a lot of advocates and so many folks speaking for women of color, and not always women of color speaking for themselves, especially not collectively. We were often divided by race. Chanravy and I set out on that journey together to begin to think about what it means to build solidarity, to build power with women of color, and to change the conditions and experiences of women in Rhode Island. For us, that was our love of organizing; our vision for what we could do together was really what brought me to this work, and has kept me in this work.

What, if anything, was the impact of having the Community of Practice as a space/container to share thoughts, experiences, and ideas? Did participating in the Community of Practice inspire any new thoughts, dreams, or visions for you?

I think for myself, it wasn’t always about what’s new as much as it was about what’s possible and what’s needed, right? Because we forget that part of it. I think for myself as a Black woman and as a director right now, in the current climate, there are so many things that we’re pushing up against. Sometimes, it was about just really needing a space where I could be explicit about who I am, how I’m feeling, and what I am dealing with on a day-to-day basis and not have to worry about the backlash that comes because I’m speaking my truth whether I’m talking about race, or I’m talking about gender, or I’m just talking about the struggles that I have to deal



with every day. Or, just the challenges of what it means to actually lead in this context and the tension that exists with how much you love doing the work you do every single day, it's what gets you up in the morning, but it's also the thing that exhausts you. And there's a tension within that and the need and the desire to be able to hear from other folks who are experiencing similar things, yet different – that was really important. This past year, it was really important, especially with all the stuff going on with Palestine to have a safe space for people to talk about the impact of Palestine and what it meant, and for the sisters, for the Muslim sisters, for the Palestinian sisters that were in our space to be able to really show them that Black women and other women of color are standing with them because they are the front lines in the context of the work, but to be able to show up and make sure that we were also doing work around Palestine to show solidarity and to fight this horrible genocide. Unknowingly, the space was able to hold that.

For myself, I had a life crisis in the midst of all of this and just needed a space to be present in. I didn't always want to participate in that moment, but knew I could hear and learn from others by simply being present and listening. And there

wasn't this requirement that I had to do everything. That was important. And to hear from folks doing things from other parts of the country and making connections, seeing the threads, and hearing my story in their story was so important. *The intergenerational aspect of the space was so valuable, learning from folks who are younger than I am and hearing their depth of political maturity highlighted and brought more laser focus to my analysis, my own understanding of the work, was important.* I believe the way in which folks created the container was really important for us. The depth of flexibility and the challenge that the facilitators constantly had of us being in this one dimension called Zoom, and figuring out ways to engage us so that we could feel present and held in the space together.

How have the funds (\$10,000 stipend) received through the LL Community of Practice supported your work?

To be honest, the way it helped us is it allowed SISTA Fire to do mutual aid this year. Mutual aid is a huge part of our work. We work in partnership with women in our membership more often than not. Our communities find themselves in situations of crisis because they're being threat-

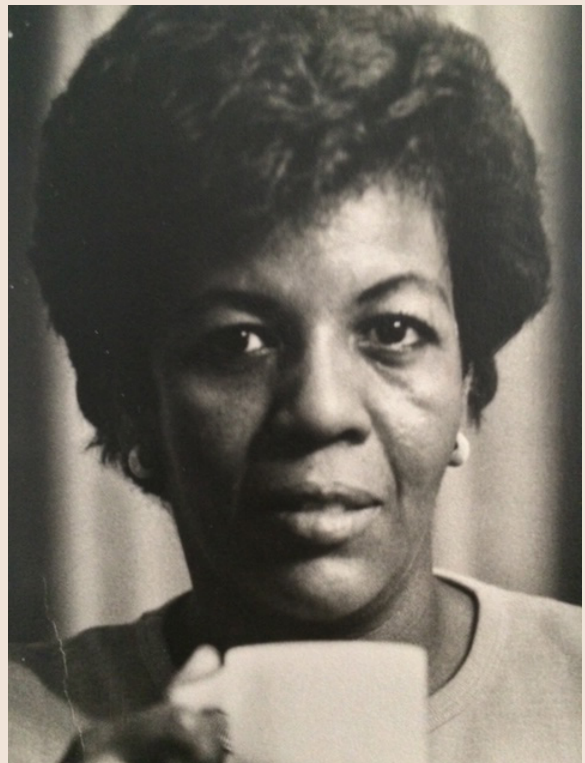
ened with evictions. Most recently, we had a sister who had a fire who was dealing with the court system and needed resources that were not making them fill out hundreds of pieces of paper. Just knowing that this one thing doesn't have to make or break them. SISTA Fire could be there in support of them, and so that money allowed us to provide support for folks. In addition, we brought people together this August 2024 to begin to think about what we're calling a Liberated Circle. The Liberated Circle is building a temporary infrastructure where we get to come together to feel joy, celebrate who we are, and think critically about an agenda that we want to build, to change what's happening in our communities. A number of the women that we supported during mutual aid participated. A part of our Liberated Circle is really looking at the economic impacts on our lives and really trying to reframe how we think about the economy. *How do we build a more feminist economy? How do we think about a more rejuvenating and relational economy that really takes into consideration who we are? How are we healing? How are we working jobs that honor who we are, that allow us to build wealth in our families and not just survive?* Through our mutual aid work, we were able to recruit women to really help tell their stories, but also, to help us strategize on how we move forward. In our first meeting, one of the first questions we asked people was, "Why are you here?" One sister started by saying "I'm not an organizer," but yet, she brought three friends with her and she said, "I'm here because I was in a moment of crisis." When she lost her daughter, she said SISTA Fire stepped in. *She said, "I had nothing; and y'all came in without a question." She said, "You didn't even know me and supported me."* I want to be able to do that in connection with other women and really work on changing what's happening.

Finally, we had an elder in the room, and she said, "I've been waiting for women to be organiz-

ing women and really thinking about what we're doing, and I want to be part of that." Therefore, looking at how the work connects and reconnects us all together when we create these different kinds of spaces that do center women of color and non-binary folks of color. We had some queer folks in the space. Our space is also inter-generational, and a safe space that holds work around intersectionality, across race, across gender, that is gender-expansive and willing to see us as our whole selves as we build toward a potential future. For me, the role that the resources played was allowing us to continue to build the foundation of this work together.

Who are liberatory ancestors, teachers, guides, loved ones, and comrades that inspire your work and values?

First, I have to say Adelina Gomes, that's my mama. My family and I always say her spirit is the spirit of SISTA Fire because my mom always created a space of love and protection for women.



When I was in high school, I remember having a friend who got kicked out of her house because she told her family she was pregnant. Her family kicked her out. I brought her home, and I was like “Ma, she don’t have any place to go,” and she was like, “Okay, but I just have to call her mother so her mother knows she’s here.” My mother had a long talk with her mother, and it took time, but I think it was that connection between mother to mother. My mother reached out to her and really listened to her struggle and created space for her daughter. Eventually, she was able to go home. That was always my mama’s spirit! She always looked out for younger women in our family and all of her granddaughters, and she always shared her story with them. My mother always challenged me to come home and do the work. I think for me, my mother was part of the reason that I am doing this work.

Another elder who has inspired me, always in deep leadership and with direction from directly impacted people, was Ella Baker. Ella Baker always talked about organizers as a core part of investing in young leaders, helping to build organizers who are willing to change our communities locally. I really try to think about that in the context of how I practice my work.

As an organization, we have really looked at the Combahee River Collective. Their statement of purpose around their work really gave us a framework and a path to think about how to approach SISTA Fire. It really helps to unpack our values and the way to approach our work, which means to center Black women, to have an analysis of capitalism, and what it means to build solidarity and work collectively with other people, as a few of those things.

I’ve been blessed to have just amazing people in my life. Finally, my friend Makani Themba, who, before she was my friend was my manager... in so many ways she was my political mentor. She created a political home for me. She real-

ly helped me learn and understand how to build community, how to build family in the context of that and the movement. She really showed me the importance of communities defining and developing policy that is led from the ground up, and the important role that policy can make in changing the conditions of our lives. She always taught us about narrative, about how we tell our own stories, and the strategies to do that.

How do you hold yourself accountable to your values?

That’s every day. Every day that I wake up, I put my feet on the ground, and I say “thank you, Lord Jesus, guide me, guide me” and I try to walk in my truth. I try to walk in honesty. With SISTA Fire’s staff, I always really try to not just talk about our values but to say, what do they look like in practice? I really tried to be clear about what they look like in practice, and when we bump up against them. And what happens when I make mistakes? Whether I’m making a mistake in the context of how I’m managing, or if I’m making a mistake because I’m frustrated. I am an Aries, and I am all fire, and the fire comes out before the love comes out. I try to back it up. I try to back up and own my mistakes and stand in front of that person and apologize. I take accountability for what I did. I always try to talk it out. Here’s what I should have done, and moving forward here’s how I see myself changing and doing better. I really try to listen and hear from SISTA Fire staff because they’re all really brilliant, amazing people and they have taught me so much. We try to work towards transparency as much as possible. When we’re able to do that, I think that people have much more love and respect for who we are as an organization. People have more love and passion and willingness to be in relationship with us. *At the end of the day, everything that we’re doing is about the relationship. And so we have to really honor that.*

How do you sustain yourself as you engage in your work? What are the resources, practices, and spaces that support your well-being?

My most important practice is really my prayer life and being in collective prayer, so I have a prayer partner. I have a prayer book. I try to commune with the ocean as much as I can, but it's not something that I've always done well. *I feel like I'm constantly learning how to be better.* I came up during the time when it was about a grind. It was about really trying to get things done, and it was about constant hard work. I think I've had to learn to reframe my understanding of those things, especially when you're building an organization. Building a vision and a collective vision with folks helps to build sustainability for the organization. It becomes really important about what you put in place. So I think for me, I really have tried to put in place things inside of SISTA Fire that make it more public of how I need to take care of myself because I'm asking other people to take care of themselves. We've been really working on integrating more healing practices inside the organization, and we do a lot. On my own, I've had to really be intentional and find partners to do this with. With my sister, we book a vacation together every single year and it's a time that we come together with friends, and I know I have those two weeks for the purpose of my health. I really try to get up in the morning, after my prayer time, and do some walking and stretching. But really building in things that are public and private to myself. I'm not always that good at it. That's why it's a practice!

Can you share examples of how your organization practices and embodies liberatory leadership?

It's really clear to me within the context of SISTA Fire that people come in at so many different levels in terms of their skills and knowledge. So, identifying what the core skills and knowledge



are that we all have together. It really helps create a balance around the work. There's a set of core skills and knowledge in the organization that we're working on and developing together. One example of that is: how are we working? How are we planning? How are we project managing? We are trying to build that knowledge across the organization and having people try that out in different ways, and really helping people not have fear because they don't know how. A lot of people in organizations keep things hidden because they're fearful of the challenge or the trouble that they will have, but I really try to talk to my staff about what's important is that you're trying and you're taking the time to do the reflection that's needed to help you figure out what's working and what's not working, and what are the potentials for change and taking accountability, right? So, how I try to support them is really identifying where their growth has been, what vision they have for themselves, and what they want to work on so they have the space to be able to do that. *One significant practice is truly giving them the space to lead. Sometimes, people don't always believe that they can. If you don't try,*

then you won't ever get to master it. So, how do we create a container that allows them by helping them build their skills and knowledge, but also then stepping in and trying it on. We do a lot of work around shared leadership and so really partnering with other folks, helping folks learn about, what does it mean to have a team? How does the team support the leadership? How do you support the team itself?

We talk a lot about our values. How are our values helping us? How do we always lead with our values? What is the relationship between our values and our actions? How do we make decisions? Who are we? How do we make organizational decisions?

I really try to create space for members and staff to have input on challenging situations that we have to make decisions about. Earlier this year we had to make hard decisions about our work around Palestine and what it means for us to do that. How are we going to lead, and what kind of capacity do we have to lead? We recognized the potential threat of what funders were saying about people who were doing work around Palestine, and that we had to sit and really understand what it would mean if we did work and the impact it could have on us financially. This process is consensual, if we were all in agreement, what is this work replacing? Once everyone was in agreement, based on who we are as an organization, based on what our values are, we would continue to do what we were doing. SISTA Fire stands in our values, and we understand that building collective power is an iterative process that takes time.

Are there any challenges that you have experienced as a result of embodying liberatory leadership in a non-profit organization?

It's always a challenge to wonder how hard to push when things don't feel like they're in alignment. Is it something that you put your energy towards or not? Spending time with our staff discussing what we see and what are each of their perspectives. We are generationally different, we're really different in culture, race, religion, gender, and sexual orientation... Sometimes, their perspective is different from mine, but we are often aligned... For example, last year we had to make a collective decision. We were turned down for a grant that was around racial equity. We were really unclear why we were turned down, given that the work we do is beyond equity. When I started to touch base with other organizers who were leading organizations, they shared with me that they were being turned down. I pulled my staff together to talk to them about the moment we were in. I really tried to talk to them openly, to share my difficult leadership questions because they're gonna have the same leadership questions in the future.

Part of my job is preparing them to fully lead the organization. My role is not to always be the Executive Director. We can't wait until 10 years down the line to prepare people. You have to prepare people to lead now..how are we preparing? I brought this dilemma to them and talked about what they thought we should be doing. They said, we have to do what we always do – we organize the people. We started organizing the other executive directors who had the same experience in order to call a meeting with the foundation and say, “we need to understand why all of these women of color organizations were not funded.” There are organizations led by white women that are funded. What's the analysis around racial equity that you're holding that we're not able to see? Unfortunately, nothing came of that for us because the analysis is too different and mis-

aligned. In this moment, the practice of solidarity and deepening relationships was critical for us to move forward.

What gives you hope? What keeps you motivated?

I am Black in America, and all my hope was seeded by my ancestor's before me. I will say this, "We are our ancestors' wildest dreams." That quote always touched my heart because I've never been able to put it into words. I know that every day the work that I'm doing is contributing to a vision and possibilities for change for another generation, but yet, it's also creating change every day. And that hope lives in me because I also believe deeply that, SISTA Fire was given to us as a vision of possibility for my mom's spirit and I know God doesn't make any mistakes. We live in purpose. *As the saying says, "I am my ancestors' wildest dreams" and I hope to be somebody else's ancestor someday, and so I'm just trying to do my role in what's possible, for what's to come.*

What seeds of wisdom would you give to someone who is interested in liberatory leadership but does not know where to start?

I think the biggest thing for me is understanding who you are, and understanding your place and purpose in the world. Do you do that in relationship with others? Liberatory leadership is about living in your practice, living in your freedom now and trying to hold that and cultivate that, not just in yourself but in others, wherever you are. You may not be an organizer like I am. Your work may be something else. But it's about how you do your work in the present moment that's really creating the potential for future change. That you're never doing it alone, you are doing it with people, and you're investing in those around you and building because we're never going to have liberation or freedom if we're not willing to do it with others. Our work that we do, it's more *than survival work, right? It's living work. It's growing*

work and taking the steps to learn how to be accountable. Taking the steps to be self-reflective, being willing to make the adjustments, and learning to self-regulate, to really, to be critical of what you see around you, but also have a balanced analysis. I say balance, I just mean that you're not going so far off in one direction that you're just willing to leave other people behind you. You can't be liberatory in understanding, and if you don't have analysis around the implications of capitalism in our lives, in whatever way it is, that's a challenge. Because it is the beast, and the secret, and non-secret all of the time that is killing us because it morphs into new things, and to understand what that means in the context of how we do our work and what the other alternatives to those things really are. I think that we have to really lift our heads up and pay attention to what is going on in the world and be actively engaged in that, right? Not engaged on your own, and not feeling that you're not accountable to anybody but we have to be accountable to our communities and to the collective people that we are in this work with.

If you were to lean into your most radical imagination, what does your idea of liberation look and feel like? What is the future that you are building towards?

I don't know for me if it's radical, what it is, is just. I want our people to be able to live a whole life. To live a life that they have quality housing—the type of housing they need. They have good water, they have healthy food, and they can go in their garden that we're building and grow food together. It doesn't need to be a utopia. But there is a deconstructing of the oppressive systems that are here, that are not of our making. We are willing to operate together in a way that is relational, that is, about building and creating space for all the people around us. I think there's an assumption that we can't have those things, and it's so radical. Maybe, it's radical in the context of deconstructing capitalism. If that is the

thing that's holding us back, I'm for it. I'm mostly for, though, what it means to build healthy relationships, a healthy space where we honor Mother Earth, that we invest in Mother Earth, we invest in our children, that we invest in each other, and create community with one another that allows people to show up as their whole self. That we're not being predefined by something that is no longer or never should have been part of who we are. That we're taking white supremacy out of our existence. We get to see everyone for their beautiful expansive genders, that they are their beautiful, brilliant selves. *For me, I feel like we could have so much of that right now, and what I'm fighting for and trying to build is the foundation for that to exist.*

