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COPS/Metro Alliance-StMU Oral Histories with Sister Bernadette Barrett

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COPS/Metro Alliance-StMU Oral Histories

Narrator: Sr. Bernadette Barrett

Date: 03/26/2024

Location: San Antonio, Texas

Interview Session: 1 of 1

Interviewer: Qiuying Chen (Kitty)

Transcribed By: Qiuying Chen

Transcript Edited By: Kensley Dieckow May 2024

Narrator's Biographical Information:

Sister Bernadette Barrett is a Holy Spirit Sister who has a long history with COPS/Metro. Her order was founded on the principles of social justice and equity for the emancipated African American community. She was a member of COPS/Metro from 1995 to 2002 and continued her social justice work in Louisiana, until she returned to San Antonio in June 2023. Sr. Bernadette has since picked up her work with the COPS/Metro organization.

Summary of Interview:

Sister Bernadette Barrett shared her thoughts about the racial shift and demographic change in COPS/Metro and San Antonio. Furthermore, she discusses how COPS/Metro uses diverse voices in its decision-making process and empowers young people and minority groups to come to the table with high-ranking city executives. Lastly, Sr. Bernadette reflects on her takeaways from her work in community organizing with COPS/Metro.

Interview Key Terms:

COPS/Metro, San Antonio, Social Justice, Race, Demographics, Minority Groups, House Meetings, Community Organizing, Alliance Schools, Racial Dynamics/Relations

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Sr. Bernadette Barrett by Qiuying Chen

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Sr. Bernadette Barrett Interview

Sr. Bernadette Barrett 00:00

It's wonderful.

Kitty 00:02

Yeah! So Hi, I'm Kitty. I'm actually a MA Public History Student, as all of us are here. Today, I'm just going to interview some COPS/Metro problem [questions]. So first, can you actually spell your name so I could-

Sr. Bernadette Barrett 00:20

Yeah. My official name, okay, Bernadette, B-E-R-N-A-D-E-T-T-E. And I go by Bernie for short.

Kitty 00:36

Okay, Yeah.

Sr. Bernadette Barrett 00:37

The last name is Barrett, B, another B, B-A-R-R-E-T-T.

Kitty 00:46

Okay. Thank you so much! And um, so, can you provide a brief overview of your involvement with COPS/Metro and your roles, like what's your position within the organization?

Sr. Bernadette Barrett 00:57

Okay. Positions, We really don't... We try not to have too many positions. I guess.. My community, I'm a Holy Spirit Sister here and founded here in San Antonio. And we were founded to work with the African American community after they were... In 1883 or so, after they were freed. They were no, they weren't slaves anymore. So justice is part of our charism that we work for justice. So COPS/Metro, really, we were involved in, we live on the east side of town. You know, San Antonio is divided into... And over there they had, they got churches together, and it was called the East Side Alliance first. And then it was mostly East Side churches and organizations. And then it developed into the Metro Alliance because COPS was mostly on the west side and it was mostly Catholics, Catholic churches. But there were other, other denominations that wanted to join and you know, other groups. So Metro Alliance was formed.

Sr. Bernadette Barrett 02:21

I spent most of my ministry in Louisiana, actually. But from '95 until '02, I was living in San Antonio. So I was really involved that time. And at that time, there were two separate organizations, one was Metro, one is COPS. And there was a certain amount of, there was friction, because COPS was the powerful one, and the original one, Metro was the kind of the stepdaughter. So whenever we would have meetings, we'd always make sure... We in Metro Alliance, would make sure that there was someone from Metro Alliance, as we call them Co-Chairs. Whenever you have meetings, you have Co-Chairs. So we would have a COPS person and a Metro Alliance person But after... I don't know exactly when COPS and Metro got

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together and became one organization. So I've been...I've been back in San Antonio since June last year [2023], and I've been involved in it. But I also, while I was in Louisiana, I was working in a community organization similar to this. And call it..we talk about IAF, have you ever heard of IAF?

Kitty 03:58

I haven't.

Sr. Bernadette Barrett 04:00

Okay, IAF is the Industrial Areas Foundation. And that's... It was started by a man named Saul Alinsky up in Chicago. And that's a long time ago. It's more than 50 years ago.

Kitty 04:19

Yeah so you mentioned you recently come back to San Antonio?

Sr. Bernadette Barrett 04:23

Yes.

Kitty 04:25

What makes you want to involve in COPS again after-

Sr. Bernadette Barrett 04:28

Well, if you want to achieve something, one person, you know one person going to the mayor, one person going to anyone is not going to make a difference. But if you have a group going together, it does make a difference. Also, COPS and Metro, they develop leaders. They're really supposed to develop leaders. And those leaders then help with their churches and their organizations because they really develop them. You get help to know when to speak up and do research, all kinds of things. So it's really... And also, sometimes they talk about COPS/Metro as a mini university. I've gone to all kinds of workshops and by different economists that I would not be going to on my own. So it's a good... Or this community organizing is good training for people. And that's... As a sister in my community, that's what we're about, developing leaders.

Kitty 05:46

Yeah! So now move on to the demographic questions, actually. So um, how has the demographics within COPS change since you join? Have you-

Sr. Bernadette Barrett 05:56

Ohh. When I was involved, I was involved way back there. See, since my community was involved, even though I lived in San Antonio.. in Louisiana, anytime when we came back for meetings, or during the summer, we used to go to the meetings. They were fine women that were back there. They were... They grew up in COPS and Metro, especially in COPS, they grew up... They were Hispanic women who knew what they were about. I learned a lot from this one lady, her name is Linda Ortega. She would not take no for an answer. So I learned a lot from her. And, when I came back now, it's different. There aren't as many churches involved. There aren't... How else would I describe it? There are not as many from the east side of town. There are very

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few Black people involved. It has changed. It has changed a lot, to me. The... It's just not as large as what it used to be.

Kitty 07:29

Oh, smaller?

Sr. Bernadette Barrett 07:31

I think it is. I feel it is. It's smaller. I don't know. It's hard to stay involved in it because it does take a lot of your time. You know, going to meetings and meeting together and talking about what are we supposed to do, and then time to train younger ones. So, to me anyway, it has changed. And also, there probably are more people involved from the north side of town. See San Antonio is spreading way out. So there are more from the north side of town probably, that's how I see it anyway.

Kitty 08:12

So it's like, um, compared with now rather than the time that you, wait, like early 2000s?

Sr. Bernadette Barrett 08:20

Oh yeah, early, early COPS/Metro had a lot, a lot of women, a lot of people involved, a lot of Catholic churches involved. I don't see that as much.

Kitty 08:31

Oh really? So you mentioned this "less Black people", but are there any White or Asian or non- Mexican? Like non-Hispanic people in the COPS?

Sr. Bernadette Barrett 08:40

Oh yeah. There are White people involved, but most I'd say the majority are Hispanic. Which is because of the town. That's how the town is. The city, I should call it.

Kitty 08:57

So how would you describe the racial climate in San Antonio during the time you first became involved in COPS/Metro? Just in in San Antonio region?

Sr. Bernadette Barrett 09:09

Well, I guess it was still... You know White people had the power and you know. It's hard, It's hard... I'm a White person, but it's hard for White people to give up power. So it was, yeah I'd say there was a lot of discrimination and school systems, you know, the predominantly, especially the predominantly Black, are a lot of times are neglected. So are the Hispanics.

Kitty 09:45

Oh I see. So actually how do you feel— Wait, like what makes you want to, like join the Hispanic dominant organization while you are White?

Sr. Bernadette Barrett by Qiuying Chen

Sr. Bernadette Barrett 09:59

I've worked in the Black community for years. We were founded to work in the Black community, our community. So working with people from other races or other ethnic groups doesn't bother me.

Kitty 10:14

That's great! Oh yeah. Um so how has the relationship between COPS and other minority groups evolve over time? If there's any?

Sr. Bernadette Barrett 10:24

Well COPS was minority.

Kitty 10:26

Oh yeah true. But like others?

Sr. Bernadette Barrett 10:32

Well I don't... That's what I'm saying, there aren't just many... There aren't too many Black churches involved in it anymore. So that relationship, well, it needs to be better. But there is, you know, there is tension between Black and Hispanics.

Kitty 11:03

Oh how come? Like does it have any specific things happened? I'm just curious.

Sr. Bernadette Barrett 11:06

Well, I don't have any examples of it. But I think that two minorities, you know. It helps the dominant group, if there are two smaller groups fighting against each other.

Kitty 11:26

Oh okay, so actually is not a good thing. So um, how does COPS/Metro approach the inclusion of diverse voices and perspectives within its decision making process?

Sr. Bernadette Barrett 11:43

Let's see what we... We have what you call house meetings. And a house meeting, you know... Like in my neighborhood, I might know five or six, well maybe ten families. And I might get one or two from each family to come and we'd have a meeting together. And we pose a question. So from that.... Remind me again, what the...

Kitty 12:14

I'm sorry. Like, how does the COPS/Metro approach the inclusion of diversity voices and perspectives, within its decision making?

Sr. Bernadette Barrett by Qiuying Chen

Sr. Bernadette Barrett 12:24

Oh! So see, when we have the house meeting, we listen to see, okay, if we're trying to find an issue that we're going to work on. It doesn't come from the top down, it comes from the bottom. So we listen to what they're saying. But what... Because you have to pick an issue that's possible. You know, and then you get to... Anyway, you listen to them. And then you bring it back to the... Then you bring it back to the bigger group. And there is a collective... I don't want to say at the top, there is a collective of leaders, who usually look into issues to bring it down to bite-size. But we do listen to people. And another thing is we listen to stories. You know, people tell... Like in the Bible, you hear stories among the people. You listen to their experiences.

Kitty 13:29

Yeah, that's really great!

Sr. Bernadette Barrett 13:31

Oh, yeah, we try to listen to their experiences.

Kitty 13:33

Like you can feel more close to them.

Sr. Bernadette Barrett 13:34

Yeah, for sure.

Kitty 13:38

So has COPS ever partnered with other... I might have asked this before but has COPS ever partnered with other minority groups and gotten long-term success? Or long-term partner with other minority groups? Some organizations?

Sr. Bernadette Barrett 13:58

Well sometimes they do, they're... I think one time here there was a union, a union had joined. I'm not sure if the teachers union joined. But I guess mostly it's churches, but then other organizations do come. Like right now, there's a community center on the east side of town called Ella Austin, and they just joined. So like that's, I know it's a minority. It's an African American. So they just joined. I don't know if they've ever had Muslims in it. They do have Jewish, they used to. I don't know if there's Jewish now. But they did. I don't think there's any group that they say "we don't want you".

Kitty 14:59

Yeah that's great! So, can you share a specific initiative or campaign by COPS/Metro that you believe have made a significant impact on racial dynamic within the community?

Sr. Bernadette Barrett 15:12

Racial dynamics.

Kitty 15:16

Yeah, initiative or campaign?

Sr. Bernadette Barrett by Qiuying Chen

Sr. Bernadette Barrett 15:20

Ehhhhh.

Kitty 15:22

It's okay if you don't any.

Sr. Bernadette Barrett 15:29

Yeah, I can't come up with one except that, you know, there was, they call them Alliance Schools. Where for, we got... We went into different schools and we got parents to be involved in decisions. See, there was a bond passed here for public education. So the parents got involved in saying what they wanted in their schools, what improvements, and then to make sure that they did. So that's... I mean, we did one time on the PGA, you know what PGA is? Professional Golf Association. Now that's more, the other, the environment. And they were going to build over the Aquifer. That's one thing that COPS/Metro tries to protect is the Aquifer. They were going to build a new golf course. And we did a campaign. I guess we brought a lot of... because that was citywide. Oh, gosh, over 100,000 signatures. And the impact was that then they were able to negotiate with the hotel or whatever wanted to come in to give living wage.

Kitty 16:54

Oh, I see. Um yeah, so do you think that COPS has a good relationship with other minority groups? Just in general?

Sr. Bernadette Barrett 17:04

I think so.

Kitty 17:06

Like good relationships?

Sr. Bernadette Barrett 17:10

I think they try.

Kitty 17:20

Oh ok, so I mean, like, it could be better or?

Sr. Bernadette Barrett 17:21

Or it can... Yeah, it probably can improve. But see, the Hispanic people in this town are the ones that are not getting everything that they should get. So it's something important to them to fight for there— for what they should be getting. Whereas, the White people, all they've got to do is take out their purse.

Kitty 17:57

Uh huh, I see. Yeah I understand.

Sr. Bernadette Barrett 17:59

At least I think that's how it is.

Sr. Bernadette Barrett by Qiuying Chen

Kitty 18:03

So um, looking ahead, what do you envision as the future of COPS/Metro work in promoting racial justice and equality in San Antonio?

Sr. Bernadette Barrett 18:14

Well, I think we're thinking about it already. One thing is, like, some of your questions they were about organizations, to not just focus on churches joining. There's lots of organizations in this town, and a lot of them are working for the same thing. So, if we could all work together, the organization's can still save themselves. But you know, try and get them to be part of working together, whatever way they work. You know, I don't know how were going to do that, but it's important that...

Kitty 18:57

Yeah seems good to just bring, like together rather than work separately.

Sr. Bernadette Barrett 19:04

Yes. But you know how some people they, It's almost like their family. You know, this is my family. But anyway, we can work on it, I believe.

Kitty 19:17

Yeah. So actually that's all the questions, but the additional question could be, do you... I'm just looking at some additional questions. Like, can you share a memorable experience or moment from your time when you're in COPS? Or Metro? How did it impact you personally? It doesn't have to be like-

Sr. Bernadette Barrett 19:47

Doesn't have to be a big thing, that's right.

Kitty 19:48

Yeah just some specific moments.

Sr. Bernadette Barrett 19:54

I guess, for me with COPS/Metro, you know, I'm not looking to be... You know, cause when we have an assembly, well then you pick people who are going to be on the stage and leading it. But for me to see women and sometimes young women up there, and some of them don't speak good English. And they are able to talk to the executive directors of different companies and hold them... You know, ask them questions, holding them accountable. They're not afraid. So it gives them confidence. So I like to see that, where somebody who normally would not be doing that, and it takes a lot of courage to do that.

Sr. Bernadette Barrett 20:53

I remember, one time there was... I remember going to, you know, there's... I guess they're insurance here, it's called USAA. And, I remember going to, you know, we used to go to the companies to raise money, because you have to have money, we pay dues, but then you have to have more than that. So I remember going to this executive anyway, the executive met with us. And, you know, the group around the table, they all told their parts of the story. These were just ordinary folks, some of them just, they just had high school. And here they were, sitting at a table with an executive director. Now, you know, everybody doesn't get to do that.

Kitty 21:44

Yeah it seems a powerful moment.

Sr. Bernadette Barrett 21:46

A powerful moment, yes. That they are sitting at the table when it comes to decisions. But anyway, we asked the guy for a pile of money, but... And he didn't give us as much as we wanted, as much as we asked for, but he did give some money. But just the experience of being there. You know, their offices are usually upstairs. You're getting to sit with these executive directors. So I think, for me, it was an experience. But for the folks, the other ladies and gentlemen, it must have been a "Wow! Look at me!". And that gives you confidence to know you can sit down. One of the things we used... This lady used to always say, "We all put on our pants the same way." So you know, you don't have to be afraid of anybody. We all put on our—pull them up the same way.

Kitty 22:49

I mean, we are all humans.

Sr. Bernadette Barrett 22:50

Yes! [Both laugh]

Kitty 22:54

Yeah. So I think that's all of my questions.

Sr. Bernadette Barrett 22:56

Okay. Can I... Do you want to turn that off and I'll ask you some questions?

Kitty 23:01

Oh yeah definitely! Yeah.

Sr. Bernadette Barrett 23:06

Is there somebody waiting? No.

Transcription Notes: This interview was lightly edited as needed for readability which may include inserting paragraph breaks, removing redundant words, or adding clarifying words. Added words or words difficult to decipher typically appear inside brackets.

Sr. Bernadette Barrett by Qiuying Chen