

Marisa Zapata:

Hi y'all, I'm Marisa Zapata. And this is the podcast where we examine homelessness by talking to researchers and experts, who of course include people with lived experience of homelessness, to understand what we're missing in the headlines and soundbites. In each episode, we will help clear up misconceptions about homelessness and to answer what it would take to prevent and end homelessness in Portland and beyond. I'm an Associate Professor of Land Use Planning at Portland State University and Director of PSU's Homelessness Research and Action Collaborative, a research center dedicated to reducing and preventing homelessness, where we lift up the experiences and perspectives of people of color.

Marisa Zapata:

Okay. We are here today with Kacy McKinney. She is a professor at Portland State University and is part of the Portland State University's Homelessness Research and Action Collaboratives Faculty Fellows Program, and has been doing some amazing work to bring the student's experiences at PSU, with homelessness and housing insecurity to the foreground, to help us better understand what their experiences have been like and how we can best support them. Welcome, Kacy.

Kacy McKinney:

Thank you so much. It's great to be here.

Marisa Zapata:

All right. Kacy, why don't you just tell us a little about yourself? What do you study? What do you do?

Kacy McKinney:

Well, first as you said, I'm in the two, on School of Urban Studies and Planning, but I'm also affiliated faculty in Comic Studies. I am a geographer by training and I am also a visual artist who works in comics. I got a certificate in Comic Studies from the amazing Independent Publishing Resource Center here in Portland. So I do those two things together. And I started my research in the past studying agricultural technologies and rural labor, migration issues, child labor. So I've been thinking about youth for a long time, and as the years have gone on as an instructor, as a teacher, I've been paying more and more attention to the experiences of my students, my college age students. So those are some key pieces.

Marisa Zapata:

So what got you interested and engaged in homelessness? I understand we're on the board of Sisters of the Road, one of our most well known homeless service providers here in the Portland area.

Kacy McKinney:

That's right. I got to Portland in 2015 and was here as a house person, in fact bought a house and was thinking a lot about the issue of homelessness then, and thinking about what my role could be as somebody who has been a community organizer in the past, and also a scholar,

activist and thinking about what it would mean for me to be a house person in this city. And I got involved with Sisters of the Road, I think that year, maybe 2016 as volunteer, and then eventually ended up on the board and was the secretary for a few years, and then was the board chair for a year before transitioning off the board in 2021, I think.

Kacy McKinney:

I spent that time learning about homelessness in the city from people experiencing it. And the thing that I kept hearing again and again in the relationships that I was building was the need for humanization and dignity and respect and visibility. And that was something that really stuck with me as the idea of dignity. And I brought that into my teaching and began to hear stories from my students about what it feels like to not be seen, the shame that can come from the kinds of stereotypes and generalizations that we use to talk about people who are experiencing homelessness. And it just got me excited and interested. And then of course, coming to PSU in 2019 and hearing about HRAC, I wanted to be a part of that and being really inspired by your work and the other work that's happening there in the thread of changing the narrative. Which makes so much sense to me as somebody who really wants to change how we talk and think and teach about homelessness.

Marisa Zapata:

So for listeners, changing the narrative is one of our focal areas in the research center and was born out of this question and concern around communications and the ways that people talk about and think about homelessness and being able to really uplift who are the actual people experiencing homelessness and what are their experiences like. When we first started the center, one of the things that came up almost immediately from our community partners was the most important thing that PSU could actually do to address homelessness was on a research center. Rather it was actually ensuring that our students, staff and faculty were not having to receive housing services. And so we've been trying to lift up projects that can help emphasize and help the institution as well as funders for the institution understand what does homelessness actually look like in higher ed?

Marisa Zapata:

A lot of people have stereotypes that come from the student portfolio of the upper middle class student or the middle class student from 1970, being able to afford college from like that summer of full-time minimum wage work. And that's not the reality anymore for the cost of college, but also not the reality of who goes to college. And so really standing that our students experiencing homelessness really do need a lot of support. For me coming to Portland State, I certainly knew students who were experiencing homelessness at other institutions, but not to the degree that I found here. The number of students who would be saying that they were finishing an assignment in the car they slept in, or sleeping on a bench and then getting harassed by security was quite alarming. So we were thrilled to see Kacy's project both come in because it was encapsulating those questions and trying to upload those experiences, but also really wanting to engage with students as co-researchers and co-producers of a research project.

Marisa Zapata:

So tell us a little bit about like how this came to be and what was important as you developed the project.

Kacy McKinney:

One of the things I've wanted to do for a long time, as I mentioned with thinking about dignity and narratives, is get work in front of a wide audience that is engaging and rich and beautiful, and that invites you into the stories of people with lived experience to better understand what they've been through. And you mentioned students experiencing homelessness currently, but I think too, one of the things I found immediately in the research was how experiences throughout the life course of homelessness had continued to impact who are students now. So I wanted to get and to use a creative approach to changing people's hearts and minds, honestly, to beginning to see and make visible the different kinds of stories that our students experience. So I used qualitative interviews. And the first thing that I did was get an amazing team of undergraduates together to support me as that's something that I deeply believe in, is creating opportunities, paid opportunities, training opportunities for our undergraduates who are amazing and deserve those early experiences and exposure to research.

Kacy McKinney:

So we were doing qualitative research through interviews. And the fun thing I think about these interview is that we knew that they would be turned into comics in a collaborative process. So rather than just doing an interview in which we asked about students' experiences and what it means to them to have been homeless, or to currently be experiencing housing instability, we also asked them to help us visualize a story and comics about their experiences. So what part of their experience is something that they would want to share? How do we think about it visually? How might we support an audience being welcomed into their story through visual means? And that process of doing qualitative interviews repeated several times with the same 10 people, about three hours total with each of the 10 people led us to creating this, we called it a cover page that we would share with the artists and begin the process of helping them translate.

Kacy McKinney:

And remember, this is qualitative research, so it was confidential. The artists didn't know who the students were. The students did know who the artists were because we went through an amazing process of pairing them. But the fun thing that came of that is really the development of those relationships if they wanted. A student could say, "I would really like to meet the artist. I would really like to work with them directly," and we had those meetings via Zoom. They could also say, "I want to give my feedback in an anonymous or confidential way, but I will continue to give my feedback." So the comic that's created out of those interviews is preserving the come confidentiality of the student if they so desire while also being fully a collaboration between my research team, myself, the artist and the student.

Kacy McKinney:

And that to me is completely innovative. I've never heard of something like that happening before. And it did a number of things. It served a number of purposes. It created something that truly is authentic and beautiful and rich. It created something that feels deeply authentic to the stories of the people with lived experience. They feel valued and respected in the work they feel seen in the work. And the artists feel really proud of creating something that does feel authentic and good and respectful for the participant. So it was a new experience for all of us, but something that I think can be used as a model for collaborative research with the arts and thinking about homelessness, but not just homelessness in projects to come.

Marisa Zapata:

I have some more follow up questions. But first for listeners, this is Marisa Zapata and I'm here with Kacy McKinney. We are both professors at Portland State University who are doing work on homelessness. Professor McKinney, or Dr. McKinney, are we calling you Kacy? I forgot to ask before we started, has been doing a wonderful and amazing and powerful project with our student of Portland State University, researching their experiences with homelessness and then offering a visual way through comics to actually understand those experiences.

Marisa Zapata:

Okay. I love what you're talking about in terms of process. I think that this is one of the few examples that I think is very tangible for what we like to say in public participation, co-production, right? We talk about co-producing policies, researchers will talk about producing research, but you're talking about some really specific ways of having that happen. So just to make sure I understand the process, you hired undergraduates and graduate students as your research team. How many students were on that team?

Kacy McKinney:

Just undergraduate students.

Marisa Zapata:

Oh, just [crosstalk 00:10:11] Okay.

Kacy McKinney:

I hired two. Originally in my funding proposal, I asked for one, but then I found money to hire two.

Marisa Zapata:

So you had two people helping you out, and then you had 10 students who wanted to tell their stories?

Kacy McKinney:

That's right. And I think just to back up for a moment, we put out the call to students around campus and through a lot of different means, social media emails, et cetera, and we got a huge response. 55 students responded within about 10 days saying that they would like to participate. And some of them in their applications to participate or in their response to the call said things

like, "Even just seeing this project has started to make me feel like I can heal. Even just seeing that this is something that the institution is willing to fund, that researchers want to pay attention to is beginning to make me feel seen and to change my relationship to my experiences." So even just the call to say, "Would you like to participate in this?" Was already making a difference for students.

Marisa Zapata:

I will be honest. Every time we talk about this project, I start to tear up. And I'm not trying to be melodramatic. I think it just hits my buttons with our students and what we talk about, right? The importance of visibility and being seen can in and of itself be such a powerful, powerful opportunity. But I guess it also means you're saying that there are potentially 45 other Portland State students out there who might be willing to tell their stories?

Kacy McKinney:

Absolutely. I think there would've been more too, if we had left the call open longer. So that's one of the reasons why I'm trying to do it again. One of several reasons why I'm trying to do the whole process again and invite 10 more students.

Marisa Zapata:

We'll get to that in a moment. You selected the students and then you said you found artists, what did that look like?

Kacy McKinney:

It was really interesting. We actually started by looking for the artists. It just made sense because we were still in institutional review board process. So looking to get human subjects review, to be able to do our research interviews. The timing worked out to where we could just ask for the artists who were doing work for hire and do that call first. We put out that call all over and it just went wild on social media. It was being tweeted. We heard from 75 artists around the country who wanted to participate in this process. They received a year long membership to the IPRC, the Independent Publishing Resource Center, a partner in our research and they received \$500 for their work. And so we heard from 75 people and had a terribly difficult time deciding which 10.

Kacy McKinney:

But we were able to begin, and I know you're going to want to know about this, but to be begin to prioritize the voices of artists who are disabled, artists who are from the LGBTQAI community, and artists who are Black indigenous and people of color. So we are immediately thinking, how do we invite 10 artists who want to participate in this really unique, collaborative process, who have amazing range of creative works that will create a really beautiful curated series, and then who also maybe identify in some of these ways that we are prioritizing in this work? And certainly anyone who has experienced homelessness was also prioritized in that process of selecting artists. So we did that first, which was a really, I think, interesting way to begin a process of collaborative research, but it made feel like we had our team ready and on board.

Marisa Zapata:

And then from the artists that existed, did the students then pick which artists or did you do that pairing?

Kacy McKinney:

This was an incredibly successful process that it could have not been somehow, but I think it influenced us. Once we had already chosen the artist and then went to choose the students, it influenced us in a way that rendered itself to beautiful partnerships between people who got each other. And I think some of the ways that happened is that some students, as we heard their stories, as we did the interviews with them, the three of us on the team said, "It has to be that artist." They were thinking about the style that they bring, the use of color, the use of lines, the design of the page and how a particular artist would be able to render that story.

Kacy McKinney:

We also had some students who asked for a particular artist because they could see the list in relation to identity. There were several students who said, "I would really love that person. I feel like they'll get me." And others who said, "I really would love that artist because I really think their style resonates with my story and who I am." And it worked, and everyone was really excited by who they got paired with. It helped the students choosing that all of the artists are amazing and really incredible people who absolutely wanted to be a part of this process. So the relationships that we built were pretty incredible.

Marisa Zapata:

Yeah. I love the fact that the students were saying whether they wanted to give feedback and they wanted that to be anonymous. Do you know if at this point, any of the students are still in touch with the artists?

Kacy McKinney:

They are. There's a couple. It's quite a range. But there is one pair who are certainly friends now and in fact the three of us are going to go on a picnic in a couple weeks, the participant, the artist, and myself. That's an outlier, but really incredible. And there's a couple of people who were participants, who I hope to work with in the future on team. There are certainly artists I've become friends with. And there are people who are keeping in touch. There's one case in which participants, I trust the artist, I really love their work, I'll give some feedback, but I don't need to have more of a role in it than that. And that person she's very happy with the results. I'm happy to hear that.

Marisa Zapata:

Can you talk at a high level, what are some of the takeaways from these stories? I know this is always the challenge, right? You've done such an amazing job at curating and visually representing and telling a very personalized story, but at the same time, are there things that you've seen across the stories, things that you could say that, "Hey, look, this is important for people to really understand about our students."

Kacy McKinney:

Yeah. I think there certainly is that range and they are each unique. And also there is certainly the role of systemic injustice as a thread throughout. I think some of the ways that they connect is how impactful homelessness and housing and stability through the life course, as I mentioned before, this idea that somebody might have been homeless as a child or as a young person or housing in unstable for time after time, after time are stable now, but it still is a huge part of who they are and how they're experiencing education and how they're experiencing life in Portland. So I felt like that was a really important thing to recognize.

Kacy McKinney:

One student talked about how the story isn't over. They really wanted us to emphasize that it was not about resilience for them, that resilience had a negative tone for them, and they really wanted it to be clear that they did not have a happy ending, that their story does not have a happy ending. It doesn't have an ending because the experiences of homelessness and housing instability in their body have yet to be fully expressed. And that pain and the ways that it's going to weigh on them in their lives it's not even clear yet. So I think that idea of what homelessness and housing instability experience at different points and at multiple points in their life, how that impacts a student or really anyone in their later life is really important.

Kacy McKinney:

And I think it's worth noting that we talk to graduate students and undergraduate students and younger students and older students nontraditional age. We talk to people who have multiple degrees and people who are just starting their first degree, people who are veterans, people with a lot of different experiences, people with kids, people who are people have lived in cars, this whole kind of range. And coming back to your question of threads, certainly it's how I'm experiencing this in my body. What it took to get me to where I am today is this important thread in all the stories. Who did it take? And it often took respect and dignity and visibility and mentorship and connections, relationships with people to help them get through their experiences. Some of the students talk about ancestors and they talk about ancestors in the sense of the people who came before them, who are their relations, biologically, and the people who came before them who supported them when they needed it, to be able to be who they are and where they are today. That's a thread that I didn't necessarily expect, but it was about support in multiple ways, both spiritual and family related and also practical people who stood by and made it possible.

Kacy McKinney:

There's one story in which the participant wanted to tell not his own story, but the story of the people who had been lost, people who had lived unhoused alongside him as a youth in the '90s in Portland, and he really wanted to show how those people allowed him to get to where he is and how they experienced Portland and the city. And they were often unseen, disrespected, discriminated against, seen as these wild characters, these street kids who weren't worth anything, who had no value, and they got him to where he is today and they were beautiful people. And so his story is really about remembering them as his ancestors and the people who

got him to where he is today. So I don't think that a normal kind research, a survey would never get to that kind of story and-

Marisa Zapata:

Oh, and I think that last point is just so important when we... One of the things in public participation processes you'll hear people say is like, "When we put a focus group together, we need to remind everyone to speak from the I," and really understanding that is a very culturally specific orientation to what it means to show up and share. And part of it's about pushing back from the White bro who is like, "We all think..." And it's like, no, we all don't really think. But also recognizing that there are religious groups, racial and ethnic groups as you're talking about a culture of what it means to be homeless together, right? If we think about that as a cultural experience in a cultural group that asks you to speak differently. And I certainly see this in a slightly different way with people I work with who are the first to say, "If you give me a \$100, I'm giving \$10 to 10 people and keeping none for myself," right? So a very different orientation into what community even means and looks like.

Marisa Zapata:

I have a few other things I want to follow up on. But first, this is Marisa Zapata and I'm here with Kacy McKinney. We are two professors, and I'm going to just say amazing professors, at Portland State University. And we are here talking about Kacy's research with our students here at Portland State University to tell these stories of their experiences with homelessness and housing insecurity. I wanted to just go back to what you had been saying about the importance of the life course of homelessness. I don't want listeners to think, oh, well, some of these students, or maybe even all of these students weren't actively homeless. So as you said, there might be the implication that everything's fine, everything's good. But we know that youth who've experienced homelessness are significantly more likely to experience homelessness as an adult. And so it's actually one of the survey indicators we look at as, if you have been homeless as a youth, you are going to need more, for the clinical term, intervention or supports to be able to avoid that later on in life.

Marisa Zapata:

But I think you're also talking about the importance of really humanizing what supports mean, what an intervention means. And it is about that relationship with other human beings to help get you through, and to move on to the next phase. I wondered if you could talk a little bit more about these notions of resiliency. Resiliency is actually kind of a ugh word for me. I get tired of being told how resilient as a woman of color I am. And so I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit more about what came up for students when they were thinking about that terminology. You talk about it some, but I'm wondering if you could expand on it more.

Kacy McKinney:

The first thing I wanted to go back to is just this idea of categorizing it. You mentioned, and I think it's worth saying that a lot of the students who came to us said things like, "Does this count? Does this experience of homelessness that I'm describing count? Is this housing instability? And so we, in some ways at the very beginning when deciding when the students

applied or asked to participate, they were still wondering, does this qualify? Do I qualify? And so there's a process of understanding what this homelessness and housing instability mean technically. What does it mean practically in people's lives? That this research process, it started the mechanisms working to, I think, change how some of these students understand their experience and how to qualify it.

Kacy McKinney:

So resiliency, I think the person I mentioned before, the participant, I mentioned it before said from the very beginning, "I would like to be a part of this, and it's really important to me that you do not say that I have a happy ending." And I have a lot of people in my life talking about resilience. We talk a lot about youth and students as able to withstand. And this participant said, "We need to look at the systemic injustices that put me where I am. We need to look at the lack of support services and the forms of discrimination and racism and anti-Asian sentiment. And these different thing that I'm being impacted by in my life, that I'm having to deal with, which is very different from me being the focus as somebody who has a particular amount of power and ability to rise above. I'd like to focus instead on what it is that's bringing me down. What it is that's forcing me into these situations."

Kacy McKinney:

And that student really shaped, I think how the whole research team was thinking about the rest of the research. Hearing from that person made us think harder about how we ended each story, about where each story ended. Because it reminded us that it can be really easy to say, "And then here's how it all ends, I ended up and things were well." And that's not the case for any of the people we talked to. None of those people would say, "Everything is fine now. Everything is great now." They would say, "People and supports helped me to get to where I am and I'm proud of where I am, but that wasn't easy and I shouldn't have had to go through that."

Kacy McKinney:

And that's, I think the point. That for me is the real difference with resiliency is, I shouldn't have had to go through that, and we need to look at those systems that are at play, those forms of injustice that are at play that forced me to have to get through this rather than how great I am as an individual in being able to have survived when others have not. It doesn't make me different from them. We need to think about what caused that. So I think that's how I would put it. And it's certainly what has made my research team and I think about is, be careful not to slide in to what you call the ickiness of emphasis on resiliency, as opposed to what causes all of this, what has led to who experiences homelessness and why, and how?

Marisa Zapata:

Yeah. I've been thinking a lot about growing up in a Chicano community, what it means to sit in the struggle, right? Or people will talk about sitting in power, continuing to be part of the fight. I used to think about that as just an exhausting... We have to be going hardcore at all times. But I started to think about that more as just making peace with the idea that there's a lot of things that have happened to me or much more traumatic things that have happened to people that I love and care about that we never return to the glorious, perfect self before the negative

experience. And it doesn't mean that we're not thriving even later on in our life, but that those things come with us, and they aren't the old Disney model of, I toiled under my evil stepmother and now I have gotten the prince, and everything is wonderful and I have a pretty dress. But really trying to, I think, sit with, no, like things can get better, you can live a wonderful life, you can thrive, but there will always be things that you carry with you. And so I think that this is such an important component of the work.

Marisa Zapata:

Okay. Well, so I wanted to pivot a little bit, I was super interested in like... Well, let's first actually back up, you say comics. And I always pause before I say comics, because I'm ready to be corrected of like, no, it's a graphic novel. So why do you use comics? When should we be using graphic novel? What's the story here? Unpack this for me.

Kacy McKinney:

I think you'd find some different answers from different people who engage in this medium and who appreciate this medium. But I say comics, because I think it's more the original terminology. A graphic novel, a lot of people would say is a fancy, newer version, the sort of better and fancier. But the work that we're all doing still, a lot of us still call it comics because that feels it's not putting on errors. And I guess that's one of the ways that I think about it. It feels like an umbrella term that's not putting on errors. I think it's interesting to consider that the term comic or comic book often brings up the idea of humor for people. And I think graphic novel does help us move away from that misunderstanding. But I'd rather, we just try to understand comics in a broader way. Some people call it sequential art. I think that works pretty well. It doesn't always have to have words. Some say that it's a combination of word and image on the page. It doesn't always have to have word though. So I think graphic novel can be a fancier term. I think part of the reason to not call this a graphic novel is that it is an anthology of short pieces. So that makes it a a comics anthology rather than a graphic novel.

Kacy McKinney:

Two, the idea of graphic is hard with stories about homelessness. We are not seeking to be graphic in the sense of gruesome or violent or explicit. So I think I wanted to avoid that kind of misunderstanding. We're avoiding that form of graphic while also being the other form of graphic visual. I think they both work. And I think that graphic novel is a publisher's term that is used to move us into a new era of comics, but comics feels very sort of natural to me.

Marisa Zapata:

I think the same here. But again, I think even framing it is putting on errors, that's why I'm prepared to be scolded. I literally think about it every time, I'm like, no Kacy believes that they can be called comics.

Kacy McKinney:

You will not be. For are most people, I do not believe you'll be scolded for that.

Marisa Zapata:

I just live in this terror because I have been scolded before obviously. I was also just really interested in again, I think going back to even these notions of what is resilience or the idea that you're working in a hard topic area. I think when we're doing this hard work, we also find spaces for joy and laughter and connection. And I'm wondering what some of your favorite moments were from? Either the stories as they ended up being told, the research process or in sharing comics in the community.

Kacy McKinney:

Some of the things that come up for me are in the actual interview process. So it's worth, I think reiterating that we did 30 hours of interviews, all three of us were present at nearly all interview. They were all via Zoom. So my two research assistants and myself, all of those hours were with the participants by Zoom. And we had so many moments when we got off the phone or the participant left the room and, "I love that person, they are amazing. I want to be friends with the. How incredible?" The students led the way in that and it really broke down my training that is very... I'm a feminist critical geographer, and that to me means that I understand that objectivity is not a thing in research, but that is still what a lot of people believe. And I still [crosstalk 00:29:41]

Marisa Zapata:

Back up. Back up.

Kacy McKinney:

Okay. Okay.

Marisa Zapata:

You broke everyone's souls. You're like the 32nd version of why objectivity is not a thing?

Kacy McKinney:

Well, objectivity would suggest that we could step completely away from our own baggage and our own positionality or who we are, the different parts that identify as, their experience, to look at a story, or look at a research or data as feminist scholars say, as the view from nowhere, as if we don't have any of those positions in us. And what I like to think of is that objectivity in that sense is actually just White supremacy. It's a form of a norm or a neutral perspective that often has been held by a White racist man through research history. So for me, objectivity is not a thing, it's not neutral. We can't be neutral or value free in doing research. We bring baggage, we bring our identities, we bring our lived experience. I don't know if that helps. What do you think?

Marisa Zapata:

No, it totally helps. It totally helps. I just think that again, this is like the spiral in the way, if research isn't objective, what is it? And this is getting into what I was thinking about. You were saying that the undergrads were leading the way and breaking down this last conception of, I would say having to stay a little more detached.

Kacy McKinney:

Yeah. They were showing me what it looks like to be... And I think just to follow through that idea of objectivity, that objectivity does not equal accuracy. And so I think the part of the point in doing the research, we seek accuracy, we seek to respect and really listen to the data and hear people and follow a process that is the same for each person, for example. But we are also going to have moments where we are present. And I think in talking to undergraduate students with an undergraduate research team and also to graduate students, we had to do it differently. And they taught me how to do accurate, respectful, ethical research while also being really present and being trauma informed, being able to recognize that we have connections even as we are trying to learn from this particular person. So we created an incredible relationship with each person because they showed me how to not be detached, and while giving space for that person to be fully present and to answer our questions and to ask questions of us. They taught me that. And I think that's like I'm calling out to faculty here and beyond PSU and beyond to really respect and think about what undergraduate students have to offer to a research scenario. So I learned a lot about how to do research well on these topics from the two people that I hired to support me.

Kacy McKinney:

So some moments of joy and humor. We would get off the phone, you just gush over people. We did that with artists too. And it was just a really like the therapeutic moment to be like, "And did you remember what they said about this?" And, "Oh my gosh, she's so funny. She's so wonderful. Like what an incredible person." And then we got down to business of remembering and writing and doing our research notes and thinking about what questions we would ask the next time when we talk to them.

Kacy McKinney:

There's a couple of moments of humor in the comics themselves, which are moments of joy for me. I talked about how the comics don't have to be funny. And in fact, the comics on homelessness and housing instability that we created are mostly not funny. There are some moments of humor and those come directly from the perspective and the vibe of the participant and the artist's ability to translate that humor. There's one story in which a student talks about having to immediately leave housing that was unsafe and rolling a mattress into a taco to fit it into a tiny car and getting the hell out of there. And it's a great humorous moment that she feels like really represents who she is, and it represents that moment and how not every second of lives led with instability and insecurity is devastating and sad. That like, we all have our ways of surviving and there's humor and there's some joy even as there is a challenge and unfair obstacles and trauma,

Marisa Zapata:

You were highlighting a number of the things that are, I think, integral to the mission and the goals of PSU, right? Working with our undergraduate students, bringing them and their experiences forward, but also really I think saying that our students always have something to teach us. And so I just think it's such a wonderful example of what it means to really live PSU's values. One of the things that I knew you were doing in your project, but when I actually went through the comics and when I went through the website and looked at everyone who was

involved, it was clear to me that you had taken racial equity into your soul and brought that in. And I'm going to tell everyone, Kacy is White. So she is a White lady who I actually am like, oh my God, she really did the thing. Can you talk to me about why that was important to you and how you approached that?

Kacy McKinney:

Well, I think it's worth reminding everyone that HRAC requires it of us. That's not why I did it, it's me living the values of the Homelessness Research and Action Collaborative too. It's required of us as members to take racial equity as a center point to our work. And that made sense to me, it was part of the reason why I wanted to be a member of HRAC and to do research through HRAC. I had this focus in some way for multiple different reasons, but I think a key reason is that we know from the research that HRAC and others have done that individuals from communities such as LGBTQAI communities and Black indigenous and people of color disproportionately are impacted by homelessness. So it feels really important to represent that even in a collection of 10 stories, I wanted to forefront those voices of people from those disproportionately impacted communities.

Kacy McKinney:

I wanted to also at the same time in choosing the artists, uplift, if at all possible, if that's something that I can be a part of doing, the voices of artists who are from those communities as well. So in some ways it's twofold and actually at each level. At the research team level, at the participant level, at the artist level, we really wanted to forefront the voices of people from those communities, whether that be the art or the stories themselves, people with lived experience. Part of what I seek to do in trying to create comics that anybody can read, that everybody will read and that seek to change harmful narratives and disrupt harmful narratives, is by changing stories that we're hearing about. And I think that's like it's disrupting the normal language and reporting that we're seeing on homelessness in Portland and around the world, who experiences it, how and why, and who stories matter. And I think by creating this range of stories that really forefront certain voices, we begin to disrupt the stories that are being told about homelessness, who experiences it, how and why. So those are some of the reasons. But I think just being a scholar who is emphasizing the significance of inequity and White supremacy in how people experience cities and how people experience poverty means that I have to, in my work, prioritize these voices.

Marisa Zapata:

Yeah. And I think it's particularly interesting here in Portland, that the profile in terms of racial and ethnic population at PSU is not actually the same as the City of Portland, right? We've got a lot more representation of students of color, but if you were walking around downtown Portland, the people you are likely to see experiencing homelessness are White, right? And so understanding disproportionate representation in homelessness of people of color does not mean that they are the majority. And so in a lot of ways, you're both lifting up the fact that the face of the Portland State student is no longer a White student, right? As much as it is a student of color. And then also thinking about the fact that this also disrupts the narrative of the visible White person who's experiencing homelessness.

Marisa Zapata:

I'm here with Kacy McKinney. This is Marisa Zapata, and we are talking about Kacy's research project at Portland State University with our undergraduate students to tell their stories and experiences of homelessness through comic books. All right. Well, before we wrap up, I want to give Kacy a chance to tell us what's next, what's going on. I will be shameless in saying that this project is amazing. And it's a project that I personally very much believe in. So Kacy, what's going on? You sold out, let's start with that. Kacy worked with Street Roots. Let's talk about that partnership and then selling out the first printing. What's going on? [crosstalk 00:38:20]

Kacy McKinney:

Yeah. Early on in the project, I think even from the stage of applying to HRAC for funding, I knew that I wanted to partner with Street Roots. And that is in part because I knew that my ideal mode of distribution for these comics was through Street Roots vendors. And that has a whole other level of the creation of new relationships and connections. And if I can just really briefly, I want to mention how incredible it has been to do this, to distribute. We printed 4,000 copies of this anthology and they sold out within 10 days. And that they were sold is through Street Roots vendors around the Portland metropolitan area. And some of the vendors have shared back things like, "They're selling like hot cakes. They're selling like fried chicken." Which I just can't get enough of.

Kacy McKinney:

But there's been this huge outpouring of support from community, people who don't usually buy Street Roots papers, people do usually buy Street Roots papers seeking out vendors all over the city to buy not one, not two but 10 copies of the comics so that they could share them with people who they believe should read them. So it was incredible, unprecedented response. We sold 4,000 in 10 days through that means. And then we were able to print 2000 more, there may be still some available. If there are, they are running down into the last few.

Kacy McKinney:

A couple of next steps for me, one is to try to publish the comics as a trade publication. So adding a few more elements to it. I'm in talks with a publisher now, and I'm hoping to print those in the next couple of years as a trade publication. So really with distribution around the US, maybe beyond. That's really exciting. But I also want to get to work doing another series, another phase of 10 more stories that will take about \$40,000. But part of what that involves is and supporting 10 more artists, again, through our partnership with Independent Publishing Resource Center, connecting with Street Roots for another 10 stories, finding 10 more participants from among students and continuing our partnerships with those groups while also telling, 10 more stories to keep that work going. Yeah. So we're looking for some money. If you are out there and you want to support us, we're looking for \$40,000 to do it all over again. And I'm really excited and energized to do that work. And I'm so appreciative of the ongoing support of HRAC and our community partners Street Roots and the IPRC.

Marisa Zapata:

Also, you've had some gallery exhibits, what have those been like? I went to one of them and I just, I have to say, the look on the students whose work was being displayed, who [inaudible 00:41:01] their faces, just so much freaking joy. just so much joy and just beaming with excitement. They were funny, because a couple of them were like, "Oh, we really want to work for HRAC." And I'm like, "Well, just to be clear, if you worked for HRAC and you're working for me, I'm not Kacy, this wouldn't be a such fun."

Kacy McKinney:

Oh, come on, you're fun.

Marisa Zapata:

No. No. Not like you Kacy, and not when you're working for me. I'm more honest about that.

Kacy McKinney:

The exhibitions were incredible. We started with the Downstairs Gallery, which is run by the incredible artist, muralist, musician, Darren Todd. We have very much shared values, the Downstairs Gallery and myself in terms of what we're trying to do around the arts and racial equity in the city. So we partnered early on and we just had a very short public showing at the Downstairs Gallery in February. And the first night was just for people who were connected to the project, and that is something like 60 people. And people came and they brought partners and they brought friends and we just had this incredible night of artists, participants, Street Roots staff members and vendors, IPRC members and staff, just this incredible collection of people that have been part of the project so far. And that really represented to me the strength of this project as collaborative. We are all really proud of it.

Kacy McKinney:

The second night and the third night were all open to the public. And we had people coming through, some of my colleagues, but members of the community who had heard about it in our incredible long list of media coverage for the project. So people had heard about it and they came out, vendors were selling those copies like hot cakes, again. And I think it's worth mentioning, and I didn't, that the money from those sales stated with Street Roots vendors. We're selling them for \$4 and Street Roots vendors kept all the proceeds from that. So it's been a really incredible amount of support and economic opportunity for vendors as well.

Kacy McKinney:

After Downstairs Gallery, we moved to PSU campus at the Native American Student and Community Center, which is an incredible space, a really warm and beautiful community space on our campus. And we had an incredible exhibit there too. Over the course of a few weeks, faculty were bringing in their whole classes, faculty were bringing in their families. There was a really incredible flow of people moving through that space. And just to give an idea of the exhibit, the 10 comics were printed onto large boards at large scale, and so you could really get into the stories. And that really, again, rose the visibility of the project. And I know of several faculty at PSU at PNCA here in Portland, the University of Portland are all using the comics in their courses to take each about homelessness, to teach about the arts, about nonfiction

comics, about poverty, about racial equity. And so there's a really these are clearly already being used, not just in seeing the exhibit, but actually also using them in the classroom.

Kacy McKinney:

Then the final exhibit, which ends at the First Presbyterian Church, downtown Portland, and they have an incredible space. They've been really warm and inviting. And we are looking for the next home for the exhibit. I have my heart set a little bit on the Portland Art Museum, if you're listening, docents and beyond, it would make my heart sing to have this work there. And I think it makes a lot of sense to have it be so visible. The other home of my dreams is the Multnomah County Library, Central Library. Those are my two dream locations. But I'm really wide open to where we send the exhibit next. It deserves, as a member of the staff at First Presbyterian said in her initial email to me, that this deserves to be seen by the public. It needs to be seen. And I absolutely agree.

Marisa Zapata:

I cannot agree more. So if you want to find out more information about the project, we'll post the link, but that link is www.pdx.edu/homelessness. The comics project is listed first on the front page of the website. You can find out more and hopefully have the opportunity to see this amazing artwork yourself. Thank you Kacy for being here with us today.

Kacy McKinney:

Thank you so much, Marisa. It's been a pleasure. (Silence).