Our City, Our Solutions:
Interview with Gaby Hernandez and Marissa Garcia of PODER

Alison Reed

Gang injunctions are modern day apartheid.
— Babatunde Folayemi¹

People Organizing for the Defense and Equal Rights of Santa Barbara Youth (PODER) is a broad coalition of Santa Barbara community residents, students, parents, laborers, and professionals dedicated to social justice and collective empowerment. PODER organizers led a grassroots campaign for three years (2011–14) against a gang injunction civil law proposal. This historic victory continues to reverberate across the country as a sign of what can happen when people fight to replace criminalization of youth with opportunities for their physical, educational, professional, and spiritual flourishing. Through a series of community forums, public safety surveys, media campaigns, pro-youth initiatives, direct actions, and other grassroots mobilizations, PODER put pressure on politicians and exposed the

gang injunction’s proposed “Safety Zones” as open-air prisons that further criminalize and contain people of color. Gang injunctions perpetuate racial profiling while protecting vested interests in gentrification, the denial of civil rights, and interlocking systems of policing, surveillance, and imprisonment.

Understanding how gang injunctions fuel the prison industrial complex, Antiracism Inc. joined PODER’s struggle in the wake of a series of “Activist Encounters” we facilitated on the UC Santa Barbara campus during the 2013–14 programming year. This second year of the program featured the subheading Antiracism Works and sought to extend the critical frames for addressing issues central to Antiracism Inc. by bridging intellectual work with community connection and engagement. For example, we hosted an organizing meeting on “How to Stop Prison Expansion” facilitated by Diana Zuñiga, former statewide coordinator at Californians United for a Responsible Budget (CURB) in Los Angeles. This event organically prompted the Coalition for Sustainable Communities (CSC) to form and mobilize against the jail and ICE detention center projects in North Santa Barbara County. CSC was initially invited to present on the proposed jail at a PODER community forum on 27 March 2014. Then, CSC continued to operate in solidarity with PODER, who successfully defeated the proposed gang injunction in the summer of 2014. Like PODER, CSC was committed to building life-affirming relations that support and sustain the physical, mental, spiritual, and social health of our communities. From light brigades to town halls and court hearings, we collectively fought for recognition of how the wars on drugs and terror, racial profiling, and policing impact our communities, and further, for acknowledgment of the difference between people with problems and people as problems — seeking new visions of security and accountability without cages.

Alison Reed served as Graduate Fellow of the Antiracism Inc. program series at UC Santa Barbara. She met two key organizers of PODER, Gaby Hernandez and Marissa Garcia, during a community forum at which the Coalition for Sustainable Communi-
ties was invited to speak on prison expansion projects in North Santa Barbara County. This interview was conducted via email in March 2017 and is edited for length and clarity.

Gabriela “Gaby” Hernandez, Licensed Clinical Social Worker in Orange County Mental Health, grew up on the east side neighborhood of Santa Barbara. She was raised in poverty by a single mother of three. At the young age of 12, Gaby got involved with gangs, the juvenile criminal justice system, and began a cycle of self-destructive behaviors. With the support of her family, community-based mentors, social workers, probation officers, educators, and effective community-based programs, Gaby was able to transition from offender to student. Gaby received her bachelor’s degree in Criminal Justice from Long Beach State University and her master’s in Social Work from the University of Southern California. She now works as a therapist/social worker with Orange County’s most vulnerable children, youth, and their families. Gaby is also an active member of several grassroot organizations that focus on issues of social justice. Gaby is an advocate for community-based programs that are effective and opposes punitive/oppressive measures that only limit the possibilities for youth of color.

Marissa Garcia was born and raised in Santa Barbara. She is involved with several organizations and has worked on campaigns including the mail ban at the Santa Barbara County Jail. She dedicates most of her time to prison advocacy and is currently working on the national movement to amend the 13th Amendment.

Reed: Thank y’all so much for agreeing to discuss your crucial work with PODER (People Organizing for the Defense and Equal Rights of Santa Barbara Youth) defeating the gang injunction in Santa Barbara. To begin, would you describe how folks started mobilizing when it was proposed in 2011? What were the first steps?

Hernandez: I was not around for the initial mobilization, but my mentor Babatunde Folayemi, a former city council mem-
member and youth advocate, had begun contesting the injunction and holding forums to inform community members about its impact. Osiris Castaneda as well as some (paid) activists—Jacqueline Inda and JP Herreda—quickly got attorneys for some of the defendants. They also worked on the beginning stages of mobilizing, such as holding forums and getting the word out. Osiris Castaneda made some documentaries through YouthCineMedia to show the face of those accused. So, the first steps were getting legal representation, community education, and mobilizing people to get involved.

I got involved after Babatunde passed away in March 2012. I ran into some of Babatunde’s mentees and we talked about his work with the injunction, and how he had asked us to get involved, but we were always too busy. On the day of his candlelight vigil we agreed to meet up and see how we could help. We researched who was involved, what steps were taken, and what still had to be done. The paid activists had stopped organizing because their funds had dried up. When we expressed commitment regardless of funding they pretty much handed their information over to us. Within two months we had linked up with several other folks interested in fighting the injunction. Within six months we started bringing our resources together, brainstorming, power mapping, and putting on presentations for anyone who was interested. We began to challenge the status quo, specifically the Democratic liberals who claimed to care about community but were allowing this to happen. We agreed that a direct and indirect approach would be most important to challenge the system that was pushing this injustice.

Garcia: To add to what Gaby mentioned, I too was not involved in the beginning stages of bringing [the gang injunction] to light or mobilizing any efforts when it was initially proposed in 2011. I remember reading the Santa Barbara News Press one day and seeing an article about it that listed 30 names of people. That is how I found out my boyfriend (now husband) Marcial was even targeted. He was still incarcerated in Mississippi when the gang injunction (GI) was proposed in 2011, and at that time—like
most folks in the system—he had received a letter from the city, and not understanding what it meant, disregarded it. I remember not too long after, I saw a post on Facebook by Osiris Castaneda about holding a meeting at the Westside Community Center. I met Osiris back when I was 15 years old; he made a presentation at La Cuesta for “at-risk” youth, and he became my mentor. I guess you can say he planted the seed. He exposed me to everything schools never taught me.

So, when I saw his post, I was curious about what this gang injunction was and why my boyfriend’s name was on it—it seemed scary. I attended the meeting, and the majority of the people there were people from the neighborhood—kids, gang members, family members, etc. I think back on that meeting now, and for someone in the community to actually gather a group of people from the neighborhood like that—who had no idea what activism was, or rights and law, anything like that—was pretty damn amazing. I remember he put up a large screen and started his presentation; he was so passionate that day he was sweating, but it seemed like he was acting out of desperation to inform us something bad was going to happen. Of course, most of the people from the neighborhood took off halfway through, saying that this was too much information and they didn’t understand what the words meant, but thanked him anyways. There were just a few people left at the end, and I remember putting my name and number down on a piece of paper.

Some time went by, and my man was released in July 2011. Within three weeks he had been arrested. Somewhere between the release and arrest, Osiris reached out to me and asked to meet Marcial, saying that it was important for him to understand what was happening to him. I was for it. Marcial wasn’t so sure, but I convinced him and the two met. Osiris found Marcial legal representation through Juan Huerta. I remember how hard Osiris tried to motivate Marcial about it, offering him trips to Los Angeles to get involved with projects. I remember after we left the attorney’s office, Osiris pulled me aside, and warned me. He knew at the time Marcial and I were still living that life, and
he was concerned I made a bad choice being with him. He told us to be careful, because we would be targeted everywhere we went. And we were. Marcial was arrested during a “gang raid” in October 2012. We were both homeless and strung out on drugs at the time. I found out right away about his arrest and ran down to the police station demanding what his charges were. Refusing to leave, the now-retired police chief Cam Sanchez pulled me aside, and convinced me it was nothing serious, but if I helped them Marcial would be okay.

I had no idea at the time how serious his charges were going to become, and I was so fearful of his parole officer giving him a violation, that I agreed to let them search my garage. Cam Sanchez drove me in his car with parole officer Alvarez, convincing me this was nothing bad, but they just had to show for the record that parole searched his property. (We were homeless, so I told him all we had was stored in my parents’ garage.) To protect Marcial, I agreed to let them search, and again they kept telling me it would just be a few minutes and no big deal. I remember I was high, but all I kept thinking was, What did Marcial do? I knew if it had been bad, he would have told me, and we would have bounced. Cam Sanchez pulled up in front of my house, and I asked him if he wouldn’t mind knocking on my door and talking to my mom first, as she was going to freak out over seeing a police officer at home.

Instead, he pulled out a walkie talkie, said some code words and within 30 seconds, 12–16 SWAT officers ran up to my house. I guess they had all parked just blocks away. They were suited up head to toe with rifles, shotguns, the vests, everything. By the time I got to the door to tell my mom what was going on, KEYT had posted up on my front lawn and recorded my house being raided, my mom and me trying to hide, and they interviewed Cam Sanchez. He had lied to me about everything. I still have those pictures of all the police officers in my garage tearing everything apart. My mom was having a nervous breakdown in the backyard, and I was sweating and crying—wondering, What the hell did my husband just do? They were treating my house like a murder had happened. Of course, they walked away with
nothing but my letters and pictures of my twenty-first birthday party, pictures they used as evidence in the gang injunction trial. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing, and to top it off, I had the police chief trying to convince me to give him information in return for a softening of Marcial’s charges. I of course knew better, and as they all started to leave, sobbing I went to his parole officer pleading with him to tell me what was going on, what he did, what his charges were, and why did you guys do this to my family. He just walked away and said, “Marcial will probably never come home.”

The raid was aired on the 6 o’clock news, with an anchor reporting live, and I remember sitting down watching myself trying to get in my house, and the police raiding it, and watching the direct lies the police chief gave to the news about what happened at my house. I spent the next few months out in the streets, trying to escape everything. I had left Marcial, and was lost and confused, until I started researching his case. As I read things in the paper about this “gang injunction,” I put two and two together and realized something was very wrong about everything. Not just his criminal case, but this civil case. I sobered up and decided to try looking for answers as to why this was happening to him. I remember telling my mom — something is wrong, and I need to save him. In January 2013 I attended a meeting and was told to reach out to PODER. I didn’t even know what an “activist” was, what city council people do. The big fancy words: protests, legislation… all that stuff was foreign to me. I used to think the people who stood on corners with signs shouting and protesting were crazy people. And then I guess, I became one.

Gonzalo Rios, who was also a student of Osiris, asked me to come to meetings, and I started to volunteer and help in any way I could, and that’s all I remember. From that point on in early 2013, PODER and the gang injunction became my life. Meetings, community walks, speaking out publicly, are what I remember the most. We had to educate people; it was crazy how many people had no idea what was going on. Lots of reading, staying up late, and constantly strategizing. When you ask about first steps,
I don’t think there is one that could clearly be defined. There were so many steps, so many people, so much work, so much learning, so much trying to tell strangers about something that was taboo, or controversial… I wouldn’t have known where to start without PODER.

Reed: That definitely speaks to the power of collective action. Social justice victories require deep commitment to a vision of liberation for everyone. It was a three-year fight until the gang injunction was declared unconstitutional, yes? But of course, the struggle is ongoing. What means of community nourishment did y’all cultivate during that time, to sustain the work?

Garcia: What first started as a quest to find answers for my husband became an act of desperation to save him. I believed in my heart that he was being used as a tool to pass the gang injunction, and I believed his criminal case was one of the poster examples used to try to scare the community. Until you witness with your own two eyes, and hear with your own two ears, direct lies by the people you grow up thinking are supposed to protect you and tell the truth, but do the exact opposite — with the person you love, your family, your everything — unfortunately, you will never quite understand how traumatic and life-altering it becomes. I started this commitment with an intent of liberation for him, my husband, and as time went on, the more I learned, the more I was exposed to, the more angry and sad I became; it was like an explosion went off in my head when I realized what was really happening not only in my community, but the rest of this country, and it evolved into a vision of liberation and love for everyone.

I was determined to find the truth behind what was happening to him, and in the process, learned more than what I signed up for. When you ask about community nourishment, what sustained the work was love. Everyone who worked on the GI — from the lead organizers to the neighbors who just showed up to eat our food — operated from a sense of love. There was something very unique about this fight. I was never exposed to
any of this before, but everyone I worked with and met along the way, taught me something, forced me to rethink my attitudes and beliefs, pushed me out of my comfort zone—everyone brought something to the table. The work was never-ending, and at times, we overcommitted; I remember instances when we were beyond exhaustion. I remember being told to take care of myself. I was literally rolling out of bed, throwing my hair up in a bun, with no makeup on and dirty clothes from the day before—running late to lead some protest or some meeting. I remember everyone sacrificing something significant—lots of missed family events, job opportunities, trips, sleep. This “nourishment” I experienced while working for something, something I had no idea how huge it would be, is probably what saved my life.

I remember the first time a stranger came up to me and genuinely thanked me for everything PODER was doing, and thinking why? I thought what we were doing was normal. Or, the time I was told that what I was doing inspired someone else to do the same…I felt weird. The bond created with PODER—I can’t explain it other than as family. PODER will always be in my heart; they were there for me in ways no one had been before, and in return, they have my loyalty for life. Before PODER, the GI, and all the work put into it, I had never felt accepted for who I was, loved for just me, and through this experience, I felt like I finally found a place where I belonged. I found a purpose. The nourishment the community gave to me while in my quest and determination to liberate them, I believe, though not realizing it then, ultimately liberated me.

Hernandez: We became a family, and our closeness is what helped me survive. I have never been involved in a fight so time-consuming and emotional. My cousin was named on the injunction; it was my neighborhood and a lot of people I grew up with. This was a personal fight for me and many of the other organizers. So we would eat, drink, and hang out together as much as we could. We had working parties where we would work together and chill at the same time. We all remain like
brothers and sisters because we spent so much time together. I also relied on emotional support and guidance from experienced organizers with Chicanxs Unidxs, which I am a part of. Babatundes’ wife provided emotional healing when I felt like a victory was so far away. She would compare our struggle to past struggles and motivate us. Seeing people come out to events and support us also motivated me to keep going. Towards the end we were so exhausted and burnt-out that I didn’t have energy to plan a win or loss. When we found out we had won, I remember crying, because, 1) I was in disbelief, and, 2) we were utterly drained after having fought so hard for so long.

I worked fulltime while raising my two daughters who are active in sports and community activities. I was also running a Girl Scout troop, organizing in Orange County, and traveling back and forth to Santa Barbara for sometimes weekly events or meetings. I would stay up until two in the morning finishing up projects for the next day. I tried to help as much as I could from here because folks in Santa Barbara were on the ground pretty much every day. Just thinking about it now brings tears to my eyes because of those same reasons.

Reed: I love how you both express the struggle itself as being spiritually sustaining, even when (at times) draining. What was the greatest resistance y’all faced in convincing people that gang injunctions are so obviously racist? What were strategies you used to bring folks into an understanding of the relationship between race and space?

Hernandez: We were strategic in how we approached folks; of course, some people didn’t care about race issues but did care about Santa Barbara’s image or their property values. It is really hard to organize around injunctions, because the majority of the community does not care about alleged gang members. They didn’t care if it was racist or classist — they just didn’t want “those people in their neighborhood.” You realized just how marginalized they were. With folks from the neighborhoods we were able to talk about race and how it affected people in the
criminal injustice system and they quickly got it because they had either been affected by the system or had a loved one affected. We made sure to have statistics with us and stories of unjust sentences or charges.

Garcia: I felt surprisingly enough, at times, some of the greatest resistance we faced was from the same people who had started working on the issue. We operated with no fear, and donated our time; we were never paid, until a small emergency grant towards the end to help us during the trial. I feel PODER challenged everyone, on both sides. Even the ones against the injunctions were hesitant to be as outspoken or involved. The most resistance I felt in terms of blatant racism was the comments on Edhat—you never saw anyone say anything like that publicly. I remember one time doing a door-to-door walk to businesses on State Street. There was a tattoo parlor, and I went in and started talking it up, and it turned out one of the guys I was talking to was deputy at the jail and knew my husband. It hurt to hear the hate in his voice, but I stood there and listened to him, so I could learn and try to see from their point of view. I knew I couldn’t change his mind, but it helped me prepare for another encounter—perhaps better lingo for the next person. Perhaps a new approach PODER hadn’t tried before. 

Like Gaby mentioned, in the beginning no one talked about the value of homes going down in affected areas. As soon as that approach was discussed by Gregg Hart, the Santa Barbara Association of Realtors signed on real quick in opposition to the GI. Strategy was crucial when it came to race, or when to pull the “race card.” With statistics and proof to back up our claims, we always had to be one step ahead of the opposition, and we were. There were times I feel we had to negotiate our usage of words to unite folks, which shouldn’t have to happen to begin with…but the facts didn’t lie, and people couldn’t deny that race was and is an issue. Race was crucial in strategy as well as in the discussion and implementation of solutions.
Reed: It still makes me feel physically ill when I go to the jail every week and the sign out front reads “Jail/Public Safety.” So-called safety for some means brutality for many. It’s soulless, I think — that people actively support the prison industrial complex when seduced by the misguided popular notion that cops and cages protect communities from harm. The US carceral state relies on notions of “safety” to protect white interests and property while criminalizing people of color. What other code words did your opponents deploy to champion surveillance, policing, and imprisonment?

Hernandez: The Milpas Community Association (our #1 nemesis) had a March for Public Safety in October 2010, which we believe led to the push of the injunction in January 2011. Public safety was clearly a way to target Brown youth. We continue to see organizations like the MCA and other wannabe community groups that want to keep Brown folks in the shadow for the sake of racism, classism, or both. We were often accused of being pro-gangs or pro-crime to harm our efforts. They would also ask “if not injunctions, then what” and we would turn the question on them: What else is the city doing to address gang issues since they say they have exhausted all other remedies? We expect that from white nationalist groups; however, one might expect more from the Democrats who use the same verbiage of “Safety First” when they run for office. The lack of knowledge about why police and prisons even exist blinds their ability to fully understand the root causes of crime, violence, or gangs. They all want a scapegoat to look like the heroes.

Garcia: I agree with everything Gaby stated. We noticed the city attempted to validate the issue by overpublicizing outdated information — basically, relying on one to two instances where a crime had been committed in the neighborhood, and using cases that were ten years old. I felt out of desperation they started to use fear tactics. I remember watching a report on KEYT right before the trial, where they aired a news special about the Mexican mafia taking over SB and showed a picture of Marcial
(my husband), claiming he was taxing vendors on the Westside. All I could do was laugh. I became used to the blatant lies. All they had was his face full of tattoos, and an ongoing criminal case — so they blew it out of proportion to scare people. “Pro-gangs” we heard a lot. When you speak on public safety criminalizing people of color, even with the facts, that is still an ongoing fight in Santa Barbara. People who have experienced it believe it, and those who haven’t don’t want to see it. Comparing cases helped, but tackling the criminal court injustice system in Santa Barbara was, and still will be, difficult.

Reed: As a follow-up question, did you find it useful to strategically reclaim and empower these code words, such as “safety” and “security”? If so, how? And/or did you create new language to address issues?

Hernandez: Yes, we definitely had to reclaim those code words and align with the same goals that we all want safety and security in our city. But we stressed how injunctions were not the solution and that we needed to address these issues from the bottom up. “Our City, Our Solutions” became our motto. Some of our members were gifted in creating confrontational language as well as language to unite. They were not used to folks using their terms against them such as “democratic process,” “fiscally responsible,” or “proactive approach.” “Safety” and “security” also meant loving, helping, and healing our community, and people seemed to unite in that sense.

Reed: While I would never conflate people directly and indirectly affected by state violence, I wonder if in building alliances and broad-based coalitions, it’s important to remember that this thing — whether we name the gang injunction, white supremacy, global racial capitalism, the prison industrial complex, etc. — is killing all of us. Have you found it effective convincing people that what they think helps them actually harms them?
Hernandez: Working on the injunction helped shed light on so many other issues in Santa Barbara. It took so much more energy because we couldn’t ignore those issues and had to call them out. From gentrification, unjust sentences for Brown youth, political cowardice, homelessness, mail being banned in jail, privileged youth taking Brown youth’s funding, police abuse... the list went on and on. We attempted to intersect the injunction with other issues; when we had forums, we didn’t just focus on the injunction but how other factors led to the injunction being seen as the only alternative. With as much information as we gave at those forums, I think we began to create mass consciousness about these issues. Pretty soon other organizations started using our terms in their language, especially nonprofits.

Garcia: There was no other way to convince people than to at times overload them with the truth; sometimes we crammed too much in at once. But I saw everyday people, my neighbors, start connecting the dots, thinking for themselves, and even if they didn’t fully agree with the messaging, they brought up an issue to address, and we did our best to follow up. To me, PODER was more successful in creating alliances with our people, versus other nonprofits and orgs. People who never came to meetings before would come, and they would raise an issue, and someone else would agree, and the discussion would begin about ideas for solutions. People started to plug into their area of interest, or passion. We didn’t use terms or money to make that happen.

Reed: Yes, against a monetized version of social justice, people find themselves by showing up and doing the work. What organizing strategies, testimonies, events, and evidence do you think helped convince people that the gang injunction was part of the problem, not the solution?

Hernandez: Media was a critical component of our efforts. It was a quick way to get our message out and capture people’s interest. We held forums on a monthly basis with the intent to present whether ten people or 300 people showed up. Those num-
bers scared politicians who saw our audience grow and grow, as well as the diversity of people attending. We held fundraisers to hang out with supporters while showcasing local talent and demonstrating that efforts could run on hardly any money. Our light brigades became popular and got a lot of attention; they also became a place to gather. We held protests and showed fearlessness of criticism and being ostracized by “power holders.” We began to take up space at city council meetings while at the same time respecting people’s time and hunger—so we made sure to have food outside of City Hall, so people could eat before and during meetings. We held space at tourist attractions with signs that cautioned against gang war zones: “Be aware you are now entering a gang war zone.” We posted advisory notices to tourists all over beach areas and downtown.

We got people of different ages, races, and classes standing to write declarations stating they were not afraid of their neighborhood and did not feel an injunction was necessary. We had experts and white folks who were respected in the community speak out against the injunction, which shifted the political climate. Once we got the Democratic Party to support our efforts and the Homeowners Association to express opposition to the GI, many people started to change their minds. I think most people were just tired of hearing about the injunction and wanted it gone; it brought a lot of negative publicity to the city.

Garcia: Yes, to be honest, the city was so tired of it all. We literally operated on the strategy of one step ahead: if we got hit with something, we had to come right back harder, whether staging a press conference inside the police department, lawsuits, or memes. We just kept going and going—open to new ideas and opportunities. People supported and helped from all races, backgrounds, educational levels, etc. It was beautiful. The leaders did not know what else to do.

Reed: What pro-youth alternatives did you present in redirecting resources away from policing and punishment to programs
that support the collective health and healing of communities impacted by state violence?

**Hernandez:** We conducted our own research, which we always do when addressing an issue, and explained in the Solutions Proposals how tons of research had already been done to outline what kind of services were needed and did not exist in Santa Barbara. This clearly showed that we were interested in addressing the issue, that we knew what we were talking about, and that Santa Barbara was being sneaky about the GI.

**Garcia:** And some of those proposals are currently being implemented today!

**Reed:** Beautiful. I see in the PODER Solutions Proposals recommendations such as reentry, mentorship, and afterschool programs; community collaboratives and support services; funding for youth sports; and spaces for collective study of pressing issues such as incarceration and immigration policy. Which movement legacies, ancestors, chosen family, and stories empower you in the struggle?

**Hernandez:** Of course, Assata Shakur’s famous chant was used repeatedly in events: “It is our duty to fight for our freedom. It is our duty to win. We must love each other and support each other. We have nothing to lose but our chains!”

Babatunde’s legacy kept me going: “Gang injunctions are modern day apartheid.”

My ancestors “Los Chupes” who were not conquered by the Aztecs and had women in the front lines with men. Learning from the Black Panther Party and Los Zapatistas. Looking back at myself being a young girl who had been harmed and grew up to be tough just to survive and how I could have easily been included in an injunction had that happened when I was a kid. I see myself in all the youngsters; I see my friends and family members who were able to change their lives because we were given a second chance at life.
Garcia: Angela Davis, and the ongoing battle for this world to finally see peace.

Reed: What was the greatest lesson you learned in defeating the injunction?

Hernandez: That people power is important and that you can win as long as you are more committed than the system. Any opposition is a win.

Garcia: The power really is with the people. The truth, no matter how ugly, will set you free, and as long as you operate out of the love in your heart, with no personal agenda, love will always win. It was love that defeated the injunction.

Reed: What advice would you give young community organizers starting out their journey?

Garcia: Take constructive criticism as a blessing, and as you learn your strengths, always seek opportunities to grow and learn from others; don’t feel discouraged or stupid because you never graduated from high school and are sitting in a room with politicians and college graduates trying to put in work. Shine; be you. Take care of yourself or you will burn out.

Hernandez: Do not reinvent the wheel; use other organizations and their efforts. Many orgs including PODER are willing to share media, research, and documents to fight back. Create a system where self-care is encouraged and one day a week of connecting (no work) is promoted. Too often that is the last thing that one feels like one can do because of deadlines and fast-paced organizing, but it pays off. Keep building and training new people. Do not spread yourselves thin.

Reed: What are y’all working on now? How does your past work with PODER inform and inspire you today?
Hernandez: Poder is my baby; I helped start and sustain it. It was a long time coming. The last organization that existed was in the 1970s and 80s—Concilio de la Raza, which was super organized and funded to fight against issues affecting people of color in Santa Barbara. When I think of Poder, I think of a pure form of people power: we didn’t have a hidden agenda, we didn’t have funding to check us, we didn’t care if the Dems liked us, and we didn’t care if we made people uncomfortable. We stayed loyal to our efforts and the people.

At this time, we are working on several issues from gentrification to youth in the criminal injustice system. Some of our members are active with the Ethnic Studies Now Coalition and building El Centro. We are in the midst of training new folks to sustain our efforts as we have had many members move out of the area. We continue to be successful at calling out the system in Santa Barbara and pushing national issues like increasing rents and police abuse.

Garcia: After the GI, I focused on my husband’s trial. I held it together. It was my goal that perhaps if I got his name in the paper enough in opposition to the GI, that maybe the judge would remember him and give him leniency. I found an investigative reporter who followed us for two years on his story; her hope is to publish it nationally in a few months. Marcial was found guilty of second-degree robbery, false imprisonment, street terrorism, and gang enhancements. He was a two-striker, and his convictions should have given him a life sentence. I humbly believe my tireless efforts, and unwillingness to trust our attorneys, is what spared Marcial a life sentence. I prepared, edited, and filed a Romero Motion with our attorney’s assistant. A Romero Motion in California is rarely granted. Because of that Marcial received a 35-year sentence. We are still in the appellate process and have successfully gotten ten years reduced so far. After he was sentenced and transferred I relapsed hard, ended up homeless, and lost everything. Losing him hurt, but in the process, issues I experienced growing up I could no longer hide and started to come out, so it was a blessing in disguise that I was introduced
to activism—I never would have known my worth without it. I am a survivor of sexual, physical, and emotional abuse. Fighting to survive is all I know how to do. I am currently working on healing and trying my best to be as involved as I can with the prisons and amending the 13th. Marcial and I are currently separated, but my promise stays the same, and I will never stop fighting until he is home, and everyone is free.