

With All of Us at the Table

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Trans* communities have made tremendous and visible strides to define the language, narratives, and public images that best represent how we actually see ourselves. In the few years that TJFP has been in existence, we've witnessed a wave of new organizations and projects being formed and taking leadership on the issues that impact us. Individually, there are more and more trans* people who have found positions from which to influence how trans* people are regarded in health care systems, schools, public policy, and many other sectors.



One person's experience and point of view cannot fully encompass the vast cultural, generational, regional, and economic realities, among many others, that exist within the broad spectrum of the trans* community.

However, as each of us navigates the world of media, activism, and advocacy, the experience is still frequently one of isolation and tokenism. Even well-meaning groups too often rely on one voice at the table to give a "trans* perspective" on a host of complex considerations. The problems with this are obvious – one person's experience and point of view cannot fully encompass the vast cultural, generational, regional, and economic realities, among many others, that exist within the broad spectrum of the trans* community. Not only that, but any time one of us is called on to be the single voice advocating for "our own," whether that be the trans* community as a whole or one part of it – trans* women, people of color, disabled folks, etc. – it quickly creates a dynamic of scarcity and defensiveness. In other words, when we sense that we're the only one in the room who can stand up for a particular position, we'll often fight for that position at all costs – and in the process, lose the space for careful reflection, nuance, and deliberation.

TJFP has a unique model, and not only because it is the only grantmaking group in the United States that is led by and for trans* people working at a grassroots level to make change. TJFP also seeks to center other identities that need full representation in order for us to ensure a fair process for how applications are read and, as much as possible, make sure that no one person is being asked to speak on behalf of an entire segment of the community. This has meant that even in our small panel of six people, there is a majority of people of color, multiple trans* women, and people from a variety of other experiences related to geography, faith, age, ability, and class.

This past year, there was a particularly striking example of why a truly inclusive process is so needed. At one point in the decision-making, a disagreement emerged about a few of the applications. For a little while, tensions ran high – there was a racial component at play, as well as conflicting opinions about how to apply the criteria and the panelists' own knowledge of these particular groups in

interpreting the applications and reaching a just decision.

As a facilitator, I have watched many groups struggle in moments like these over the years. I could easily imagine the process failing had the group not had multiple people of color who could work together to find the best answers to the dilemma at hand. In groups where there is a greater degree of tokenism, the sole representative is often either deferred to – with the others usually acting out of guilt – or disregarded and shut down. Neither outcome has true integrity. Instead, what I saw in this case was how better representation created room for complexity in the conversation. I saw high engagement, a willingness to listen to each other and step back if needed, to offer challenges, to voice vulnerability and frustration, and to slowly find a way forward so that a decision could be made in a way that respected the many insights being offered and the inherent value of the applicants themselves. With all of us at the table, we had what we needed to give our best to the process and to each other.

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