

BUILDing a Just Future: Stories of Strength and Discovery

This story told by Bianca Agustin was recorded at the Ford Foundation Center for Social Justice on June 3, 2024. This storytelling initiative was a partnership between The Moth, a New York-based nonprofit dedicated to promoting the art of storytelling and celebrating the commonality of the human experience, and Ford's BUILD program, which provides general operating support, combined with organizational strengthening support, to grantees. Through our partnership with The Moth, we added a tool to the toolbox of our grantee partners: the power of true personal storytelling.

Transcript begins.

BIANCA AGUSTIN: In the summer of 2011, I was working for a large local of the Service Employees International Union. On this particular day, I was at the union headquarter office in lower Manhattan for a big meeting called by our executive vice president. I was so excited. My heart was pounding with anticipation. I was expecting a huge announcement that I had been working toward for quite some time. I'd spent the last five years of my life coordinating a campaign to win union recognition for food service workers employed by a French multinational corporation called Sodexo. My team—you all know and love them. My team of organizers, researchers, and worker leaders had waged a passionate and creative public campaign, and I was convinced we had finally gotten the company to the bargaining table. Word around the office was that Sodexo had signed a national recognition agreement, and there was talk of promotions for all of the staff who'd worked on the campaign. So I took a deep breath as I approached the conference doors to calm my nerves and to force myself to tone down the big, fat grin I had on my face. All of the department directors were already in the room when I arrived, and they were sitting around the table, oddly quiet. Kevin, our usually boisterous executive vice president, was looking rather sullen and serious. I knew before they even said a word that this was not the celebratory occasion I was looking forward to. "Good morning," I struggled as I entered the room. I forced a smile that I feared was no longer warranted. As I sank into my seat, Kevin started the meeting. "I've invited you all here to share an important update regarding Sodexo. We wanted to tell the senior staff before it hit the press later this week." My entire body perked up at the mention of Sodexo and a update worthy of press coverage. I had poured my heart and soul into that campaign, living in hotels and out of my car for months at a time. I deprioritized my health and my personal relationships to ensure success. Kevin went on, he explained that SEIU leadership had made the difficult decision of entering into a settlement agreement with Sodexo, and that under the terms of that settlement agreement, Sodexo would withdraw the lawsuit they had filed against the union, and the union would stop the organizing campaign. His words hit me like a punch in the gut. "Stop the organizing campaign?" I kept whispering to myself in disbelief. Kevin continued to talk, but at this point I was barely absorbing what he was saying. He finally stopped talking and asked if anyone had questions. In my state of shock, I mistakenly asked aloud, "How can we just stop the campaign?" The question immediately provoked awkward, tense glances among the directors,

and a death stare from my director, who told me—very sternly—that he would answer any questions I had separately. I nodded and sat through the rest of the meeting in silence. As I walked slowly back to my department, the numbness started to recede, and once I was in my office behind that closed door, the weight of what Kevin had just said to us hit me hard. I was heartbroken. I was angry. And I was, like, totally destroyed. It was a devastating loss for my staff and for the workers, but this one affected me on a deeply personal, like surprisingly personal, level. And I think when I, in retrospect, it's because I've always had a hard time with failure. Especially my own. I stopped playing the cello in middle school when I didn't make first chair, and I gave up playing softball in high school when I didn't make the all-star team. I like to be good at what I put my time and energy into, and I had a track record of winning campaigns at SEIU, and I had given the Sodexo campaign my all. And I just, I couldn't, I wouldn't, I didn't accept that we had lost. But it was my responsibility, as the campaign coordinator, to talk to the other staff and the worker leaders about the settlement agreement. And so I went around to all of the impacted work sites with the lead organizer, and we had extremely emotional, tearful conversations with our worker leaders. Those were probably among the hardest conversations I've ever had in my life. And when we were done, I returned to New York and my supervisor asked me to give a presentation about the Sodexo settlement at the next all-staff meeting, and he instructed me to talk about it as a path toward winning, not a loss. I was offended that he would even ask me to do such a thing. I couldn't understand how he could see this agreement as a win in any way, shape, or form. It was a loss, pure and simple, and I couldn't stand in front of my peers and say otherwise. I didn't give the presentation that day. In fact, I didn't attend the staff meeting. I took a week off to continue to grieve, to cry in the shower at my leisure, and just to think about what I wanted to do. I was in crisis. I wasn't sure I wanted to stay in the movement. I wasn't sure I wanted to stay working with SEIU. And over the course of those seven days, I spoke to family and friends and all of the staff that I had worked so closely with on that campaign, including Jan, the lead organizer. Jan was struggling with all of the same emotions I was, and Jan was seriously considering quitting. And so that thought surfaced in my head. "Do I want to leave? Is this really the right place for me?" And when my week of leave was up, Jan had made up her mind to leave. And so we met in front of the office building one morning and grabbed a cup of coffee, and we sat on a park bench—way too close to the office, in retrospect—and we just started reminiscing, and talking, and trying to remember the highlights and the lowlights of the campaign. We were crying, we were laughing, and I was telling her how much I was going to miss working with her, when Kevin walked out of the building. We were sitting in his line of sight, so he spotted us easily and he started walking in our direction. Jan calmly collected her things and stood up and walked past him back into the office. I stayed sitting. Kevin was an officer that I had worked with for almost a decade at this point in my career, and I loved and respected him as a labor leader, and I was willing to sit and talk to him even though I was struggling. Now, Kevin, people in this room may know him is not a warm and fuzzy guy. He's this fiery, loud Irishman, and this day he was out of character. He walked up and sat down right next to me without saying a word, and he just leaned in and put his arms around me. I started bawling in his arms, and when he let me go, I looked up into his face and I could see tears welling up into the corners of his eyes, and he said to me, "I hear you're thinking about leaving." And I nodded. "I am." He asked, "Why?" And I immediately respond, "Because we failed. I failed." And with no hint of irony, Kevin said to me, "No you didn't, Bianca." I was so

fucking pissed. I could not believe he had said this to me. “Kevin, we lost. We didn't win the union. I had to walk away from those workers.” He stared at me for a few seconds. Awkward silence. And with noticeable exasperation in his voice, said to me, “Yes. In that way we lost, Bianca. But you're forgetting the significant thing we achieved.” I'm really caught off guard by that comment. I'm starting to listen to him in a real way, as he reminded me that our campaign developed a group of worker leaders that organized across race, language, immigration status. They took on the boss together, over and over. They went on strike three times during that campaign. And Kevin concluded, “Those workers don't need a collective bargaining agreement to exercise their collective power. They're already doing that. And your campaign made that possible. Your work made that possible.” And in that moment, something clicked for me, and I realized that Kevin wasn't just trying to retain me because I was a workhorse. He was actually trying to convey a complicated truth, one that I had refused to accept all my life: that some things simply can't be measured as a win or a loss. And me and my team had actually achieved something beautiful, something far from failure. Thank you.

[The Ford Foundation logo and the Moth logo appear on screen.]

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End of transcript.
