

Pioneers in Justice: BIOGRAPHIES



Sammie Ablaza Wills
API Equality – Northern CA

Sammie Ablaza Wills is an enthusiastic, queer, non-binary Pilipinx organizer passionate about supporting people in reclaiming their inherent power and dignity. Growing up in a hustling class immigrant household, their political journey started with witnessing xenophobia against their family, fighting budget cuts in public schools, and learning about trans Pilipinos fighting colonization. Sammie is the Executive Director of APIENC (API Equality - Northern California), a grassroots organization building power for transgender and queer Asian and Pacific Islander people in the Bay Area, where they originally started as a youth Summer Organizer. In their current role, Sammie supports hundreds of community members to organize for rights, build intergenerational connections, and heal for trans justice.

During their time at APIENC, Sammie has worked alongside members to publish “Up to Us,” a groundbreaking report and strategy brief on the needs of transgender and non-binary API people in the Bay Area. As part of their commitment to sustainability and leadership development, Sammie is on a spacious transition out of their Directorship, and will support incoming staff and other transgender API leaders to build powerful and compassionate organizations. Sammie has served as a fellow for the Trans Justice Funding Project, was honored by the Mario Savio Young Activist Award, and sits on the board of Movement Generation: Justice & Ecology Project. Alongside their organizing work, Sammie is a death doula and community archivist.



Zahra Billoo
Council on American-Islamic Relations
(CAIR-SFBA)

Zahra Billoo is a California native and the daughter of Pakistani immigrants. She serves as the Executive Director of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, San Francisco Bay Area (CAIR- SFBA) office, the oldest and one of the largest CAIR chapter offices. Since joining in 2009, Zahra has led the organization through a period of six-fold growth. Today, she manages one of the largest CAIR offices in the country.

Under Zahra’s leadership, CAIR-SFBA has significantly expanded its capabilities to provide know-your-rights sessions on a nearly weekly basis to mosques and community members in the San Francisco Bay Area, while also providing direct legal representation to Bay Area residents facing numerous civil rights violations, including FBI interviews, employment discrimination, airport harassment, school bullying, and hate crimes. Zahra’s advocacy has included media appearances in local and national media, including MSNBC, NPR, the San Francisco Chronicle, and even FOX News. She was listed by the San Jose Mercury News as a “Woman to Watch” in March 2017 for Women’s History Month, as well as by the Chronicle of Philanthropy in their January 2018 cover story on millennials who lead.



Cat Brooks
Justice Teams Network

Cat Brooks is the Executive Director of Justice Teams Network and has been engaged in the struggle against state violence for over a decade. Cat's leadership has always been informed by and in collaboration with impacted communities. She played a central role in the struggle for justice for Oscar Grant and is the co-founder of the Anti Police-Terror Project (AFTP) whose mission is to rapidly respond to and ultimately eradicate state violence in communities of color. Inspired by her own lived experience, Cat Brooks has spent her life organizing to bring an end to unjust systems built into the societal status quo. She serves the people in the fight for justice, collaborating with State Assembly members to pass transformative legislation around criminal justice reform. Raising her daughter in West Oakland, she works to comfort families who have lost

loved ones to state violence and mentors young people in civic activism and theater. She brings with her the combined forces of compassionate grace, resilient tenacity, and laser-focused vision, all rooted in, and nurtured by, the fierce love of her late activist mother and ignited by an unjust system that incarcerated her father instead of providing him healthcare support to fight his addiction.

Cat also finds time to ground herself in art. She is an award-winning artist, resident playwright, director and actress with The Lower Bottom Playaz in Oakland and 3 Girls Theater in San Francisco and co-host of KPFA's UpFront; a morning drive-time news show featuring local, state, national and international content. Her one-woman show, 'Tasha about the in-custody murder of Natasha McKenna in the Fairfax County Virginia Jail, will have its world premiere at Z-Space Below in San Francisco in July 2022.



Maria Noel Fernandez
Working Partnerships USA

Maria Noel Fernandez brings over a decade of organizing experience to the movement for a just economy. As Deputy Executive Director, she oversees Working Partnerships USA's organizing, civic engagement, communications, and operations departments, building coalitions and community power to win groundbreaking change for working families. She is a founding member and campaign director for Silicon Valley Rising, a coordinated regional effort that's inspiring an inclusive tech-driven economy. So far, the SVR campaign has helped nearly 10,000 service workers in the tech industry organize for better wages and a voice at work.

As Working Partnerships USA's organizing director from 2014 to 2017, Maria Noel was instrumental in developing organizing and campaign strategies that won a \$15/hr minimum wage in eight Silicon Valley cities, the first-in-the-nation Opportunity to Work ballot initiative, and other policies that are improving the lives of working people and their families. She led the organization's non-partisan civic engagement programs that are building a strong grassroots base of low-income voters of color in Silicon Valley.



Tinisch Hollins

Californians for Safety and
Justice

A crime survivor and a native of San Francisco, **Tinisch Hollins** is the Executive Director of Californians for Safety and Justice — the Alliance for Safety and Justice’s flagship state-based program in California. Her leadership helped to pass historic first-in-the-nation legislation that extended employment leave for all survivors of violence, as well as legislation permitting crime victims to terminate their leases if they no longer feel safe in their homes following a crime. Tinisch also played a pivotal leadership role in the defeat of Proposition 20, a regressive ballot measure on the 2020 California ballot that sought to repeal numerous successful criminal justice reforms.

She has been deeply engaged in the Bay Area social justice movement as the community organizer, policy advocate and systems navigator for nearly two decades. Tinisch has worked passionately to bring the voices of survivors to the center of community engagement and public policy and has advocated tirelessly for those voices to guide decisions, priorities, and resources.



Niloufar Khonsari

Pangea Legal Services

Niloufar Khonsari (Nilou) (she/they) is the founder and co-director of Pangea Legal Services, an immigrant justice organization based in Northern California. As a formerly undocumented immigrant and asylee from Iran, Nilou started Pangea with the belief that every individual deserves the right to move, together with their chosen community or family—with dignity and free of fear.

Since launching Pangea in 2013, Nilou has represented over 230 asylees and other clients in complex, multi-year immigration cases. As an advocate, Nilou believes in challenging systems that are classist, racist, anti-feminist, and otherwise oppressive. This is why Nilou adopted community tactics developed by undocumented activists to create Pangea’s own community-led public campaign model to empower clients and the larger immigrant community. Working alongside community organizers and undocumented activists, Nilou helps clients exercise political agency that challenges how the immigration system dehumanizes and criminalizes immigrants. Also recognizing that oppression is systemic and embedded in nearly all institutions, including nonprofits, Nilou created one of the first horizontally structured and worker-led legal nonprofit organizations in the country.

Prior to founding Pangea, Nilou ran a private legal practice, worked at several Bay Area nonprofit organizations, and was a Fulbright Fellow in Sierra Leone. She is a graduate of Georgetown Law School ('09) and Georgetown University (SFS '06). Nilou currently resides in Berkeley where she is raising a magnificent two-year-old child.



Camille Llanes-Fontanilla
Somos Mayfair

Camille Llanes-Fontanilla is the Executive Director of Somos Mayfair, a 24-year old grassroots community organizing non-profit. She first joined the organization in 2010, advancing its nationally recognized leadership development and organizing model. Camille is a skillful bridge-builder, maintaining and expanding relationships with key stakeholders, and securing over 20 million dollars for SOMOS and the Mayfair community. Her organization led a two-year campaign that brought light to governance issues in the East San Jose school district that won the support of the Mayor and Vice Mayor and led to a 'kids-first' agenda. That campaign experience produced a trust and relationship building model that is being used by school administrators. Through her work she carries the question of how

to create spaces that support what liberation can look like. She has 16 years of experience in nonprofit management and has extensive executive training. Camille was born and raised in East San Jose. She earned a Bachelor's Degree in Mass Communications and Ethnic Studies from the University of California, Berkeley and has a Master's Degree in Public Administration from San Jose State University.



Lorena Melgarejo
Faith in Action Bay Area

Lorena Melgarejo has served as the Executive Director of Faith in Action since 2017. With over 20 years in community organizing experience, Lorena started her career as a union organizer for Justice for Janitors and later worked as a faith-based organizer for Faith in Action National. In 2005, she became Lead Organizer for San Francisco Organizing Project. Before she stepped into her Executive Director position with Faith in Action Bay Area, Lorena coordinated parish organizing and immigrant solidarity for Faith in Action and the San Francisco Catholic Archdiocese's Office of Human Integrity. Lorena is a longtime resident of the Mission District in San Francisco.



Isa Noyola
Mijente

Isa Noyola is a first generation Mexican translatina activist and national leader in the LGBT immigrant rights movement. She was the former Deputy Director at the Transgender Law Center and now serves as the Deputy Director at Mijente, a political, digital, and grassroots hub for Latinx and Chicax organizing and movement building. As a national leader in LGBTQ immigrant rights movement, she works extensively for the release of transgender women from ICE detention and an end to all deportations. Isa is also the co-president of The Women's March board and is one of cofounders of San Francisco's community based organization El/La para Translatinas. In 2015, she organized the first national trans anti-violence protest that gathered more than 100 activists—mostly trans women of color—to address the epidemic of violence trans communities face. She is

also on the advisory boards of Familia Trans Queer Liberation, Radical Imagination Family Fund, and the International Trans Fund. Currently she is being featured in The California Museum exhibit "California Women Inspire: Celebrating Women's Equality in the Golden State."



Imani Rupert-Gordon
National Center for Lesbian
Rights

Imani Rupert-Gordon is the Executive Director for the National Center for Lesbian Rights (NCLR). NCLR is a national legal organization committed to advancing the civil and human rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people and their families through litigation, legislation, policy, and public education. Previously, Imani served as the Executive Director for Affinity Community Services, a social justice organization that works with the entire LGBTQ community with a focus on Black women. She also served as the Director of the Broadway Youth Center, part of Howard Brown Health in Chicago, serving LGBTQ youth experiencing housing instability.

Imani is known for her visionary leadership. In 2020 the Chicago Foundation for Women presented her with the Impact Award. This year she was presented with the Freedom Award from Equality Illinois and has been named the 2021 Sex Education Trailblazer by SIECUS: Sex Ed for Social Change. The Crown Family School of Social Work, Policy and Practice (formally the School of Social Service Administration) will honor her with the Judith Butler Award for her exceptional promise in the field of social work in the summer of 2021. Imani received a master's degree from the University of Chicago Crown Family School of Social Work and a bachelor's degree in Sociology from the University of California, Santa Barbara.



Aria Sa'id
The Transgender District

Aria Sa'id is an award winning transgender advocate and political strategist based in San Francisco. She is a founder and executive director of The Transgender District, the world's first legally recognized district of its kind. Ms. Sa'id is both a Board member of the Women's Foundation of California, and an alum of its acclaimed Women's Policy Institute fellowship program. In 2019, she was listed in the annual OUT100 which highlights 100 of the world's influential LGBT leaders, and she is the youngest Black transgender woman recipient of Resolutions from the California legislature. In 2020, she was featured in Refinery29's annual "Black is the New Black Power List" as one of 8 Black women in America to watch. Her work has been featured in Harper's Bazaar, Forbes, Vogue, Travel & Leisure, The Guardian, CNN, Huffington Post and more. To learn

more about her work, visit her website at: www.ariasaid.com



Marlene Sanchez
The Ella Baker Center for
Human Rights

Marlene Sanchez is the Deputy Director of the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights in Oakland, CA. She is a proud San Francisco Native, Chicana, movement leader, organizer, and a formerly incarcerated woman. Marlene came to community work at age 15 looking for employment and a way out of streets and the juvenile justice system. She was hired as a community health outreach worker, providing HIV/STD education and harm reduction supplies and love to hundreds of young women who lived and worked in the underground street economies of San Francisco.

She has since stepped into leadership at the Young Women's Freedom Center, Communities United for Restorative Youth Justice (CURYJ), and recently served as the Interim Executive Director of Alliance for Girls, an organization she helped found. Marlene is a founding member of All of Us or None (AOUON); a movement building group working to restore the rights of – and fight against the discrimination of – incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people.