LAURA FLANDERS & FRIENDS

BIPOC MEDIA ANSWERS THE CALL: COMMUNITY ACTION AFTER HURRICANE HELENE

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LAURA FLANDERS - Hurricane Helene caused unprecedented damage across Western North Carolina. The Office of State Budget and Management estimates a total of 53 billion dollars in damages alone and statewide recovery efforts are still underway. Amidst misinformation and no information, local media had to step up to inform desperate people fast. No local media outlet these days has all the resources it needs. And so today we are recognizing two local media projects in the region that in spite of the odds, saved lives and expanded their relationship to the communities they serve. With me to do this today is Co-Host Amir Khafagy, Immigrant Labor Reporter for Documented, based in Queens, New York. Hey, welcome back Amir. Glad to have you.

AMIR KHAFAGY - Laura, it's a pleasure to be here, thank you. In North Carolina, many BIPOC-led local media outlets worked in collaboration with existing community networks as they found themselves on the front lines of relief efforts, redefining what service journalism is actually about. I'm happy to introduce our guests today, Brooklyn Brown, a reporter for Cherokee One Feather, the local newspaper of Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians based in Cherokee, North Carolina. Also with us is Magaly Urdiales, the co-founder of JMPRO Community Media, a grassroots nonprofit that shares essential news and information with immigrant communities by producing print, radio, and online journalism in Spanish, English, and Mayan Indigenous languages. Thank you both for joining us today.

LAURA FLANDERS - Let's start with getting for our audience who are around the country, some sense of the communities that we are talking about. Can you help paint that picture? Brooklyn, let's start with you.

BROOKLYN BROWN - Yes, so Western North Carolina is an Appalachian community. My news outlet in particular covers the Eastern band of Cherokee Indians. We're the ancient Indigenous civilization of Western North Carolina.

LAURA FLANDERS - And what about you, Magaly?

MAGALY URDIALES - Yeah, so our community media channel covers all western North Carolina counties and we were located in one of the counties, in the city that was most impacted by the hurricane, which was Swannanoa.

AMIR KHAFAGY - Brooklyn, I was hoping you can tell me more about the mission of Cherokee One Feather. I work for a community-based media outlet in New York called Documented New York. And we sometimes feel like we do more than just straight reporting. And it seems like your news organization does that as well.

BROOKLYN BROWN - Yes, so the Cherokee One Feather, it is a community newspaper. It's community journalism. So our mission, our goal is to provide information to the Cherokee community, which is particularly the Qualla boundary, which is the land trust in Cherokee North Carolina that our members of the Eastern Band live on, but can also be off boundary. We have members of the Eastern Band off boundary. And so what we do is we provide information that the community needs. That can be anything from food drives to hard hitting investigative journalism.

LAURA FLANDERS - And what about JMPRO? Can you tell us more about that and why? How did it get its name, Magaly?

MAGALY URDIALES - It came from Justice Media Project and we have a very strong foundation of community organizing. And because we believe that combining those efforts of media skills and community organizing, we can really help to change things in our community. And especially with the hurricane, I think JMPRO Community Media has already been working in the communities since the pandemic and have the structure to just have a group of community reporters that can work in rapid response mode so we can go to the communities and start helping in any way we can because the hurricane got us on guard.

LAURA FLANDERS - Describe if you would, what it was like for you that day, the day that you decided you had to sort of jump into action around the hurricane.

MAGALY URDIALES - Well, I think the first day we were really surprised and we were going around just trying to look for ways to go out. My neighborhood was trapped, it was damaged all around it. It was unbelievable to see a whole house submerged in water and then with no services, with no electricity, we will, we were getting, this is going to be really bad for us. So our only question was where can we start? I mean, we have a community of reporters in different counties and then we couldn't get connected with them. We didn't know if they were okay. So we start driving little by little, looking for safe roads that we can start going through them by car, making sure that we also save the gas because I mean the gas station were closed. Yeah, and then I think after that we were thinking, how can we get our helicopter? There is no way we can get to those places without us getting trapped as well. And people were calling us, saying us, are you going to evacuate? And it was for us a moral decision. A moral decision, how can we evacuate when we have, we felt that we have the responsibility to use the infrastructure that we already

has been built and to start helping with the skills that we have. So by 2:00 AM in the morning, we start calling and I say 2:00 AM in the morning because that was the only time that we can get a little bit of signal. We have to walk through the mountain, the higher place to get signal and start calling people just to make sure we can get connected with the resources that we have in other places.

AMIR KHAFAGY - Brooklyn, I was hoping you can speak to the values that you drew upon during this crisis.

BROOKLYN BROWN - Fortunately, the Cherokee North Carolina area was one of the more less affected areas of the hurricane. We still were impacted, you know, we still had flooding, we still had power outages, but just not as devastating as other areas. However, we did have members who lived off boundary in areas like Swannanoa and Haywood County that did lose everything, including our editor here at the One Feather, Robert Jumper. And so because of that, we instituted a Cherokee value we call Gadugi. It is a word in Cherokee that means community, lending a hand, offering what you can. And so the Eastern Band mobilized, the Principal Chief Michelle Hicks tallied up I think 3.2 million in supplies and funding for that crisis. Similarly, during the pandemic, it's Gadugi community, it's about helping your neighbor, being there for your neighbor, and like I said, giving what you can, which could be money, it could be cleaning supplies, it could be just a prayer.

AMIR KHAFAGY - Yeah, you said something interesting, you said off boundary, and I think I've made it while we were prepping for this, I made the mistake of saying reservation, is there a difference? Could you explain that a little bit for someone who might not know?

BROOKLYN BROWN - Yes, so the reason that it's called the boundary and not the reservation is because we own the land. It's our land, it's the Qualla boundary, it's a land trust, it's not a reservation. But like I said, off boundary is our members who are living in places that are not technically the Qualla boundary, but they are still members of the Eastern Band and they're still members of our people that we care about and want to help in crisis.

LAURA FLANDERS - I'm so impressed that organizations that we know struggle, each of your organizations struggle on a daily basis simply to survive as we do. And yet you came together to be doing this work to others who are facing crises right now in local journalism perhaps, or covering local crises or communities feeling in crisis after the election and after everything that we've been through this year, what's your most useful learning, perhaps? How did you stretch? What did you learn? What did you get inspired by that you might want to share, Brooklyn?

BROOKLYN BROWN - Yeah, what I kept coming back to were the stories. These were all individual stories that come into the larger narrative of love and community outpouring,

Appalachian communities, Western North Carolina, we are who are rebuilding. We were the ones on the ground with our neighbors helping, mothers saving their drowning children, neighbors saving each other in the flood. So that's what inspired me and continues to inspire me in crisis, is that in this tragedy, we had such an outpouring of neighborly love. And that's what community journalism is about, is sharing those individual stories that come together to show just the strength of a community.

LAURA FLANDERS - Magaly, what about you? I mean there were news reports at the time, as I understand it, telling journalists and others to stay away.

MAGALY URDIALES - Well, and I think it back to what was the most needed at that moment, I think it, many barriers and many problems of the corporate media came in place. We were called for people that were looking for story, that were looking for somebody that was crying because their loved one wasn't found yet. And for us it was frustrating. It was frustrating how transactional, in a moment like this, that can be.

LAURA FLANDERS - Transactional, we'll give you, if you give us, et cetera.

MAGALY URDIALES - Yes, I think in media needs to be more transformational. And one of the things that has been a strength of JMPRO is JMPRO Community Media is that before this crisis, we take the time to know the community. We take the time to have listened in spaces where we can listen [to] the needs of the community. Those first days, the most important need was food, electricity, shelter, water. So I think it for us, it is important in this time of crisis to check ourselves, to check our boxes and evaluate what can we do to support, how can we be transformational and how can we use the power of media to connect to a bigger resource? Because what we needed at that moment is that if you have connection with huge companies that has a helicopter, hey, make that connection and call and let them know that we need them. If you have that power of people in power that can bring water immediately, we need that right now.

LAURA FLANDERS - Brooklyn, I want to ask you a similar question. Do you have critiques of mainstream commercial for-profit media as they attempted to cover the story?

BROOKLYN BROWN - Yes, I do have critiques of sort of the sensationalism that was coming with it. And like Magaly was saying, they were not trying to help or provide resource, they were just trying to profit off of what was happening to us.

LAURA FLANDERS - Amir, I'm sure you've had this experience of being in a situation where reporters are looking for the most pitiable character. Like, oh, who can we focus on to show just how, you know, what bad shape these folks are in and therefore need our rescue? I'm sure you saw a lot of that, both of you, and I hate to bring it back to your minds, but what's your advice to

journalists going forward? Perhaps some of them with all the right intentions coming to a place they don't know well, assigned to cover it with the idea that bringing attention will bring support?

MAGALY URDIALES - Make sure that you use the social justice lens, that you are inclusive in the way you conduct your media, and make sure that you try to be part of the community that you try to cover. In this crisis, we have a group of more than 134 local organizations and leaders with different skills and they, everybody just show up and say, I'm here, how can I help? And they are here for the long road. So I think being that involve the community, I think that's the most important thing for JMPRO Community Media, since we focus and center the voices of the community most impacted. Brooklyn, am I hearing hire a local person perhaps rather than come yourself?

BROOKLYN BROWN - That and just to listen. A lot of the stories and the people I were talking to, they were in need of really simple accessible things like insulin for a diabetic that lost all of their medicine. You know, 50 dollars to pay, you know, affordable motel room costs. So it's about if you are going to come and cover the community to listen to what is being told, that the coverage that you're doing, it's not just that you're documenting, you are actively helping someone share their needs with the community.

AMIR KHAFAGY - I hear what you're saying and I think there's a lot of critics, especially of local media that say that that's not impartial, right? As reporters, we're supposed to be neutral and we're supposed to be impartial. What do you say to those critics and do you find that to be a complication when it comes to reporting on these communities? We could start with you, Brooklyn.

BROOKLYN BROWN - You can be objective and you can report the facts while also helping someone in need. And the facts were that people had lost everything and that they needed help, those were the facts. So the objectivity doesn't have to be cold, you know, reporting the facts doesn't have to be without passion. And that's something I see a lot in community journalism is that we are able to practice good journalism while also having a heart for the community that we're covering.

AMIR KHAFAGY - Hmm, Magaly, same question.

MAGALY URDIALES - There are different ways and different roles that we can play and I think for us, the most of all, we are part of the community most affected and we are respectful of the needs of the community and respectful of who needs to be the voice in the camera. So I think having those values in place, I think are very important. You are most of all human treating with

humans and covering humans stories that we need to be very careful about. Very empathetic and very respectful.

LAURA FLANDERS - It's been our observation that communities in crisis, often not at first, but eventually emerged stronger with stronger relationships, stronger connections with one another, and real experiences of having collaborated that make future collaborations easier. You may not know quite what that looks like right this second. We're talking to you awfully soon after Hurricane Helene. But what do you think, Brooklyn, are there stories from now that, to give you a sense that you will emerge stronger?

BROOKLYN BROWN - Absolutely, I think, I was a history professor, so I, of Appalachian history, so I know the history of what has happened over centuries to Appalachian communities and that sort of historical pattern of something tragic happening to us and then us coming back stronger. So I know based in history that we are going to come back stronger, but I also think it's now politically in the political climate that we're in such a strength that we get to show as Appalachian people, we get to break the stereotype that we are living off of the government and we're, there's so many stereotypes about Appalachian people and that now in this moment of tragedy and crisis that we are getting to be, that we're getting to show who we are through our love, through our strength, through our togetherness, through our diversity. I love that today we have two women of color talking about the people of color in Appalachia that we're helping and on the ground. So dispelling and dismantling the ideas of Appalachian communities is, for me, the immediate. What's happening immediately that shows me that we're going to build back stronger.

LAURA FLANDERS - And what about the media, Magaly, do you feel like the media projects you've been part of and connect with have really gained in strength?

MAGALY URDIALES - I think so. I think so. And there are many stories that I can count, but you know, but you know how western North Carolina can be politically divided? In this crisis, what we saw was solidarity, what we saw is spaces where it doesn't matter your political position, you came together just to help each other, just to strategize together and to create process where there was nothing, right? And I think it, that is a big lesson. We are now part of new efforts that are going to help not only in this timelines of restoration, but also efforts that will help to the needs and barriers that we have been having before this crisis. So yes, definitely, I think it's solidarity and the new processes created and that was because we have the opportunity to work together. There was, in my case, there was no way for us to go nowhere. We needed to get together, we needed even to cook together to survive. And those situation keep us, keep us alive, keep us moving forward through this crisis that was exhausting because it is still happening. It is a long time for recovery.

AMIR KHAFAGY - Listening to you two speak, it really, it's eye-opening and it really makes me feel optimistic about the state of local journalism and media because I think we hear this idea that local media's in perpetual crisis and local media outlets are closing left and right. Magaly, I hope you can speak on how has this crisis allowed your news organization to grow and expand?

MAGALY URDIALES - One of the beautiful things that happen is that our cohort of community reporters started growing. We start having calls from people that was located in another county that these people said, hey, I can be here, I can report from here. I can be the point person. And that was something that happened in another county. Something that I am not only grateful, but I am proud of. How people in the community, people that is shy talking on a camera can come with their cell phone and say, I can be here to report.

LAURA FLANDERS - Magaly, one thing we haven't talked about is digital equity. And I know that that's one of the aspects of your work. Can you just fill us in on that part of the work that you do?

MAGALY URDIALES - Yes, and I think it is related to whom do we want to give the voice of the platforms that we promote? And one of the thing and the values of our programs is that the community reporters that are part of the cohort team of JMPRO is people from the community, workers, construction workers, hotel workers, people that speak Spanish, immigrant people, Native speakers that just want to come together and build their capacity to disseminate not only news, but also resources in a way that is meaningful to the communities that they live [in]. And I think that is when we are thinking about digital equity, I think our communities deserve to have the platforms that we need, the resources that we need in order for us to build a strong community media platform. So I think there are different aspects of the work that we do that we can talk, but I think the most important thing is how we can create these spaces where they can receive capacity building sessions in their language. They can have access to higher education in their language, and the most important thing they can have access to, their resources. All of our workers have a camera, a very modern camera, computer, and the resources and equipment that they need to be able to do their work.

LAURA FLANDERS - Love it. Brooklyn, to you, I heard from one of your pieces that people need not just food and water, but also ice cream.

BROOKLYN BROWN - Yes.

LAURA FLANDERS - Do you want to talk about that story? It just moved my heart.

BROOKLYN BROWN - Yes. So one of our local JROTC instructors at our Cherokee High School, he has a food truck business. And the idea for that story actually came from my editor

Robert, who was one of the people that lost everything. And he said, you know, in this time of tragedy, like what I want and need is a little bit of joy, a little bit of normalcy, something positive. And so Jason, who was the instructor, he was handing out ice cream and he said, you know, for families and specifically children, just to get a little bit of ice cream was a joy in chaos, which was the title of the article, "Joy in Chaos." And so, you know, you don't think about that a lot, that just something small, some ice cream, a toy can mean everything to somebody in times like this.

LAURA FLANDERS - Well listen, thank you both so much. Brooklyn Brown, Magaly Urdiales, thank you so much for being with us. It's been a pleasure to hear from you. And I don't know about you, Amir, but obviously, you know, we planned this conversation before the last election, but there's something about it that feels absolutely spot on the right message for me to be hearing today.

AMIR KHAFAGY - I agree, I think it's so important for people, especially immigrant communities, communities of color, to have access to a media platform that really speaks to them, that really is in touch with their needs. And it's a vital necessity to have local media in communities that are traditionally not touched by mainstream media.

LAURA FLANDERS - Well, it sounds like an endorsement of the continuing project here at "Laura Flanders and Friends" of this monthly feature, Meet the BIPOC Press. Thank you once again, our guests and Amir for joining me. Don't forget that you can get the full uncut version of every week's conversation through subscribing to our podcast. And as I've now started saying, stay kind, stay curious, and stay brave. Until the next time, for "Laura Flanders & Friends," I'm Laura.

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