

University of Washington

Women Who Rock Oral History Project

Transcript

**Onion Carrillo**

**Narrator:** Onion Carrillo, founder of Ladies First

**Interviewed by:** Alexis Hope

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Alexis Hope (AH): Could you introduce yourself?

Onion Carrillo (OC): My name is Onion Maria Carrillo, and I'm the founder of Ladies First. I've been doing grassroots community organizing for 10 years now.

AH: Can you tell us how and why you made Ladies First, now that it's coming up on 10 years?

OC: Yeah it is. I grew up in White Center, and White Center when I was growing up had a lot of helicopters, cops, and gang violence and I think growing up, for me as a woman, in a Chicano family, where my family immigrated from Mexico and I was like 1st Generation here. It was really hard for me to balance what was like, in a safe way, to be a woman in like all of the things that were happening socially and politically in our community and our society and the world. White Center was a predominantly Cambodian refugee space for people who were escaping the genocide in Cambodia. So I grew up around a lot of historical trauma, especially from my own family history and also from what was happening from my own peers. And a lot of violence felt normalized in a very intense way. So what I wanted to do was create a change that was sustainable in our community that really revolved around empowering woman in a very genuine way using hip hop, or music, or art as tool of liberation. Cause I strongly believe that art is this expression people catch onto faster than, I can sit and lecture somebody but people won't get it the same way as when they see something that moves them deeply inside. So I was like let's bring art together to bring awareness to something that feels really hard, to bring awareness to the isolation that woman are feeling, to bring awareness to a lot of communities that are marginalized, and to create a space for people to feel and to work through their own stuff. Especially for me it was about working through anti-violence with a rape perspective. For creating communities that were keeping each

other accountable and being accountable across all barriers of oppression, the "isms": racism, homophobia, sexism, all of those things.

For me starting Ladies First was essential, it had to happen, because nothing like that existed for me in Seattle, and I would go to bigger cities, like I would go to Canada, I would go to conferences and would be speaking and I would find out what was happening in like New York and what was happening in California. And I felt really frustrated about coming home to Seattle and it would be this really isolated thing. When there were gangs in the culture of Seattle everybody was really divided, and it really spread out and it was communities pitted against different communities. I didn't like that. I wanted it all to be unified in this way where everyone was feeling safe. I could connect regardless of what sect ?, or what crew, or what neighborhood they were coming from, but that people had this bigger unity that they could join forces on and kind of mobilize behind. I think another thing about organizing and activism is that people like to organize the people out there and from like my cultural history I know that the Zapatista movement really articulates "don't come and rescue us," like help yourself out. So, a lot of my political analysis was really trying to frame "what do we need in Seattle." Even though we live in America, that's a privilege, and understanding all of the complicated oppressions that live within this privilege of living in America. So knowing that I was poor and having all of these struggles in my life I wanted to bring a space together, and it started really simply, I was working and organizing at CARA, Communities Against Rape and Abuse, and it started with an International Women's Day, where my boss came up to me and said "hey we should do something for this international women's day that's coming around." I said, "I wanna do a women's hip hop event," but at the time hip hop was so scarce for women. It was very male oriented, and we would go to spaces where there would be a lot of neighborhoods where there would be these poetry readings, but there was this feeling of how inaccessible hip hop was but this undercurrent of how accessible hip hop could be. So I wanted to be an emcee, I wanted to be a breakdancer, I wanted to be a graphic artist, but I didn't know how to start and I realized that even in trying to start everyone was so separated. Everyone had their own crew and I could join a crew, but none of the bigger crews had the idea of "how do we mobilize." So, I wanted to bring women together under a political analysis of an umbrella that was talking about women's politics. So we organized it to happen at Lotti Matt's Cafe in Columbia City. It was really sweet the owners were really nice, and it was really packed. Everyone and their grandma was there. It was so much fun, and it was very vibrant. A lot of people asked for it to come, and a lot of guys showed up. Some guys asked to get on the mic but I kept it really specific for women, women-identified people who have a space to express and identify themselves.

AH: How was that decision taken?

OC: So, it was really hard because to a certain extent all these political things happen in the world...Ok so I know there is gender inequality, but then there is this political-social lens that you see the world through and your like this is messed up because I,

as a woman, don't feel safe here in this hip hop community. I feel like music videos don't really represent me. I feel as a woman when I go to a hip hop show, back in the day, it would be crowded with only men and the show wouldn't be accessible to women. So there is that political analysis, but there's also this human heart analysis, where I said these are my brothers like some of these cats I really love. Some of the cats are not cool, but some of them are really cool and try their best to hold me up, and love me, and support me and build me up through movement building. So it was that very first night I had this brother come up to me, he was a breakdancer, and he asked me "Hey can I get on the mic," because he knew I was organizing the show, and I just looked at him and said I really love you but it doesn't mean that I don't love you, but I think tonight is for the women. And it's about creating this space where women feel comfortable talking about stuff. It doesn't mean that when men get on the stage they automatically perpetuate misogyny. I think it means more that men can take a step a back and honor women's voices. And so we had this long conversation about that, and I told them that there are so many other spaces where you can get on the mic. You can go to the city and go anyplace and get on the mic. I think that this is a place where women can process and internalize deep stuff, and talk about all of the things that we can't address in front of men. So it seems that if we know the audience is women-identified people then were gonna talk about rape, were gonna talk about how it hurts, I know that rape also happens in communities with men but I feel like hip hop culture in a certain way perpetuate the major, mainstream ideas of rape culture, which were things I was trying to step back from. I was trying to create a space where we could create culture that was in response to rape culture. It was really difficult. It was really difficult and I think that the beginning part was really difficult for a lot of reasons. People didn't want to talk about rape because it was so uncomfortable, and people didn't want to talk about misogyny. Just like with racism, "It doesn't exist because were not hosing down black people with firehouse," but its at the core of social, political inequality, and I can feel it when I go home and I feel like shit, or I feel dirty, or feel like I hate myself because of what's being projected onto me or onto my community. Then I feel like it's a political issue and we need to create space that feel safe. That I can go out and do something and I can come home and feel good about myself. I feel like I have the capacity to love myself because my community accepts who I really am in all of the ways that I can be.

I think that I strongly believe that activism isn't something you do for fun or partying or whatever, it's a way of life. It has to be interweaved into the things that we do as individuals. So maybe something like this week I'm going to buy something that is politically in-line with something that I believe in. So it transcends a lot of things, whether I'm in school or whatever I'm doing in my life I will be active. Even if I'm not present in the community. I don't know if Lulu had mentioned it but there was a time when I was pregnant and everything was working... So I think it's about building inclusive communities, where it all makes sense you can have your family and still move but it moves at a different pace. So obviously I had a child and organizing as a leader for Ladie's First was hard for me, and that's when I really depended to Lulu and Gigi to step forward as leaders. We

had had conversations and been organizing together, but at one time I had all types of hard things happen to me: I lost my housing, baby was born, separated from his dad, and I think that these things happen in community, especially in rough spaces. Life just happens, and I think that it is essential for communities to build ways to support one another despite trauma or crisis that may happen in their life, cause it does happen to people. And so at that point, Lulu and Gigi were able to carry and pick up and Monique Franklin was able to pick it up, and then Heidi was able to pick it up, and now there is like a strong network of five of us. That are strong, beautiful, powerful organizers that have a good investment in Ladies First. So it feels like its in a strong and solid place and its roots are strong. And it's about time for it to grow and blossom in different ways.

AH: What are the different ways that you see it growing?

OC: For me, I think what's really important and essential for Ladies First is the culture it creates and the cultural norms: talking about prisons, violence, talking about rape, talking about power and privilege, and oppression and how those things intersect, and celebrating our own lives. Celebrating the things that we have overcome and being able to have a space where we feel safe. Those are cultural things that I want to transcend in the Seattle hip hop community or transcend the Seattle community, at large. So that more of these things pop up, and that more of people go to these events and go home and feel better about themselves. There's a lot of hip hop, mainstream music that comes that I think is so destructive. You know Eminem and Rihanna did that song together ["Love the Way You Lie"]... That's so dysfunctional! And what it does is set a dysfunctional tone for people to have dysfunctional relationships as if its normal, and it supports that. You are supposed to love your partner when they are lying to you, and that's not the first time that you hear that because the chorus hooks are becoming memorized by people whether you think about it or not. Seven years from now you'll remember those songs because of the chorus hooks and they're set up like that. So whether your thinking about it intentionally or unintentionally the music industry is almost nod??? of brainwashing you these messages of loving your partner when they're lying to you. Or like Beyonce has that song, well she has a lot songs, but one of the songs that I was disturbed by was "I Need A Soldier." Because what it does is it takes the women, who is being glorified in this beautiful, sexy kind of way, and tells her... Sends the message to men that you have to be the warrior, violent, soldier type for me to like you or else I won't give you time of day. Actually as a woman I want my brothers to know I love you the way you are. You don't have to be something outside of who you are. You don't need to be this hyper-masculinized man, you don't need to be a soldier for me to like you. Just be a brother. You need to be yourself. You get these messages, and then 10 years from now everyone will know you gotta be a soldier. And you can see people hearing that and internalizing it and thinking I need a soldier and I love the way you lie, which is just so dysfunctional. So the music that comes out of Ladies First the artist, the culture, and the organizers are intentionally and strategically combatting that mainstream culture of dysfunctionality. It not only combats it but it brings it forward in a way that says we

know this is here and were not going to pretend it's not here and were not going to ignore it. We see that it's here and we want to create communities where a kids feel safe, we feel safe, and we can have healthy relationships that are being supported by the music we listen to. Being supported by artists that believe the things that we believe, and building that network is essential.

AH: So do you consider yourself an artist?

OC: Yeah, I rap. I keep trying to put out an album but I feel like it keeps becoming a long process. I was working with a really great producer, and then I went back to school so I haven't been able to put anything out formally. I used to do a lot of poetry and that's how I started, and that's what I recognized early on was that in the vibrant Seattle community of poetry all of the boys could rap and/or do poetry or improv theater but the women would never rap and just do poetry. I was like I want that under my belt, so I can be just like the boys. I don't want that difference to be there because it was a sharp difference. Every time a woman went on stage the musicians would just step down because they knew she was just going to do a poem. It's not like that anymore in Seattle. Now a lot of girls know how to rap, which I feel really grateful for. I think in essence I just wanted to have female rappers saying really good stuff. So that's why I pushed myself to do it, and then when other people started doing it I said, "Wooo." I could still put out my stuff but I feel like there are so many people doing it too, which is what I really wanted to see in Seattle. I also paint. I wanted to get into graffiti but it was really hard for me. I ended up doing oils on canvas, and I do an art show about once a year, usually for the Day of the Dead. I did a lot of poetry back in the day. I would perform a lot but I think that it's complicated, and I think that its complicated and definitely starting up Ladies First and building those roots and creating that space meant I was taking away space from other places, and other people's conversations. I was combatting the dysfunctional relationship model that is so normally accepted in this society, and that was met with a lot of resistance and really threatening me to stop talking about rape, stop bringing it up, stop separating the men, stop making gender differences by making men feel unwelcome, and it was hard and emotionally taxing for me. I felt like I knew what I was doing and now over time, I'm a big believer in time heals everything, and over time I think having 5 organizers as a core that had carried Ladies First feels really solid. It just feels like a strong rooted tree, and its just gonna blossom.

AH: So what are your plans for the future?

OC: You know we just did a... Ladies First just did a presentation, a community presentation, and recapped our whole history, and it was the first time we had done it for ourselves from the beginning to the present day. It was really exciting and powerful. After that somebody went up and talked about women in hip hop in Iran or in Muslim nations, and it talked about this female emcee who went to school and got her degree, had children, and then went back and started rapping. That really shifted me because I think that a lot of times I feel, and mainstream society makes

me feel that if your not Justin Bieber age that your just too old... But if your not that age then Disney won't pick you up and it's just weird. But I feel that younger and younger people are getting it, which is cool and what I want, but I don't see a lot of older people sticking to hip hop. People end up having their family and moving on, and I think that is what's happened especially in Seattle. A lot of people that choose to be hip hop artists choose to move away because they don't feel like they'll get their big break in Seattle, with the exception of a couple of people. Or some people stay here and just switch up what they're doing. Like hip hop isn't gonna pay the bills now, time to get a full time job or go back to school. But to hear about this female emcee really inspired me, and there is another emcee in the community Beyond Reality... There's another emcee in the community that gets her groove on with her son, and sometimes brings him out on stage. I've definitely been grooming my son who breakdances and can rap and he can beatbox. He definitely has that stage hype part down, he gets up on the tables at his daycare and goes, "YO YO YO!" for like ten minutes. So I feel like I'm getting him really ready... Yea I think that a lot of it is grooming the next generation with good hip hop and learning to love all people queer people, trans people, and himself. Regardless of who or what he decides to be in his life I want him to be one of those of strong brothers who can step back when there's a women's show and can step forward when he needs to volunteer and help lug in equipment for the DJ. So another thing that I started up was Yo Mama, which is a mom's hip hop community. When I had my son, I was working with the doula community, and I knew Penny Simpkins really well who wrote a few books and new how to give birth really well, natural birth. This was like really different for me. But it fit perfectly in line with my values because we work with women and women have babies. So thinking about the doula world and the hip hop community, I started up this event called Yo Mama, which was like Yo MTV Raps. Which is really cool because its also another way of combating the yo mama jokes and the MTV show Yo Mama, which is embedded in dysfunctionless, disrespecting your mom and disrespecting someone else's mom. This is a core dysfunctional value. Yo Mama is about really respecting your moms. Like we had toddler hip hop and do a little bit of breakdancing and we raised money for Open Arms which is a doula, pre-natal service, which provides doulas in White Center, the community that I grew up in. It was very much in line with my values. I was on the board of Open Arms. So I brought a lot female emcees and the network that I had at Ladies First and a lot of us have children too, and so it worked out real nice to for a lot of moms to perform on stage in a way and a space that was safe where they could bring their children into their performance or onto stage while they're performing, or hold their hands, or let their children lean on them while they're performing. Because I think that culturally and naturally I think that children are attached to their parents and they should be nurtured and loved by their parents. There is something about American culture that is very individual like individualistic. Even as a 4-year-old child you are supposed to be by yourself or be with a stranger taking care of you. Like I think that it's natural for people to perform with their children on their backs. The first time that I performed after I was pregnant I performed with my son on my back in a reboso, and I went out on stage.... I had him tied onto me, and I think that the host picked him up right as I was going up. She was like, "Oh I'll

take him," and then like hugged me and took Niko. I think that it's important to see we are people, we have families, we have brothers, sisters, children, we have parents to see that in a cultural community, where the focus is on art, change, and resistance, and liberation. Again with like the mainstream media, you don't get to see what Beyonce's family looks like, in a real way. If you see its like dramatized, or glorified, or humiliated. Like when Britney Spears went through that hard time, you know they humiliated her. In a culture as an artist I don't want to feel that I'm going to be humiliated if I mess up because we all mess up. But I want to know that there is a safe place for artists, poets, emcees, and families to come together and really support each other, and I feel like Ladies First does that and has always been able to do that. You know we know deep things about each other as organizers, as activists, as artists that other people don't know when they come into the space, and we know how to take care of each other. So it's literally like putting on different hats for each other like therapy for each other, or housing for each other, literally feeding each other because we can't do it by ourselves. And so it is really like a community of survival, an intentional community built out of resistance.

AH: So was Yo Mama a monthly thing?

OC: No, it was a one-time deal, but Ladies First is thinking about picking it up. We are thinking about it because 3 out of the 5 organizers are mamas. So I think that we'll pick it up. We're talking to and setting up a few meetings and retreats to talk about the future of Ladies First after our 10 year anniversary to try and make it sustainable and solid and strong. Trying to do some structural reformatting, strategic planning for Ladies First as a grassroots, underground kind of collective. We're not a non-profit, we're not and NGO, cause we're not funded by anything except by ourselves, were self-sustaining.

AH: So does that limit the type of things that you can do?

OC: No, I feel like we're all very strategic and resourceful and I think the one thing that we all do.... Years ago I attended the Resistance Will Not Be Funded Conference in Santa Barbara, it was organized by a good friend. It was eye-opening to think about the way that non-profits are funded and how that impacts your ability to push through legislation, and it enables people to be active models for social change when your funded by the government and all of these different requirements. When you get funding from the United Way Fund you have to fill out all these requirements, there are these screenings where you have to fill out these data sheets for every client you worked with and you have to think about your community as clients and professionals and that creates a power-dynamic and a privilege dynamic. You have to fill out these applications that take up time from you ability to help people, and yourself in genuine way. What it's doing in an unintentional way is disrupting the rhythm of healing. I feel like not being a non-profit really empowers our collective, but we don't know where the future for us is going but we feel like we are well informed about the structures and the political dynamics if we choose to decide to be a for-profit business, a corporation, or a governmental organization, or a non-

profit, or just a collective but lead by a non-profit, or a total volunteer, grassroots organization. Like I think that we can all be prepared and intentionally decide what is best for our community, and what would be the most powerful way of moving forward, and the healthiest for us as organizers for us to maintain so that it is sustainable. We've been able to.... Ladies First has been really successful and we've always had the value of paying artists, but we've also been successful enough to maintain ourselves and it's not a very high maintenance event. I guess it can be. But it's also not like...I think because we don't have a lot of overhead costs and I think because we don't pay ourselves like in this really ridiculous way. We don't even have salaries, we just take a little here and there. The reward is more in the smiles and the food we share.