

Cultural Daily

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We'll Be Your Backbone

Scott Doyle · Wednesday, February 1st, 2017

Four days after the Trump inauguration, a diverse group of Southern Californians rallied outside the Los Angeles district office of the state's new junior senator, Kamala Harris, and met with a couple of staff members to voice their concerns. The tone of the gathering was congenial—with participants encouraged by Harris's stated determination to resist Trump's right-wing agenda, but also intent on holding her accountable.

"We want Senator Harris to know that we have her back," organizer Joye Swan declared. "But we also know that she's new to Congress, and there will be those who will try to bend her. And when that happens, we'll be there to bend her back."



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Swan, a professor of psychology at Woodbury College, was one of more than 60,000 Americans who took part in a nationwide conference call on Sunday January 22, the day after over 3 million took to the streets in Women's Marches in 500 cities across the country. The call was designed to translate the energy of the protest marches into sustained, strategic action, and was organized by MoveOn.org, the Working Families Party, and Indivisible (an initiative to use the Tea Party Movement as a template for an ongoing Resist Trump movement).

The first coordinated action to emerge from the call was the idea of a series of Resist Trump Tuesdays gatherings, targeted at U.S. Senators and focused on Trump's cabinet picks. When Swan logged onto the MoveOn.org site on Monday, she saw two buttons: 'Find a Local Action' and 'Host a Local Action.' Two events were scheduled for Senator Diane Feinstein's Santa Monica office, but none for Harris's.

So she pressed the second button and got the ball rolling herself. "The clock has struck thirteen," she said.

Within hours, over 200 people had registered for the event. More than 100 turned out the following afternoon at 4 o'clock, a number with handmade signs. They came from as far away as Costa Mesa and Tujunga. Many had participated in the Los Angeles march on Saturday, but some were attending their first protest.

Education, and its intersection with immigration, was a top priority for many of the demonstrators, including Swan. She said it was “egregious” to nominate Betsy DeVos as education secretary—“a woman whose life has been spent trying to destroy public education for the non-wealthy.”

Swan has some students protected by DACA, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, a policy initiated by Obama in 2012 that protects undocumented minors from deportation and offers eligibility for work permits. Trump made illegal immigration his signature campaign issue, and has spoken of reversing the policy (a prospect only underscored by his recent executive orders).



Rosanna Gamson teaches dance at CalArts, where a large number of first-generation students attend. The school, she says, has a policy of not asking students about their immigration status, and has declared itself a “sanctuary campus.” Still, she has noted a palpable anxiety amongst her students following the election. As part of a student walkout on Inauguration Day, some of her students created and performed a piece called “Mother Earth,” incorporating thematic elements from the Tales of Ovid to explore women and their power, and a national politics which threatens that power.

Julie McManus is a 25-year veteran of public schools, and currently teaches at the Ramón C. Cortines School of Visual and Performing Arts, whose campus is part of the new Grand Arts complex downtown. She sees DeVos’s support for charter schools and vouchers as part of a thinly veiled agenda to privatize education, and also worries about her connection (via brother Erik Prince) to the paramilitary firm Blackwater.

Healthcare was also very much on the minds of many at the rally. The representatives from Senator Harris’s office listened as several spoke of facing difficult health issues, and of their fear of not getting adequate coverage if the new administration is successful in repealing the Affordable Care Act. A woman still recovering from major surgery was there attending her first rally.

Brandon was there on behalf of his brother, recently diagnosed with full-blown AIDS, and fighting for his life. “Without Obamacare, he’d be dead,” Brandon said. “We can’t go backward.” He’s determined to do anything and everything he can to resist Trump’s agenda. He’s hopeful; but at the same time, he worries that Trump’s embrace of paranoia and alternative facts is expressly designed to undermine hope.

Speakers also stressed that they wanted Harris, who sits on the Select Committee on Intelligence, to do whatever she can to make sure there is a full investigation into Russian meddling in the election.

One woman was also worried about the Russian connections involving likely Secretary of State (and Exxon CEO) Rex Tillerson. Tillerson is said to have close personal relationships with Putin, and with oil tycoon Igor Sechin, with whom he has negotiated multibillion-dollar oil deals.

She had lived in Russia for five years herself, and has a feel for how business gets done there. “You don’t survive in Russia for 20 years without being in bed with what amounts to the mafia,” she said. Tillerson’s involvement in Russia dates back to 1998, and Putin and Sechin have been closely allied going back to their days at the KGB.



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After the rally, about a dozen of the protestors waited out traffic at a nearby watering hole; and there the conversation took an unexpected turn. Although fierce in their opposition to Trump and everything he stands for, they spoke in more nuanced terms about those who had voted for him.

Event organizer Joye Swan has a keen interest in the field of political psychology. Researchers have examined the brain scans of liberals and conservatives and have found that liberals tend to have a larger anterior cingulate gyrus (the region of the brain responsible for taking in new information, and thus open to complexity and ambiguity), while conservatives tend to have a larger right amygdala (closely associated with emotional states defined by fear and anxiety).

Many voted for Trump, she says, because they wanted him “to take the fear away.” Engaging with them on an emotional level only aggravates fear-based thinking. Most at the table agreed with her, and thought it important not to paint Trump supporters with an overly broad brush.

Lulu is a Palestinian-American now studying law in the U.S. She spoke movingly about her years in Palestine, and about staring across the quite literal divide separating Palestinians and Israeli settlers on the West Bank. Her practice was to engage even the most fervent settlers firmly, but calmly. She would always begin with questions. “Why? Why do you do as you do? Why do you believe as you believe?”

She feels the same way about Trump supporters. She can’t bring herself to dismiss them. “In the end we are still fellow citizens. We’re in this together.”

Yet to her, understanding the other side isn’t about accommodation. It’s about accountability.

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#Resist Trump Tuesdays events will continue in earnest until the first scheduled Congressional Recess, February 20 – 24, when the focus will turn to local “town hall” meetings. More info at MoveOn.org.

(Photos by Marty Curran)

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