*What history teaches us about the power of relationships for refugee advocacy today*

Although the Trump administration has ended, immigration remains on the [front pages](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/08/us/politics/immigration-mexico-border-biden.html). Hundreds of asylum-seeking adults and children [arrive daily at our border](https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/03/08/us/joe-biden-news), and activists are struggling to best support this population. But this is not the first time immigrant activists have risen to the challenge, and we can look to their example to face our current moment.

When 1980s U.S. Cold War policy stoked the first refugee crisis at the US-Mexico border, U.S. Citizens mobilized in transnational solidarity with refugees. This movement, known as the Central American Peace and Solidarity Movement (CAPSM) was the largest, longest, most coordinated movement for solidarity with Central Americans in US history.

In trying to understand what contributed to this success, I conducted oral histories with U.S. and Salvadoran organizers from the CAPSM movement in El Salvador. I found that what ultimately drove the movement of the 1980s was the frequency and strength of interpersonal connection.

The successes of these organizers hold important lessons for refugee advocates today. In our era of social media, activism has become more impersonal. Yet movements require authentic human connection to maintain their momentum.

Interpersonal relationships were paramount to the 1980s solidarity movement in Central America for three reasons.

First, they facilitated the flow of information from refugee testimony in rural, war-torn areas to decision makers in Washington, D.C. Foreigners lived in refugee camps, “accompanying” refugees through conflict zones. This fostered very close connections, whereby foreigners could learn of and record refugees’ testimony of human rights abuses and fax them to influential organizers in Washington.

The result, says one woman who accompanied refugees in El Salvador in Guatemala for 10 years, was swift and tangible policy change: “We could be in San Salvador. We could hear that a peasant leader in Morazán (a district in the northeast of El Salvador) had been picked up by the military and put in prison. That same day, we could get that information to Washington, and two days later he would be released.” Indeed, some of the most proactive U.S. policies toward Central American refugees came out of this period.

Second, relationships were orchestrated by Central Americans to inject funding and resources into the struggle. A Salvadoran organizer explained that the guerrilla army invited foreigners to come to El Salvador with the intention of fostering connections that would motivate these groups to fundraise or lobby their home government upon their return. These opportunities to interact directly with Salvadoran local leaders were widespread–just one Salvadoran solidarity organization, CISPES, sent 2,000 delegations to El Salvador in the 1980s.

Third, relationships were life changing, and created a generation of activists that, to this day remain committed to the people they met in the movement. Relationships gave people not just something—but some*one* to fight for.

As one U.S. activist reflected, “When you’re involved, you get to know people. And then you know when they’re attacked, when the community suffers, or when they’re killed. It takes you to a different space. It’s not just a human rights abuse, but it’s like, oh my god, they killed Sigondo?”

Since the 1980s, this same solidarity work has become more and more impersonal.

Social media allows for the fast spread of information without the cultivating of relationships as a prerequisite. Furthermore, having worked with undocumented communities in Boston and New York, I’ve found many immigrant advocacy organizations have stringent rules on how close solidarity workers can actually be with asylees.

At an organization interviewing undocumented victims of trafficking, I was counseled not to answer questions clients may ask that could lead to them connecting with me. At another organization, I was told to use \*67 when calling people for intakes so they could not call me back. My coworker at a pro bono law office explained that social relationships were viewed negatively in much of the legal field--she had been judged by partners at her firm for continuing to work with a client who was “too attached” to her after helping him with an asylum petition.

This isn’t just a U.S. practice. A friend who worked for a refugee center in Greece during the migratory crisis in 2019 was not allowed to shake hands or touch refugees—practices that she felt led to them feeling more alienated than safe.

Of course, rules restricting contact between solidarity workers and asylum seekers exist for a reason. If an asylum seeker relies on a relationship instead of an organization, they might get unprofessional advice instead of the institutional help they require. Getting close to people can lead to more trauma if refugees are later separated from that person, or if the person says something triggering or insensitive.

Conversely, in some cases, it’s helpful for solidarity workers to have boundaries. A neighbor who houses undocumented immigrants said sometimes she struggles to know what boundaries she should have with the people who stay with her—especially when she felt one man was developing feelings for her. Despite the challenges, the relationships she has formed across experiences have been transformational and sustaining.

“Some people come at it (solidarity) at the policy level, but for most people, it's the personal that opens you up, opens your heart, widens your mind, and makes you want to make changes,*”* she says.

Personal relationships can be hard, complicated, and require sensitivity and self-reflection. But, in trying to figure out how to best protect refugee communities, we have to remember that at the core of this work is human to human connection. And, if history tells us anything, it’s that social relationships are the key to successful and meaningful transnational organizing.

Activists seeking to advocate for refugee communities today, along with sharing social media posts and lobbying for policy change, must create human relationships that are genuinely sustaining and humanizing—to both parties.