

## Dondei Dean: Executive Spotlight

Director and lead organizer, Berkshire Interfaith Organizing

BY TONY D OBROWOLSKI *The Berkshire Eagle*, Sat, November 14, 2020



**PITTSFIELD** — She didn't know it at the time, but going from the palm trees of Southern California to the pine forests of central New Hampshire proved to be a life-changing experience for Dondei Dean.

While attending Dartmouth College, the Los Angeles native became intrigued by social justice issues. That experience eventually led the 2017 college graduate to her current position as director and lead organizer of Berkshire Interfaith Organizing, a coalition of 19 congregations, other groups and individual members working to advance justice throughout Berkshire County.

Dean, who majored in studio art and minored in government and Spanish at Dartmouth, joined BIO two years ago. She succeeded the group's founding lead organizer, Wendy Krom, as the organization's director and lead organizer in September.

We spoke with Dean recently about her passion for social justice, how she became involved with BIO, and what the organization stands for and is seeking to accomplish.

**Dondei Dean, director and lead organizer of Berkshire Interfaith Organizing, says her group is not about advocacy. "We're not advocates, believe it or not. We're organizers. ..."** she says.

**"Organizing is talking to people who are directly affected by an issue or a common call to justice and then saying, 'All right, how do we get what we want?' ... The area where we do that work is in racial and immigrant justice."**

**Q How did you get involved with Berkshire Interfaith Organizing?**

**A** I got involved about two years ago. At the time I heard about BIO, it was a year after graduating. ... Even though I was an art major, a lot of my time as an undergrad was spent doing activism. ... I called it rabble-rousing ... but really, it was student activism.

A lot of it was on issues of race, sexuality and class on campus. In particular, there were these issues of Native American ancestry. The college is built on native land [Dartmouth was founded in 1769 as an institution to educate Native Americans]. There were issues over

which bathrooms students who were transgender could and couldn't use. In later years, there were extremely pervasive issues of faculty of color not being tenured. Things like that had very dramatic consequences for what our education was like. ... During my years on campus, I began having those conversations in the context of faith; not necessarily religion, per se, but faith and ethics.

**Q So, is BIO more faith- and ethics-based than religion-based?**

**A** Let me tweak my language a little bit.

It is ethics-based for sure, but the word that we use is "values." You don't have to be a part of the congregation to take leadership within BIO. What it does is not just unite people of faith, but always of values.

What we find is that congregations really do have that inner call to justice, and religion has social teachings that really align well with the kind of work that we're doing. That kind of forms the values base of the leaders in our organizations.

**does BIO advocate for?**

**Q What A** We're not advocates, believe it or not. We're organizers. ... Organizing is talking to people who are directly affected by an issue or a common call to justice and then saying, "All right, how do we get what we want?" ... The area where we do that work is in racial and immigrant justice.

In the past we've done transportation, housing insecurity and food insecurity, but more recently it's been racial and immigrant justice.

**Q What projects is BIO working on that are related to racial and immigrant justice?**

**A** Immigrant justice may be the most exciting one right now. ... Back in April or March, when the pandemic first began, my friend and fellow BIO leader Nancy Gomez and I had this idea that had been germinating for a while to have a space, a Spanish-speaking place for immigrants, or Latinos, or anyone who wants to come. ... So, we created this space; it translates to "Family Style Coffee Chat." It really bloomed during the summer. People just showed up every Friday for a couple of hours sharing what was going on in their lives. ... There were people dealing with loved ones, who were out of a job, who had hyperactive kids at home. ... People who right in the middle of the pandemic are riding the bus because they don't have a car. So, you see firsthand where people are at through those several months of conversations and kind of probing questions. ... This summer we did the "Together We Grieve" march in Pittsfield. That kind of opened up the conversation around policing.

**Q How did you become a rabble-rouser?**

It really all did happen during undergrad... when I was applying to school — I'm also an artist — I was like, I want to go to art school. But, my counselor — she had a daughter at Brown and a daughter at Yale — said, "No, you can do better." ... I had never heard of Dartmouth, but I ended up applying.

**Q It must have been culture shock for you going from Los Angeles to northern New England?**

**A** Oh, absolutely. The first time getting on the Dartmouth coach coming from Boston, I was just flabbergasted by the number of trees. It felt like you could stop anywhere by the road and have a picnic. It was wild. ... Going to Dartmouth, I thought, “OK, this is an Ivy League school; there are probably going to be a number of rich people.” I guess that was true when I got there, but what I really began to see more of was the whiteness of the campus and the culture to be very, very explicit. It kind of tied into some of the things that I’ve already mentioned, like which professors received tenure, or that professors of color who made other contributions to student life when evaluating them for tenure weren’t valued as highly as someone who had written a book, or what about the students of color that you mentored who literally have nowhere else to go because there’s already a number of professors of color on campus who can be advisers or mentors. I began to see things like that.

**Q** When you were at Dartmouth, you received a monetary award to do an out-of-the-classroom project titled “Women of Color’s Activism at Dartmouth.” How did that all come about, and what was it like?

**A** I received a scholarship award to do a project of my choosing. What I chose to do was interview women or graduates who had participated in activism [at Dartmouth], because what people don’t always know about the college is that it didn’t go coed until the early ‘70s [Dartmouth didn’t admit women until 1972; it was the last of the eight Ivy League schools to go coed.] Then, when it did, there was no gender parity until a decade or two later. So, I was really curious of what the experiences of these early women activists might have been. ... The biggest thing I learned is that everyone has a different way of raising their voice. For some, it’s succeeding in defying expectations. For others, it’s “I’m going to go out there and march.” And for other people, it can be organizing, or it can be advocacy funding or putting your money where you want to see growth happen. It was very interesting. I saw a long line really tracing back to the early ‘70s.

**Q** What do you like about doing this kind of work?

**A** Just seeing the way people learn and grow. There are so many things that I could point to. Seeing people say, “Oh, I never thought about it that way,” or seeing people be moved by a story or have to rummage within themselves to say, “Why do I care?”... Seeing people show up not because they have to, but because they want to, is so, so important to me. ... What does it mean to have actual meaningful relationships with people of color? It’s those little things that begin to surface as you do the work.

**Q** You’ve got a lot going on. Do you still draw?

**A** Sometimes. It’s hard to find the time. Most of the time I’m really tired. I try to give everything my all.

### **Berkshire Interfaith Organizing**

**Location:** 175 Wendell Ave., Pittsfield

**Contact information:** 310-910-5350; [berkshireinterfaithorganizing.org](http://berkshireinterfaithorganizing.org)

**Founded:** 2015

**Mission:** BIO acts toward justice by building relationships within communities and across lines of difference, developing leaders’ skills in the public arena and taking action on issues of common concern, according to its website.

**Employees:** One director and lead organizer

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