

GIVING WITNESS: ELISA HARRIGAN



Elisa Harrigan's family immigrated to the US in the early 80's from El Salvador as refugees. As a child her family instilled the Catholic principles of respect and value for human life; "we all have a role in helping support every human to fulfill their best self." As an adult, she felt a calling to dedicate her career and time to work on underlying issues of social and economic justice programs. Her work furthers the value of human dignity and respect for life and family.

I met Harrigan when she was the Co-Executive Director of the [Community Alliance of Tenants](#), a statewide, grassroots, tenant-controlled, tenant-rights organization that aims to educate, organize, and develop the leadership of low-income tenants to directly challenge unjust housing policies and practices. She is now the Executive

Director. She is a staunch advocate for homeownership, particularly among communities of color.

CAT's staff demonstrates a commitment to carrying out the church's option for and with the poor. As the ED, Harrigan ensures that this commitment is unwavering: 56% of CAT's organizational Board lives in poverty. 77% of the voting members live in poverty. CAT's membership reflects the diversity of low income tenants in Oregon. Members are recruited primarily through its building-based organizing which is targeted to provide opportunities for organizing and leadership development to low-income tenants.

A handful of Oregon landlords control most of the low-income affordable housing. Traditionally, low-income tenants have had no recourse against landlords who refuse to make necessary repairs and landlords who will evict a low-income tenant who complains. In response, CAT and its organizers organize and train low-income tenants by apartment complexes, empowering them to advocate for their rights *as an organization of low-income tenants*.

Harrigan began as an organizer, meeting people where they were, in their homes, and listening to their stories. She is a political activist, giving voice to the voiceless. She ensures that those who have suffered social and economic injustices have a place at the political table. In her words, "my Catholic faith guides my work on a daily basis. It gives me the power to have hope and lead, especially on the hard days; as well as the humility to appreciate and share victories as not just my own. Safe and stable housing give children an opportunity to succeed, families to grow dreams, seniors and people with disabilities a chance to live independently and with dignity."

Organizing and empowering small groups is one way to challenge injustice. Another way is to work with such groups to change structural injustices. Elisa does this: In 2013, under Elisa's leadership, CAT advocated tirelessly for a law preventing discriminate against renters who use the federal Section 8 voucher program, prohibiting blanket "No Section 8" policies that frequently accompany vacancy advertisements. The new law passed.

In 2010, CAT doubled the amount of notice landlords must give to long-term tenants before evicting without cause. Before, tenants in month-to-month rental agreements could receive a termination notice for any or no reason with only 30 days' notice. A new law requires 60-day notice for tenants who have been in their homes for at least a year, giving tenants more time to find a new place and scrape together meager resources.

Saving and accumulating resources is one way those in poverty can begin to build a way out. The 60-day notice is a start (Elisa is working on eliminating no-cause evictions) to addressing this one cause of economic poverty. Providing economic assistance is another way.

In 2012, the City of Portland proposed cutting \$4.8 million from the safety net, which included short-term rent assistance, homebuyer assistance and foreclosure prevention, emergency shelters, and housing access services. Harrigan and CAT staff organized the [We are the Safety Net Campaign](#) to protect the housing safety net. The campaign succeeded to preserve 100% of the funds, and protected the programs from future budget cuts, thus providing low-income tenants another opportunity to alleviate their economic poverty. This is Elisa Harrigan.



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