**The Origins of JCIRA**

***This article is based on a conversation* with Libby Palmer and Katie Franco in November 2022. They were two of the founders of JCIRA who are still active today. Jim Buckley of Port Townsend was also a founder.**

***Sharing a History of Commitment***

Libby Palmer and Katie Franco had long embraced social justice causes and an appreciation of nature, so it’s no surprise that they met when their lives intersected in Port Townsend. “We were rowing buddies,” says Katie, “and we became friends.” They also shared a concern about immigration. Libby’s parents were immigrants, and Katie, who had a longstanding love of Mexican culture, was married to a Mexican man. When the two look back at the beginnings of JCIRA, they remember some key events. One of those began in 2007.

***Addressing Increased Border Patrol Activity***

In 2007 and 2008, the Border Patrol (BP) significantly stepped up its efforts to apprehend undocumented immigrants. In Jefferson County, BP agents set up checkpoints where they stopped cars and buses, asking people about their citizenship and demanding IDs. But the interviews were selective.

As one young Native American woman recalled in a video, *Keep the Border Patrol on the Border* [[excerpt here](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AQcVeWh3CuE&t=266s)] out of about 30 people on a bus that they stopped, “They only questioned three of us who had dark hair and dark skin.” (She had ties to several tribes, including the Makah, who have been on the Olympic Peninsula for more than 4,000 years.) The agents were also hanging out at schools, churches, Head Start programs, and neighborhoods, which terrorized immigrants and their children. “Children were afraid to go to school, because they thought they might never see their parents again,” says Libby. About this time, a high school senior in Forks, a local football hero, was deported.

Having witnessed what was happening, Libby, Katie, and Jim Buckley began talking more about immigration. They were at the heart of a grassroots effort that involved many people in Port Townsend with meetings and organized protests, although the JCIRA organization had not yet been founded.

Several major public meetings were held in the early years, which included well-known community leaders, including Scott Wilson, editor/publisher of the Port Townsend Leader; Father John Topel of St. Mary Star of the Sea Catholic Church; Annie Benson, a Seattle immigration lawyer; representatives from the ACLU; and others. Although the ACLU negotiated an agreement with the Border Patrol to uphold Constitutional rights and stop racial profiling, which helped, BP agents continued to be a major presence, since immigration law allows them to intercept people within 100 air miles from any border, well into the interior. What’s more, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) was raising its profile and had sought an office from the Port of Port Townsend.

The small group of activists talked with Port Townsend City Council members, political representatives and others. When ICE planned a new facility in Port Angeles and an expansion of their agents, they participated in a demonstration.

They also continued speaking with local churches and regularly attended a social hour after mass at the Catholic Church, which helped them form strong bonds with members of the Hispanic community. The two friends remain grateful for the support from local churches, including the Catholic Church, Lutheran Church, First Presbyterian Church, and Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship (QUUF), which continues today.

***Reaching a Turning Point: Trump’s Election***

“Trump’s election suddenly made everything so much more critical,” says Katie. In December 2016, the group approached the Port Townsend City Council and the Jefferson County Board of Commissioners (BOCC), as well as local Democrats, concerned about what would happen to undocumented people in the county. The city council issued a statement calling Port Townsend “a welcoming community” for immigrants. (Later, in February 2017, the BOCC issued a human rights declaration.)

The small group of activists also interviewed local law enforcement. Because immigration is a federal issue, both the Port Townsend Police Chief and Jefferson County Sheriff indicated they had no jurisdiction under federal law and thereby would not commit resources to pursue undocumented people. (This was before Operation Stonegarden, when Sheriff David Stanko accepted a grant to assist ICE, a policy that was rescinded under Sheriff Joe Nole.)

Then on January 21, 2017, the national Women’s March drew record crowds across the country, including Port Townsend. “That energized people. Many more people started asking what we could do about Trump’s agenda,” says Katie.

A week after the Women’s March, “We decided to reach out to those we knew who had attended and called a meeting at the Sunrise Café,” says Libby. A handful of people turned up.

But the numbers grew fast.

***Fighting Against Trump’s Muslim Ban***

On January 27, 2017, President Trump signed his executive order banning foreign nationals from seven predominantly Muslim countries and significantly tightening immigration. As the ban went into force on Saturday, lawyers from the ACLU and the Northwest Immigrant Rights Project flooded Sea-Tac Airport to help immigrants on incoming flights.

“When I saw that on TV, I knew we had to act here too,” says Libby. The number of people interested in organizing had now reached 50 or 60, they knew they had to find a new place. The local group became part of a national group known as Indivisible. However, a subset of people was especially interested in working on immigration issues. They met in mid-February and decided on the name Jefferson County Immigration Rights Advocates (JCIRA). The fledgling organization purchased yard signs that read, “Immigrants and refugees welcome here. No Muslim ban, no walls.” More than 200 people contributed $5 for a sign.

***Taking the Next Step with Help from Ray Garrido and Anita Smith***

JCIRA continued to reach out and hold conversations with Senators Cantwell and Murray, Representative Kilmer, local officials, churches, and civic groups. They attended immigration workshops, including an all-day event that Libby attended sponsored by the City of Seattle.

During this period, Katie and Libby met Ray Garrido and Anita Smith, both from the Kitsap County Immigrant Assistance Center (KIAC), at a Know Your Rights workshop that they conducted, sponsored by Dove House and held at St. Mary Star of the Sea Catholic Church. "Ray and Anita encouraged us to organize similar workshops in Port Townsend, and Ray continued to conduct those sessions,” says Libby. “They were also helpful in creating links between KIAC and JCIRA and in helping JCIRA to form as a 501 (c) (3) organization."

By July of 2017, JCIRA had really taken off and had more than 90 members. Activities and protests continued. A Rapid Response Team was formed to help ensure civil rights were enforced during ICE interventions and raids. JCIRA printed rack cards on “Know Your Rights” and distributed them. Workshops, seminars, and demonstrations continued at the Border Patrol offices in Port Angeles and the Northwest Detention Center in Tacoma.

As the cruelties of the Trump Administration intensified in 2017 and 2018, with families being separated at the border, JCIRA stepped up its activities, and more people joined. Workshops, charity benefits, and conversations with officials and law enforcement continued. JCIRA geared up to provide immigrants and refugees with contacts for legal aid and other resources.

In 2018, JCIRA founded the JCIRA Legal Defense and Family Fund to help with legal costs and/or groceries, rent, medical care and other essential services. (Later, in the Covid-19 pandemic, the JCIRA fund was particularly helpful. Undocumented people did not receive any stimulus checks, so the JCIRA fund with grants of up to $1000 per family was sometimes the only lifeline for people in need.)

“It was a heartbreaking and difficult time,” says Katie. “In the beginning it was about fighting Trump’s policies. With Covid, it became another matter entirely.” Charged with distributing the funds, Katie often had to make up to six calls to get money to people. “Especially in Forks, where many people work harvesting salal, the pandemic was devastating,” she recounts. “The demand for salal dropped, and people couldn’t work even if they wanted to. Yet they received no help from the government.”

It is a source of justifiable pride for Katie and Libby that JCIRA distributed more than $268,000 to aid immigrants during the pandemic.

***Looking to the Future***

Today, JCIRA is an important resource for immigrants in Jefferson and Clallam counties, and it is continuing to grow. “I’m pleased that JCIRA has reached out to more immigrants, including trans immigrants,” says Katie. “We’re also helping an Afghan family who had to flee Afghanistan after the war.”

Libby concurs. “We have a large Hispanic community, but it’s important to recognize the stories of all immigrants.” “We need a really big umbrella to help those with different needs.”

The co-founders also point to the recent hiring of JCIRA Outreach Coordinator Natalia Duran, as another big step for the organization. “Natalia has strong connections in the Hispanic community. She knows how to listen and how to help,” says Libby. “She helps me feel optimistic about the future of JCIRA.”

Libby and Katie are modest about their work with JCIRA. “We did what we had to do, even if we didn’t know how to do it,” says Katie with a smile. “You become more effective and strategic as you go along. But it’s important to start.”

Perhaps most critical, whether in forming an organization, or doing anything worthwhile, is best summed up by Libby: “You don’t do anything alone. You might not even have the courage to do it. That’s why it’s always important to reach out and work with other people.” That’s also why, of course, that JCIRA has continued to grow.

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See a detailed listing of JCIRA’s history [here.](https://www.jcira.org/history.html)

You may also find [Katie Franco’s reading and sermon](https://s3.amazonaws.com/quuf16-17/170709ReadingAndSermon.mp3) at Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship (QUUF) of interest.