

Music

Introduction

Harshi (0:00)

Welcome to the ConnectED podcast produced by the Community Data Clinic, your guide to unlocking resources and opportunities in East Central Illinois. I'm Harshi, and alongside me is Aisaiah, your hosts on this journey.

First off, we'll show you some cool things happening in our community. Think of it as a bunch of resources, programs, and projects that can make a real difference in your life. Then, we've got some amazing stories to share.

Real people just like you and me, who've had their lives changed by these programs we're talking about. And don't worry, we're not gonna leave you hanging. We'll also give you some tips on how you can get in on these opportunities and make them work for you.

Harshi (0:46)

Hello, Professor Wood. Thank you so much for being here with us today. We're so thrilled to have you. Could you start off by please introducing yourself to our listeners?

Augustus (0:54)

Sure. I'm an Assistant Professor at the School of Labor and Employment Relations. There's so much of the stuff that I do.

My specialty is politically economy and labor, looking at the Black working class, looking at social movements, dealing with gentrification, capitalism in late stages, all that kind of stuff. So I'm the president of the Independent Media Center. I'm the former two-time president of the GEO, Graduate Employees Organization, one of the coordinators of the 2018 strike when that happened here on campus.

I'm on the executive council for the Association for the State of African American Life and History. I'm on the editorial board of the Journal of African American History, and I host the radio show, Radio Free Labor, every Saturday from eleven to one, and I also have multiple other podcasts as well.

So we'll get into more things, but, yeah, I don't wanna just kinda crystallize the stuff I do.

Harshi (1:58)

Yeah. For sure. Thank you so much for sharing.

Augustus

Sure.

Harshi

To start off, we'd like to discuss your work with the IMC, the Independent Media Center. The Urbana Champaign Independent Media Center is a people powered organization that fosters the creation and distribution of media and art that emphasize underrepresented voices and perspectives and really aims to promote empowerment and expression through media and arts education.

Can you tell us a bit about how you first got involved with the IMC and what really drew you to their mission in the first place?

Augustus (2:30)

Sure. When I first arrived here to start my PhD in history, I noticed that there were very few community spaces that cater to social justice, speaking out, anything that would involve people power, you know?

And there were a few spaces here and there, but every time we had an event, they was always having it at...at this place called the IMC. And so the first few times I walked through there, everybody was very welcoming, and I felt a sense that not only were they serious about resistance, but that this was a kind of a hub of resources for multiple groups.

So that's kinda what drew me in at first, and I noticed that pretty much every group on the ground, whether it be on campus or in the community, that was fighting for progressive change, fighting inequality, they had to have—they had something to do with the IMC. And so for years, I worked with the IMC as a member also with other organizations I'm a part of.

You know, we held our 2018 strike. The IMC was like one of our food...food pantries, and we held our big ratification meetings there because we had, well, I'm not a GEO member, but we had—anymore—but we had 2,700 members, and we couldn't fit them in any other space but the IMC. So the IMC became kinda like this what—what I call a local movement center. It's a space in the community where people house resources.

They train leadership. They develop programs as well as movements to challenge issues that are happening in the community. You have to have a physical space that you do those things in. And so...from...throughout the years, I got here in 2013. Since then, it's—it's grown to be this major force in the community because of exactly what we just talked about that people really pull so many resources from there where it be—whether it just be art, whether it just be something like having a meeting that you know will be safe from possible counter protesters, having reading groups there, having displays.

I mean, there's just so many things that happen that we—that we're open for the community and the campus to use it for. And we're really happy that the campus has really begin to embrace the IMC and using it as much as the community members do.

Harshi (4:59)

Yeah. Absolutely. And I think when I've always thought about, like, expression through art and media. I feel like there's almost a duality there where sometimes it can be a very liberating process and help people let go of things that they've burdened themselves with.

On the other hand, it could also be a way to spark thoughts and actually take on these issues and kind of disseminate them into the community. Could you tell us a little bit about how you would define the work that you have contributed to at IMC, and what kind of impact have you seen?

Augustus (5:32)

Well, I think you—I think you said it best just then because you're going into something that a revolutionary scholar, Frantz Fanon, talked about that when you bottle up so much of the oppression, the repression, the day to day issues that you can't necessarily resolve at that current moment, it just builds up inside of you, so you have to find some kind of outlet to use it. And what Fanon said was happening in Algeria was it was expressed through revolutionary violence and the Algerian revolution.

But in other cases, in terms of artists, in terms of filmmakers, in terms of anybody that wants a visual or audio depiction of release, that's what we offer people. And it's—and as you just said, it's a—it's a brilliant way to collectivize struggle because many people who often can feel isolated or individualized that I may not be I may not have the same issues as somebody else because of the communication structures as well as the repressive nature in parts of the university, etc. You don't really have people that could connect as easily as they used to.

So with the IMC being a kind of space, a resource space where people can come together and say “I do feel this issue” and somebody else there says “That's something I feel as well.” So it's a space where people can be vulnerable with each other through the use of film, through the use of visual arts, through the use of dance, plays, all the different things we do throughout the year. And it and...and it starts the building of a—of a deep relationship with people to the point to where they're willing to say, “Hey. Maybe we can resolve this issue together.”

So I think that's probably the biggest thing that my contribution has been...has been to realize the political power of the space for members to come together and build their consciousness together as a collective whereas in if you don't know where your resources are in a community and you're facing issues as an individual or as a group then you can oftentimes feel disillusioned or alienated to the point to where you just shut down or you just feel hopeless about the situation.

But we wanna make sure that people feel hope and that they can access resources. So that's kind of been my big push since I've been president.

Harshi (7:59)

Yeah. Absolutely. And thank you for sharing your thoughts on that.

You sort of touched on this about how there's so many various forms of expression, like through dance, film, art. Do you have a certain memorable experience or a project from your time at the IMC that really comes to mind?

Augustus (8:17)

There's a lot of them. But re—I say, not recently, about two years ago, I began a film club at the IMC. And for those that are unaware, we have—we had an art theater in Downtown Champaign and the building is still standing there next to Himalayan Chimney, but it's been closed since I wanna say, 2019 Champaign, right before the lockdown started. And the reason they closed is because the curators of films left, but the point I'm trying to make is that the art theater was probably one of most powerful spaces in Champaign, the entire county, for people who are likeminded about dealing with issues, fighting inequality, social justice, to go in and have films screened that typically weren't mainstream, a lot of independent film, things like that.

And we would hold panels after the showings where we have discussions about what the film means. Unfortunately, when the—when the art theater closed, we lost that space to do those things. So I got the idea that we have to bring the art theater to the IMC because it was such a powerful thing. So we started a film club about a year or so ago, and we've been doing...each month has a theme, and it's typically a film, like I said, that you can't really see mainstream.

Like, for instance, we're in October. Last year's October film was *Titane*, which if you've heard of it, it's an international film that deals with the issues of LGBTQ rights as well as this...this, obsession with capital. I don't wanna give away any plot points in case you wanna see it, but those are the heavy things because if—if you—if I spoil that film, then it would ruin it because it's such an amazing film. And we had about two-hour discussion after it because there was just so many ideas from the audience. They just wanted to just talk about it forever and ever and watch it again.

We also recently did *Come and See*, which is probably one of the best antiwar films ever made. It was...it was about the Nazi occupation, parts of Eastern Europe, and what happened in specific areas. And that was another film that when we when we screened it there were the audience was really blown away, and they want to have discussions about how does humanism look in warfare.

And so the reason why I bring these two things up in the film club is that number one, we had a number of people show up to the film club who didn't know how to access the IMC themselves at first. So it kind of brought them in and said, “Wow. You all do all these really cool things. That's amazing.”

The other thing is that you can see from the way they discuss the film afterwards that there is doing something to them internally. I call it emancipatory moments. That's from Marxists, Antonio Gramsci, a few others that would talk about when your consciousness raised to a certain level and you reach a position of understanding...you have an emancipatory moment within and so your—your perspective of life changes.

And so you can actually see them and as they're really working through the film and the discussion. And so political education is the most revolutionary thing we can do and so that's

why I think the film club has become one of the strongest parts of our IMC and bringing another resource back that we lost years ago.

Harshi (11:48)

Right. Yeah. That's amazing. And I think what you were saying really resonated, like being able to see the audience's interaction with the movie afterwards is incredibly memorable for you, I'm sure.

And for our listeners who may be interested in getting involved with the IMC, can you share what they might be able to take away from the experience?

Augustus (12:08)

Well, the best thing you can do is you can not only meet just a group of people who are easily the nicest people you're gonna meet. Because again, that's one of the hardest things to break through when you come to a college town or you're in an area where you feel alienated is that you wanna make sure that the people you're meeting, you can have conversations with and they had—they're...they're kind. Right? So that's the first thing. The other thing is that the word I keep using over and over again are resources.

There's a spectrum of resources that people can...can access from our IMC where there'd be something short term like there's an issue on campus that needs to be addressed and I can use multiple examples throughout the years where we have taken things to the IMC and the IMC became a space where people felt safe to be able to express and organize their either protest or their—just voice to everything. So the key thing that we offer as our IMC are resources. We even have things for small...small things like people wanna get married.

They get married at our IMC. Yeah. We—we host weddings. Because, again, it's all about community. We do social events all the time. The GEO parties are there. Parties from multiple groups are thrown there because, again, socialization is one of the most important parts of building power for people. So, yeah, there's just again, the—the resource access is a wide spectrum.

So whatever people need, we typically offer. We have clothing drives. We have food drives. We have hurricane relief drives. We have reproductive justice drives. I mean, it's just, there's just very few things that we offer. So just come in.

Harshi (13:58)

Absolutely. And are there any upcoming events that they can look forward to at the IMC?

Augustus (14:04)

We have a community night every week. That's typically on Tuesday and Thursday.

And the way that we find out about our events and the community nights, we have a newsletter that I put out every week on Mondays so people can get kind of a schedule of everything that's happening that week and weekend. And so all they have to do is email the IMC and ask to be on

the listserv for the newsletter. And because we have, like, we have weekly events all the time like the community nights. We also have these major events that we throw all the time.

The big thing on the twelfth is going to be the CU Books to Prisoners book sale. That's our big event every year in the fall where people can come in and purchase books and the money goes towards making sure that the incarcerated are being—have education resources. So that's our big thing. Every year, like, if you go in during the book sale on a—on a Saturday and in fact, it's tomorrow. It's the—today's the eleventh, so it will be tomorrow.

But when you walk into the IMC and you're gonna see just stacks and stacks of books all over the main room. I mean, it's a beautiful thing. The community loves it. And, yeah, the...the books are ranged from, coloring books and books for very young children all the way to adult age. So that's our big event and very important for us because, you know, incarceration is a big fight of ours at the IMC.

Harshi (15:31)

Thank you for sharing that. I think to close off our discussion about the IMC, I was gonna ask if there's any particular ways that you see the IMC growing in the future or something that you want to accomplish within the IMC going forward.

Augustus (15:45)

That's a great question. One of the big things is—is that despite the fact that we've expanded so well, I would say probably since the pandemic lockdowns, we still don't have our—the what I consider to be the strongest relationship in every part of our community.

So that's one of the big things that we've been pushing for—for the past few years is how do we...how do we go and establish relationships and spaces? We don't want it to be where you have to just come to the IMC to get resources. We wanna establish what I call community stewardship in multiple spaces, whether it be on campus or in the community.

We should have—people should be able to feel comfortable knowing they can access us if they're in a dorm room on campus. It's like we have an issue. Well, we need to highlight the IMC, you know, having that kind of information as well as in communities and, you know, former communities.

If you've been around, you know that the...Garden Hills is no longer here, as they gentrified it out of the area. But that was one of the spaces where we were looking to build more of a relationship with our community, and we were just getting there until, you know what happens. University destroys places. So that's kind of our big thing is making sure that we're in spaces and deep relationships across the campus and the community. We're doing it, but we have so much further to go.

Harshi (17:20)

Okay. Yeah. That's an interesting point to bring up. Like strengthening that bond for sure and making sure that it's a two-way street instead of a one way street. I think that's a really great goal to have for the future for sure.

Music

Midroll

Harshi (17:38)

Let's take a quick break to check out what's coming up at the IMC. First up, on May 3 from 12-5PM, stop by the IMC's fundraising event, Resist. There will be art for sale, live music, hands-on activities at the makerspace, a bake sale, and plenty of ways to learn more about the IMC and support the community. There will also be a screen-printing workshop on May 6 from 6:30 to 8PM.

You can learn how to use stencil techniques to create posters. It's easy, creative, and a great way to channel your creativity. It's free for IMC members with a suggested \$10 donation for the general public.

Finally, the IMC's 2025 Youth Show Case is coming up on May 17 at 1PM. If you're a young comedian, singer, dancer, poet, rapper, storyteller, painter, screen printer, sculptor, or even a filmmaker, applications are open now and close May 5, so get yours in soon.

Alright. Now let's get back to our episode.

Music

Aisaiah (18:49)

So you mentioned a lot about, like, Frantz Fanon, but there's this one key quote to me that I—I really like of his, which is, “To speak a language is to take on a world and a culture.” I think that's the correct phrasing. I'm—I'm not entirely sure.

How would you say that applies to the efforts of the IMC and community organization in general?

Augustus (19:09)

Yes. Well, that's one of the big things that I noticed from the get-go is that you don't see whereas in multiple spaces on the campus, an organization's typically...the members always look the same. You know, there's not a lot of genuine diversity in organizations here. It is not the fault of the members mostly. It's because the way this campus structures things.

What—when you go to the IMC, you're...you have so many different cultures, groups. Everybody's there. It—it was—it was very surprising to see because before I came here, I was told “You're not gonna see a lot of that.”

So to find a space like the IMC that that does happen because the purpose is that when people come here, they want to see that they cannot just be represented, but that there's power in affirming their own identity and position, but also understanding how those different positions and identities are fighting for the same goals that aren't often recognized.

But using cultural...cultural production, language, education, other things that we use to build towards each other. That's what creates that objective or that goal so that people can actually say, "Yeah. We're actually going through the same issue."

In other words, it's the thing—it's the one thing that oppressive forces never want. They want you—they'll never want you to relate. So having that space to relate from that area, and I think that's what—that's what Fanon was getting at.

Aisaiah (20:41)

So you would say that, like, coalition building is, like, foundational to the IMC?

Augustus (20:45)

Oh, very much so.

Aisaiah (20:46)

Okay. And then I guess I have another question. It's kinda related to this and it—it touches to Fanon. You know, like to speak a language, right? You take in a culture. IMC, right? You're kinda teaching people that language, it kinda relate to each other.

But with any language, you know, literacy it is a part of it. So how would you say the IMC, you know, contributes to the development of literate community members in terms of just, like, literacy and organizing, literacy and advocating for themselves, let's say, at...at a local level or at home? And how do you see them taking that beyond just that one space?

Augustus (21:23)

Exactly. That's a great question because one of the biggest issues that we've always had in our community, and this is a big shout out to the original founders of the IMC, Daniel Chenoweth, is that they want to make sure that there was a literacy empowerment aspect to our IMC.

So the minute you walk into the doors and you turn to the left, we have our library/zine project. And what that project does is that project—and shout out to the zine library group—they do amazing work. But what that project does is it invites different groups to build the library from their own experiences, their own records. It's kinda like it's really cool.

It's like community archive. Like, when something occurs or you come from a different place that can—that can shed light on experiences, we want it there. And so what the Zine project has been doing even before I got to the IMC was that they were putting those—those things in those resources and spaces and communities.

One of the examples, I could keep bringing up Garden Hills because I think that was one of the strongest parts of the area, Garden Hills 10 Association, they actually had part of our zine library

in their meeting space. And I didn't know what that was. The first time I went in there, they were like, "That's the IMC stuff."

I was like, really? And so it's like, it's—it's really fascinating how we—that there's a reciprocity and a circulation of those elements from the community to the people. Now on a higher level but still community based, we have the Public Eye which is the newsletter that every...every season that goes out. That is a political education newsletter that we give out and make sure the community gets for free. We don't sell it.

The big thing we want with that is that we want people to have discussions and debates about these issues, and we typically put on panel discussions about them as well. But our key thing is that you mainly see them in community areas. So, again, we want to not only reaffirm that literacy is...literacy develops in the most powerful way for us through your own experiences as people. But we also want to develop it into the form of a critique, which comes through in the public eye. You know, we don't want it to just be "This is what happened."

We wanted to...we wanted to be "This is what happens and this is how we can intervene." We wanna add that critique element in it. And I think that's what we do differently that you don't get from other organizations and spaces. We're—we're very import—we're very big on the critique.

Aisaiah (24:04)

So we...we've kinda talked a lot about, like, again, like, Champaign Urbana. You mentioned Garden Hills. How did these efforts kinda connect outside of the county? Because, I mean, Vermillion County is just like, right there over there, Danville. Is that also a resource for IMC, or is it, like I guess, like, what coalition building is happening between here and there?

Augustus (24:24)

Well, the Danville Carceral Space, we do a lot of work with the incarcerated there through the Education Justice Project.

I'm also on the board of that. But we have, we work with them to make sure that they have the books, they have funding, etc. So that's one big coalition thing.

We also work with Media Justice Project out of Chicago and other big cities, and we hold these really cool summer forums where we discuss, like, how do we actually like, when George Floyd protests were going on, how does media justice fit into this? Like, how do we actually provide resource to people so that they understand the real narrative and the critique of this problem? And so that was a major thing. We—we flooded the cities. We did events and panels.

Some of them were zoom, some of them were not, but that was—that's kind of our big thing, and we're able to work with these different groups. And that's another thing that goes back to my initial point about my goal and that we need to be building stronger coalitions outside of Media Justice Project, outside of Danville. There are a couple of groups in Atlanta I work with that we try to connect with as well. The Mississippi Worker Center for Human Rights, we work with them. So we're on the cusp. We just gotta build it stronger, though.

Music

Aisaiah (25:42)

And that's a wrap for today's episode of the Connected Podcast, co-sponsored by the Community Data Clinic. We want to extend our deepest gratitude to all of those who have made this episode possible.

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Be sure to subscribe for future episodes and feel free to reach out with your feedback and suggestions. As we mentioned in the middle of the midroll, all of the resources that we share throughout this podcast will be in the description below. So if that is of interest to you, please take a moment to pause and check that out. Until next time, take care and stay tuned for more engaging discussions on the ConnectEd Podcast.