



Participants in Wildfire's 2024 Fellowship in Alaska, July 2024

2024 Annual Report

Programmatically, we deepened and expanded our training work in a way that was aligned with the strategy we've been pursuing for years. This included retreats and workshops with Momentum Community, Center for Popular Democracy (CPD), Strozzi Institute for Somatics (SIS), Media Democracy Fund (MDF), Free Press, Media 2070, MediaJustice (MJ), Lavender Phoenix, Communities for Just Schools Fund (CJSF). We also extended the fellowship we began the previous year, which included 3 weekend retreats, and ongoing coaching for group participants in between. Those groups include: Dream Defenders, NDN Collective, New Justice Project, Centro de Trabajadores Unidos en Lucha (CTUL), and CAAAV: Organizing Asian American Communities, Native Movement, Inquilinxs Unidx, and Lavender Phoenix.

Organizationally, we embraced a new cycle that produced shifts in staffing. Our longtime facilitator (and former staff member) BJ STAR stepped up and took the helm as Wildfire's new Executive Director, as Joshua transitioned out over 9 months. Through the staffing changes, we took a step back to restructure, and revisit our curriculum. We're entering a new phase, and we're excited to explore new strategic directions in the new year. Below includes a description of our work, and below that, more detail about our 2024 Grant cycle outcomes.

Thank you,

BJ Star, Executive Director, The Wildfire Project

Joshua Kahn Russell, former Executive Director, The Wildfire Project



Contents:

About Wildfire	2
Why We Do What We Do	2
Our Movement-Building Strategy	3
Who We Are	3
What's Special About Us	4
Our Programs	5
2023/2024 Program Outcomes	8
Leadership Update & Thank You!	10

About Wildfire

Healthy groups form the core of successful movements - they are the fundamental building blocks. They're what keep individuals in action, and they are how we transform, where we learn, and what we use to hold each other accountable as we build networks.

The Wildfire Project strengthens social movements by supporting grassroots groups across sectors to become resilient in the face of changing terrain, strategize, ground in history and a "north star" bigger than themselves, and embody healthy internal practices. Our partners develop the skills to build solidarity, engage in generative conflict, navigate contradiction, stay rooted in compassion, and win material gains toward liberation and a Just Transition.

Why We Do What We Do

We are in a historic moment of both incredible challenge and enormous possibility. The systems that support life on this planet are in collapse. Many of the challenges we face are outside of our control, but there are key obstacles within our power to overcome. In order for our movements to become capable of meaningful governance and embody the liberatory transformation of our world, we need to shift its culture toward one of powerful groups that can overcome inevitable obstacles and win in concrete, material ways.

A core challenge activist groups face internally today is "toxic movement culture" barriers to effectively building power, growing, and winning. It keeps the Left from being accessible, compelling, and sustainable. It manifests as a self-marginalizing stance, unproductive orientations to conflict, burnout, lack of vision, call-out culture, and reductive approaches to identity. Ultimately, this culture shrinks the terrain of politics down to a level of individualism and moral abstractions. Wildfire works to foster a pro-solidarity orientation to collective struggle and helps movement groups overcome the internal challenges limiting their ability to transform and govern our world.



Our Movement-Building Strategy

Social movements give us hope to chart a new course in a deteriorating empire. Because we believe in the power of organized movement groups, Wildfire's strategy is to work with grassroots organizations at the leading edge of a range of movement sectors, primarily those on the front lines. We offer a special focus on groups that have emerged out of crisis moments. These groups are most responsive to shifting context, adaptation, learning, and have the insight necessary to innovate solutions based on their social location. They offer the leadership that filters across movements and into our society at large. By assisting fundamental transformation in these groups, and linking them together across issue areas, Wildfire contributes to the resurgence of a healing Left that can take on new challenges in a changing world. Our commitment to cadre and leadership development also transcends any particular group. We invest in the development of individual grassroots leaders within and beyond our partner groups because we know that by building their commitment to the long-haul, they will continue to assist our movement's transformation long after our programs end.

Who We Are

The Wildfire Facilitation Team is made up of 12 facilitators - leaders in a wide range of movement sectors and issue areas. They include Executive Directors of organizations like the Dream Defenders; Campaign Managers for Congressional leaders like Ilhan Omar; Political Directors for groups like OutFront! Minnesota. Many of our facilitators emerged from the organizations we've partnered with - one way that Wildfire is led by its grassroots base. This team is rooted in many different movement arenas, allowing us to cross-pollinate cutting edge innovation and insights from different social change efforts



across the country. We are proud that our team is active in the movements they serve on the ground, allowing us to be uniquely multi-sectoral. Our facilitators currently work, or have roots in groups like: Mijente, Dream Defenders, Movement Generation, BOLD, Peace Poets, OutFront! MN, Militia Design, New Economy Coalition, Center for Third World Organizing, IfNotNow, Movement Net Lab, Leftroots, & SEIU.



What's Special About Us

We are a team of facilitators with the legitimacy, competency, reputation, and stake to holistically challenge norms that activists take for granted. The following approaches are our special sauce:

Whole Group Centered

Many training organizations host workshops for individuals. That model trains people in new skills and perspectives, but they return to organizations unable to integrate the skills or sustain the change. This leads to burnout and lost potential. We work with whole groups as our core strategy and believe it's how to make the change stick. Our Partners are required to participate at all levels of leadership, for a cohesive impact.

Practice-Oriented Accompaniment

Many workshops can create a feeling of breakthrough and catharsis in the training room, but that's the easy part. Real change happens in the day-do-day, which is why Wildfire focuses on long-term accompaniment. That's also why our Partner programs follow the course of a year or more, rather than just a weekend.

Experiential Methodology

Our pedagogy elicits the group's own wisdom and direction - the dynamics of the group itself becomes the material of our facilitation. There are many trainings where experts communicate their expertise, but this style often lacks transformation or retention. We work experientially so that groups can sustain their growth, creating self-replicating patterns of behavior that can spread throughout our movements as a whole. Our programs are customized to suit each organization's specific needs, rather than a cookie-cutter curriculum.

Holistic Integration

Most Leftist training infrastructure sits in the realm of depoliticized skill building, or focuses on political education and a liberatory politics that aren't building the capacity needed to carry it out. Wildfire is a holistic integration that blends these approaches - education, strategy, healing, organizing - underpinned by the emotional work it takes to recover individual and collective agency.

Multi-sectoral

Our facilitators are leaders in the field, working in Ecological & Climate Justice, Black Liberation, Racial & Economic Justice, Immigrant Rights, Housing, and LGBTQIA+ rights. We are students of the sectors we serve, therefore we have the unique opportunity to blend many lessons from the leading edge of frontline grassroots groups across these sectors.

Shifting Culture Through Conflict

Shifting culture requires us to elicit and turn toward conflict in generative ways. Movement groups are often accustomed to the kinds of polarizing conflict that they practice externally with their adversaries; when they apply these practices to navigate internal disagreements among allies, it can fracture the group and become toxic - which is why many groups opt instead for passive-aggressive or conflict-averse internal dynamics. We believe that increasing the *conflict literacy* of groups is key for them to recover their power and grow.



Our Programs



Our work is relational. Our core programs are year-long partnerships that take grassroots movement groups through creative, experiential, multi-part processes that help them shift their own group cultures through cycles of practice. This includes moving through generative conflict; grounding the work in study, history, and political education; navigating power, rank, and leadership; breaking past the self-limiting barriers that emerge from trauma and repression; building concrete strategy and organizing skills; finding balance between purpose & belonging; assisting interpersonal transformation, and building cultures of curiosity & learning.

We also offer group facilitation on a shorter-term basis, including coalition meetings, retreats, fellowships, convenings, trainings and more. Additionally, we run long-term leadership development programs to advance the facilitation skills of grassroots change-agents.

Our programs prepare these groups, and individuals within them, to lead grassroots social movements toward their own potential – to help us all become big, bold, visionary, and strategic enough to build the world we all deserve. We use experiential, democratic tools to elicit the wisdom already present in the groups, and pair that with decades of expertise to support groups and individuals to become their most powerful selves.

Who We Work With

Wildfire works with groups that are committed to at least one of the following:

- Bringing mass numbers of people into fighting organizations to win collective power (e.g. base-building campaign organizations, tenants unions, workers centers, labor unions, mass organizations)
- Building working class/oppressed people's control over resources (i.e. land, money, infrastructure), labor, and/or the decisions that affect our lives at scale.
- Building the power and leverage of the broader mass-based, power-building Left, beyond specific sector (e.g. electoral work that increases the Left's influence over policy, a popular podcast bringing mass numbers of people to identify as part of the Left, a coalition-building effort, groups that serve their communities in tandem with others doing other roles in an ecosystem)



We prioritize groups that:

- See themselves as playing—or want to play—a role in building a broader Left, mass-based, power-building movement ecology.
- Are open to transformation: challenging their own habits and beliefs, taking risks for the sake of growth, receiving potentially difficult feedback/assessments and integrating them accordingly
- Are taking the reality of climate collapse and corresponding social/economic/political crises seriously in terms of their strategy and vision

The Types of Programs We Lead To Achieve our Purpose

1. Group Facilitation

- Support existing organizations to build the relational skills required to successfully make the impact they're positioned to make as part of a broader power-building movement ecology, through long-term partnerships that include a series of group retreats, personalized coaching, and practice plans.

2. Leadership Development

- Train organizers *and* facilitators to build and maintain strong group cultures, and further a relationally grounded approach to power-building in their work through **Fellowships** and Training for Trainers.
- Support the Wildfire Project Facilitation Team through ongoing skill development and political education.

3. Public Programming

- Communications, narrative, and facilitated programming accessible to individuals at a lighter touch, with the goal of promoting the concepts, skills, tools and practices to help both organized and unorganized people prioritize, maintain, and participate in healthy and effective groups, and understand healthy group culture as fundamental to building power.



“At a time of serial economic and ecological crises, Wildfire is giving our movements crucial tools and structures to protect themselves — to not only fight back disaster capitalism but to put forward real solutions that reduce inequality and make us all safer in the future. I don’t know of anything else out there like it.”

- Naomi Klein, Author, Wildfire Project Advisory Board Member



Core Skills We Teach

The Wildfire Project works to spread the relational skills* required to build the strategic, thriving organizations needed to develop a mass-based, power-building Left big and powerful enough to govern and reshape society. This includes:

- Joining & differentiation
- Accountability & feedback
- Boundaries & requests
- Pace
- Purpose & belonging
- Building power & relationships across differences (incl. mainstreams/margins)
- Rank
- Generative conflict
- Identifying and transforming self-limiting beliefs
- And other connective practices such as: developing & incorporating ritual, increasing capacity to sit in contradiction, cultivating the capacity to surrender, keeping the real big picture in mind, drawing on untapped resources and sources of resilience, feeling visions of freedom, practicing gratitude, and increasing a sense of interdependence

Program Outcomes

After going through our programs, depending on the particular group's goals, they and their members:

- More effectively build power and grow
- Are more willing and able to defy “purity politics” by navigating contradiction, holding nuance, nurturing creativity, and taking risks
- Have the tools and skills to make strategic cultural interventions
- See themselves as creators/shapers of culture
- Be able to identify and transform self-marginalizing group behavior
- Break past fear of conflict, and engage in healthy practices to surface agreements and disagreements
- Heal from organizational wounds that have lived under the surface and hindered their work
- See and transform the “ghosts” of unhealthy or unresolved past conflicts
- Know how to facilitate their wider base through comparable processes





2023/2024 Program Outcomes

Group Facilitation

We measure the impact of our work through developing a criteria of culture-shift on a case-by-case basis with each of our groups, and over the course of one year evaluate the progress of an organization's ability to meet its own goals through the practices they develop in our programming. We get feedback from our partners during the program, and again after the program ends. In the 2023/2024 Grant Cycle we worked with groups that included:

- **Momentum Community** offers training and support to hone organizer's skills in shifting public opinion, developing hundreds of leaders, and mobilizing by the thousands. Momentum is committed to both strengthening existing groups and incubating new movement organizations.
- **Center for Popular Democracy (CPD)** empowers communities to create an inclusive, equitable society where people of color, immigrants, working families, women, and LGBTQ communities thrive together. We foster a resilient economy and political institutions that reflect our shared priorities.
- **Strozzi Institute for Somatics (SIS)** produces leaders, coaches, and organizations that embody pragmatic wisdom, skillful action, and grounded compassion; who use conflict as a generative force.
- **Lavender Phoenix** is powered by trans and queer Asian and Pacific Islander people, building power, uplifting our histories, and supporting transformation and political home to our people.
- **Communities for Just Schools Fund (CJSF)** is a national collaborative that links philanthropy with the power of grassroots organizing to transform schools.
- **Free Press** fights to ensure that media and technology are positive forces of democracy and used for justice.
- **Media Democracy Fund (MDF)** is a catalyst for racial justice and equity in digital society. We bring together diverse voices to design inclusive and responsible solutions, and empower public interest advocates to create an environment where digital technologies and the internet have a long-term, positive impact on society.
- **MediaJustice** is building a powerful grassroots movement for a more just and participatory media —fighting for racial, economic, and gender justice in a digital age.
- **Media 2070** is an effort to radically transform who has the capital to tell their own stories by 2070
- **Native Movement** is an Indigenous organization based in Alaska, working on climate change and treaty rights, dedicated to building people power, rooted in an Indigenized worldview, toward healthy, sustainable, & just communities for all.
- **Fairbanks Climate Action Coalition** Through education and advocacy Fairbanks Climate Action Coalition mobilizes Fairbanks & Interior Alaska communities toward action to mitigate and adapt to climate change. They seek to elevate climate solutions and foster a fair, equitable, & just transition to sustainable communities — locally, regionally and globally. They seek to build a renewed & respectful relationship between all beings and the earth.



Fellowship

The Wildfire Project began a fellowship in 2023 that was extended and continued into 2024.

We know that a crucial part of the way forward is deepening our capacity to build strong, resilient groups and relationships. Both our spirits and our strategies are calling us to transform the ways we relate to one another across lines of conflict, difference, and power. The 2023/2024 Wildfire Fellowship was a huge success, designed to spread the methodology we have honed for over a decade by training key movement leaders who are well positioned to apply these skills in the right places.

It included a hybrid 3-part multi-weekend 14 month deep dive for 27 movement leaders to learn Wildfire's core relational skills and tools, and apply them to help their organizations grow and reshape their group dynamics. Initially envisioned to be 8 months, we extended it an additional half year! During this time fellows also received coaching to help apply the tools they learned.

Frontline groups from Indigenous Sovereignty, Racial Justice, Labor, Housing, Climate and Gender Justice movements around the country sent cohorts of 2-4 fellows each, to cross-pollinate lessons and relationships as they learn and build together. Strategically speaking, all the organizations participating in the fellowship are not just fighting back but *fighting forward* by building concrete power and shifting the balance of forces long-term.

Fellowship Participants included:

- Dream Defenders
- NDN Collective
- New Justice Project
- Centro de Trabajadores Unidos en Lucha (CTUL)
- CAAAV: Organizing Asian Communities
- Native Movement
- Inquilinxs Unidxs
- Lavender Phoenix



Completing this Fellowship was the biggest single programmatic lift for Wildfire in years; we are so proud!



Shifting leadership

We welcomed our new Executive Director BJ Star, as Joshua Kahn Russell transitioned out. BJ initially joined Wildfire's staff as a Co-Director in 2018, and then later shifted onto the facilitation team. We are so excited that they are taking the helm at Wildfire and rejoining staff. Additionally, longtime Wildfire facilitator Kirin Kanakkanatt joined the team as Special Projects Manager.

