

BUILDING JUSTICE PODCAST



CRISJ Building Justice Podcast

Season 3, Episode 5: Amreet Sandhu on Building Justice in Sacramento and Across the World

Moderator: Monicka Tutschka, Professor of Political Science

Guest: Amreet Sandhu, Legal Librarian and Community Advocate

Please note: This transcript may be imperfect. Please contact Monicka Tutschka directly should you have questions (tutschka@csus.edu)

Music lyrics:

Company under construction, the function, justice for the human family we demand it. Justice, true freedom, equality is a must. Thus, decolonization of the planet. So bust this. People be the power now we're Building Justice. Pulling out divinations, now we're Building Justice. Welcome the planet to the Podcast, "Building Justice," "Building Justice," "Building Justice." Building is to add on, or to do away with.

Monicka:

Welcome to Building Justice, a podcast by Sacramento State's Center on Race, Immigration and Social Justice (CRISJ) . We explore critical issues affecting our communities with the hopes of creating a healthier and more just world.

I'm Monica Tutschka, a Political Science Professor at Sac State, and my guest for today is Amreet Sandhu, Amreet was born and raised in Sacramento and comes from a Sikh background. She has a B.A. from UC Santa Cruz and a J.D. from Lewis and Clark Law School. She also has a certificate in Library Science and Information Technology from Sacramento City College.

Amreet is currently completing her master's in library science at San Jose State University, and she's a law librarian at the Sacramento County Public Library. Amreet was the founding president of the Sacramento chapter of the National Lawyers Guild and she is a charter member of the Queer Democrats of Sacramento County. Additionally, she's a community organizer for the Coalition to Save New Helvetia. In her free time, I don't think there's a lot of it, Amreet uses her certificate as a citizen historian to archive stories for the 1947 Partition project through Stanford University. And would you believe it? In June of this year, Amreet announced that she's running for City Council in District Six. Amreet welcome to the Building Justice podcast.

Amreet: Monicka Thank you so much for welcoming me and even more for hosting such an important podcast that allows us to explore such important topics. I'm so happy to be here.

Monicka: It is great to have you on on the show. You have such an incredible resumé that I want to start by asking you to tell us a bit more about yourself.

Amreet: Gladly. Well, I live here in District Six, which is also where your campus is located. But my family's Sacramento story began only three miles away in the new Helvetia Housing Complex. It is currently called Aldergrove and Marina Vista. It was there that my grandparents raised our family in the 1970s, and this was necessary because they worked in the fields. And even though they worked long and hard days, their total income still put them far below the poverty line. My grandmother would later tell me that she was paid for tomatoes by the buckets. Sometimes she was paid and sometimes the farmer would tell her, Sorry, I don't have the money to pay you. And this really highlights the importance of public housing. For me because there are hard working people who put in long hours every day and still need that subsidized housing to have stable living and access to their workplaces. And there are many families like hers because there are systemic issues that keep people below the poverty line

Monicka: Amreet, when you talk about hard work, leading people not to be able to afford their home because of wage theft, because of low wages, because housing isn't affordable, um, I think you're not just talking about your grandmother, you're talking about so many people today. And I know that there are so many policies that are now trying to make it onto the ballot to make public housing a possibility. Can you talk more about how we could make it more possible for public housing to be built?

Amreet: Absolutely. I love your question because I can tell it comes from a place of concern. In terms of bringing forward solutions, I would say that very recently at the city's law and legislative committee meeting, there was an opportunity to adopt a housing support package that was crafted by three members of the Sacramento City Council that would address our housing crisis, including rent stabilization, including building more affordable units through union contracts, union jobs that would grow the middle class, and things like creating a legal support program for landlords and renters to ask questions about their rental contracts. And that was blocked. So you talk about the role of governments in blocking those solutions. And we saw an example of that only two weeks ago here in Sacramento. Technically, what happened is called a delay. That's what it was described as. Let's bring this back. Let's do more research. Let's talk about this another time. But as you know, from living in Sacramento and seeing the scale of the housing crisis, we can't wait longer.

Monicka: you're talking about the housing crisis across the city, across the county. We've got unhoused people who need housing. We've got current renters who are afraid of being evicted and becoming homeless. What is housing and housing affordability and the housing crisis look like in District six specifically?

Amreet: An excellent question. Sadly, in my district, during the time my opponent has served on the city Council, there have been zero affordable housing, public housing or social housing complexes built in my district. There were zero, and I repeat, zero 24 hour cooling centers available during our Sacramento heat waves this year, which science tells us will only be increasing to hotter levels each year. And perhaps even more shockingly, there has been tremendous damage to unhoused communities, including one on Stockton Boulevard, that was displaced, only to reappear again and again. And I ask, what is the impact on those displaced? How does having their few remaining belongings destroyed by gigantic claws impact them long term? In running for city council it is not uncommon for me, and most likely every other candidate running to hear frustrations around the unhoused. This crisis was created by human systems and it can be recreated in a much more humane way. And that's why I say let's build a Sacramento to celebrate. The Sacramento I knew growing up, one with a strong middle class. One with good union jobs. One with affordable housing. One with supports for people who fall into high levels of despair and compounding need. And one with excellent public schools like the ones I attended. One that celebrates diversity.

Monicka: Amreet, you're talking about some of the goals here where we want to grow, the kind of society we should be aiming for, one with where everyone is housed and schools are good and the environment is clean. And you've also been talking about, you know, the big structures that are that that are in the way that are blocking these laws, these zoning rules that make it really hard to to build affordable housing. But you're leaving us with a kind of message of hope. And that message is that. We can overcome these barriers. This brings me a little you know, I'm sidestepping this conversation a bit and it brings me to your to your work with Amnesty International and your work with AmeriCorps. You know, Amnesty International really focuses on human rights and supporting human rights. And AmeriCorps is deeply committed to offering services and building up kind of an ethos of service in communities of need. Can you talk about how your your experiences with these two organizations cemented your commitment to social justice and your help hone your skills on the kinds of things that need to be done?

Amreet: As you mentioned, I found my framework and my compass in international human rights law. I found myself working in Washington, D.C. for Amnesty International, a group that advocates for compliance with international human rights law. And my policy areas were human rights violations in Russia and treatment of inmates in Spain. However, on my breaks and lunches, I fed my voracious appetite for my own people's history. I explored every country and issue report available on the 1947 partition of India to create Pakistan. And that was a partition that cut right through my family's ancestral homeland, the Punjab, and caused previously unmatched levels of human displacement. In fact, Monicka, it was noted at that time in the material I reviewed, that the 1947 partition was the largest mass migration of people along any border in history. And you imagine the impact that had on the region and my people and my family. It reminded me of my high school oral history class at Laguna Creek High School here in

the region. My teacher for that class was, and Ben Weiss, who wrote one word on the board for our first class. And that word in capital letters was “war.” We spent the entire semester thinking about why wars are fought. Later as a substitute teacher working at Laguna Creek High School while I was studying for my LSAT. I became friends with and Ben Weiss and I learned that her husband was a Holocaust survivor. Though, returning to her after my Amnesty International experience, it explained everything to me about the class, the questions she raised and the moral and social issues she encouraged us to think about, issues I've never stopped thinking about and I would be bringing with me to the Sacramento City Council as we address a city, a country, a world at a crossroads.

Monicka You know what I think about your comment about political partition.

We think about boundaries and borders. And, you know, from a moral point of view, a boundary between U.S. and Canada or between India and Pakistan are morally arbitrary. And yet the effects on the lives of people who live on one side or the other side of the border can be tremendous. There's also displacement that's occurring because of the environment and climate change or because of economic reasons. You know, factories come and go and you are forced. You are displaced from your basic needs because you can't find a job. And there's also displacements that are occurring when there are failed states. Can you talk a little bit more about displacement and how you think about all these different forms of displacement and what we should do here in Sacramento when we have people who have been displaced arrive at our border?

Amreet: Mmmm I love that question because it reminds me of why I love Sacramento. Sacramento is a refugee resettlement community. People come from all over the world to build their lives here in our city, and I'm so grateful for that. And so I think, you know, here in Sacramento, being able to provide people with their basic primary needs food, water, shelter, allows us to feed our creative selves, which is what we should be doing. And so I think we need to recognize that, you know, yes, we have a big immigrant population and that includes all of us that are non-native Sacramentans, meaning specifically indigenous Sacramentans, and my vision of a Sacramento that is one we can celebrate includes just that: our primary needs met, our creative juices flowing and a level of collaboration and diversity that invites everyone to the table.

Monicka: When you when you mentioned diversity, I just think about the diversity on the SAC State campus. We have a lot of first generation college students. We have a Dreamer resource center. We have Indigenous students, just a full range of people and who are coming to college and looking for opportunity. And some of those students are interested in law and the legal profession, and they're also interested in social justice. So if a student asked you, you know, how does law and social justice intersect in your own work and how could they combine a kind of commitment to social justice and a commitment to the law? what would you tell them?

13:52

Amreet: I would tell them, Monicka, that I can't wait to meet every single one of them. And in terms of your question about the intersection between law and social justice, my answer might be one that you might not want to hear. Which is, you know, having a law degree doesn't create the kind of social change you might think lawyers can create. I think of social change and law as a

pyramid. So, you know, big triangle. And what the law does is that really tip top piece of the triangle that can make a policy change or on pass a pass funding for a program. But the social change, it comes from the rest of that pyramid, all the people pushing to create those changes, to pass those laws, to advocate, to say something's not working and it needs to be fixed. A law is nothing without people testing it and implementing it. And so I definitely encourage students to explore those intersections and I encourage them to stay committed to the fight and stay committed to working with people outside of the legal profession who have amazing ideas and experience and live, you know, specifically lived experience about what's needed and the direction we need to take our legal systems.

15:31

Monicka: There's so many scholars, there are so many activists who look at law and they take a kind of critical approach and they observe the way laws and systems and institutions and policies can have disparate impacts on different communities, particularly communities of color or underserved or minoritized people. And you are challenging all of us to, on the one hand, on the one hand critique those laws and on the other hand to create and to implement and to fund and to oversee laws that do safeguard and extend the rights of workers and women and LGBTQ people and farmers and migrants and people with disabilities and people of color. Can you talk a little bit about how your work at the National Lawyers Guild I know you were the founding member of the Sacramento chapter and you were a president. I mean, how does your service there relate social justice to the law and to social movements in an impactful way?

16:35

Amreet: Yeah. I mean, there's so much I want to share about your thoughts on disparate impact, because it's really a good way to understand the limitations of law and law as being used as an oppressive tool. Sometimes here in my own community in District six, we have the second highest number of traffic stops of black and brown men for search and seizure and that exceed the purpose of the stop. So back to my work with the National Lawyers Guild, and I think I've just had so many roles in the National Lawyers Guild for so many years that I'm really happy about the work the organization organization does and the work I've done through it. And I'll start with the most recent thing I was able to do. And Monica, you talked about, you know, farmers and workers. And because I do take a very intersectional approach to my thinking and I was really happy to work with the International Committee to pass a resolution in support of the farmworkers striking in the Punjab. This was a response to a law, you know, back to what is the intersection between law and social justice. During the pandemic, Prime Minister Modi sought to pass a law and implement a law that would put farmers in a much worse situation in terms of selling their crops. And this caused one of the largest labor strikes in history, and it only happened a few years ago, which is energizing to me. And so we were able to pass a resolution in solidarity with those striking workers. The next was my work on the national board in New York. There I was a member of the executive committee, and that was during George Floyd Summer. So back to disparate impact and and our legal systems not always serving the interests of the people. And you all, I hope, noticed how much protest there was in response to the police stop of George Floyd. So the stakes are extremely high. And that was an extremely hard summer. And I still don't think we've learned all the lessons we needed to learn from that time. And I would hate to see all that protest to be swept under the rug as something that happened a few years ago and is no longer relevant. Because if we don't address these systemic issues, it will

continue to happen. And I was also able to serve as the chair of the Queer Caucus. There were some, again, disparate impacts on people who are members of the queer community through changes in national and state legislation that we were opposed to. And we used our roles in the National Lawyers Guild to give a voice to queer communities that were resisting. And that work continues today. And as listeners may be aware, attacks on transgender people are at historically high levels in terms of state bills, and it is completely unacceptable. It is completely unacceptable to police people based on their gender identity. And it just makes me very angry.

Monicka: I'm thinking about the Lawyers Guild as serving, on the one hand to identify and raise awareness about how laws have disparate impacts on farming communities or on black lives or on queer people and on workers and the intersection of all of those identities. But you're also talking about how important it is for these organizations, specifically the Lawyers Guild, to educate people who don't have any experience in the legal profession about the law and about their rights, because the law can be so esoteric sometimes.

21:24

Amreet: I love your question, Monika, and it's one I think about every single day because I do work in a law library. And so the people who come in on our members of the legal community, of course, but it's a public law library, so they're also members of the public who are trying to understand the ticket they received, trying to figure out when they're hearing is trying to read maybe a treatise on hearsay. A lot of law still in Latin. You know, Supreme Court opinions are chapters long. It really upsets me that that access to justice is missing. I think it's a failing of our society. And I think that's why groups like the National Lawyers Guild are so important. Or maybe you've heard students might have heard about the ACLU. And so we're making strides in how accessible the law is. But there's still so much to do.

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22:31

Monicka: And when I think about accessibility, I think about your work as a librarian in the public library and how important it is to have public libraries where there are books and more available. I know you are now trying to complete your master's or you are on the way to completing a masters in Library Science at San Jose State. You are a county public library. And what is it about libraries to you or why could you become a librarian?

22:30

Amreet: So for me, there are so many reasons. Libraries are increasingly important in our society. For practical reasons, they're a shining example of public investments that strengthen our communities. And I participated in three recent panels that address this. So the first one was a gathering of the American Association of Law Librarians, and that was through the American Bar Association and the Law Library of Congress, which noted that many people living and voting in the United States have large gaps of knowledge around law and government. We talked about the accessibility issue, but there's also just a disinformation issue also that we're currently battling. And so an example of this was a survey that was released as part of that gathering, and it was on civic engagement, and it showed that 19% of participants in the survey believed that Clarence Thomas is the chief justice of the United States Supreme Court rather than Justice Roberts, and that 21% of people incorrectly believed that only U.S. citizens pay income tax. So I think libraries can help. I think we would all agree with FDR his statement that libraries are

cornerstones of democracy. Libraries are where we go to vote and gain information on local services and access technology and knowledge that may otherwise be unavailable to us, especially with the cost of databases and subscriptions and licenses becoming more restrictive and more expensive. The second was a gathering of the California Library Association, and it was a panel on censorship in libraries. I was a participant on that panel. Our panel noted that book banned attacks on library programming across the country have increased by 38% in 2022, and it's not looking much better for 2023, with 145 book ban bills across the country and more than half of the states already. And that was just in June. The year's not over. and it's not looking good. So access to information is a core value of mine, and I think it's a perfect time for people like me, librarians to take a stand against censorship, to increase digital literacy, and to battle this disinformation that has flooded our social media feeds. The third panel was through my current graduate program at San Jose State in the Library Science Program, and it was focused on queer spaces in libraries. And I was touched to hear the story of a woman who, as a young person, just didn't feel like she fit in in the world around her. And then in a library, she found just the right book, and that book increased the moments in each day that she felt happiness and it resulted in her building her current life as a proud lesbian who is also now a librarian. And I love the idea of people being able to find just the right book for themselves and creating their own maps to successful and joyful living. Lastly, I'll just note an even more important role I feel libraries play in our society, which is why I kind of joined the profession. They facilitate our survival. I'm a librarian who worked during the COVID 19 pandemic, I distributed facemasks information about free vaccination clinics and even distributed COVID 19 tests to the public. During the heat wave, I distributed bottled water and operated the library as a cooling center. During violent rains, I worked in the room right above the library Galleria downtown. And students. I would love for you to know that my campaign has a book club, and we are currently reading on a book about native California, so you might miss our gathering for that, which is next week. But our next book will be Palaces for the People How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight the Inequality, Polarization and Decline of Civic Life. And that book discusses the summer of 1995 in Chicago, where a heat wave killed 739 people in excess of the norm. And not to do too much of a spoiler alert, but on the book covers how the people who survived were the people who were connected to others, and that those who were isolated just did not make it. And even more interestingly, I read this book during a weekend in Pacific Grove here on the California coast, when California was facing its own heat wave last summer before leaving for Pacific Grove, I had donated bottled water to many of the free community fridges around Sacramento, on which students. You can also find out where those fridges are. If you need water, you can grab some there. If you want to donate water, you can donate water. It's all very community based. But I know that what I did in donating bottled water was not enough. And I sat with the knowledge that weekend that I was someone who could escape when I needed to, but that not everyone can. And even Pacific Grove was so hot, it really made it so, you know, we're getting closer to a world where escape is just not an option. And we must create community resiliency to the weather events ahead. In that moment. Of course, I did not know I would be running for Sacramento City Council, but in the last few months I've seen how our communities are just not ready to respond to climate chaos and that those who understand a thing or two about how to respond ought to be leading the charge better than the librarians.

Amreet: When I think about libraries and what you're saying, I mean, I, I am a strong proponent of libraries. They provide as you eYou are talking about access to knowledge, whether that's the

knowledge of our various histories and how those histories impact us today. Your knowledge about new events, ways to try to predict the future and the future for ourselves and our community. I mean, you find those kinds of resources at the library. And when you are commenting about going to the library and getting a book and seeing yourself in that book and maybe finding some solace in that, and here, if you are a marginalized individual the community seems to be against you and you find a book that supports who you are and that gives you a frame that empowers you and enables you to live your best life. I mean that. That is such a gift. And books provide that. And when you're able to read books with other people in a communal space, like in the library, through a book club that's hosted by the library. And when you see the library is a place where you could get some your immediate needs met. If you're in a crisis, then libraries become a space for us to nourish ourselves and nourish our creativity. And maybe tackle something as complicated and as hard as climate change. You know what? What do you think we can do here at the local level to combat climate change and promote environmental well-being for Sacramento?

31:30

Amreet That is the most important conversation in this entire campaign for anyone seeking office right now, in my opinion, because we all live on this giant mud bowl together and we're only going to make it together. And so whatever political divisions we've had, whatever personal divisions we've had, we really got to work together to make it. And so here locally, responding to climate change must begin with breaking up with fossil fuels. I understand that maybe that might be a process, but I'm doing my part in furthering that process by refusing any campaign contributions from fossil fuel companies. So I will not be accepting any political action committee money from fossil fuels. And so in terms of the local level, I'm hoping that commitment to refusing donations will be helpful. But it's really just no secret that those commercial interests are very influential in politics and that we do need to be electing people into office who have the courage to refuse those donations. So I think on a city level, you know, we absolutely must subsidize public transportation and make it—I would love for it to be free. It's currently free to youth under 18. I think it should be free for all of us because if we want people to exercise climate neutral or carbon low carbon options to transportation, we have to make them convenient. We have to make them accessible. You know, we need our trains running on time. We need them running with higher frequency. And I'm a bicycle commuter. It's a big part of my identity. If I can take a carbon neutral ride to work, I will. That said, I am part of a huge bike bicycle community here in Sacramento, including Sacramento Tweed Ride, where we take leisurely, slow rides around the city to get people more comfortable cycling in a urban setting. And I'm also a member of a group called Bike Party. And once a month we have a huge bike party and that's what it is. A bunch of people meeting on our bikes and we ride around the city together. But I will say a member of our bike party community was targeted by a driver and hit and is suffering injuries. And this happened only two weeks ago. So it's one thing to tell people, hey, you ought to be riding your bikes and you know, you ought to be walking. But if it's not a safe option, it's really not an option at all,. And so if I'm elected to the city council, one of my top priorities would be to increase livability to make sure people can exercise and car free options. And for my neighborhood, which is here by Sac State, I don't see a safe route into the downtown grid, which is where I work. So I really want us to get to a place where our bike lanes are connected throughout the neighborhoods that the parks and schools are connected to bike lanes on, and that people are able to reduce their dependance on automobiles. And that's just, you

know, one of the many ways. I think the other way is making sure that we, as the City of Trees, are investing in our urban forests, too, so we can be planting valley oak trees. Trees that are created to withstand the heat and dryness of this region that can give us some protection from the hot asphalt that has high temperatures on summer days. It's becoming a human rights crisis, honestly, because so many unhoused people are living on sidewalks that are hot, that have no tree cover. My work with the neighborhood association was directly battling the city council at that time, i

ncluding my own councilmember who is seeking reelection on preserving our tree canopy. At that time there were sections of the tree ordinances, the cities of Sacramento code sections that were threatened, and the threat was the removal of heritage trees. So during that time, the reason you see so many big, beautiful trees in Sacramento is trees beyond a certain diameter received special protection in our city. But what I was told was that those trees are in the way of new developments and that we need to change our protection for those trees so that we can build more housing. I knew I was opposed to that, not because I'm opposed to building new housing, but because I'm fully aware that trees suck up all the excess carbon we are producing and we need them to help us reduce our carbon footprint. We need green spaces to protect us in our hot summers. And so when we're making these choices about building more housing, and if those choices mean we're eliminating protections for trees, I think we need to think about is this a net win or net loss for our region? Climate change now requires this more than ever.

Monicka: When you're talking to me about, you know, bicycles and trees and housing, you know, I often reflect on which neighborhoods have the good tree canopy and where are public busses actually working and, you know, where are there bike lanes that are. More safe than not safe at all. And it's frequently the more affluent communities that have these amenities. You know, a lot of my students, they want to take public transit and then bike to some sort of combination from there, from school to home and home to school. And they say, you know, Monicka, if you teach a class till 9 p.m. I can't attend the last half an hour because I won't make the bus back to where I live. Or they'll say, it'd be really nice to bike, but I live, you know, just off of Power In and there isn't really a bike lane and the road is rough and, and trucks are barreling forward. And so I'm not going to risk my life to take a bike. So just finding ways to create those bike lanes and build public transportation that's usable and reliable so that people who who already are on board, they already want to take alternative transportation and not jump in their cars can actually live up to that commitment. The last comment you made about, you know, trees being cut for private developers and how, you know, private profit frequently trumps so many other concerns and your commitment to not take donations from fossil fuel industries so that if you are city council member District six in the future you won't be pressured or as pressured to facilitate, you know greater dependance on fossil fuels or to facilitate development that might not be directed towards public housing or to affordable housing is really admirable. Is there anything else you'd like to tell the audience before we close? It's been a real pleasure to have you on the podcast.

Amreet: Thank you, Monicka. It's been inspiring for me too, to just talk with you about these really important topics. And I think I would, if you wouldn't mind to just read a small section of a book about James Baldwin. Welcome to Baldwin's Table. Conversation lulls and Baldwin looks at you. You're puzzled, he suggests. Speak your mind. Perhaps you say, "we're too far gone,

Jimmy. The problems are too big. The challenges are too great.” “We are beginning late. I must say,” he replies “But any beginning is better than none.” Or maybe you ask. “Settle it for me, Jimmy. Are you Christian or aren't you?” He answers obliquely. “The love of God means responsibility to each other.” Perhaps finally, your question is this , :What will it take, Jimmy? What will it take to change the world?” “Commitment,” he says, “You mean it or you don't.”

Monicka: It's been such a pleasure to have you on the podcast, to think alongside your and to hear about what needs to be done and the commitment and the responsibility we need to take to build that better and more just future for us all. I appreciate you so much, Amreet. This is Amreet Sandhu from Sacramento. And I want to close by saying thanks for listening. We hope our ongoing conversations spark understandings, empathies, and motivation to join the struggle for a better future for all. You just listened to the ‘Building Justice’ podcast. The information contained in this podcast, including its title and description represent the views and opinions of the hosts and guests and do not necessarily represent the views or opinions of the Sacramento State, CRISJ and/or the ‘Building Justice’ podcast committee.

Outro Music Lyrics

No more penalties and no more wars. Based on the actions. Now, time for "Building Justice,"
"Building Justice." Time for building justice, justice.