

Last Best News (<http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/06/voices-from-the-valley-sonia-davis/>)

Voices from the Valley: Sonia Davis

By: **SHERRI CORNETT** | June 10, 2018



Ed Kemmick/Last Best News

Voices from the Valley is an occasional series of conversations between Sherri Cornett and Billings-area leaders who are committed to creating a vibrant community for all.

Sonia Davis is a co-founder of [Billings SURJ](#)

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(<https://www.facebook.com/SURJBillings/>), a chapter of [Showing Up for Racial Justice](http://www.showingupforracialjustice.org/) (<http://www.showingupforracialjustice.org/>), and the Senior High School speech and debate coach. She spoke compassionately with me about white people addressing injustice, and about mutual respect, standing up for each other and the wisdom of youth.

Sherri: Sonia, how did you start working with SURJ?

Sonia: I was in the Bay Area, attracted to the idea of collective liberation and impressed with all of SURJ's resources for training. When my husband and I moved back to Billings in 2016, I met Dan Cohn, with whom I started the local chapter.

Sherri: Nationally, SURJ came out of people of color asking whites to find appropriate ways to get involved with the work of dismantling white supremacy. Yet, the Billings chapter is multiracial.

Sonia: Yes, that is uncommon within the SURJ network. I am indigenous. My father is a Mexican immigrant, now a citizen, and my mother's family comes from Mexico. I consider it a privilege to be part of SURJ and, though it is still uncomfortable, I do a fairly good job of navigating white spaces. Culture isn't individualistic. We are all examining our thoughts, prejudices and biases.

Sherri: Tell me more about one of SURJ's [values](http://www.showingupforracialjustice.org/surj-values.html) (<http://www.showingupforracialjustice.org/surj-values.html>)— using “calling in” as a way to overcome the history of shaming those who have been perceived as not perfect enough in their social justice efforts.

Sonia: The conversations we have in our SURJ meetings are for those who actively want to learn. White people won't find easy solutions. The inevitable mistakes are addressed by “calling in” instead of “calling out” ... in private conversations out of respect for each other, not in public or online. We talk about alternatives, correct terminology, fact checking. And, we try to move beyond the pattern of binary thinking ... more space for “yes, and” and less of “either/or” and “I'm right, you're wrong.” And, realizing there can be multiple, valid viewpoints and truths.

(<https://goo.gl/mjhWkW>)

Sherri: So, the priority is keeping them in community and encouraging them to continue questioning! What other tools are used at SURJ gatherings?

Sonia: People often freeze when they see someone being attacked in verbally or physically racist ways. They can't think of the right thing to do and feel guilty afterwards. Through role-playing such scenarios, people learn to overcome that brain overload so they can take action.

Education is also important ... truths about people of color, learning what white people can work on and how to do it without taking over from people of color. And, about intersectionality — how class and income inequality, race, culture, disabilities and marginalized communities overlap.

Sherri: What about teaching children these concepts?

Sonia: We do need to share our life skills with them. Though there is our village, our community of mothers, which sets up expectations for children for mutual respect, integrity and kindness, I believe there is already wisdom in youth. We need to create more ways for them to share their perspectives, to question, to call out injustices and oppression, and we need to encourage teachers to open up to such challenges in the classroom.

Sherri: I heard that some of the students from Stoneman Douglas High School, who so quickly and eloquently responded in the media about the shooting there, were studying forensics and debate.

Sonia: I was on my high school debate team for four years. It helped me see beyond the problems and discuss solutions. My speech and debate kids exercise critical thinking. They have to be able to argue both sides, which does not come naturally. They take these skills into their classrooms, to their dinner tables. Quite a few of the students who organized the March for our Lives in Billings were speech and debate students.

Sherri: That is encouraging! Where else do you find optimism?

Sonia: What empowers me to be unapologetic in this work is knowing that I have really good people working along with me, who have my back. I am inspired by [Jerry Clark](http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/04/voices-from-the-valley-fitzgerald-clark/) (<http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/04/voices-from-the-valley-fitzgerald-clark/>), [Gwen Kircher](http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/05/voices-from-the-valley-gwen-kircher/) (<http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/05/voices-from-the-valley-gwen-kircher/>), [Claudia Stephens](http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/04/voices-from-the-valley-claudia-stephens/) (<http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/04/voices-from-the-valley-claudia-stephens/>), and my sisters, who raise their kids to stand up for themselves, even though they are dealing with the same racist issues I did 20 years ago.

Sherri: I recall Gloria Steinem talking about how she, Angela Davis, Dolores Huerta and others stood up with each other, to give each other the strength to publicly speak about provocative, yet necessary, ideas.

Sonia: I envision a strong community where we can rely on each other and ... where white folks do not call the police on black people for just existing. Twenty-five years ago, Billings came together and showed what we are capable of. Unfortunately, it was not a “one and done” kind of thing. Now, more organizations are working alongside the Not In Our Town movement.

Change can happen. People can choose to reject myths and untruths that get in the way of this. Even though at times it seems like an uphill battle, I have faith in Billings. We are finding each other and I am excited about the future.



Sherri Cornett

With degrees in political science and art and a long history of advocacy work, Sherri Cornett's passion for dialogue and community has found outlets in the national and international social-justice-themed exhibitions she curates, her own art and the organizations and causes into which she contributes her energy and leadership. After 14 moves, Cornett finally found her home in Billings in 1993. www.sherricornett.com (<http://www.sherricornett.com/>).

Here are the previous installments of Voices from the Valley:

- ◆ April 22, [Claudia Stevens](http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/04/voices-from-the-valley-claudia-stephens/) (<http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/04/voices-from-the-valley-claudia-stephens/>).
- ◆ April 30, [Fitzgerald Clark](http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/04/voices-from-the-valley-fitzgerald-clark/) (<http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/04/voices-from-the-valley-fitzgerald-clark/>).
- ◆ May 6, [Gwen Kircher](http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/05/voices-from-the-valley-gwen-kircher/) (<http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/05/voices-from-the-valley-gwen-kircher/>).
- ◆ May 14, [Marci McLean](http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/05/voices-from-the-valley-marci-mclean/) (<http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/05/voices-from-the-valley-marci-mclean/>).
- ◆ May 20, [Tyson Middle](http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/05/voices-from-the-valley-tyson-middle/) (<http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/05/voices-from-the-valley-tyson-middle/>).
- ◆ May 27, [Patrick Scott-Wilson](http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/05/voices-from-the-valley-patrick-scott-wilson/) (<http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/05/voices-from-the-valley-patrick-scott-wilson/>).
- ◆ June 3, [Abena Lane](http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/06/voices-from-the-valley-abena-lane/) (<http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/06/voices-from-the-valley-abena-lane/>).

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