

Ithaca College Student Activist Jo Dull Speaks About Challenges and Rewards of Activism

Hugo Orrantia

If you're involved in social justice organizing on or off campus in Ithaca, there's a high chance you've met IC student Jo Dull. During her time at Ithaca College, she has become the president of CUSLAR (Committee for US-Latin American relations), a member of SJP (Students for Justice in Palestine) and volunteers at the Elmira Homeless Union. On top of that, she's also a part-time student, a nanny for two families, and a peer success coach. Her last semester at Ithaca is coming to an end, and soon she'll head North to go work for the Vermont Workers Center, and in June, start a summer at the Ithaca Youth Bureau.

Jo loves the hustle, but it can be a lot. "I feel like really overwhelmed a lot of the time," she admits. "But I think that it also, like, I like to thrive in the chaos in some ways, you know?"

From nannying to coaching to labor advocacy, all of Jo's work involves other people. It's that interaction with other people that keeps Jo going. "I like to call myself like an introverted extrovert because I feel like I do also really like to retreat sometimes," she said. "But I find that like I thrive in building relationships with others and like, that sort of like, it can be just draining, but it also is like really empowering and, like, keeps it keeps me like, activated, you know?"

It all started with quarantine, which changed Jo deeply. Before that she was a "popular kid" in high school. "I was band president. I was in women's choir. I was in several plays..." The quarantine era was marred with crises in the United States. Through the internet, Jo saw police brutality, a rash of COVID denialism, the failures of the government to prevent deaths from COVID. For the first time, she was outside her white middle-class bubble. Once the lockdown lifted, though, it seemed like her friends at school and family at home didn't care as much as she

did about these issues. “We were just online and... seeing everything that’s going on, being like, more exposed to stuff just because we were online more. I think that kind of, like, changed the way that I interacted with my peers.”

“I got really angry for a while and kind of realized, like, a lot of my friends didn't care about these things, or didn't want to even open their mind to like engaging in political education,” she said. “And I think I got bitter and angry....” This anger was even more isolating. When confronted with apathy, Jo receded inwards.

“... but, you can't just, like, shut people out, you know?” Once Jo came to college to study sociology in 2022, though, her outlook started to change. “That came probably from the sociology department, honestly, of just like learning about how we're all affected in different ways by like these systems and structures and how it's the owning class intentionally dividing and conquering us, and like how that really blinds a lot of people” By coming to an understanding of why people have the opinions that they have, it became easier for Jo to meet people where they are and work with them. This opened Jo up to lots of opportunities in organizing, and helped break her out of stasis. She became president of CUSLAR, joined SJP, and set to work in collaborating with many off-campus organizations like No Más Lagrimas.

“I think that putting people down is just, like not going to do anyone any good. Like, we have to lead with love, we have to lead with empathy, we have to lead with understanding, which is exhausting sometimes.”

When trying to win people over onto your side, Jo maintains that it matters to go about it respectfully and calmly, without immediate condemnation or anger. “If you're defensive and

aggressive, then like, they're not going to want to listen to you. But like helping people arrive to their own conclusions, I have found gets people further, you know?" For example, Jo is almost the opposite of her father – She's a very left-wing, socially progressive young woman, with a liberal arts education, who organizes for social justice. Her father, on the other hand, is a Catholic, Iowan, 65-year-old capitalist tractor equipment seller who went to Yale. ("Like, crazy guy," Jo added). Of course they butt heads. Sometimes they reach an impasse. "I feel like recently he's been, like, 'You think I'm so, like, square, like, you think I'm so conservative,'" Jo said. Despite this, she feels like she has made some progress in changing his mind. "I can also see my own growth of how I interact with him and how he's come so far and, like, definitely, like, him 10 years ago is not who he is today."

The key is to lead with love. "I think that putting people down is just, like not going to do anyone any good. Like, we have to lead with love, we have to lead with empathy, we have to lead with understanding, which is exhausting sometimes."

Although leading with empathy is productive, that exhaustion is the cost, and sometimes it doesn't really go anywhere. Still, it's worth it. "It is definitely still, like, a push and pull, but I think that overall, I'm much better now than in the past two years. I think I've, like, grown a lot in being, like, much more empathetic and trying to be understanding and like, work with someone and not get in a fight."

Over years of work, Jo has built up that patience that building community requires. Social justice work requires not just a sense of right and wrong, but also patience, grit, and respect. One experience Jo remembers fondly was her time working for the Elmira Union of the Homeless (a part of the National Union for the Homeless). The EUH's motto: *You Only Get What You Are Organized to Take*. The Homeless Union takes organization very seriously, planning years in

advance. “We're going to do the foundational work. We're going to get the political education. We're going to build these networks. We're going to feed each other. Yeah. And then once we have the numbers and people's needs are met, then they can actually take the time to do the action, you know?” Jo said. “So I think it's like, realizing that, like It's not going to happen instantly. Like, even though it feels like, oh my God, something needs to change right now. It's more logistical or realistic, to be like, well, change doesn't happen overnight.”

The EUH, as well as the Kairos fellowship (a training program for young organizers) showed Jo how much community matters, especially in an increasingly isolated world. “I think right now we're all so eager to be connected to one another,” she said. “it feels like hopeless in a lot of ways, you know? And, like, if you don't see direct impact, it feels like you're doing nothing. Yeah. But I think, like, I think that's the thing is that it is it is about the long term. It is about the, like, drawing on past movements and ancestors and like people who have been like mobilizing and organizing for like centuries and decades... is it is unfortunately an ongoing long-term battle. And, like, I think what keeps me going is the, like, knowing that I have a community, I guess.”

It's nearly the end of Jo's last semester at Ithaca College. She'll stay in Ithaca, but for now, the future is uncertain, both personally, and in the world at large. But as long as there's people to work with, Jo will find her place. “I think [community] is what keeps drawing me into, like, social movement organizing. It's just, like, it's so beautiful in these spaces where we carve out intentional care for one another,” she said. “And that's, like, what, in my mind, activism and social justice work is doing, just like trying to build systemic change that's built on love for, the humanity in each other.”

