

NINA MOINI: A group of Minnesotans are back after a trip to Selma, Alabama, this weekend to commemorate 61 years since a pivotal moment in the Civil Rights movement. On March 7, 1965, state troopers attacked marchers on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma. The day would become known as Bloody Sunday and helped spur the passage of the Voting Rights Act.

A contingent of Minnesotans from various civil rights and immigration rights groups were among the thousands who gathered at the bridge this weekend. They participated as part of a trip organized by the Rainbow PUSH Coalition, an organization founded by the late Reverend Jesse Jackson, Sr.

Two of them join me now to share more about their experience.

Christina Ojo is with Ayada Leads. Hi, thank you for being here, Christina.

CHRISTINA OJO: Thank you so much for having me.

And, Rico Durán is with COPAL MN. Thanks for being with us as well, Rico.

RICO DURAN: Thank you for having me.

NINA MOINI: Christina, why did your organization, Ayada Leads, decide to be part of this trip?

CHRISTINA OJO: We decided to be part of this trip because during the peak of the ICE operations, Yusef Jackson, the son of the late Reverend Jackson, had come down and truly connected with a lot of the immigrant communities that were being impacted and affected by what was happening. And when offered to go on this trip, our team really sat down together and said that this was a great opportunity to really form bigger connections and really just find a way to truly empower one another as a people, not just the immigrant community, but like the communities of color and as a whole. We thought this was a monumental way to literally reach across the aisle and join hands together.

NINA MOINI: Talking about the intersectionality of different identities, Rico, could you tell us a little bit more about how many people from COPAL went on this trip, and how your organization was brought into the group.

RICO DURAN: No problem. We were a delegation of, along with all the organizations, close to 100 people, but from staff of COPAL, probably 32 people.

We got the invitation from Rainbow PUSH directly. This is an ongoing process of how Minnesota has been not just lately, but has a long history of civic participation in this when we received this invitation to be part of this commemoration at Selma.

NINA MOINI: Christina, can you talk a little bit about what it felt like to be on the bridge with so many others on that day?

CHRISTINA OJO: Oh, my goodness. It was absolutely, amazing. I remember as we were walking onto the bridge, I was just, like, wow, I am marking-- I am walking in the same place that civil rights leaders once walked, fighting the good fight. And I-- I felt this overwhelming sense of empowerment, of knowing that I am doing the same work that they did, and that we are continuing this fight. And no matter how long it takes, we are going to win this. We're going to win this battle and win this war.

NINA MOINI: What about you, Rico? What was it like for you?

RICO DURAN: Hey, I got to say something. I agree with Christina, but at the same time, I would like to say all these people participating and chanting and being there, listening to all those guest speakers, but at the same time, recognizing all this-- through the language that the people were expressing, they're bringing history back. I think it was a moment when people that were connected-- we all were connected to this celebration. Never is enough to describe when we hear from history, when we hear from other folks. But once you're there, totally feel that connection and saying, this is totally where the country is united right now.

NINA MOINI: Christina, I read this from the informational poster about the trip, and it said, "From the Midway Blitz to Operation Metro Surge to the bloodstained Alabama bridge, one thread connects our past to our present pain, the relentlessness of the fight against voter suppression and government overreach." Tell me what you think about those themes, and how they were reflected today and in the past few months here in Minnesota.

CHRISTINA OJO: The themes, like, I think it's monumental that-- not monumental. It is utterly just-- it baffles me that we are still fighting the same fight from so many years ago. And yet, that thread that does connect us, it really, truly just, it shows that we are not alone in this fight, that we must stay united. I'm trying to find the right words.

NINA MOINI: Sometimes, there aren't always words for a feeling, in a moment. I know, Rico, the Voting Rights Act and voting in general has been a central topic of conversation. President Donald Trump just yesterday said that he won't sign any other legislation until Congress passes a proof of citizenship voting bill. Just having been on this trip, how are you reflecting on the meaning of the Voting Rights Act and just the ongoing debates surrounding it today?

RICO DURAN: One of the things that we do in COPAL is we watch close from our leaders and we try to respond as soon as we hear those. As part of this, I can express an opinion, but mostly, what I would like to say is that we are responding according to every situation. Sometimes, it takes just moments when we want to just tell the people what to do, but we wanted to educate. We wanted to base our statements in good sources, but also, always going back to the Constitution, the laws, and what is out there. When we talk about voting suppression, we have to review history, and then we can most definitely analyze and bring the community together, for those discussions, those conversations, and what we wanted to really defend when we talk about the Constitution and also all these rights for the people in this country.

NINA MOINI: Christina, did you find that when you met and interacted with other people down there, were they curious about what has been going on in the state of Minnesota for the past few months?

CHRISTINA OJO: Most definitely. There were several times that other organizations from other parts of the country, they very much were, like, Minneapolis is here. And they were just, like, I think, truly, we really did represent what it means to be Minnesota strong, because people were just like, we're here for you. We're supporting you. We're in this together with all of you. And it was truly amazing to see that Minneapolis, the Twin Cities was recognized for what all the organizations did to really help step up and try our best to defend the people and how the rest of the world saw us. The rest of the country saw us.

NINA MOINI: Rico, we're in this midterm election year. There's a lot of organizing that's going on within COPAL that is not related and related in some ways, but was going on before and will continue to go on before the spike in federal agents that we saw here. What are you doing right now to get ready for that midterm election and engaging with people and with voters?

RICO DURAN: That is a good question. COPAL has a history of eight years working in Minnesota, bringing the people together to engage into, like I said before, civic participation, but most important to meet elected officials, but also those who are running for any specific areas. So what we hear this year, a special-- I feel like people are ready to participate, ready to get connected. COPAL has this membership that are really asking or waiting for the moment when we are going to keep connecting and bringing those issues and bringing the campaigns that the people are requesting in Minnesota.

Something I would like to say, just thinking of what Christina just mentioned, how people recognize us. And I think that the voting process, also, the world or the country will be observing. They'll be watching what Minnesota does. That's why it's important to keep close to the facts, close to the campaigns, close to education that we will do this year to engage the people in the voting process.

NINA MOINI: People will still be watching what happens here in Minnesota. Christina, I'll give the last question to you here. What will stay with you? What is something from this trip that will stay with you forever?

CHRISTINA OJO: Something I have been reflecting on the entire time we've gotten back is, like, OK, as a child of immigrants and also a Black American, we mentioned it earlier, how I stand on this intersectionality, and I've always kind of viewed myself as a bridge and not really belonging to either lands, but really, like, I'm a pinnacle, like a point, within both communities and such.

But what is amazing about bridges is that they connect people. And when we were walking over that bridge, I just-- it wasn't just like how I felt on the inside, but the looks I saw on everyone else's face. This, like, despite everything we've been through, we are-- it's not just the fight that we're doing right now. It's also the joy of just being united as one to face whatever we need to face. Like, there was one point we were at the very top of the bridge. I saw a sea of people all like looking so strong, and I just-- it was-- it's something I will never forget. That strength, I will never forget it.

NINA MOINI: Thank you both so much for sharing with us. Really appreciate your time.

CHRISTINA OJO: Thank you.

RICO DURAN: Thank you so much.

NINA MOINI: That was Christina Ojo and Rico Durán from COPAL MN.