



## SOUTHERN OREGON COALITION FOR RACIAL EQUITY

PUBLIC STATEMENT ON BEHALF OF THE FOUNDER AND LOGISTICS DIRECTOR OF  
THE SOUTHERN OREGON COALITION FOR RACIAL EQUITY

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It is with bittersweet gratitude that I announce that the Southern Oregon Coalition for Racial Equity (SOEquity), as we know it, is no longer. In June of 2020, I saw the incredible energy and increased activism in my home region and wanted to join in uplifting the Movement. My years of experience in fundraising, logistics and administrative coordination paired with my own lived experience as a disabled and queer Black femme with intersecting marginalized identities in Southern Oregon inspired me to create an organization that could serve as a central connector for the on-the-ground activists, already established organizations, and other stakeholders and decision makers. Thus, SOEquity was born.

It's been a wild ride since then! We've responded to countless crises in our community, including serving as one of the first on-the-ground organizations to mobilize after the September 2020 wildfires, providing daily meals to unhoused and displaced community members in Hawthorne Park through the Hawthorne Mutual Aid program, and coordinating direct support to the family of Aidan Ellison, a young Black man who was murdered in cold blood in November 2020. We have worked extremely hard to stay accountable and transparent while still protecting the privacy and confidentiality of our work. It's a hard line to tow, and we certainly made some mistakes along the way.

I originally envisioned SOEquity as a partnership—one where I was co-leading with a group of other leaders who made decisions collectively and communicated effectively to ensure we always had a united front when needed. I thought I had found that in my initial team of 4 other queer and/or BIPOC women leaders. Unfortunately, over the course of the last 18 months, each original leader has either voluntarily resigned or became so overwhelmed they began to cause more harm than good for the organization. Out of respect for my former coleaders, I will not get into the details of why each individual left SOEquity.

In July 2021, the remaining leaders of SOEquity voted to:  
transition out of a partnership model, create a sole proprietorship under my name, end our fiscal sponsorship relationship with the Rogue Action Center, and create a new nonprofit corporation to better serve our community.

While I did volunteer to file the sole proprietorship as the founder of the organization, I was actually not in favor of this process. I did not want to take 'ownership' over SOEquity as I knew the backlash it would cause. However, I was the only person on our leadership team without a child



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and/or partner at the time. This work is my life, and I had nothing to lose (or so I thought). And, so I volunteered to take on the liability as the sole proprietor of SOEquity.

In addition to deciding on this transition, the SOEquity leadership team voted to hire a legal and tax expert to oversee the process. Kala Park Bernhardt has an MBA, JD, and CPA, all from Oregon schools and is a woman of color who was born and raised in Gold Hill, Oregon. It was extremely important to SOEquity to hire a person of color who knows this area, and Ms. Bernhardt was the perfect fit at the time. The SOEquity Leadership agreed to hire Ms. Bernhardt as a contractor with a retainer of \$5,000 and covering expenses and labor costs of up to \$10,000 to transition the SOEquity team out of being a fiscally sponsored-organization under the Rogue Action Center to its own independent 501(c)3 nonprofit. Unfortunately, this project never came to fruition despite Ms. Bernhardt being paid \$8,000 for work she claimed to be completing and never provided to SOEquity. Ms. Bernhardt later began making false accusations that SOEquity did not pay her and accused me personally of misusing SOEquity funds that she was in charge of overseeing. I believe this to be the result of working under intensely traumatic circumstances that neither her nor I were equipped to deal with. I cannot speak for her, but I will share my own traumatic experiences from the last few months to provide as much context and clarity as to why SOEquity went into a forced hiatus.

On September 8, 2021, I had a nervous breakdown. Years of unaddressed personal trauma and the last two years of collective trauma as a community first-responder finally got to me, and I could no longer compartmentalize and ignore my own hurt while still being an effective leader. I asked one of my dearest friends to help me find a safe space to process this trauma. She agreed and took me to Nativewomanshare, a local land project stewarded by two BIPOC-identifying women whom we both trusted. One of my SOEquity coleaders was also present at the land project that day.

I felt safe enough to let out the years of pain I had been shoving down, and, to be frank, it came out in some very unconventional and loud ways. Despite being loud, I was mostly left alone to continue this release. Then, I witnessed two of the individuals at this land project try to physically restrain a young neurodivergent Black boy. As a neurodivergent Black person who has been unintentionally abused and connected so deeply to the story of Elijah McClain, I was triggered and tried to intervene. This, however, only escalated the situation. Because I was so worked up, I went to the bathroom to calm myself down. Unfortunately, I was not able to reach a level of peace needed to interact with the other adults on the land at the time, as they started banging on the door to try and confront me.

Here is where I must pause and say that I have worked with kids on the spectrum as well as children and adults in mental health crisis. I have also had multiple mental health crises where I have dissociated enough that I either attempted suicide or had the cops called on me. I have also successfully deescalated multiple situations where the cops have been called on someone else who is in a mental health crisis. I know what this looks like, and I have gotten very good at calming myself down to avoid a potentially life-threatening situation. The individuals that day did not know any of this and thought that I was a danger to myself.

Because the banging on the bathroom door was not helping deescalate the situation and only further triggering me, I walked out and screamed, to no one in particular, "NO ONE EVER RESPECTS



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MY BOUNDARIES.” In the moment, that was all I could say. I then walked away to one of the cabins on the land. The cabin that I had actually been invited to move into and live on the land permanently. I had been told this was *my* space to do what I wanted with, and in that moment, I needed to calm down. Instead of respecting my boundaries, the eldest so-called steward of the land physically broke down the door to the cabin and began screaming at me. She tried to physically restrain me and continued to violate my personal boundaries to berate me for being too loud on ‘her land.’ She does not legally own this land and claims to practice indigenous values of stewardship not ownership.

At this point, I fully dissociated and was in survival mode, Fight or Flight. So I fled. I began walking down the mile long driveway to remove myself from what was now an extremely unsafe situation for me. My friend who initially brought me there followed, and we sat on the side of the road and eventually I calmed myself down, though I was very loopy still. My coleader then drove by to pick us up, and I thought they were taking me home to my parents’ house. Instead, they took me to the Asante Emergency Room in Grants Pass. A place that—at the time—was overrun and understaffed due to COVID-19 and notorious for mistreating people in mental health crises.

Being taken to the hospital against my will is also another major trigger for me. I have been taken to the ER when I was a danger to myself. I have been taken to the ER when I was a danger to others. That day, I was neither, and when I realized what was going on, I tried to leave. My ‘friends’ corralled me into the Emergency Room anyways, and I was taken to a back room.

While I was in this back room, I was treated more inhumanely than I ever have been in my life—and I have been the victim and survivor of multiple traumatic events including rape, physical assaults, domestic abuse, psychological abuse and more. I was told to my face that I did not have any rights while I was there. I was forcibly stripped down and forced to wear papery, scratchy scrubs that only worsened my sensory overload. I was locked in a room with nothing but a lumpy cot and a pillow for about 24 hours and completely ignored when I tried to get anyone’s attention, even for a blanket or a glass of water (eventually I did get both of these things, but it was after constant begging that was ignored for an inhumane amount of time). I was forced to take medication that was not prescribed to me. To this day, I have no idea what they gave me.

At one point, a mental health evaluator came in and spoke with me. He deemed me coherent enough to be released and confirmed that I was not a danger to myself or others. They kept me overnight, against my will, anyways.

I thought I was going to die in there. And, in a way, I did. It was the death of ego and self that I needed to fully recommit myself to my work and my community. And it taught me the importance of identifying who my true allies are and who will turn on me as soon as they don’t like what I’m doing. A lesson I would only continue to learn over the few following months.

After I was released from the hospital and had time to recuperate, I went to Options of Southern Oregon and was diagnosed with borderline personality disorder. While it’s a highly misunderstood diagnosis, it was a relief for me. After dozens of doctors and therapists, medical trials, and countless medications over the last 15 years, I finally had a diagnosis that explained so much of my past



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behavior that I could not previously explain and was excited to get into specialized therapy to address these issues and prevent them from recurring in the future.

The following Monday, I learned that my coleader and the ‘friends’ I was with on September 8<sup>th</sup> had been telling people in our network that they took me to the hospital, and I refused treatment and was unwilling to take accountability for my actions. I was heartbroken. I grieved that evening and then knew I had to get back to work. And so I did.

Unfortunately, keeping one’s head down and getting back to work may seem like an avoidance tactic to the outside and untrained eye, which is why Melissa Jones, a former Hawthorne Mutual Aid volunteer who runs the ‘Stabbin Wagon’ Harm Reduction unit despite having no training or understanding of best practices within addiction services, started to become suspicious of my actions. She accused me of misusing SOEquity funds, keeping my coleaders in the dark purposefully, and began spreading rumors to our volunteers that SOEquity was falling apart and that I was unstable and untrustworthy.

At this point, I feel it important to remind everyone that my coleaders had agreed two months prior to transition complete ownership over to me and agreed on the structure of how we would spend our funds in order to dissolve the partnership. Ms. Jones did not know that and refused to listen to me when I tried to explain the situation. Instead, she began spreading egregious rumors about my mental health and the status of SOEquity’s operations, as well as attacking my personal character and integrity in mutual social networks. As someone who spoke up on Ms. Jones’ behalf in a committee addressing mental health crisis, I was shocked that someone who claims to prioritize harm reduction was so willing to sow unfounded seeds of doubt and cause direct harm to a Black community leader who just experienced a severely traumatizing event due to a poorly handled mental health crisis.

This type of blatant refusal to cooperate and desire to retaliate is rooted in white supremacy. Of course, a white woman is going to be suspicious of a BIPOC-led group that is capable of organizing and mobilizing in ways that she cannot. And so she decided to take it out on our project manager for Hawthorne Mutual Aid, a formerly unhoused queer white individual. On September 27, 2021, she came to Hawthorne Park during our scheduled services, unannounced, and began screaming at our project manager, triggering their own PTSD symptoms and upsetting other unhoused folks, who were there for services, and forcing our team to pack up and leave the park early.

The following day, Ms. Jones came back to the park and sat on the hood of her car for the entire time we were providing food and resources, not speaking to us—just “observing.” This type of community policing made our volunteers that day, all of whom were Black or Indigenous, extremely uncomfortable. Multiple people asked her to leave, and she refused.

This was unfortunately the start of a snowball effect over the next few months. The majority of our white volunteers quit shortly after when I called Ms. Jones a “Karen” for harassing our BIPOC volunteers on my personal social media. They ironically saw my post as “bullying” and refused to volunteer at the park unless I took down the post. As a Black leader who was born and raised here in Southern Oregon in active Klan country, I am not one to be bullied into silence for speaking my mind, and so they quit.



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Before we had the chance to recruit new volunteers, the remaining SOEquity team had to deal with the consequences of an ill-advised event that happened a few days prior. Ms. Jones and some other housed individuals organized a “Raid-aversary” event to “celebrate” the one-year anniversary of the major raid in Hawthorne Park that saw multiple activists and unhoused individuals arrested. This poorly thought-out event led to an increased police presence and eventually a second raid on September 30, 2021. Thankfully, SOEquity’s competent team arrived and were able to prevent any arrests from happening that day. Though it did lead to the eventual targeted harassment and arrest of one brave Hawthorne resident. Our public statements regarding these events can be seen on our website.

In the following months, the trauma of working in the park with an increased police presence became too much for our project manager and volunteers. While I worked to get the structure in place to transition to a secure and permanent location, my co-organizers responded to the stress of Hawthorne Mutual Aid by becoming more and more resentful and suspicious of my actions. This was exacerbated by Ms. Bernhardt’s aforementioned false accusations and attack on my character. This unfortunately came to a head when Ms. Bernhardt reported her false claims to the Director, Michelle Glass, and the Board of our previous fiscal sponsor, the Rogue Action Center. Despite having worked with me closely for over a year and a half in overlapping crises, they believed Ms. Bernhardt’s illegitimate claims at face value.

Even worse, instead of giving me a chance to share my experiences and truth—or even investigate these accusations independently as there is zero evidence that I have misused funds other than Ms. Bernhardt’s intangible accusations—the Rogue Action Center responded by banning me from their October Board Meeting they had originally invited me to, seizing the SOEquity vehicle that was purchased through an Oregon Food Bank grant to SOEquity, and firing our Hawthorne Mutual Aid program manager as the position was through a WorkForce grant position the RAC had offered to SOEquity. This unprofessional and aggressive behavior is irresponsible at best, and grossly negligent and supremacist at worst.

I am deeply disappointed in my community. I have spent the last few weeks determining how to move forward, unsure if it was even safe for me to continue working in the region in which I was born and raised. I have had to come to terms with a *lot* of harsh truths and see individuals for the fallible beings they are who have not yet worked through their trauma and internalized supremacies. I will end by offering a few unequivocal truths:

I have not misused SOEquity funds.

I am not responsible for the termination of our Hawthorne Mutual Aid project manager.

I have done everything I can to give grace and patience to my fellow activists and community organizers, and when I asked for the same in return I was met with aggression and retaliation for misdeeds I did not commit.



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And, still, I am not perfect. I have certainly made mistakes. I have responded to intense situations with anger and frustration. I have lashed out. I have cried. I have screamed. I have had multiple meltdowns and breakdowns. And I am doing everything I can to hold myself accountable.

But, part of that journey is holding my community accountable as well. And normalizing the idea that we, as leaders, are allowed to make mistakes.

I am 27 years old. I am a young and neurodivergent, Black and Irish, queer and nonbinary activist who was born on a farm in Hugo, Oregon. I was raised in an evangelical, white supremacist cult that indoctrinated its followers to the idea that you can achieve anything through sheer willpower. That mental illness was not real. That being gay or trans was a sickness to be cured. It has taken me 27 years to accept this devastating reality and 27 years to get a proper diagnosis for my very real and very treatable mental illness, which I am absolutely addressing. And which is absolutely nobody's goddamn business.

The ableism, supremacy and savior complexes that are rampant in the Southern Oregon activist community is disgusting and will only continue to cause more harm than good unless others beyond myself begin to take responsibility for their actions. The desire to place complete blame on one of the only activists who was born in this community and has an in-depth experience of what it means to be Black, gay, and neurodivergent in Southern Oregon is so fantastically bigoted that I have been at a loss for words until now.

Do Better, Southern Oregon.

As I expressed at the beginning of this public statement, SOEquity, as we know it, is no longer. In the upcoming weeks, we will be undoing the accounting errors and operational damage committed by Kala Park Bernhardt. We will be working to hold our former fiscal sponsor, the Rogue Action Center, accountable for their countless acts of negligence against one of the only Black-led organizations in Southern Oregon. We will identify consultants and counselors of the Global Majority who are willing and able to work with local organizers to process their trauma and internalized supremacy, responsibly. Above all, we will continue to fight and uphold our mission of creating an equitable and accessible Southern Oregon through an antiracist lens.

In 2022, we will be rebranding as the Black Liberation, Indigenous Sovereignty and Solidarity Alliance; BLISS Alliance for short. In 2022, Ignorance is no longer BLISS, and self-accountability is the Top Priority.

On a personal note, I have finally come to terms and fully accepted my identity as queer, polyamorous and nonbinary. As such, I finally had the strength to leave my abusive living situation and live in my truth. In 2022, Kayla Marie Wade, as we know them, will be no longer. I have embraced my Gaelic and African ancestral roots as well as my commitment to Indigenous solidarity, as someone who was born directly on this Land and was inadvertently taught coopted Indigenous survival and stewardship practices from jump. In 2022, I will be legally and formally changing my name. I am excited for this next step in my personal, professional, and communal journey.



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I hope you go on this journey alongside me. And I forgive you if your journey must be in direct odds with mine.

Much Love and Power,

Ifae Fawn  
(pronounced ee-fay)  
*The Activist Formally Known As  
Kayla Marie Wade*