

EX Fabula

Story. Stage. You.

Audio Transcript: Brian's Story

3, 2, 1, welcome to Ex Fabula! True, Personal Stories. Ex Fabula! Story, Stage, You. Ex Fabula is a Milwaukee non-profit committed to strengthening community bonds through the art of storytelling.

Ex Fabula Fellows are community members who use personal stories to inspire community led dialogue around some of the most pressing issues in the greater Milwaukee area like segregation, and economic and racial inequality.

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Ex Fabula Fellow, Brian Chiu, shared a story at "Translator" in March of 2016.

So it was 1998, and I was a graduate student at the University of California, in the Irvine campus. A whole bunch of graduate students were trying to form a labor union, a teaching assistant labor union. So Irvine was the only - among all the 9 campuses in the UC system. Irvine was the only campus that hasn't organized yet. Other campuses like UC Berkley, UCLA have already decided to go on strike the following year. But they'll most likely fail, as they have for the past 20 years prior, because they're still missing one or more campuses. So if Irvine had to organize, we'd have to go from zero to strike in one year, which has never been done before. And the other thing that's never been done, is that in order to build a stronger union, we decided to organize across departments, so I was from Electrical Engineering, and my job was to organize Comparative Literature. So I thought, "oh, Comp Lit, they study Marxist theory over there. This is going to be easy." So one day, I caught up with the Comp Lit TA, you know in her office hours, and we started going through my spiel about union, about the importance of a strike. Immediately, she responded really positively, like she believes in the unions, she believes that strike is the only weapon of choice for workers seeking justice in the workplace. So I thought, "this is great. So can I count on you to vote yes in the strike vote then?" And then she blew up. She started saying things like, "well, I did my undergrad in UC Berkley. That was a radical campus; this is not." And things like "And your parents' union is the United Automobile Workers? UAW? You know, we're PhD students, for Christ's sake." And then things got kind of weird. She proceeded to correct my spoken English. I think things like, she was saying instead of using words like "when the strike vote has been collected," versus using words like "when we have collected enough strike votes to cross the threshold." She said, "use the active voice; it's more convincing." And things like, "Instead of using the word threshold, maybe try precipice; it's more precise." So I was a little flabbergasted. So after 20 minutes of this kind of involuntary English instruction, which is my third language by the way, I walked out. And she ended by saying, well if you'd been a competent organizer, I would have voted "yes." So I was in tears when I walked out, I didn't realize -- it was surprising, because she was supposed to be a political ally. We're both graduate students, we're both teaching assistants; we're the same rank. And she's a Berkley radical. And it took me a while to realize that it wasn't about anything I said, or anything about my spiel; she

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was attacking me personally. But I think the worst part is you don't know where you're getting hit; you know, I thought, "dude, I just got hit -- it hurts! But I don't know where I got hit. Was it because I'm Asian? Was it because I'm an immigrant?" You know, this took me back to when I was 10 years old. We had just arrived in the United States, not speaking a word of English, in the back of my parents' restaurant, watching some customer berating my parents over something I don't understand. You know, was it because my demeanor was way too direct, you know, too unsophisticated, too blue collar? So you know, I was, I felt really horrible. I went back to my mentor in the union, who happened to be the first Wisconsinite I ever met. He's white; he's also from a blue collar neighborhood. And he also experienced some of this stuff when he was organizing, mostly the classism part of it. He told me something indispensable as an organizer, that I should abandon all preconceived notions, all presumptions of people I meet. At least, I shouldn't base anything on what they say, especially people who profess to be strong Marxists. I should base everything on what people do. We had the same problem -- this disconnect between speech and action that we both didn't understand when we started. So this was really important. I think this really, over the next few months, really shaped me as an organizer. So about a year later, the Irvine campus organized in record time. The following year, the entire state, all nine campuses, went on strike together. On the 4th day of the strike, the California state legislature stepped in. They changed labor law in our favor, and they compelled the university to negotiate. This is something that they'd never been able to achieve since the 60s, and we won, that day. So by the time I graduated in 2001, I was the vice president of the union. I was in charge of organizing work at five out of the nine campuses. And today, with

15,000 members, UAW Local 2865, is the biggest TA union in the world. The 2015 to 2016

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