



CHRYSALIS

AN INCUBATION PERIOD
FOR ALTERNATE ROOTS
TO REFLECT, REGROUP,
STRENGTHEN, AND
THRIVE

AN INTERVIEW

WITH ALTERNATE ROOTS
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
DR. MICHELLE RAMOS

INTERVIEWED BY:
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SINCE THIS INTERVIEW WAS COMPLETED, ALTERNATE ROOTS (OR ROOTS) HAS FORMALLY ANNOUNCED ITS CHRYSALIS MONTH, TAKING PLACE IN JANUARY 2023.

Q: WHAT IS A CHRYSALIS PERIOD, AND WHAT PROMPTED ROOTS TO CONSIDER DOING ONE?

MICHELLE RAMOS: ROOTS operates from a very people-centered way of working, so it makes perfect sense that we would take a pause to dig deep, reflect, and plan for the future. When we started discussing this in spring 2022, we were coming through this huge period of growth and expansion, and we were barely keeping our heads above water trying to manage all that growth.

We realized that many nonprofits have expanded so quickly and gotten so much money, all while being asked to grow bigger and reach more people and be more expansive. But there's no grace given for all the time it takes to implement that change, so **THAT'S WHAT THE CHRYSALIS PERIOD IS ALL ABOUT - CREATING THE SPACE AND TIME TO FOCUS ON OUR ORGANIZATIONAL GROWTH.**

The chrysalis period really resonated with me, because I've got a staff saying, "We need to pause. We need to stop. We need to be strategic about how we're moving forward." And there's been no time to do it, because we keep hearing, "Produce, produce, produce! More money! Get more staff! Do more programs! Expand, expand, expand!" I've got people who are supervising who have never supervised before. I've got people coming into the organization that haven't been a part of the organization, and they've got a whole learning curve ahead of them. I've got generational tension happening between my 20-year-old staff, making all these demands of the things they want in a workplace, and my 50-year-old staff being like, "What are y'all talking about? Put your head down, do your work, and quit complaining!"

Being thoughtful is in ROOTS' DNA, so we knew we needed to make the time to move into that growth in an intentional and healthy way.

Q: WHAT DO YOU HOPE TO ACHIEVE DURING A CHRYSALIS PERIOD?

MR: THE NUMBER ONE GOAL FOR ME IS TO BE RESPONSIVE TO THE CALL MADE BY STAFF FOR WHAT THEY NEED AS HUMAN BEINGS, AS PEOPLE, to be able to do their job and to feel good about doing their job. They've asked for this, they have given such incredible reasoning for why it's needed, and it's clear to me they need it. I know I've got some staff that are exhausted and in way over their heads with managing staff that they've never managed before. We have trust issues, because of our primarily remote setting and the impact of people who've had very little face-to-face time with each other. I want staff to know that they were heard, that I'm honoring their desire to do this, and recognizing that they may see something I don't, because I'm not on the frontlines with them day in and day out.



We're tending to and nourishing our roots.

THE NUMBER TWO THING IS TO ACKNOWLEDGE THAT WE HAVE GONE THROUGH THIS EXTENSIVE PERIOD OF GROWTH, AND WE'VE NEVER HAD TIME TO JUST SIT WITH THAT.

We went from a staff of six to a staff of 19 in four years. The sudden growth has created issues of trust by not allowing time for bonding, especially because ROOTS is such a people-centered, person-to-person, heart-to-heart organization. We'd never want to lose who we are as an organization, because of all this outside influence that has come in to impact our work. We're tending to and nourishing our roots, so that we stay true to who we are, our values, our principles, what we stand for, and what we believe in. We're also going into our 50th anniversary in 2026, which is a milestone for this organization. I want to be sure that we have everything on point as we're celebrating an amazing organization.

Q: DID THE WHOLE ORGANIZATION GET ON BOARD WITH THE IDEA OF A CHRYSALIS PERIOD RIGHT AWAY?

MR: I was absolutely NOT on board with the idea immediately. Within the organization, responses to the idea kind of divided into camps based on job description – the development people, the membership people, and the finance people we're all like, “Whoa, what are we talking about? We can't do that!” However, the people who have more fluid roles like our communications folks and our cultural organizing folks, they responded, “Yes, let's absolutely take a breath. We need to, and we've needed to do this for years.”



We had to make sure we all understood that a chrysalis period isn't a vacation.

As we talked through it and thought through it, I realized it actually makes a lot of sense, but we had to make sure we all understood that a chrysalis period isn't a vacation. At one point, our communications director said, "Just to be clear, we're not asking for time off to go sit at the beach and have drinks with umbrellas. We're talking about taking a pause in order to plan, to work intentionally, and to think about a five-year plan for staffing and how we're holding all this new growth and expansion."

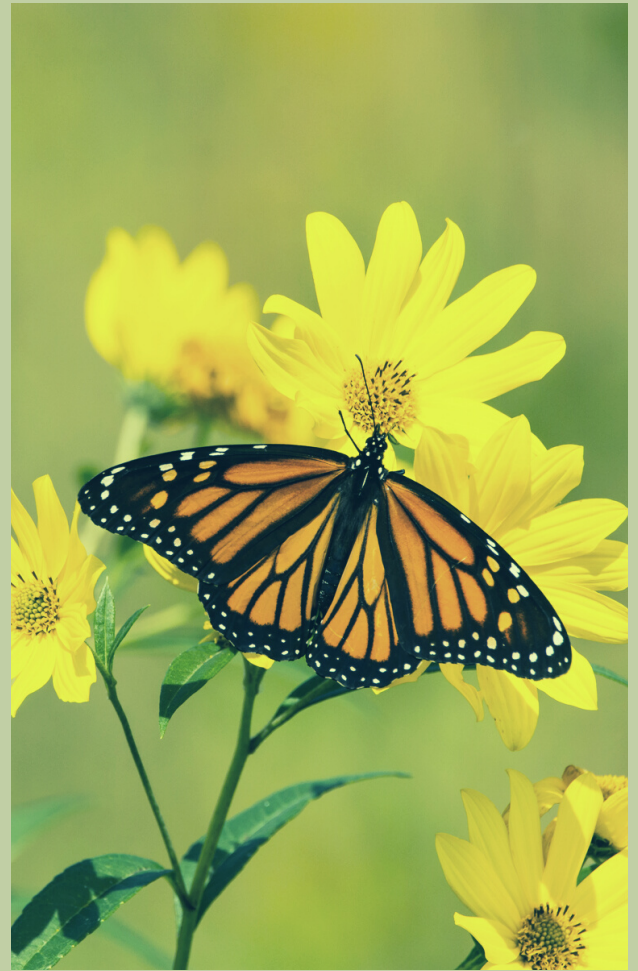
Q: WHAT WAS THE PROCESS LIKE FOR DECIDING TO EMBARK ON THIS PATH?

MR: The seed of the conversation came up in our Ford BUILD process. We were meeting monthly with a committee of staff and members, and exploring a chrysalis period had come up, so we pegged it as a thing to talk about with the committee. At that time, there was a lot of deep conversation about it, and we later found out another organization we respect – Allied Media Project – had undergone a chrysalis year. Then the topic came up again in a staff meeting, because we were talking about capacity and trust issues due to all our growth, so we put it back on the table. From then on, we continued the conversation from a standpoint of, "if we're going to do this, how are we going to do this?"

ROOTS has multiple smaller conferences and re-granting programs, as well as a big annual conference, so one of the first things we did was lay out our commitments by grant year, with what we had promised to deliver every year for all our grants until they expire. Completing that process made it clear that we couldn't even consider a chrysalis year until 2026 if we were to build it around when our grants are due.

THAT'S WHEN WE REALIZED WE NEEDED TO RETHINK HOW WE MIGHT DO THIS AND FOR HOW LONG, BECAUSE TAKING A YEAR OFF FROM PROGRAMMING WOULD BE VIRTUALLY IMPOSSIBLE FOR US IN THE NEAR FUTURE.

Eventually, we decided on a chrysalis month, but the process really made me reflect on how it's so contrary to the framework of nonprofit structure: stopping, taking time, pausing, and breathing. The white supremacist world that we live in doesn't work this way – we're supposed to work, we're supposed to produce. The idea that we would stop, just stop everything, was something a lot of people couldn't wrap their heads around. I saw this in some of our staff and our board when the conversation came up – the aversion to stopping the work. That's grounded in white supremacist practices globally, but especially strongly in the United States. I had to digest the idea myself, because I could feel my own resistance to 'stopping.'



It was about convincing me and folks like me who immediately thought, “No, we can't do this,” to really sit with it and think about how much value there could be.

We had just gone through almost two and a half years of a pandemic, and we were just starting to get back into our normal programming. It felt like a moment in time where we had enough money to do things, we had enough staff to actualize things, we had energy happening, and people were paying attention to the South and to Black and Brown people. We wanted to ride that wave, because it might not last long. That influx of energy, resources, and capacity was setting my soul on fire, so then to have my staff want to put on the brakes was a little frustrating for me at first.

I had to sit with that for a while and really listen to the staff, listen to their perspective, listen to what it was that they were asking for and calling for. I had to recognize that if we didn't do everything that we said we wanted to in 2022 or 2023, that's okay. We still can do it, it's just going to be a little slower. It was about convincing me and folks like me who immediately thought, “No, we can't do this”, to really sit with it and think about how much value there could be in this if we really allowed the process to happen.

Q: WHAT HELPED YOU SIT AND WRESTLE WITH THE 'SHOULD WE' OR 'SHOULD WE NOT' QUESTIONS?

MR: My Strategic Partnerships Director Clarissa Crawford was the one that got me. Of all my staff, she's very quiet and just listens, but then when she opens up her mouth, it's golden. She said, "I will explain to the funders that the reason why we need to have this time off is because they gave us money, but they didn't give us time. They didn't give us capacity to build this." We even had staff members say, "Put me on the phone with a funder, and I'll tell them why we're doing this."

WHEN YOU ALLOCATE LARGE AMOUNTS OF MONEY LIKE THIS, YOU HAVE TO TAKE THE ORGANIZATION, THE PEOPLE, AND THE INSTITUTION INTO CONSIDERATION.

The money's great, but it also causes harm and trauma, because it causes exhaustion. The biggest sort of resistance to doing the chrysalis period came when talking about funders – "What will the funders say? What will the funders do?"

Q: WHAT DO YOU IMAGINE THE CHRYSALIS PERIOD WILL LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?

MR: THERE IS AN EXPECTATION THAT SOMETHING IS COMING BACK FROM THIS TIME THAT WILL BENEFIT THE TEAM, AS WELL AS THE WHOLE ORGANIZATION.

Our staff is scattered across the South, so, presumably, some of our teams may want to get together in-person. We'll provide resources, so they can come together and have that face-to-face time. If they've got people that they want to come in and help facilitate their process, we'll have resources available for them to do that as well. We also have resources from our Ford BUILD grant available to us. We intend to use part of those funds to help fund some of the groundwork that is needed for this period to be successful.





Q: WHAT PARAMETERS WILL STAFF BE WORKING WITH DURING THE CHRYSALIS PERIOD?

MR: ROOTS IS A SHARED LEADERSHIP ORGANIZATION, IN THAT WE DON'T LIKE TO OPERATE HIERARCHICALLY IN ANY WAY, SHAPE, OR FORM IF WE CAN AVOID IT.

We may offer a menu of things that would be impactful to work on during the chrysalis period, and we'll likely move through a joint decision making process for what this time looks like.

We would never mandate that everyone needs to create a five-year plan to get through the 2026 period, for instance. But if I provide options to consider our five-year work plan to get to 2026, or a visioning session, staff get to design what they want. I love doing that, because often, they come up with much better ideas than I could have ideated on my own.

Staff reflection time has been a part of ROOTS for a while now.

Q: WHAT DOES STAFF REFLECTION TIME MEAN FOR ALTERNATE ROOTS, AND HOW DOES THAT TIE IN TO THE CHRYSALIS?

MR: Staff reflection time has been a part of ROOTS for a while now. We always give a paid week off to our staff after our annual conference, because it's such a lift for the whole team, and it's essential to have that time to take care of themselves. For at least the last 7 years, we've also given the last two weeks of the year off. The goal of that was always for staff to have time to step away from the work and to be with family, or travel, or do whatever they want to do. We pay them those two weeks, so that they don't have to stress about being able to afford the time off. We encourage them to take care of themselves and restock, nourish, and replenish, knowing that they're going to be coming back for another whole year of work.

The January chrysalis month following our two-week reflection period makes sense, because staff will be rejuvenated, and they're coming back from time where they've been very intentional about focusing their energy and efforts on invigorating themselves personally. Now, they're going to step into a four-week period where they're going to be doing that, but with their work and with the organization.



To follow
the Chrysalis
journey, visit
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Alternate ROOTS is a participant in BUILDing for Growth, a capacity-building program designed to address challenges of rapid growth. The program was developed by La Piana Consulting in collaboration with the Ford Foundation's BUILD initiative.