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**SAN JOSE  
STRONG**

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change the world? If not, what else can?

BY ETHAN GREGORY DODGE P10



# STRENGTH in Members

*The woman behind San Jose Strong now has her sights set on developing an app for activists* BY ETHAN GREGORY DODGE



**I**T WAS A HOT June day in San Jose, a city still reeling after police had tear gassed and fired rubber bullets at peaceful protestors responding to the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis a few days earlier. Social media across the world was inundated with black squares posted in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement. Having attended the San Jose protests and become overwhelmed by the larger national conversation, then 21-year-old San Josean Mary Celestin seized what she saw as an opportunity.

From her phone, she uploaded eight images she designed herself earlier that day and carefully reviewed them. Once satisfied, she posted the batch on Instagram, asking followers to share and repost.

Above the image of a clenched fist, Celestin put out a call to action: “San Jose! Let’s get to work.” Below it read, “A guide to activism for San Jose.”

Posted four hours before an 8:30pm curfew would go into effect in San Jose, Celestin’s guide began with a call for civil disobedience. Describing the curfew as an attempt to “dissipate the movement,” she suggested “sit on your lawn, walk down your street, even for 10 minutes. You can stand with the movement from your own home.”

The post also provided information

on attending protests, where to donate money, how to support Black-owned restaurants and how to contact both the mayor and the police chief.

“I just took the national conversation and centered it in San Jose,” Celestin says.

The timing of the post achieved the desired effect, garnering more than 8,000 likes and hundreds of shares. Celestin began receiving up to 100 DMs a day from people asking for more information about protests or other ways to get involved. The need for a dedicated platform disseminating such information became starkly apparent to her.

“Hearing these questions where people couldn’t find an answer elsewhere and were thus compelled

to DM me showed that this was a need and that the issue was a lack of social infrastructure,” Celestin says.

Three days later, she made a new Instagram profile called San Jose Strong and posted the same infographic there.

## Making Connections

San Jose Strong quickly became an organizing hub for local activists. Its shirts and signs with “Black Lives Matter” and “San Jose Strong” written in bold bubble lettering were iconic in the 408 during the summer of 2020.

In a post earlier this month commemorating its two-year anniversary, SJS claims to have produced more than 175 infographics





Greg Ramnar

**STRONGER TOGETHER** SJS volunteers Sachin Vallamkonda, Eleni Jacobson and Ariel Chu.

overt (being called the n-word by passersby) and covert. Despite her stellar academic performance, she had to fight for opportunities in high school that her white peers were afforded with no resistance.

Now she would like to help smooth the way for others through SJS, helping to build a future where civic engagement is as simple as receiving a push notification summarizing what the San Jose City Council is discussing and voting on that day and an option to submit comments with the same ease as replying to a text message or an email.

"Most people have to work at 9:30am on a Tuesday and don't have 10 hours to go through every side link on that complicated government website," she says, referring to the website where city meeting agendas are posted. "The city should be there for you. You shouldn't have to find the city."

## Building a New Platform

To make that vision of streamlining civic engagement a reality, Celestin wants to turn San Jose Strong into an app. 23-year-old Yeabtsega "Sega" Birhane, a lead developer of the app, says this goal is key to the future of community involvement in San Jose.

"I think it's easy to be very jaded when reading the news and seeing the political environment on a national level," Birhane says. "But going through college, taking different courses and listening to various podcasts, I know that the biggest change you can make as an individual is by plugging into your community and helping it where you can and where you're passionate about."

and community guides and added more than 150 companies to their database. But more important are the people—almost 50 volunteers organizing around various social issues such as education, privacy and surveillance, art and music, and survivor advocacy.

"If you have an idea or something you think matters but you're not quite sure how to do it and you need that support and want community help to find the resources you need, we serve well as a conduit for those resources," Celestin says. "We're a digital database for resources and an organizing hub for residents. That's the ethos of San Jose Strong."

The digital database is the informational arm of SJS, responsible for messaging and communication.

Underneath this "arm" are a database committee, a calendar committee, an artist and design committee, and various software engineering committees.

The organizing hub is the activist arm, which is made up of committees organizing around various social issues such as education, art, music, survivor advocacy and privacy and surveillance.

In July 2020, I had just launched the Citizens Privacy Coalition of Santa Clara County. Celestin was one of the first organizers to reach out to me with interest in collaborating. I'm no longer affiliated with that organization, and it is now part of SJS. But by connecting with Celestin, I met dozens more San Joseans who were trying to make their

hometown a better place.

Celestin was born in Oakland to an American-Cape Verdean mother and an American-Haitian father. She spent her first years in San Jose and then attended elementary schools around the country before returning to San Jose's Cambrian neighborhood, where she attended middle and high schools.

When getting a bachelor's degree in civil engineering at Harvey Mudd College in Claremont, she would rave to her friends about San Jose, so they weren't surprised when she started SJS. "San Jose has such a rich tapestry of culture from all of these different people who come here from all over the world," she says.

Yet her experience living there hasn't been without racism, both





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## STRENGTH ◀11

That's precisely what she and the rest of SJS hope to enable with their app.

The SJS mission statement reads, "Where vacation and visit platforms, like Visit San José, serve as spark notes for tourists, we are the whole book for residents."

Birhane expands on that statement. "The mission is to bring the community of San Jose together by providing a central hub to find information about San Jose, whether it be transit, activism, things that are going on around the city, or volunteering with different organizations. A central place for community activism," she says.

In line with Celestin's vision, Birhane and her team see the app as an alternative to social media. They aim for it to be not only more accessible, but more respectful of privacy as well. Intentionally built on infrastructure and platforms without invasive privacy policies, the app will not require user accounts and will minimally track user behavior.

While the app is being built, the database committee is gathering the information presented in the app. Each business and organization listed is asked explicit permission and must be comfortable with the fact that SJS supports causes such as Black Lives Matter, equitable housing, defunding the police, Palestinian freedom and several others.

"We have an idea of a minimum viable product, the core features we want," says Birhane. "We've been working on finishing that. We all work full time and this is just a side project. It's not a huge barrier—it just means that things go slower, which is fine because there's no hard deadline."

Despite that fact, the team hopes to release the first iteration of the app in January 2023.

Celestin feels that San Jose's mix of both urban and suburban environments makes it the perfect testing grounds for her vision. "It's a good blueprint city," she says. "If you can do it here, you can map that to most any city."

In Celestin's ideal vision, the app will be accessible not only to everyone with a smartphone but also

to those who don't. The latter would use it via kiosks and other portals throughout the city, such as library computers. She hopes this would enable the unhoused population to get directly connected to government programs and groups with the resources to help them.

The goal of all this information-sharing, Birhane hopes, is to promote engagement between individuals and communities that wouldn't have met otherwise. "It humanizes everybody to everybody else instead of your neighbor being some stranger you don't care about."

For now, SJS builds these connections through a community calendar on their website and highlighting events and local businesses on their Instagram. Event organizers can submit entries through a form and a committee adds



Greg Ramar

**DIGITAL DEMOCRACY** Founder Mary Celestin describes San Jose Strong as a resource database and organizing hub.

it to the calendar. They also regularly scan certain social media accounts for large upcoming events.

But San Jose Strong's biggest asset are its volunteers. And each one brings a different set of skills and strengths to the work. "I appreciate that we all contribute opportunities and connections from our own diverse areas of expertise," says Eleni Jacobson, lead of the calendar committee.

## The Art of Protest

Celestin's original infographic, commonly referred to by SJS volunteers as "the guide," set the tone for what the organization would become known for: informational, graphic posts to Instagram. As a result, art is a pillar to the SJS strategy.

When Ariel Chu saw that original

infographic, the 21-year-old was looking for a way to get involved in social justice in San Jose. "Mary created the guide and in the captions she said she was trying to create an activist organization in San Jose and to reach out if you want to volunteer," Chu recalls. She did exactly that.

Chu brought experience as an artist to their volunteer work with SJS but had to overcome a learning curve to produce digital art. "For SJS, I definitely wanted to push myself to try and get better," they recall. "Art is such a huge creative outlet for me. That's why I'm grateful for joining San Jose Strong and be able to partake in social activism while pursuing my creative passions as well."

In the early days, during the protests and demonstrations of 2020, a request would be thrown out

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## STRENGTH ◀13

to all SJS artists to create a certain infographic. Any artist could take the assignment—a process that Chu calls “discombobulated.” “Now we have a rotation so artists know when they’re going to create a piece of work.”

**We forget to realize that a lot of the primal and real work is done by younger people. Sometimes, they’re people that are only in high school or recent college graduates. They’re doing all this amazing work and putting in all this time and energy into social activist work.**

For Pride Month last year, Chu and other SJS artists created a zine showcasing the work of seven queer artists from San Jose. Chu, “a proud

bisexual,” was happy to work on a project that highlighted other queer creatives: “Their work is super impactful.”

After putting in months of effort into the zine, hearing the appreciation from the profiled artists was one of Chu’s most rewarding moments with the group.

## Document and Build

Sachin Vallamkonda, with whom Celestin attended Archbishop Mitty High school, was also impressed by the guide and the other educational material SJS subsequently released. “It became this whole huge platform,” he recalls.

Inspired by Celestin and other activists during the summer of 2020, Vallamkonda felt it was important to document the whirl of social and racial justice activity happening at the time.

“I wanted to create some type of archive of different videos, photos, audio, from local events,” he says. “Both to capture the entirety of the movement itself, but also to make sure the amazing work done by activists in the local area is remembered, highlighted, and not forgotten.”

So, he created SJS’s South Bay Activism Archive, “trying to create some type of portfolio, archive, or a video project showcasing specifically the work done by youth activists.”

Originally, the team would solicit content from the public. But being back in San Jose for the summer and having received a small grant from his university, Vallamkonda has tried his best to attend different local events to document them himself. Earlier this month, he could be seen taking pictures at rallies for reproductive rights. He also intends to interview activists about the work they are doing.

“We forget to realize that a lot of the primal and real work is done by younger people,” he says. “Sometimes, they’re people that are only in high school or recent college graduates. They’re doing all this amazing work and putting in all this time and energy into social activist work.”

I want to highlight the amazing accomplishments, achievements, and all the work they've put heart, sweat and tears into."

Vallamkonda says the term "youth activist" can be a little fast and loose and he's not interested in setting a strict standard. "Anyone who considers themselves a young person working in the space of activism and community movements, I would definitely love to interview them."

While getting individuals the recognition he feels they deserve, Vallamkonda says the mission of the South Bay Activism Archive is two-pronged. Despite spending the first 18 years of his life in San Jose, it wasn't until launching this project and speaking with local historian and author Jan Batiste Adkins that he learned about his hometown's rich history of activism.

"From a historical point of view, it's important that we remember all this work so we know how to build on it in the future."

While currently concentrated on gathering material for the archive, Vallamkonda and his team plan to release the archive on a website in timeline form when it's ready. "We hope to make the website active and live, where we can continually be adding pieces to the archive."

## Strengthening Survivors

Originally born in India, 25-year-old Shivani Kavuluru moved to Campbell when their father obtained a new job. There, Kavuluru attended all of elementary school before returning to India for middle and half of high school. They then returned to Santa Clara County to finish high school and, upon graduating, began attending Pitzer College in Claremont.

In high school, Kavuluru began advocating for survivors of abuse. In college that advocacy continued by "suggesting and making amendments to the student code of conduct and finding abolitionist solutions that are not punitive but instead regenerative." A survivor of domestic violence themselves, Kavuluru says their experiences have enabled them to "move in this world with ferocious kindness and warmth and forgiveness."

At Pitzer, Kavuluru became a mentee of Tiombe Wallace, a Black feminist therapist known for her trauma-informed approach to therapy. "I owe all of the mindfulness, the tenderness, the warmth and the empathy training to Tiombe," says

Kavuluru. "I cannot tell you that there's ever been a conversation [with her] where I haven't come away from learning yet another valuable piece of wisdom that I'm able to apply to love myself and others."

After graduating and returning to San Jose, Kavuluru says, "I was already trying to create a safe space for survivors in San Jose. I knew I wanted a space guided by the values I had learned from my mentors."

Kavuluru approached Celestin with that vision and found the San Jose Strong leader was "so willing to embrace it and help us create that kind of space." From there, Trauma Informed San Jose was born.

Kavuluru says the group is not complicated or grandiose. It's often survivors getting together and simply having dance parties, making art, and bingeing episodes of *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. "There's some radical power in just the mundaneness of existing," Kavuluru says. "And I think we've really embraced how powerful that is: to exist with each other, share energy with each other, and be there for each other."

Kavuluru adds, "Oftentimes as survivors, and especially survivors with multiple intersectional identities, sometimes it's just a celebration to be."

## Change Agents

When asked about San Jose Strong's ultimate goals, Celestin compared the work of organizing to the process of developing positive life habits.

"You can't do the big things without it being so routine on that small, day-to-day level that when the big opportunities come, it's de facto that you're going to make it happen," she says.

Celestin points out that she is often disheartened when she witnesses individuals who call for social justice yet can't resolve interpersonal conflicts in their own lives. While she doesn't believe a community must fix all of its own problems first, she hopes SJS members can help each other learn the most effective ways to bring about change.

"If our SJS cohort can do that with each other and we can do that when we interact with other people, I would feel more rewarded by that than by any number of downloads our app could get."

To learn more, visit [sanjose-strong.com](http://sanjose-strong.com).



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