

Brittney Nystrom receives Kroc Institute Distinguished Alumni Award

[Simon Vogel](#) | Monday, October 11, 2021

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The Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies presented its Distinguished Alumni Award to Brittney Nystrom ('98) over Zoom on Friday. The award [honors](#) "Notre Dame graduates in peace studies whose careers and lives exemplify the ideals of international peacebuilding," according to its website.

In terms of Nystrom's career and life, she has an extensive pedigree of human rights advocacy. Following her graduation from Notre Dame, Nystrom worked for AmeriCorps, a national service organization, as an employment counselor at a community center. Her exposure to the injustices of the criminal justice system then led her to law school at Northwestern and subsequent work shaping immigration policy reform in D.C. After extensive work in the policy sphere, she moved to Utah, where she is currently the executive director of the ACLU of Utah. After accepting the award, Nystrom began her presentation titled, "Overcoming Intersections of Oppression: Immigrant and Racial Justice in the U.S." The presentation focused on exposing the barriers to equal application of civil rights for immigrants, refugees and BIPOC communities. "We talk about newly arriving immigrants sailing past the Statue of Liberty and embarking on this wonderful new life in America, and that's part of our national mythology," Nystrom began. "The reality is that there is a clear line in our history and in our laws of racism and xenophobia." She described the ways in which marginalized communities are "othered" or made socially distant from the rest of the population because they are associated with fears related to disease, loyalty, and crime.

"The latest hysteria around immigrants and contagious diseases is playing out on the US-Mexico border with Title 42," she said.

Title 42 is a Trump-era immigration policy that bars people from entering the country during a health crisis and is still active under the Biden administration. The policy denies immigrants legal protections such as due process in the name of public health. This, Nystrom argues, is senseless when there are vaccine cards and COVID tests to verify the health of immigrants. Nystrom cited Japanese internment and FBI surveillance of Martin Luther King as examples of the othering of marginalized groups due to fears of disloyalty, saying that this continues today with the suppression of Black Lives Matter protesters. The last way in which communities are othered, Nystrom explained, is through rhetoric portraying these communities as violent and criminal.

"We saw President Trump candidly refer to El Salvador, Haiti, and African nations as 's—hole countries'" she said.

As a result of the othering, these communities are separated from the population and stripped of constitutional rights. For instance, Nystrom pointed to undocumented immigrants who are unable to exercise their first amendment rights due to fear of deportation.

The presentation took on a more hopeful tone as Nystrom described the path to empowering these marginalized communities: inclusion, truth and intersectional campaigns.

“Institutions will need to be overhauled,” she said, in reference to a more inclusive system of education, healthcare and government. The ACLU, Nystrom emphasized, focuses specifically on the governmental aspect, filing lawsuits and challenging discriminatory policies, including voting rights among others.

Nystrom emphasized the need to understand forms of oppression.

“We must acknowledge the impact of centuries of segregation and exclusion in our institutions and our opportunities,” she said.

Nystrom argued that if a marginalized community was to be fully integrated, there must be a fundamental understanding of their history of oppression.

“Civil rights die first at the margins of society,” Nystrom said. “We need to make sure we’re living up to what us Americans say we’re all about in our founding documents — equality and justice.”

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