

May 2016 River Rally Diversity and Inclusion Panel Written Q&A

Prepared for: River Network
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Solutions
Panel: May 21st, 2016
June 15, 2016



Dr. Bernice Smith

Environmental Protection Agency

Alberto Rodriguez

Duwamish River Cleanup

Natilee McGruder

McGruder Solutions

1. Will Isenburg

For: Anyone

Doing recycling surveys in low income neighborhoods and doing fish consumption advisories and related PCB clean up plan I have a hard time knowing if/how to approach communities of color/minorities to educate and engage. I'm a working majority that to date have only ticked

people off, and **I want to know a better way of building relationships and educating without looking like some self entitled savior. Any pointers are appreciated!** Thanks!

Alberto Rodriguez:

I have been lucky that the organization that I work for is really well-known in the community because the community started it in 2001. I said this because in order to “educate” and “engage” communities, you need to have an established relationship and trust with said community. If this is not your case, I would start there. I offer some insight on how I started establishing said relationship and trust with the communities I work with and for when I first started working for DRCC/TAG in 2011 on the article below. I would also make sure recycling and fish consumption are top priorities to the community; if they aren’t, figure out a way to tie these two issues with priority or important issues the community has. Lastly, PCBs are the contaminant of concern and the driver of the cleanup of the Duwamish River. Even though we have subsistence fishing communities that actively use the river for sustenance, I have never approached community members and tried to deter them from fishing: I don’t want responsible parties to use this as an excuse to avoid cleaning the river, but also not fishing in the river will affect their health as these are already food insecure communities and/or they need to fish in order to keep their cultural traditions (which is also an important part of health).

Article:

https://www.rivernetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/RiverVoices_Oct2015_DiversityInclusiveness.pdf

Natilee McGruder

To build any relationship into a long lasting one both parties need to give of themselves. People are generally willing to give to you when: 1. They know you 2. They like you 3. They trust you. It also helps if when they are around you, they feel good, they feel powerful, they feel hopeful and inspired and activated. This may sound like a tall order and in a way it is. The learning curve is steep. But once you do it well you will have grown your network by everyone that person or group knows and who they have trust with. Spend time with the people you want to reach out to. Get to know them. What do they do for fun? What are their biggest concerns for their family

and community? Identify what skills you can add to their problem solving in life. Share with them your passions and what you care about. Ask them for help.

2. Jennifer Bolger-Breceda

Milwaukee Riverkeeper

For: Anyone

As revealed, diversity inclusion is a complex broad issue—Milwaukee is the most segregated city in the nation—please share a successful collaborative story or project that you were involved with—given this conversation this morning our water/river groups have limited resources, capacity and even scopes **so how do we find partners—specific stories of success please.**

Alberto Rodriguez:

I wish Jennifer would have attended the workshop my colleagues and I did on Monday at 10 a.m. I am not going to try to summarize a 90-minute workshop here but you can find some information about the project we are currently working on below. I also manage another project (air quality related) that is an extremely successful partnership between federal, regional, and local agencies with nonprofits and community groups. That said, my organization has had a strong presence in the community since 2001 and we have built relationships and trust with the community ever since. Now that diversity, equity, and inclusion is the “new coconut water”, many agencies, non-profits, foundations, etc. want to start walking their talk. We have used our position with the community and our relationships to these other groups to the communities advantage: if they want/need to reach out to disenfranchised communities, we facilitate that communication as long as the community is aware, willing, and they will get something out of it.

Project 1: <http://duwamishcleanup.org/community-health/healthy-river-healthy-communities/>

Project 2: <http://duwamishcleanup.org/community-health/clean-air/>

New Coconut Water: <http://nonprofitwithballs.com/2014/09/is-equity-the-new-coconut-water/#more-1422>

Natilee McGruder

I will echo what Alberto said about the workshop I did at Rally and not being able summarizing all of that here for you Jennifer. I will give you some actionable tips on how to find partners in the black community: go to your local black church, approach your local Delta Sigma Theta (Delta) or Alpha Kappa Alpha (AKA) chapter, go to your local Boys and Girls Club or YMCA and ask if you could present at their upcoming meetings or events on the relevance of whatever you care about on their membership's lives. Have a specific ask in mind when you go and research them and talk with them enough so that you know how to offer value to their organizations and programming in return.

One example from the Rally workshop that I did with my friend and colleague Adam Johnston was about an initiative we started called Alabama's Young Black and Green. We contacted local HBCUs and found science professors, then we cold called and visited them, which led us to speaking to a few classes which led us to a science club advisor which led us to hostings some events with students including a spoken word night, internship day and various topical information sessions on environmental justice issues in Alabama and opportunities for students to contribute to society while gaining valuable skills, experience and money. We did all this will less than \$1,000 and three people doing it on the side from our daily work. It was fun, it was meaningful and it proved that partnerships are about giving people what they want while inviting them to help contribute to what you need—on an even and respectful basis.

Here's a great quote regarding building partnerships for diversity from my favorite resource, Bonta and Jordan's *Diversifying the American Environmental Movement*:

To effectively reach out to communities of color, environmental institutions will need to expand their partnerships and collaborations.

They will need to work with groups that already effectively work with communities of color, including organizations of color, such as Latino

Issues Forum, urban parks, and schools. These groups, many of which are led by people of color, have a proven track record of successfully working with communities of color. They have earned the respect and gained the trust of these communities. Most importantly, these partnerships need to be based on equity, meaning all parties equally share resources, power, and decision-making responsibilities.

Resource: <http://environment.yale.edu/publication-series/documents/downloads/0-9/05-Bonta-and-Jordan.pdf>

And here's a good way to check in with yourself: <http://nonprofitwithballs.com/2015/01/are-you-or-your-org-guilty-of-trickle-down-community-engagement/>

3. **Matt Bolt**

For: Anyone

Access and inclusion includes the intersection of the LGBTQ and HIV and minority communities as well. **How is your organization approaching this need? Where can we do better?**

Alberto Rodriguez:

You are correct, access, diversity, and inclusion goes beyond race and ethnicity. At DRCC/TAG we approach and use, first and foremost, a racial equity lense for two main reasons: 1) currently, across the U.S. race is the most significant predictor or a person living near contaminated air, water, and soil (check this article); 2) historically, people of color have been the most affected by the systems of oppression this country was founded on (and that are still being perpetuated). We believe that by lifting the voices of the communities who have been, and still are, the most affected by structural and institutional racism, we will be able to also lift our brothers and sisters from the LGBTQ, HIV, etc communities too. What can we do better? |

think we can be better at finding commonalities between our movements by having a more holistic approach to address the issues we are trying to tackle... and even if there is no common ground or connection, we need to support each other for the sake of supporting each other in this struggle.

Article: <http://www.thenation.com/article/race-best-predicts-whether-you-live-near-pollution/>

Natilee McGruder

As an individual, I make the most diverse friend group possible and listen to people--in person, on Youtube, Facebook, wherever. I'm trying to find all the different perspectives and understand the main sources of conflict between different groups of people. I'm listening to them to hear how I can be a better ally. I'm checking my own levels of privilege and oppression. I'm working with the in-groups I have a born passport into (blacks, women, southerners) and relating our struggle to that of another marginalized group. I'm making the connections across the organizational lines and when I speak and spend time with young people. I take time to listen to our youth. They have some great ideas about how to move forward!

Within my organization I reflect those same personal values: learning what people want by asking them through community assessments and using those to guide the work, youth classes and workshops to inspire the next generation of civically engaged people, creating video and other content that spreads a message of empowerment and inclusion along with specific asks of my pet issue, seeking out young people, people of color, LGBTQ people and present to them the opportunity to work with my organization to gain profitable and social and civic skills to improve their lives.

4. Kevin Jeffries

For: All panelists

How do minorities already working in the sustainability movement successfully talk to other minorities without arousing aggression, Uncle Tomming, or feeling like a sellout? DC Blacks sometimes feel if they clean up their area people will take it. They rather keep it dirty than have it taken. **How do you change that mentality?** Thanks.

Alberto Rodriguez:

As environmentalists or part of the sustainability movement, we need to stop trying to sell our ideas and solutions to communities. Instead, we need to listen and work with them to address their priority concerns. Once you know what their priorities and concerns are, it is your responsibility to make the connection to your agenda/project and move it forward, sometimes as a “second thought”. In your case, I think leading with a public health approach will get you farther than the environmental benefits. Lastly, as environmentalists we NEED to figure out how to avoid displacement (gentrification) as it is an incredibly valid concern for the community to have. I know my organizations (DRCC/TAG) is trying to figure this out as it is a big concern to the communities in the Duwamish Valley.

Dr. Bernice Smith

Thanks for your question Kevin. Having volunteered in various organizations in my lifetime, I have learned that it's best to get to know people rather than lead with my credentials and what I know. Humility goes a long way. Once you understand what people value, you will likely find that there is something you share in common.

Minorities already working in the field of sustainability can influence other minorities in becoming active in the sustainability movement (if I am accurately interpreting your question) by first building a rapport with other minorities to understand their values and needs. It takes time to establish a rapport and build trust. Once a rapport has been established, you may gradually talk about your work and how your efforts or those of your organization, have improved the community. You might also invite individuals to a meeting or an event that engages the community.

Without using the term sustainability, you could draw upon one of its pillars, i.e., social, economic and environmental, to intersect your work with what people value. Minorities are the most vulnerable to environmental and health risks, such as contaminated water, land and air pollution. I do not know anyone who does not desire to have a quality life of wellness,

productivity and longevity. Overtime you may influence individuals and communities to take ownership in making their community clean, safe and resilient.

The U.S. National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969, refers to sustainability as a process to “create and maintain conditions, under which humans and nature can exist in productive harmony, that permit fulfilling the social, economic, and other requirements of present and future generations.” The agency has a host of websites that provide information, tools and resources for communities, and various sectors to engage in sustainable practices. I just identified a few, but hopefully you will find something that connects with your work and the needs of your community. See below:

<https://www.epa.gov/communities>

<https://www.epa.gov/environmentaljustice/environmental-justice-your-community>

<https://www.epa.gov/p2/internship-programs-pollution-prevention#dc>

Other references:

<http://www.nationalresourcenetwork.org/en/solutions/rfa>

Please do not hesitate to email me if you have any other questions.

Best wishes!

Bernice L. Smith, Ph.D.

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Natilee McGruder

Refocus from “changing their mentality” to “sharing their concerns.” Validate their perspective first, once you truly learn what it is. Acknowledge that they might have an excellent point since there is a relationship between “fixing things up” in a neighborhood that has experienced decades of neglect, only for rich people to come take it once it’s halfway decent again. Try to listen to their reasoning and fears as well as what they don’t say.

Provide them with examples of an alternative methods via presentation, one on one conversations and in person visits to the location and victors that they can learn from. Facilitate a relationship between them, their problems and real life examples of successfully overcoming similar obstacles. Find a community ally to present your information with. Be upfront with them that you don’t have all the answers but that you have some ideas about what could work--but only if they are down for the cause. If they’re not down, find another way to connect with them and then work from that position of strength towards where you want to go. Be ok with the fact that your approach to the work may be different and that neither is better.

5. Paco Ollervides

River Network

For: Everyone on the panel

How can we spearhead this momentum of being more inclusive in this movement given the amazing people, talent, skills we now have, so **we can make a true difference before next Rally?**

Alberto Rodriguez:

Honestly, I think it will be hard to make a “true difference” in such a small amount of time (“before next year”) if we do not make structural and institutional changes that are needed. For example, how do we expect to have a River Rally that is representative of the communities that we work with and when our own organizations (staff, board, volunteers, etc.) are not representative of said communities? Addressing diversity, equity, and inclusion challenges require bold and systemic changes in policies, programs, projects, and practices. To advance

these will require a lot of work and we must fundamentally change our hiring practices (this is just one example of things we need to do) and prioritize historically excluded communities so they have power in leadership and decision-making in our river conservation movement.

Natilee McGruder

I agree with Alberto's response 150%. Making a real difference to me would mean Rally reflecting our nation's current population—young and old, rich and poor and everyone in between— in a strong, organic and not piecemeal way. I don't see that happening in a year. But I do see two things going for you: the foundations to do the real hard work are being laid by River Network leadership and staff AND I don't think y'all have a choice. Adapt or be made irrelevant!

My favorite guide for the complete organizational overhaul to gain lasting results and personal inspiration is *Diversifying the American Environmental Movement* by Bonta and Jordan.

Resource: <http://environment.yale.edu/publication-series/documents/downloads/0-9/05-Bonta-and-Jordan.pdf>

6. Dawn Coleman

Birmingham, AL

For: Everyone

I just wanted to **thank you all for being unapologetically you today**. Your words were inspiring and well received.

Natilee McGruder

Thank you Dawn!

7. Katie Britt

Tallahassee, FL

For: Natilee

I'm a 24 yr old, white country girl in Tallahassee, FL and am working towards water restoration for the state government. I want to bring more opportunity personally to diverse people and hear local folks thoughts and problems in my local Tallahassee community. But I'm not directly engaged with these folks—not in work, volunteer organizations that I am in, not in friend circles —**how do I—a little blond girl get into a situation where I can talk to and engage and become friends with these folks—Tallahassee will surely benefit from more engagement like this. Where do I start? I care and I'm young so I can't donate \$ but I want to learn and donate time.**

Natilee McGruder

I'm going to give you the same answer I gave Will who said: : **“I want to know a better way of building relationships and educating without looking like some self entitled savior.”**

My reply: To build any relationship into a long lasting one, both parties need to give of themselves. People are generally willing to give to you when: 1. They know you 2. They like you 3. They trust you. It also helps if, when they are around you, they feel good, they feel powerful, they feel hopeful and inspired and activated. This may sound like a tall order and in a way it is. The learning curve is steep. But once you do it well, you will have grown your network by everyone that person or group knows and who that person already has trust with. Spend time with the people you want to reach out to. Get to know them. What do they do for fun? What are their biggest concerns for their family and community? Identify what skills you can add to their journey of problem solving in their life. Share with them your passions and what you care about. Ask them for help.

To you specifically Katie, I would add: your youth is an asset--so use it! People are willing to forgive many a misstep if you come to them humbly and authentically, especially when you mess up or feel awkward and out of your comfort zone. You already know that you have one

glaring problem--you don't hang out with any of the folks you want to know. So start hanging! Find a church that's active and respected in the community and join them for Sunday service. See who you can talk to and how you can get involved in their ministry. Contact a Boys and Girls Club or YMCA and see if you can volunteer with the youth. Ask the staff if you can help them a few hours a week with anything and observe, be helpful and and be normal. You will start to learn cultural context, life goals, interests, dislikes, etc. Be an anthropologist and be open about it. Your approach should be "I am here to share in your work. Please help learn how I can best serve and put me to work!" From this you will gain the relationships and skillsets you will definitely need to navigate the rest. Here are few resources to get you thinking:

Hilarious Post and Amazing Blog: <http://nonprofitwithballs.com/2015/01/are-you-or-your-org-guilty-of-trickle-down-community-engagement/>

My Roadmap to Success aka Bonta and Jordan's Diversifying the American Environmental Movement: <http://environment.yale.edu/publication-series/documents/downloads/0-9/05-Bonta-and-Jordan.pdf>
