



Rhonda Anderson (1950-Present)

Environmental Justice Organizer

Sierra Club

“I feel blessed that I can deliver resources to communities in such desperate need-communities that other people want to forget, ignore, not acknowledge to the detriment of all people.” Rhonda Anderson, 2006.

Overview

Rhonda Anderson is the Senior Organizing Representative, Beyond Coal Campaign & Environmental Justice Organizer for the Sierra Club, Detroit Chapter. At the Sierra Club in Detroit, Anderson works with neighborhoods on a day-to-day basis. She assists with community organization, helping empower communities to by providing information on improving the community’s health and quality of life (i.e., environmental justice). This community level work is important, as is using the language of the people to communicate environmental issues. For instance, communities may be more familiar and responsive to “quality of life” and “health.

Early Life and Education

The depth of knowledge and experience that Rhonda Anderson brings to her community organizing efforts every day is the culmination of years of hard work for the people of the city of Detroit. According to Anderson, in order to be a successful Environmental Justice organizer, you have to know people from the bottom up; her life’s work thus far demonstrates just this principle.

Anderson is one of four children born to Curly Hugh and Clotine Anderson and is part of the first generation of her family born in the segregated North. Anderson’s grandmother was a slave, born during the time of the Emancipation Proclamation; a time when certain states allowed slave owners to keep the children of former slaves. Anderson’s parents were sharecroppers who picked cotton for a living; they eventually moved north to settle in the Downriver community where Anderson grew up. Anderson says she was raised with a lot of Southern values, and even though her community was very segregated, she grew up protected because her community was so small. In fact, Anderson believes that, of all the generations of her family born in the North, hers has benefited the most. “It’s a shame that things have become much more difficult for African Americans. Racism may not be as overt as it once was, but I believe that its subtlety makes it as effective or even more so than when I was young.”

After receiving her Associate's Degree in political science from Wayne County Community College, Anderson went on to work for nine years as a business representative for Service Employees International Union Local 79. It was there that she met her friend, mentor, and fellow Environmental Justice activist Donnelle Wilkins. Anderson credits Wilkins, the Executive Director of Detroiters Working for Environmental Justice (DWEJ), with sparking her interest in a career in the environmental field. While still with Local 79, Wilkins contacted her, looking for an organizer to help with the campaign to shut down the incinerator at Henry Ford Hospital. Anderson accepted the job offer, and left Local 79 to work with DWEJ on the campaign for four months.

Career

Anderson later left DWEJ to become a community organizer with the Warren/Connor Development Coalition. It was there that she really learned the ins and outs of community organizing. At Warren/Connor, Anderson helped communities organize the block clubs that she worked with. This position taught her the skills necessary to get into the community, how to work with people, and what to talk to them about. She eventually left this job and became a youth specialist at the homeless shelter Alternatives for Girls, where she worked on the street with prostitutes and was a detention specialist for the Wayne County Juvenile Detention Center. These positions gave Anderson the experience necessary to carry out the environmental work she currently works in.

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Highlights

There has not been one isolated highlight in Anderson's career; rather, she considers every aspect of her work a highlight. She is doing the work that she loves to do and is getting paid to do it. "I feel blessed that I can deliver resources to communities in such desperate need—communities that other people want to forget, ignore, not acknowledge to the detriment of all people."

Unfortunately, there seems to be no end to the number of environmental justice struggles in and around Detroit. Detroit is among the most segregated cities in the US, and according to Anderson, the racial tensions between the city and the surrounding suburbs are unbelievable ("CensusScope -- Segregation: Dissimilarity Indices." "The city is so isolated and so segregated, and the people are suffering because they are black," she commented. "Many [people]...from the outlying communities...have never considered that there could be a serious environmental problem going on." Among Anderson's major concerns are skyrocketing -and often-deadly- asthma cases among African Americans. Of the thirteen lead smelters in the state of Michigan, twelve are located in Detroit. She quoted from a recent study that found that nearly ninety percent of African Americans live within thirty miles of a power plant, and are more likely to have asthma and make more hospital visits. Anderson knows of at least four friends and family members who

have recently died of asthma attacks—one a 28 year-old woman; the other, her friend’s 14 year-old daughter.

Challenges

While Anderson does note any specific failures or career lows, it has been a struggle to be an African American woman in an organization whose membership is almost entirely white and middle class. Despite this, she is able to find some solace in a majority African American city and feels that the organization is making some headway within the organization. Anderson has also run “Dismantling Racism” training for the Midwest Regional staff, and completed a nine-month “Building Capacity through Diversity” program whose participants included the Sierra Club and a variety of other local organizations. The need for such a program stemmed from racial conflicts within Detroit’s environmental groups; the program included monthly meetings and overnight retreats and was made possible through funding from an external grant. The program was somewhat helpful, and though Anderson was not exposed to new information, she did feel somewhat challenged to consider where she was. “It’s more important what white folks do,” she stated, “They can’t continue to ignore race and class issues.”

When considering the challenges, the highlights, the low points, and the achievements of a career fighting for environmental and social justice in the City of Detroit, every experience is equally significant. To Anderson, there is nothing more significant than meeting with a group of community members to discuss what to do about local air pollution, or to discuss the proposed international bridge. Despite the daily obstacles she is confronted with, Anderson’s continued relationships with the community members keeps her going. “We so desperately need to know our food sources, where toxins are coming from, how to identify polluting facilities...we need to just know. Then we can make choices for ourselves, and we can tell elected officials what we want. Some folks don’t know they can make complaints about smells, noises and industrial plants. Some don’t know they have the right to clean air and water.” For these reasons, Anderson plans on sticking with her career in the environmental field.

For More Information

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