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Michelle Depass, 2005.

Michelle Depass first became interested in a career in the environmental field while she was in law school. Any previous exposure to the field in her early education did not have a major impact; in fact, the definition of "the environment" that she learned as a child did not speak to her at all as a young person growing up in an urban area. After graduating from Tufts University with a degree in political science, Depass chose to attend law school at Fordham, in part because her father was a real estate attorney—it was what she knew. Once at Fordham, Depass was attracted to environmental law because it was very different from any area of law that she had previously been exposed to; environmental law was a "public good" law—not one person versus another. In addition, growing up in a competitive place like New York City greatly influenced her career path and helped her make the decision to attend law school.

"I was slightly idealistic," Depass recalls. "How can anyone not want to protect the environment? What really got me interested, though, was a clinical I did at the EPA while in law school. I was working alongside a lawyer who was trying to correct environmental wrongs, and I enjoyed all of the people I was working with. That was where I first heard of environmental justice and I fell in love with it."

Between college and law school, Depass was employed as the public affairs director for the New York Coalition for Safety Values, an organization that advocated for a safety belt use law in the state. The Coalition was a collaborative effort made up of a number of NGOs, private industry, municipalities, and other groups that have experienced some form of suffering from the costs of accidents. Depass' primary responsibility in this role was create public service announcements and to travel to universities, state fairs, and conferences to promote safety belt usage.

Depass' first environmental job was at the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and would greatly influence the direction her career would later take. For a full year, Depass worked as a legal assistant in the Superfund Division for Region 2 on cases regarding Superfund liability. "That was back when Superfund was well-funded, more of a hot issue—back when the Agency was really going after people.

Then, questions of how to avoid liability were still somewhat up in the air. I did a lot of research on those issues while I was there,” Depass says. In addition, Depass helped to negotiate final agreements and write them up.

While at the EPA, Depass was fortunate to meet Samara Swanston, one of the founders of the environmental justice (EJ) movement who was also one of the Superfund attorneys. It was at a biweekly brown bag lunch hosted by Swanston that Depass first heard about environmental justice. Swanston discussed EJ in the context of the issues they were working on in the city at the time, such as hazardous waste and toxics, and then expanded the discussion to include international struggles. As a result, Depass learned about EJ from a local, city perspective that was easily connected to a larger, global problem.

Currently, Depass is the Environment and Development Program Officer at the Ford Foundation, both one of the world’s largest foundations and the world’s largest social justice foundation. Depass’ portfolio at Ford is called “Environmental Justice and Healthy Communities.” Her primary responsibility is to evaluate and seek out programs in advocacy, research and organization that can address environmental justice issues and poverty through a social justice lens, and then to provide resources to those projects.

“I didn’t have a master plan in terms of a career path,” Depass explains. “I intended to work for a large environmental organization when I graduated from law school, but I quickly found that the doors were not open to people like me—none of the large environmental organizations were interested in hiring black people.” Depass had not been looking very hard for a job while she finished law school because she had been promised a position with the EPA after graduation; unfortunately, at that time the EPA was undergoing a hiring freeze. Depass remembers, “I didn’t know people, and there was no one working in the field that looked like me. Fortunately, though, it turned out to be the best thing in the world.”

Depass’ first job out of law school turned out to be in environmental permitting at the Port Authority. While there, she reached out to Samara Swantston and discovered that the organization that Swantston was helping to start had just received funding and they were looking to hire an employee. Depass was intrigued by the offer to work on issues that linked law advocacy with race and class, and accepted the position of Executive Director of the New York City Environmental Justice Alliance. Over the next four years, Depass would build the organization up from one person (herself) to six employees operating under a significant budget. At that time, Depass felt ready to move on to other things and made the decision to go back to school to hone her skills. After receiving a fellowship from the National Urban Fellows program, she subsequently enrolled in Baruch College (CUNY), from which she would graduate with a Master’s in Public Administration.

While completing her fellowship work, Depass was recruited to do a working part of the National Urban Fellows program for San José, California. There, she worked in the area of transportation and the environment and was asked to return to become the city’s environmental Manager. Though Depass was reluctant to leave New York, she was given a good offer and thought that it was important to spend some time in California. “It was a different environment for me, as well as an opportunity to be a manager of projects rather than an advocate. It turned out to be a huge learning experience,” she says. “I was responsible for the oversight of all the airport facilities, and it was amazing—just like a city but more condensed.” Depass’ position put her in charge of decisions regarding fuel usage, transportation permits, and inspections. While there, she created an alternative fuel program for the entire airport. Depass remained in San Jose for about five years before returning to New York City, where she accepted a job as a litigator for the Center for Constitutional Rights.

Shortly after beginning this new job, Depass was recruited by the state of New Jersey to be the senior policy advisor for the NJ Department of Conservation. Depass spent most of her time there working on land use issues, which were of utmost importance in the state due primarily to its high population density. Also, it was here that Depass made what she believes to be one of her most significant achievements—writing and getting approved the Environmental Justice Executive Order for the state of New Jersey. Not only did Depass truly enjoy her job at the NJ Department of Conservation, she really loved the people that she worked with. She could have seen herself working there for many more years—then Ford called.

“I’ve been recruited for my last three jobs,” Depass states. “It feels good after the way I started, to be wanted. Now, my sights are clearer about who I want to work with and the principles I want to work with as well. The biggest issue [in career advancement] is who you know; they’re all connected in this field.”

Learning from the experience of mentors can be a huge asset to developing one’s own career path. Depass’ mentors include Samara Swanston (mentioned previously), the EPA Superfund Division attorney who first taught her about environmental justice. Swanston showed Depass how to be a diligent legal advocate for communities. Luis Garden Acosta, the executive director of El Puente Williamsburg, an environmental justice and human rights organization, taught Depass how to be both principled and kind in her approaches, and to treat everyone with respect. Depass also learned a lot from Regina Williams, the city manager of San José, who brought her to the city, placed her in a position of authority, and demonstrated how to be a good public administrator. Barbara Oshansky taught Depass that you can never do too much when it comes to being an advocate for the disenfranchised.

“Ralph Tonses, the director of the San José International Airport, was the first person to help me understand that you should know your own worth and go after it,” Depass remembers. “Don’t sell yourself short on negotiations and compensation. He was the first to truly recognize it for me, and taught me how to capitalize on it.”

Due to her current line of work, Depass has had and continues to have every opportunity to mentor young minorities who are just starting out in the field. Part of her job responsibilities at the Ford Foundation is to fund mentoring internships and fellowships. “I clearly had a number of important mentors, but I still feel that there isn’t enough mentoring going on in the field. I spend an inordinate amount of time mentoring people. I would love to do it as a full-time job because I think it is critical, but I’m paid to do other things,” Depass reflects.

The minorities that Depass helps are generally looking for guidance in making their next steps, whether it be which job to take or what advanced degree to return to school for. For Depass, mentoring entails helping young people understand what it takes in terms of preparation and opportunity, guiding them through systems, and getting them in touch with others in the field who might also be of help. Being a good mentor means understanding what someone needs to do to round out their portfolio; advice in this area must be specialized because each person is different. Depass has two general pieces of advice that she tells young people looking to get a foot in the door: one, never end a conversation without asking for two other names of people to talk to; and two, try to get a national portfolio and connect with others that share similar interests.

The highlight of Depass’ career has been, quite simply, the fact that she has been able to have a career in the environmental field. “For a while I was ready to leave environmental issues completely, especially around the time I went to get my master’s degree,” Depass recalls. “I didn’t see opportunities for young African-American women. I had loans to repay and wanted to work in the environmental field, but I didn’t

think it was an option for me.” Depass also notes that, over the past five years, the environmental field has become increasingly accessible for minorities. There are more opportunities available today, and it is possible to be a working environmental professional and still be able to pay back your student loans.

Despite the initial feeling of being less than welcome in the field, Depass has had a number of experiences that keep her satisfied with working on environmental issues. The best part, by far, has been the people, whom Depass feels are generally much nicer in the environmental field than in other fields. In addition, the people that Depass works with are usually more pluralist—more engaged in what is good for society than those who are employed in other fields. As a lawyer, Depass feels that it is much more satisfying to argue environmental cases because they do not pit one person against another; rather, when she wins she is winning for society. “I find it fascinating to be able to work in a field where I can dabble in all different types of things—law, science, economics, social sciences. The environmental field is a huge mix of so many different areas,” she says.

At Ford, Depass is involved in diversity programs on a daily basis; diversity is a recurrent theme in the world of funding, and Depass’ current position is no exception. On a day to day basis, Depass advocates for diversity in workshops and programs at the Ford Foundation. While still in law school, Depass was granted a Minority Fellowship from the NY State Bar Association to attend its annual Environmental Law State Conference. It was at this conference that she had her first exposure to environmental law in a real-world setting, and this exposure spurred her interest in the field. Since then, Depass has participated in the selection of the summer-long Minority Law Fellowships that the Association offers, and has also funded the program since arriving at Ford. Depass is also involved in the National Urban Fellows Program, which aims to increase the number of women and minorities in public administration positions in the United States.

Depass tells minorities considering a career in the environmental field that networking is the best thing they can do to help their careers; who you know in the environmental field is important. “There are lots of people out there who want to help minorities get into the field,” she says, “and they will want to know that you have the background it takes.”

“Just like any other industry, people will say, ‘you have to be ten times better than a white candidate...’” cautions Depass. “Try to get the most varied experience.” Depass advises that young people get a scientific or technical background—either legal or scientific as opposed to social science; the better equipped you are with a specialty, the better equipped you are for the job. According to Depass, it is also important to diversify your geographic frame of reference, much like she did when she accepted the position in San José. California, in particular, is a great training ground because of its broad regulatory system and because Californians are innovators when it comes to environmental protection.

For More Information

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