



Chione Flegal (1976-Present)

Director

PolicyLink

"I hope other young people [of color] realize that they're in a position where they can step forward and do incredible things to bring about change." Chione Flegal, 2006.

Overview

Chione L. Flegal, Director of PolicyLink, works to ensure that infrastructure policy promotes social, economic, and environmental equity. She leads efforts at PolicyLink to address infrastructure disparities in low-income unincorporated communities in California's San Joaquin Valley and to promote equitable solutions to climate change. Prior to joining PolicyLink, Chione managed Latino Issues Forum's Sustainable Development program and directed the organization's environmental health and justice work. Chione advises the California Air Resources Board on the implementation of climate policy by serving on the AB 32 Environmental Justice Advisory Committee. She holds a master's degree in city planning and a BS in environmental science, policy, and management from the University of California, Berkeley.

This interview was conducted in 2010.

Early Life and Education

In tracing her growth as an environmental professional, Chione Flegal starts at the beginning: her childhood in the rural Santa Cruz Mountains. "Early on I had a great love for the outdoors," she recalls. "I loved everything in the outdoors, especially flowers—I wanted to be a botanist at first." Growing up in two rural communities—one she describes as "very rural," the other an agricultural community—Flegal was influenced not only by the natural environment surrounding her, but the human interaction with it. Her family had deep roots there, and she grew up with a strong sense of place. "The fact that we grew up in the place where my mom and grandparents had first come as migrant farm workers had a deep impact," she says. "We had ties there, to the history of the community." Flegal says those formative experiences have everything to do with why she has devoted her career to environmental issues and their effect on Latinos and farm workers.

Flegal attended the University of California-Berkeley as an undergrad. Still inspired by her childhood dream of being a botanist, she began studying the natural and environmental sciences. However, she sensed a disconnect between what she was studying in her courses and her own experience with the environment. In particular, “there seemed to be a gap between talking about the natural world and the people who lived in it,” Flegal recalls. Wanting to focus more on human interaction with the environment, she switched her focus to a cross-study of low-income communities and environmental issues. “I was interested in how the environmental issues I learned about in school affected my community and others like it,” she explains. “Fortunately, in that time and place that was something people were starting to talk about. That inspired what I do now.”

Flegal had her first environmental job with the city of Berkeley’s Planning Department as a student intern, where she worked on local parks issues. While in school she also participated in a program where college students taught classes to high school and community college students on urban environmental issues. “This was a really wonderful opportunity, because it allowed me to share my interests with other young people and reaffirmed my desire to work to address environmental inequality,” she says.

A later work-study position landed Flegal at Latino Issues Forum (LIF), a non-profit public policy and advocacy group. Although she did not know it at the time, LIF would become the focus of her work for years to come. Sustainable Development is one of the group’s core policy issues, and Flegal found an opportunity to combine all of her interests into one action-oriented whole. She counts her first months as a work-study student at LIF as one of her career highlights thus far.

“One of LIF’s strengths is that they put me out there in a lot of ways that I wouldn’t have put myself out there,” Flegal says. “They had me researching and helping produce a report about environmental issues and Latino voters. It was the first time someone had looked specifically at Latinos, and how issues of the environment resonated with our community. At that time, I didn’t realize how much of a public face we had; that report got coverage across the country. It was amazing to work for an organization that really celebrated your potential. Even if you didn’t have a lot of practical experience, if you were smart, passionate, and interested, they threw you out there. It was an incredible high point...it made me realize that even though I was young and inexperienced, I had something of value to offer the organization and the movement.”

Career

Flegal transitioned from her work-study position at LIF to a fellowship opportunity at this same organization. Later, she left the organization to attend graduate school at Berkeley, where she earned her master’s degree in City and Regional Planning. After earning her degree, she felt she needed a drastic change and moved abroad to Ethiopia, where she worked on famine relief with several local and international organizations. “That was a pretty profound experience,” Flegal says. “It magnified all the issues we work on here in the U.S. in regards to race and the environment. The level of powerlessness is incredible. It was very educational to work on all the issues I’m passionate about in such a different environment.” While the experience was transformative, it was also draining. “I could see so many problems on such a huge scale—I didn’t know where to start,” Flegal remembers. “It was important and eye-opening, but it wasn’t the work for me. I felt like I was dealing with symptoms and never the real problems.”

After two years in Ethiopia, Flegal returned to the U.S. Once again, LIF came into her life; they were looking for someone to manage their environmental programs and Flegal was eager to return to working on environmental problems affecting communities of color. Flegal has been with them ever since. “Even though it was a pretty random set of circumstances that brought me to LIF, I’ve been extremely fortunate to find an organization whose program areas and focuses really reflect the things that I’m interested in,” she says. “A lot of people ask, ‘What does the environment have to do with Latinos?’ But here we know that the health and well-being of our communities is directly tied to our environment.” Flegal now runs LIF’s Sustainable Communities and the Environment Program, and uses a “broad spectrum of methods”—policy, advocacy, education, and grassroots leadership development—to bring attention to the environmental issues facing Latino communities in California.

Highlights

Flegal says another career highlight has been the people she has been honored to work with. “There are amazing people working on every side of the environmental health and justice movements. I learn something from these people every day and am touched by the love that people bring to their work,” she says. “It can be difficult to work on issues that have such a profound effect on peoples’ lives, often in a negative way—to learn about a community that cannot drink their water because it is filled with poison, or a group of workers that have been exposed to deadly pesticides. But then you look at the people you work with and you feel inspired. We are a tenacious movement,” she laughs. “We do this work because we have hope for our future.”

Mentoring Others

Flegal has especially enjoyed working with young staff and people who are new to this movement. “I really have enjoyed mentoring young people and watching my younger staff members grow in their work,” she says. “Every time I have seen one of my students or my staffers pull something off for the first time, speak to the media, testify at a hearing or do something that they didn’t know they could do, I feel proud. Ultimately that’s the best kind of change we can hope to create through our work...developing the confidence and capacity for change in our communities.”

Flegal considers getting a college and graduate education her most significant achievement. She was the only one in her immediate family to graduate from college, and says that “has been the door that’s opened to everything else.” At Berkeley, Flegal was co-president of Students of Color in Planning, a group that worked to recruit students of color to the Planning program and formed a core support community for those that were already there. She acknowledges that being a person of color in academia and the environmental field is a continuing challenge that does not get any easier; however, she does not want that to deter other young people of color from the field. “Don’t lose heart,” she encourages. “Thinking about my college classes, and even today going to conferences and being the only person of color in the room or the only person talking about environmental issues in a certain way, feels very isolating. But I hope other young people [of color] realize that they’re in a position where they can step forward and do incredible things to bring about change. As people of color we bring a unique but invaluable perspective to the environmental field, and our presence is critical to ensure that the future of environmentalism reflects our communities.”

Flegal reaches back to her roots in the Santa Cruz Mountains to explain why she feels so passionately about preserving the natural world for future generations. “I want the life that my grandmother gave to my mother, that my mother gave to me, to be something I can give to my children,” she says. “Part of that is a safe and healthy place to live. A lot of people of color don’t have that.” Ultimately, that drive continues to be nurtured by her lifelong connection to the outdoors: “The natural world is still where I find peace. I hope that other people, my community and my children, will get to enjoy it in the same way I have.”

Importance of Mentoring to Career

LIF Director Luis Arteaga has been a huge influence and valuable mentor to Flegal as she developed personally and professionally. “He’s been great at pushing me to explore different ideas and ways of looking at problems,” she says, “but he’s also been someone who connected me to a very strong network of activists at a very young age. He’s been a mentor in every way.” On a more personal level, Flegal’s grandmother has served as inspiration for the work that she does. “I think about her life as a migrant farm worker and the life that she gave her children and grandchildren...I think of her all the time in this work,” she says.