

Yuki Kidokoro (1969-Present)

Southern California Program Director

Communities for a Better Environment

“There are lots of different roles you can play within the field...figure out where you fit.” Yuki Kidokoro, 2006.

Overview

Yuki Kidokoro says her involvement in the environmental movement reflects the many paths—and diverse interests—that can lead to a career in the field. “I consider myself to be more involved in the social justice field—however, environmental issues make up the main part of my work,” she says. As an activist, youth leader, and administrator, Kidokoro has continually sought ways to integrate social justice concerns with the environmental movement.

Kidokoro remembers first becoming interested in environmental issues as a high-school exchange student in Belgium, where her host family had a “strong environmental ethic.” Spending time away from home was also a good way for her to gain a broader, international perspective of the world. As an undergraduate student at the University of California-Los Angeles (UCLA), Kidokoro joined student activist groups doing work on environmental and social justice issues. By the time she graduated in 1993 with a degree in French and linguistics, she knew she would go into some kind of social justice work. “I knew I wanted to do something positive,” she recalls.

This interview was conducted in 2015.

Highlights

Kidokoro was open to any kind of grassroots organizing, though environmental issues were her strength. She worked in a series of temporary jobs, including a stint with the Coalition for Clean Air. However, opportunities to do the kind of work she wanted were rare at the time, and she returned to school after two years, earning her master of arts in urban planning from UCLA in 1997. It was there that she learned about her current organization, Communities for a Better Environment (CBE). Kidokoro volunteered with CBE while in graduate school, helping to identify funding sources for a new youth program. When she graduated, they offered her a full-time job; she began in 1997 as a youth coordinator, and served as lead organizer until reaching her current position as Southern California Program Director in 2003. Now, she

supervises program staff, provides guidance to campaigns and projects, writes grants, and participates in networking and movement building.

Importance of Mentoring to Career

“It’s hard to say that I had explicit mentors,” Kidokoro says of her experiences with mentorship. “I learned from a number of different people.” Her graduate school instructors were influential, especially her former teacher Gilda Hass, who is now executive director of a group called Strategic Action for a Just Economy (SAJE). Hass provided her with guidance on a project exploring popular education; Kidokoro says that experience helped shape her own style of organizing. Her peers also served as mentors of sorts, especially those who were doing youth organizing at the period when she was starting out in the field. Kidokoro says it would benefit the environmental and social justice movements to create explicit mentorship programs pairing experienced activists with newcomers.

As a youth organizer, Kidokoro mentored many young people of color, an experience she calls the highlight of her career so far. “Youth organizing was the most rewarding for me,” she says. “Working with young people...being a part of their development of skills and knowledge is great. I don’t take credit for it, I just feel good about being able to help provide a process for that. It’s exciting, and I learned equally from that process.”

Challenges

Though her career has been both productive and personally fulfilling, Kidokoro has struggled with burnout. “I was asked to be the interim executive director [of an organization] for a period of time...I accepted the job, but I wasn’t prepared for all the responsibility. At the time, I had to take care of someone who was very close to me and go to work at the same time. It was a difficult juggling act.” Even during her lowest period, however, Kidokoro never considered leaving the environmental and social justice field. “The burnout was never about the program,” she says. “I was committed to it. It’s never been a question of leaving.”

Advice to Young Professionals

Kidokoro’s advice to minorities interested in environmental work follows from her own experience. “Make sure that you are in it for the long haul, and find balance in your life to avoid burnout,” she advises. Also drawing from her own experience, she notes that there are many different hats to wear within the environmental/social justice movements, and those who are considering it as a career to find the one that best fits them. “There are lots of different roles you can play within the field...figure out where you fit. And wherever possible, try to find mentors, especially other people of color who are doing the same things you’re interested in.”