



Michelle Lin (1981-Present)

Environmental Justice Organizer

**Arab Community Center for Economic and
Social Services**

"The whole experience has been a huge highlight and a great way for me to get started on what I want to do in life." Michelle Lin, 2006.

Early Life and Education

Ever since she was a child growing up in the Atlanta suburbs, Michelle Lin knew that she would one day work in the environmental field. "I remember wanting to be a marine biologist, a forester, to do research and to spend time outdoors," Lin recalls. "I was always intent on doing something environmental," she says. Lin and her two older siblings were born in Taiwan, but the family emigrated to the U.S. when she was three years old. Lin says they moved largely to get away from the poor air quality in Taipei, as her mother and brother suffered from severe asthma. Lin notes that environmental health impact had a big influence on her family, as well as her own developing interest in environmental issues.

Lin believes she would not have developed the same appreciation for the natural world had the family stayed in Taiwan. She says growing up where she did helped that process: there was a lot of green space in her suburban neighborhood, and many of her neighbors were very much into the outdoors. Lin says her parents allowed her to grow, explore the world around her, and take on that interest for herself.

Lin received a bachelor's degree from the University of Michigan's School of Natural Resources and Environment, where she met her first mentors in the environmental justice field. She recalls the tremendous impact that Bunyan Bryant, Dorceta Taylor and Paul Mohai had on her future career. Lin credits them with teaching her about the goals and structure of the Environmental Justice movement, and about the research practices used within it. Lin also credits other professors who were actively involved in community organizing for teaching her how to link university work and community activism, as well as how to be respectful when working within those communities. Additionally, Lin was influenced by a number of upperclassmen, mostly within the Asian-American student community, who nurtured and supported her developing identity and desire to do social justice work. "I've had a whole community of people help me to get where I am today," she says.

Career

Lin is currently an Environmental Justice Organizer at the Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services (ACCESS) in Dearborn, Michigan. “During college, I started to understand more how race, class, and other social factors affect quality of life for communities of color,” she says. “After I was turned on to environmental justice, I felt very passionately and strongly about it. I still love the outdoors and natural resources and so forth, but environmental justice issues are much closer to my heart.” A fellow student told her about a part-time job opening at ACCESS, which involved coordinating an anti-racist training program for organizers and activists in the mainstream environmental movement. “That was my foot in the door in terms of my career,” she says.

Through her work at ACCESS, Lin has become more familiar with the “big players” in the Michigan environmental community. She has also had the opportunity to talk about race, class and environmental justice within the community, and worked to combat racism in a variety of settings. Additionally, during her three years with ACCESS she’s been able to do some youth-oriented educational work, such as working with a Great Outdoors program and teaching environmental education to Arab-American elementary school students; she has also begun coordinating an environmental justice campaign around a state-level executive order, and has helped develop other state-level environmental justice policy initiatives.

Mentoring Others

Though still a relative newcomer to the field, Lin has had the opportunity to mentor one or two other minorities, with whom she has shared her interests and experiences. “I encourage them to figure out what they want to do on their own, but let them know that there is a way to do it,” she says. “There aren’t a lot of people of color in this field, and it can be hard at times, but there are others out there like us who are doing it. I tell them to be patient and about how hard it can be, but also to stay true to their own values and goals without compromise.”

Contributions

Lin feels that it is too early to focus on a particular career highlight. “I still feel young and new to everything,” she says. “The whole experience has been a huge highlight, and a great way for me to get started on what I want to do in life.” Lin’s supervisor at ACCESS is very supportive, and encourages her to do things her own way while she develops the skills to do them. Her job has allowed her to get very involved in the local environmental justice movement, for which she feels very fortunate. “Being able to find a job doing environmental justice organizing has helped me to meet people like Donele Wilkins, and other local community organizers, that are working in neighborhoods,” Lin explains. “These are the people that you read about in school, and now I can actually work with them. Without a job, who knows how involved I would be able to be in the environmental justice movement.”

Lin also does not have a career low point so far. She says that because ACCESS caters to a community of color, it has been a great environment to work in; however, she can see how doing her job somewhere else would be much more difficult. “I can see how my interests could be marginalized in another group, but fortunately I don’t have to deal with that,” she says. Lin can, however, see a low point for the movement as a whole. “The movement is becoming professionalized, and too often the work of

community organizers becomes jobs or careers rather than something that is more rooted in the community,” she notes. “Movements as a whole need to look at how that fact impacts the work being done, and how it is possible to bring in new, young, different people. If young people of color can’t get access to the jobs, how are we building upon what we are doing?”

The nature of Lin’s work involves dealing with diversity issues on a regular basis, and so far, it has been the anti-racist coordinating position that has found the most rewarding. In that capacity, Lin was able to bring together thirty activists and organizers over a ten month period to talk about diversity in their own organizations, the impact of race on careers and life experience, and the history of race as a social construct. Participants also looked at the history of specific communities, and the historical experiences of European immigrants in the U.S. Lin says the program’s goal was to dissect the environmental movement, examine how it has both perpetrated and challenged systems of oppression, and finally integrate those concepts into the participants’ daily work. “It was a two year project done in collaboration with Freedom Trainers,” Lin says. “They brought the facilitation and training mechanisms into the process. It was a great experience, and the fact that it was long-term and really asked people to dig deep, to work on themselves and the internal structures of their organizations, made the outcomes feel very successful.” Lin continues to conduct anti-racist trainings and workshops in addition to her regular job duties.

Lin says she has stayed with her career in the environmental field because she feels that everything is connected, regardless of which social justice issue you are working on. She approaches her work with the idea of tying it all together; whether discussing immigration rights or youth groups, Lin says, she will always try to add environmental justice to the conversation.

Advice to Young Professionals

For minorities considering a career in the environmental field, Lin has the following advice: “Follow your interests and where your passion lies. Connect with other people of color in your field, because it is really important to build community and support one another. It is easy to feel isolated when working in predominantly white fields, and is easy to stay that way. That’s why finding a community is so important. Finding community and building relationships with white allies is important too—there are some out there—and from there it is possible to make the environmental field more inclusive, and more relevant to our own communities.”

This interview was conducted in 2015.