



Penn Loh (1968- Present)

**Lecturer and Director of the Master in Public Policy
Program and Community Practice**

**Tufts University, Department of Urban and
Environmental Policy and Planning**

"...Think through what kind of difference you want to make in your life, in this world and figure out how that can connected to a career." Penn Loh, 2005.

Overview

Penn Loh is Lecturer and Director of the Master in Public Policy Program and Community Practice at Tufts University's Department of Urban and Environmental Policy and Planning. From 1996 to 2009, he served in various roles, including Executive Director since 1999, at Alternatives for Community & Environment (ACE), a Roxbury-based environmental justice group. He has published broadly on environmental and social justice issues. He has served on the National Environmental Justice Advisory Council's Health and Research Subcommittee, the Massachusetts Environmental Justice Advisory Committee, the Massachusetts Energy Efficiency Advisory Council, and on the boards of the Environmental Support Center, the Environmental Leadership Program, New World Foundation, and Community Labor United. He is currently a trustee of the Hyams Foundation and member of the Massachusetts Energy Facilities Siting Board.

This interview was conducted in 2015.

Early Life

Penn Loh, the oldest of four children, was born and raised in a suburb of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Loh's mother – a librarian by profession – is primarily a homemaker, and his father is an electrical engineer. Loh, following in his father's footsteps, attended the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) where he earned his bachelor's degree in electrical engineering. While at MIT, he took a class taught by Noam Chomsky and Louis Kampff called "Intellectuals and Social Responsibility." The course had a profound influence on Loh as it helped him to realize that the jobs engineers were being funneled into were about making money and not about making the world a better place. It made him reflect on the internship he had in a company that built missiles and he, ultimately, decided that electrical engineering wasn't really for him. He had never considered himself an "environmentalist," so he didn't consider a career in the field right away. At the time, Loh believed that being an environmentalist meant recycling and being in the outdoors. Though he thought these things

were great, he didn't consider them as pressing or as relevant as issues of social justice or the plight of communities of color. Consequently, he did not pursue an environmental track.

However, shortly after graduating from MIT, Loh stumbled across an environmental position while searching for work in the non-profit sector. He took a job as an energy research analyst with the Tellus Institute, an environmental consulting group. His work was heavily quantitative – focusing on how much energy could be saved by conservation initiatives. Loh also worked on computer programming and developed software for utility companies to use to determine how much pollution could be abated and how much energy and money could be saved with the implementation of conservation programs. At the time he worked on these projects, corporations were concentrating on demand side management in their conservation efforts. That is, they focused on things such as financing projects to encourage people to switch to less energy intensive compact fluorescent light bulbs.

Loh received a scholarship to complete a master's degree in the Energy and Resources Group at the University of California, Berkeley. He graduated in 1994, but not before serving on an Affirmative Action Committee for the program; he wanted to help diversify the student body. Before attending graduate school, Loh had been active in social justice issues; for instance, he was heavily involved South Africa divestment campaigns while attending MIT. However, it wasn't until he went to California that he was able to see the connection between social justice and the environment clearly. In his own words, "At UC Berkeley I met people involved in the environmental justice movement which was blossoming in 1992 and realized that I could do work that followed my passion for social justice and still put to use some of the technical skills I had learned in my undergraduate career...I was 'radicalized' in college. [I] developed a political consciousness. I was involved in activism work on campus at MIT...everything from anti-apartheid to confronting military research....During that time I didn't see the connection between racism and militarism...and the environmental movement." Meeting undergraduate students who had started a student of color environmental justice organization (called Nindakin) was an eye opening experience and turning point in Loh's life. Loh considers those students – though younger than he – his first mentors.

For two years after graduate school, Loh worked with the Pacific Institute for Studies in Development, Environment and Security, a non-profit, research think tank. Loh's work involved investigating water sustainability issues in California. He also had the opportunity to work on environmental justice issues while there, including work on reports regarding population, immigration and social justice. Finding the connection between the technical skills and social justice application is what made him continue with a career in the environmental field. When Loh returned to the Boston area in 1996, he started working with Alternatives for Community & Environment (ACE).

Contributions

Loh served as the Executive Director of Alternatives for the Community and Environment (ACE) from 2000-2009, but before becoming the executive director, he held several other positions within ACE. He first started as Director of Research and Development; there were only four people on the staff of ACE at the time. Loh spent about half of his time doing fundraising and

the other half providing technical and communication assistance to many of the programs that aided environmental justice groups. He developed workshops on community mapping and used Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to help community groups. He was promoted to Associate Director of ACE when the co-directors/founders of organization decided to leave. Loh assumed more of the financial, administration and communication duties of the organization in his new position. The co-founders encouraged Loh to continue to grow his role within the organization and provided him with the confidence needed to do so. In 2000, the board appointed Loh as the Executive Director of ACE.

As executive director he did a diverse role within the organization. In addition to managing the general affairs of the organization, he was still involved in fundraising, personnel management, board development, and he sometimes acted as a spokesperson for ACE. Under Loh's tenure as the Executive Director of ACE, the staff size of the organization doubled. It currently has eleven full-time staff as well as part-time youth organizers. Loh has this to say of the organization, "ACE is very diverse. We try to figure out how to go deeper and to live the experience everyday. It isn't just about having a group of people together with different skin colors ...What does it mean to be multi-racial and multi-class?...How do we belong to an organization that strives for that and how can we best develop work to fight against some of the institutionalized racism and classicism that is present everywhere?...It is ongoing work."

Under Loh's leadership, ACE actively sought people who will grow and advance throughout their tenure in the organization. Loh says, "I think it is my responsibility to make way for the new leadership when my time is up here...I will do this for a while and then move on so someone else can take it to the next level." Loh feels that it is very important for the leadership in the organization to be turned over to someone in the community who advanced through ACE the way he did. For Loh, his career highlights come when he sees people – particularly young ones – feeling empowered and are actively engaged in making a difference in their communities. Loh says there have been many instances of youth growing and exercising leadership over the years. A few years after ACE transformed into a member-led organization, he transitioned out of leadership. ACE is now led by Kalila Barnett, who was born and raised in Roxbury (where ACE is based) and had been organizing in the community and serving on ACE's board. Since 2009, Loh has been a full-time faculty member at Tufts University Department of Urban & Environmental Policy and Planning, helping to prepare students to be "practical visionaries".

Loh feels lucky to be able to get paid to do what he is passionate about. Knowing that he is contributing to long-term social change and being able to work with "amazingly dedicated" and diverse people has been incredible. As Loh sees it, "The situation that I am in is not typical. It is rare and special." He feels that many of his career choices were a function of him being in the right place at the right time. He said he never could have imagined the path that he has taken, but his life and opportunities have just been an evolution. He says, "I wouldn't be doing this if it was just a job."

Advice to Young Professionals

Loh gives this advice to minorities considering a career in the environmental field, "Think through what kind of difference you want to make in your life, and in this world and figure out

how it can be connected to a career. Put your career in perspective...there is certainly a need to make money, but look at ways to be involved in the field in a way that also makes a difference for communities of color.” He adds, “Having a degree does help to open doors, but [the degree] says nothing about whether you have the commitment or the ability to do the work...for the kind of work we do...you don’t need to have a degree. Many of the lead staff at ACE don’t have college degrees or are only now working towards one. I am not advocating not going on to higher education, but recognize that you learn a lot just by doing the work. Most things, like how to work with people and communities, you could never learn while in school.”

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