



Angela Johnson Meszaros (1963-Present)

Director of Policy and General Council
California Environmental Rights Alliance

"If the air, water or food causes you to have serious problems or even die, you can't enjoy any of the other things that you hold dear." Angela Johnson Meszaros, 2005.

Overview

When asked about the highlight of her career, Angela Johnson Meszaros immediately thinks of her colleagues. "It's their combination of community organizing and professionalism that brings work to life for me," Meszaros says. "It's just amazing to work and learn from them." While she was the Executive Director of the California League of Conservation Voters Education Fund, Meszaros organized a monthly luncheon series to bring together people from around Los Angeles area who work on environmental justice issues. Meszaros believes that it is important on many levels for activists, community members and professionals to get to know one another and bond when they are not involved in a crisis. These monthly luncheons – which are ongoing – started a large number of friendships and collaborations in addition to building knowledge and information sharing.

This interview was conducted in 2015.

Early Life

Meszaros was born on October 23, 1941, and is one of three children. Her parents, Leroy, a delivery truck driver, and Nettie, a bookkeeper, in Vallejo, California, raised her. Meszaros does not believe that her childhood in Northern California had a strong influence on her future career path.

Career

Meszaros is currently the Director of Policy and General Council at the California Environmental Rights Alliance (CERA) where she works to develop state and regional policies to monitor the implementation of air, toxics and land-use planning policies in low-income communities of color. Meszaros' interest in an environmental career began during law school at the University of Southern California (USC), when her civil rights law class reviewed the environmental justice movement for a case study on childhood lead poisoning. She was so inspired by what she learned that she entered a year-long fellowship as a project coordinator for Lead Safe California in 1994.

There, Meszaros helped to build a coalition in Los Angeles to facilitate drafting state legislation geared towards removing lead hazards from homes.

In 1995, Meszaros started the Environmental Justice Resource Network (EJRN) with funds from an Echoing Green fellowship. The EJRN was founded to provide legal, educational, and technical assistance to low-income communities of color affected by environmental hazards. Later, Meszaros worked at the Environmental Defense as Executive Director of the California League of Conservation Voters Education Fund, and as a researcher at USC before accepting her current position at CERA.

Importance to Mentoring to Career

Of all the people that she has worked with over the years, Meszaros was most influenced by her mentor Bill Lannlee, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Legal Defense Fund's Western Regional Counsel. Lannlee taught Meszaros about the role and limitations of using the law to accomplish social and political goals, as well as how she can use her perspective as a person of color working in the legal profession to protect low-income communities from hazards. Meszaros also values the wide range of community members she has had the opportunity to work with. Each person has taught her valuable lessons regarding how to interact with communities that you are not a part of, how to hold pertinent issues in the forefront of the struggle (rather than getting lost in law or policy), and to always keep your humanity when thinking about how to address the issues you are confronting.

Meszaros continues to work in the environmental field not only because of her colleagues, but because the environment is the foundation for everything that she considers important. "If the air, water or food causes you to have serious problems or even die, you can't enjoy any of the other things that you hold dear," Meszaros says. She has practical advice for minorities who are looking to work for an environmental organization: find a way to work more directly with impacted communities, a task not easily accomplished with most mainstream organizations. In fact, everyone—no matter what field they are in—should find a way to incorporate environmental issues into the work they do.