



## **Alejandra Tres (1971-Present)**

(Former) Executive Director

**Association of Environmental Health  
Academic Programs**

**National Environmental Health Science and  
Protection Accreditation Council**

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*“Know that you will come up against some subtle or overt resistance, a lack of understanding of why minorities are so important in this [environmental] field. Use your own story to represent not only yourself, but your community.” Alejandra Tres, 2006.*

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### **Overview**

Alejandra Tres is Executive Director of the Municipal League of King County, a voluntary civic organization dedicated to effective and responsive government. Previously Alejandra was Executive Director of the Association of Environmental Health Academic Programs and the National Environmental Health Science and Protection Accreditation Council. Ms. Tres was also an organizer with the Sound Alliance and the NW IAF. Alejandra served as a research analyst at the Department of Environmental Health at the University of Washington and consulted for several organizations including the Washington State Board of Health, the March of Dimes, Ford Foundation, and Mercy Corps International on issues such as environmental justice, housing, public participation, organizational development, and civil society. She lives outside of Seattle with her husband Jeff, sons Carlos and Cisco, dog piba, a flock of chickens and sundry of other animals.

*This interview was conducted in 2015.*

### **Early Life and Education**

Alejandra Tres never dreamt she would end up working in the sub-field of environmental health or any other subject so closely tied to politics. “My family left Argentina in a politically volatile time,” Tres explains. “My father was politically active there, and had been involved in labor and democracy issues. So I always thought that I didn’t want to be involved in politics—I wanted to study something “black and white” like science, in my case environmental science.” However, Tres quickly realized that there were as many gray areas in environmental science as in politics,

and she eventually came to embrace it. Now, she combines social and political advocacy with environmental science, as she works to provide information about environmental health issues to those most in need of it.

Tres earned her bachelor's degree in environmental Policy and management studies from Dickinson College, and soon afterward began working for a Pennsylvania waste management company in solid waste compliance. While learning much about solid waste compliance on the job, she developed relationships with some of the workers who dealt directly with the waste, most of whom were Spanish speaking. Tres became interested in helping them gain information about what they were dealing with and giving them tools to effectively and knowledgeably advocate for themselves. "I wanted to help them with basic stuff, like health care and knowing what they were dealing with every day at work," Tres says. "I wanted to find out more about them, what their needs were, and about cultural competency in the field."

## **Career**

Tres moved to Seattle to work on a research project that examined the skills, knowledge and abilities of environmental workers. "We were trying to answer the question, 'What does it take to be an effective, competent professional in the environmental health field?'" she says. She also earned a Master of Public Affairs from the University of Washington but decided not to go for doctorate because she first wanted to look for solutions that were "more practice-based, not as academic." The principal investigator of the University of Washington project was also a co-founder of the Association of Environmental Health Academic Programs, where Tres now serves as the Executive Director. In addition to her role at UW, Tres directs the National Environmental Science Health Science and Protection Accreditation Council. She has also consulted for a variety of government and private organizations in matters of environmental justice, housing, and health policy, among others.

Tres will soon be moving on to work with the Sound Alliance, where she will work with the Puget Sound Latino community to build broad-based political alliances that address diverse progressive issues, including environmental, health, and labor concerns. "I felt it was time to be working more directly with political change," says Tres. "It also allows me time to consult on environmental issues of my choice with my colleagues in the field. The environmental leaders of color are some of the brightest and most creative people I have ever met, and I look forward to working with them in whatever way we can."

## **Importance of Mentoring Others**

Tres says that while her career has been largely self-directed, she owes a lot to people who encouraged her, and served as role models for how to approach the field of environmental health. During her first college internship, Tres notes that the staff encouraged and supported her in ways that her parents, who did not speak English, were unable to. "They took the time to say, 'You're smart, and you can do something,'" Tres recalls. "That was a really important boost to my confidence." Tres says she tries to mentor other minorities in the field as much as she can: "Every time we hire a minority (which is often), we try to debunk the myth that there's no minorities out

there doing educational or environmental work,” she says. She notes that the field needs more formal mentorship programs, both to provide opportunities that can’t be had through informal mentoring and to “help busy people realize how important it [diversity] is.”

Tres is proud of the efforts she and her colleagues have made to diversify their niche of the environmental field. In some cases, the rewards have been very tangible. “We’ve increased minority enrollment in environmental health programs by 40%, and we’ve worked actively with minority universities and institutions to create minority health programs with an emphasis on cultural competency,” she says. “Our Board is now comprised of a number of people of color. We’ve done a lot of things people said couldn’t be done.”

## **Highlights**

In Tres’s view, it is critical to define minority participation as something beyond having students or people of color present in the field; true diversity requires diverse participants to contribute their creativity, knowledge, experiences and ideas to shape its approach. Tres says that in terms of career achievements, she’s most proud of that respect and recognition her programs have earned. However, she acknowledges that type of recognition can also have its downside. “Some people now go after ‘minority money’ because it’s there,” Tres says. “When you’re involved in diversity issues, it has to come from a personal place...you have to know why you’re doing it. ”

## **Advice to Young Professionals**

Tres says she has stuck with a career in her field because it is continually challenging and rewarding. “It’s a great place to make change,” she says. “It affects everyone’s lives whether they realize it or not. The urgency is compelling. It’s a place to empower communities beyond the immediate; it’s a real platform for building intimate and trusting relationships in communities, relationships that can help them take on all kinds of issues.” Tres says that given the dire need for information and empowerment in communities of color, and the direct impact that professionals in the field can have, the need for more minorities in the environmental health field is huge. “It’s a really critical field for minorities to be in,” she says. “It’s a place where you can tell your own story. Know that you will come up against some subtle or overt resistance, a lack of understanding about why minorities are so important to the field. Use your own story to represent not only yourself, but your community.”