

Episode 8: Michelle Romero Why environmental justice is crucial to today's climate careers

Yesh: (00:10)

I'm Yesh Pavlik Slenk, and this is Degrees: Real talk about planet saving careers from Environmental Defense Fund. On January 20th, a whole new era begins.

Clip of Joe Biden: (00:23)

I believe that every American has a fundamental right to breathe clean air and drink clean water. I know we haven't fulfilled that right. No, we haven't fulfilled that right for generations or more.... Fulfilling this basic obligation to all Americans -- especially low-income white, black, brown and Native Americans who too often don't have the clean air and clean water. It's not going to be easy, but it's absolutely necessary. We are committed to facing climate change by delivering environmental justice.

Yesh: (00:40)

In the runup to the inauguration, I'm excited to share with you a special two-part series on environmental justice.

Here's why this matters to you, listener. Yes, Biden's two trillion-dollar build-back-better initiative could mean hundreds of thousands of new, planet-saving jobs. But it's bigger than that. If you're already in the sustainability space or trying to break in, an understanding and commitment to environmental justice is just as important as your grasp on greenhouse gas emissions. To serve in this space means that every technical, strategic, staffing, and advocacy choice you make will be influenced by the pursuit of environmental justice. And that will set you apart as a genuine environmental leader.

Like my guest today! Michelle Romero is national director of Green For All, a nonprofit working at the intersection of race, jobs and justice. As you'll hear, Michelle came to the fight against climate change through her passion to improve the wealth and health of communities of color. And now, Michelle is bringing together unlikely coalitions from the right and left, rural and urban communities to find new solutions for reducing poverty while building a clean-energy economy.

Our conversation really inspired me, not just because she's amazing, but because of the opportunities this new approach brings for people seeking purpose-driven careers. I really hope it inspires you just as much.

Michelle Romero, welcome to Degrees.

Degrees

WITH YESH PAVLIK SLENK



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Michelle Romero: (02:18)

Thanks for having me. I'm so excited to be here.

Yesh: (02:22)

Michelle, I'd like to start by taking a measure of where we're at. You said that we're living under a great "eco divide". What do you mean by that?

Michelle Romero: (02:31)

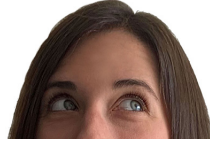
Yeah, we here in the United States--this first world country -- still have a situation where some communities have access to clean air, clean water, beautiful parks and others don't. And sometimes that division is separated by something as simple as a freeway, where you go left off the freeway and you see beautiful trees and small businesses and shops and a university. I mean, this is literally in Palo Alto, right? You, you go left and you get off and you're there at Stanford—some of the richest houses are there. You think of the Silicon Valley tech giants, you know, living there. And then you go right off that same freeway -- separated by nothing but a road -- and you have one of the poorest communities. And that's kind of the way things are, places in East Oakland, for instance, surrounded by busy freeways and highways and heavy pollution, from the port, from the trucks coming to the port. And just a few zip codes away, you have people with higher life expectancy because they aren't exposed to those same toxins. And so that's what we mean by the eco divide. You know, that we have a situation where some people benefit from a clean environment and some people are the sacrifice zones for the rest of us.

Yesh: (03:52)

And you're right. That's a great visualization. And I think we've probably all experienced that. So let's talk about what's at stake to say that we collectively, whether you're on one side of the freeway or another are in a critical moment, seems laughably, obvious. We are experiencing a raging pandemic, a faltering economy, and a climate crisis all converging on us at once. Why is now, right now this moment in time, so critically important for your work?

Michelle Romero: (04:27)

Well, I think, you know, the COVID pandemic has helped open the eyes of a lot of us who had not seen the stark inequality that we have in this country. We're seeing it in COVID death rates where people of color are more likely to be having the worst effects of COVID or, or die from COVID if they contract it, and, you know, part of that stems back to preexisting conditions and health outcomes for people. And again, you know, when you're living in a community, that is, you know, if you're black or Brown, for instance, your chances of living in a community with higher rates of pollution and lower quality of air, um, are higher, are higher. And so what does that mean for rates of asthma, rates of cancer, respiratory illness, and other pollution related diseases that make you more susceptible in, uh, in a pandemic like



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this. And so I think, this year has, has brought a lot of painful events. But in a way that I think has exposed the underlying inequality to more of the country that had not seen it before, if it wasn't in their own backyard. Right? And so this gives us an opportunity, I think, to bring people together around how we build back better, how we build a better future, a fairer economy and a cleaner environment for everyone. And so the other opportunity is Congress, which has had difficulty coming together on many issues is now poised to spend trillions of dollars, having to rebuild our economy, having to put people back to work, and get us out of this health crisis. And that's an opportunity to drive those investments in clean energy projects, in underserved neighborhoods, in weatherizing homes, in cleaning up transportation so that we can have safe public transportation and clean transportation solutions that connect people to their essential jobs and essential services. We can begin to create a better future for all.

Yesh: (06:22)

And what are the long-term costs? If we fail in this moment?

Michelle Romero: (06:27)

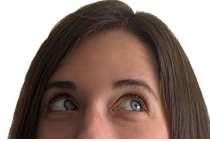
We won't get another opportunity like this. Let me just be clear. We won't be able to spend trillions of dollars putting people back to work in any old industry. And then think that we're going to have the trillions of dollars that we need to fight climate change. So how we leverage these dollars to have multiple benefits at the same time, right? Fight poverty, fight pollution, fight the COVID crisis all at the same time, that's going to be really, really important. And so we need policy makers in Congress and we need the new administration to really understand that equity, which is the outcome of addressing inequality, is fundamentally core to our success.

Yesh: (07:12)

Thank you. I want to come back to your work and dig a little bit deeper in a moment, but before we do that, if you haven't always been an environmentalist, what was your relationship with the environment as a kid growing up?

Romero: (07:24)

Growing up? You know, one of my memories is just riding our bikes in the streets, honestly. Uh, and it was pavement, I think a lot about pavement. I actually don't think a lot about spending time at parks. I'm sure that we did, but I don't recall that, um, in the neighborhood where I grew up, but I didn't think a lot about the environment or climate change growing up. I did think a lot about workers. Um, my dad and my grandpa and all of my uncles worked for the garbage company. And so we did recycle and we were very aware of our conservation in that sense. You know, my grandma always used the butter tubs, like many grandmas do I think, uh, to turn them into salsa jars after they were done and things like that. And when we threw things away, we were conscious of what we were throwing away and how we were throwing it away.



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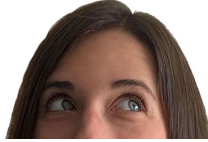
But I would say a lot of that had to do more, um, with saving money, um, than it did saving the planet. And it had to do with how we treated the workers at the other end of our garbage. So it was a real people centered approach, I think to it. And so I didn't know that we were, um, environmentalist or think of myself ever as an environmentalist.

Yesh: (08:35)

you've talked about your transition from that initial identity and not resonating necessarily with the environmental movement, uh, but then accidentally becoming an environmentalist yourself. And you talk about that transition happening during a moment in Flint, Michigan, can you paint a picture of what transformed you?

Michelle Romero: (08:57)

Yeah. I took this job at Green for All I because I had a mentor—Vien Troung—who I really admired and she was looking for someone to help run campaigns. And I said to her, well, listen, I believe in you. And I know that what you are working on there must be something greater that I don't see yet. Um, and so I'm going to come and I'm going to work for you, but, I can't promise you that I will be as passionate about these environmental issues as you— again, because I didn't see myself as an environmentalist and I thought it was something different. But sure enough, she sent me to Flint, Michigan within weeks of starting at Green for All, it was the middle of the Flint water crisis. We had a chance to talk with moms who were raising their kids in the middle of this water crisis. And it was in that room when I was hearing from African American mothers. One woman -- deNitra Brown -- talked about her three-year-old son having a pee pee accident, you know, it's potty training age. And she tried to rinse them off in the bathtub. At this point, they knew they couldn't drink the water, but there was no information about actually using it just on your skin, right? Why should it cause any issues on your skin? And so she bathes him in the water just to rinse them off real quick. And he starts screaming, mommy, it's hurting, it's burning. Um, and she pulls them out of the water and she sees that his skin is cracking and bleeding. And at the time I had a three-year-old, back home. And I just, I couldn't imagine, what it's like for that mom every day, not to be able to do basic things and to not be able to protect your kid, when the issues are outside of your control., I realized in that moment that these issues were not just happening to deNetra and her family, they weren't just happening in Flint. and I started recalling things that I had never thought much about, how back home in Richmond, California, just a few years before I ended up in Flint, uh, I had been watching the news. The local news was explaining that the Chevron oil refinery in the community had exploded and that people should be sheltering in place. Now we all know what shelter in place means today because of COVID and we know how much we hate it. so imagine growing up in a community where, leaks like that happen so often that they actually have an alarm system in the city to tell you to get inside your homes and the people in the news that time that I was watching were telling people to find towels or blankets to shove in the cracks of the doors. Richmond, California is also a predominantly low income, black and Latino community, like Flint. And so it was in that moment that I



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realized it was happening to certain people, not everybody because we're devalue certain people's lives. And that has to change.

Yesh: (12:04)

I'm a little speechless, honestly. Your story about these families and these people that you're meeting, it would transform anyone. I hope it would transform anyone. I also have a daughter and I can't—Oh, I'm getting a little choked up. I can't even imagine not having the ability to take care of her the way that I need to—excuse me. Um, so when you, when you are motivated to do your work every day, are these the stories that are getting you excited about the programs that, that green for all is, is working on?

Michelle Romero: (12:45)

Thinking about families like deNitra's, thinking about families like, you know, my friends who grew up in Richmond, um, these are the stories of the people that keep me motivated on the days that it gets hardest. These are the stories of the people who remind me that I can't quit, when it gets hard. But I think what inspires me the most is seeing the amazing genius and talent in our same communities. To show people things like the Green Raiteros program in the Central Valley of California, you know, the bread basket of California where all of our agricultural goods come from. This is a rural area where many communities have to travel hours by public bus to reach the nearest government services, the nearest hospital and so on-- and, um, my friend Ray Leone, actually who's the mayor of Huron started this Green Raiteros program to bring electric vehicles to the community and have electric vehicle ride share programs where companies like Lyft and Uber don't really operate. And so they're innovating new solutions and helping connect people who really need rides to reach their hospitals for medical appointments, to be able to go about their day and do their business and reach educational opportunities and things like that. And transportation is one of those really key resources for socioeconomic upward mobility. And so I get inspired by how the clean energy economy and things like clean transportation can help to solve poverty and pollution.

Yesh: (14:24)

I understand that your team's working on what you're calling the Common Ground Summit that we'll identify and bring together from both sides of the aisle to, to align around climate action. Can you talk a little bit about that initiative?

Michelle Romero: (14:36)

Yeah. So Green for All new, over a year ago that no matter what happened on election day in November, 2020, that there was going to be a day after the election in November, 2020. We have to be thinking about how we come together. How we can heal the pain and frustration that one side or the other is going to have. So we set out to work with liberal and conservative partners to build relationships and build trust pre-election. I'm really proud of the group that we brought together. I'm not ready to share



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who they are just yet, but Um, but we have, over the course of many, many months been able to identify common ground on about a dozen different policies— it's everything from, you know, how do we weatherize our homes and buildings and how do we help innovate, um, new technologies that we're going to need to save the planet? How do we deploy clean transportation solutions and hard to reach areas? That's the kind of work that we're going to be doing this year ahead, um, and doing it in a way that centers, the needs of our, you know, the underdogs in red States and blue States. I think both parties have not done enough to address the pain that is happening in low-income communities and in communities of color across the country. And this is an opportunity to, build a bottoms-up bi-partisan ship, uh, a new style of bipartisanship, um, that doesn't leave us out.

Yesh: (16:16)

And when you're talking about bringing these groups together, are you saying that they really are agreeing and finding common ground to advance these policies together?

Michelle Romero: (16:27)

Absolutely. when I set out on this work, I was very skeptical. I was very thoughtful about who would we approach to work with? Where might that take us on policy? I was surprised at every step of the way. I will say we have an awesome group of human beings who just really care about addressing climate emissions and who really care about building a stronger economy. I think that, um, they're concerned about things like not being able to maintain the US's global competitiveness. They're concerned about our national security and what that means when you start having resource scarcity in places. I'll give you an example: electric vehicles. I think you see the left talking a lot about, we electrify everything right now, right? Let's just pick electric, electrify everything, and, um, force all new sales of vehicles to be electric, and kind of really mandate this change. And on the more conservative side, some of the legitimate questions that are coming up are things like, well, where are we mining the materials for these batteries? And what are we going to do when we recycle these batteries? And are those jobs here or are those jobs overseas. There's a need to have, um, fuller conversation about that from an environmental justice standpoint, What is it like to live in those communities, right. Where we're now doing that for this, um, seemingly good green cause. We need to be thoughtful about that now to make sure that we're solving not just the near-term crises, but, um, perhaps not creating our next one at the same time.

Yesh: (18:14)

So Michelle, you recently were awarded a \$10 million Bezos Earth Fund Grant! Tell me about a project that you're excited to be funding because of this grant, and maybe an outcome that you're hoping to see as a result?



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Michelle Romero: (18:29)

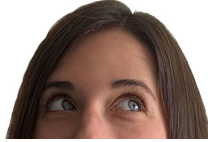
Yeah. One of the things that we are going to be launching this year is a listening tour to, um, offer an opportunity for people across the country to actually weigh in on what's the future economy that they want to see? For us, it's not just about putting people back to work in the old pollution-based economy. It's how we're going to build a cleaner and fair economy. And so going to places like Appalachia and going to, uh, inner cities and going to, you know, port communities and other places to go into farmers and talking to them about like, "what do you need to see out of a new green economy", right? How can clean energy solutions help you here? We have to really help more people imagine the future that's possible and how they fit into it.

Yesh: (19:15)

I love empowering people with that freedom. And you have talked about creating, not just green jobs for building back better in this new economy that we're all working toward, but green jobs that are actually good economically. Can you give me some specific examples of green jobs that are also good jobs?

Michelle Romero: (19:35)

Yeah. You know, with all the infrastructure money that's going to be, um, happening, I hope right? With the trillions of dollars that we put into projects that can help put people to work? I want to see those tied to fair labor and workforce standards. I want to see those tied to supplier diversity requirements, which just means, you know, that a certain part of the contracts have to go to women, or minority or veteran-owned businesses, so that we can really boost small businesses that have been struggling in this economy as well. Um, there was a great example of this that we did in, uh, Portland, Oregon, many years ago when we were recovering from the housing crisis, right—back in 2008, 2009. Um, there was a pilot project that was going to be going around weatherizing homes in Portland, and they're providing financing for low-income communities to take advantage of some of these upgrades for their buildings. So they can use energy more efficiently, keep money in their pocket. And we saw this as a, um, a double opportunity, where you could do those things and create strong local jobs. So we helped facilitate a community workforce agreement with the city. And this is the kind of thing I think we need to see all across the country with these infrastructure projects, a community workforce agreement that said, 'okay, you need to prioritize hiring in, um, you know, chronically underemployed communities. And you need to make sure that you're contracting with women and minority owned businesses'. And so we applied some criteria that would help those, uh, be more competitive for the projects. And the outcome was amazing! You know, 48% of the jobs from that project went to people of color. And about a quarter of the contracts went to, uh, women and minority- and veteran-owned businesses. Now that's in a city that had only 22% people of color. And I just said 48% of the jobs, right. So that's, that's what equity is, is, doubly investing in the people who need the resources that haven't had them for generations. Uh, and that's how we start to get to a more fair economy. And that's the kind of thing we have to see more of.



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Yesh: (21:49)

I want to go back to something you mentioned earlier about bringing in multiple stakeholder groups who may seem at odds with each other under a lot of circumstances and try to align them on policy that benefits both. Can you talk a little bit about how you do that? How you start those conversations?

Michelle Romero: (22:10)

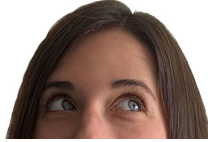
Yeah. Green for All sort of sits at the intersection of the environmental, economic and racial justice movements. So much like a bi-racial or multi-racial child, I feel like we kind of have a foot in each area and often see gaps in ways to help one side or another understand each other better. And now we're applying that same sort of secret sauce that we've had to political polarization and division. A lot of times, between the media and the ways that we speak in our different movements, we create an entire language that's not understood and not heard by others. And so they feel very isolated and excluded from that conversation. And if we don't find a way to hold space for understanding, without calling people racist, being able to accept that everything about our unequal founding of the country to government structures and systems that have led to situations where people have lived very different lives and experiences and don't know what they don't know. You know, Brene Brown has a great, um, quote in her book, 'Dare to Lead', about leadership and vulnerability and how vulnerability is really the birthplace of innovation. And to innovate our way out of this polarization, we have to be vulnerable. And that means getting away from our soap boxes and our microphones, where we're just shouting at each other about how the other side is wrong and we're right. We're going to be right about some things; we're probably going to be wrong about some things too, or just not aware of some blind spots that we have. And so that's what we try to do with the coalitions that we build, with the partners that we are building on the left and the right, and just have a conversation. And from that we're learning from each other, how each other speaks about issues, what truly matters to us. And that frankly, we have a lot more in common than we think.

Yesh: (24:28)

I want to shift a little bit to thinking about your career and in your view on this very broad space of sustainability, climate change, eco justice, that we're all working in or hoping to work in. One of our conceits on this podcast, is that any person in any job can make a positive impact. Would you say that that's true? And if so, what advice would you give to our listeners who are trying to find their place in that, in that wide space?

Michelle Romero: (25:01)

Let's see: any person in any job can make a difference... I think that that's true. I think, though, that not every work environment is right to allow our gifts and our talents to contribute. Frankly, I think some are going to be more open than others to allowing us to make that kind of impact.



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But, we can't all work on everything and no single person can solve all of the issues alone. That's for sure, but we all can do something. For instance with George Floyd and the numerous police killings of black men and black women and indigenous folks and, and brown folks, I think a lot of people saw that as a wake-up call on how they do better, and had questions around how do they work on racial justice issues when maybe their career, for instance, is, as a transportation policy planner or state or someone in a nonprofit at an environmental organization that doesn't work on racial justice issues You know: what does that mean to contribute to those issues. And it's just bringing those values to the work every day, using the power that you do have to speak up on whatever your area is, to offer an alternative, to offer a new idea, or a question, like, 'how is this campaign going to make things better or worse for those communities that are the most impacted'? And just force the conversation.

Yesh: (26:42)

As we bring this conversation to a close, I would like to ask you a question I'm asking all of our guests. And, and that is if you could have a very personal, just for you, Michelle Romero, board of directors, and this is a group of people that you may or may not know, but it's a group of people that you rely on or look to as you're making big changes or decisions in your career and life. Who are those individuals or those groups that you lean on.

Michelle Romero: (27:10)

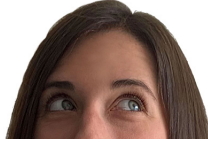
Wow. So if I had to think of my own kitchen cabinet, so to speak?

Yesh: (27:16)

Exactly.

Michelle Romero: (27:17)

So if I had to think of my own kitchen cabinet, I would definitely want women of color. They have been some of my rocks throughout my professional journey so far and have really challenged me in deeply personal ways that have helped me get outside of the box I put myself in. Women who would just say to me, for instance, 'if you think you should be in that meeting, just come', right? Like, invite yourself. Don't wait for permission. I would want in my cabinet, people who are brave and daring and who do things that you know were told not to do because they inspire me. They inspire me to be a little bit braver and a little bit bolder. I would also want people who I can be fully honest with. People who will accept the Michelle Romero for, all of her worries and things that keep her up at night because those people are really important to have in your circle as you are trying to make change. I'd want someone funny on there too, probably just to keep it humorous. At Green for all, we value 'solutions, servant leadership and soul', and the soul part really, I think, is important to remember—to have fun in this work, to remember to celebrate the wins along the way to remember that it's okay to have joy, even when there is suffering, and the suffering isn't going to end quick enough for you to delay your own personal healing and joy.



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Yesh: (28:45)

Mmm. yes, joy and healing and fun fortifies us to work longer and harder for what we care about and I so appreciate that you give yourself, your team, and even our listeners permission and encouragement to do that. Well that's our time for today. Michelle Romero, thank you for joining me on Degrees.

Michelle Romero: (29:09)

Thanks for having me.

Yesh: (2:11)

That's our show for today. Thank you, listeners, for tuning into Degrees. We've linked to Michelle Romero's 'Green for All' website in the show notes. Consider this your invitation to get involved. Tune in for part two of this series on environmental justice next week with my guest is Peggy Shepard, the much-loved godmother of this grassroots movement. If you liked what you heard today, share this episode with friends and family and ask them to subscribe! Also point them to our website, degreespodcast.org, where we've posted our favorite sustainability job boards and other sustainability career resources. While you're there, we'd love to hear from you. Email us on our web site—our team reads and responds to every email. Or send me a message on Twitter: I'm @yeshsays. Degrees is presented by Environmental Defense Fund. Our producers are Rick Velleu and Amy Morse. Our executive producer is Christina Mestre. Our production company is Podcast Allies with Elaine Appleton Grant and Lindsey O'Connor. Our editor is Karen Lowe. Engineering by sound genius, Matthew Simonson, and theme music by Lake Street Dive. I'm your host, Yesh Pavlik Slenk. Stay fired up, y'all.