



Tamara Toles. O: My name is Tamara Toles O'Laughlin and I'm the North America director at 350.org. I have been in this work ... wow, I know I moved every three years for 21 years doing environmental work. So, at 40, I feel like half of my life.

Eve Austin: Thank you. Okay, so this is for this Town Creek stories project. I want to ask you if you could talk about your work, the work that you've done that was funded by the town creek foundation, and if you have a particular story that you'd like to share about that.

Tamara Toles. O: Before I moved onto three 350.org, I was the executive director of the Maryland and Environmental Health Network, which was a project funded by Town Creek Foundation under the auspices of the Baltimore Area Grant Makers Association. As the executive director for two years, I had the pleasure of connecting the dots publicly on human health, the environment and the stories that needed to be told around how energy choice makes it more or less likely that people will achieve health. And being able to do that from Baltimore is particularly important for me because, just as a general narrative, most of us, normal humans have not been invited into a conversation around what we make investments in and infrastructure. So, we are the last to know that our health is threatened.

So, through the generous support of Town Creek, I was a really able to create a number of interventions to ask questions of folks who were impacted about their relationship to energy choice, to develop some and support advocacy by folks who are impacted and to allow health advocates, environmental advocates and folks who are clear that energy is sort of a through line, in their headache, struggles and challenges to bring them together in a bunch of forums from the Maryland General Assembly to our meetings as members of lots of different associations forming in that space, organizations operating either as health advocates, environmental advocates or energy advocates, and creating a bunch of really easily understood translated texts, multimedia programs and interventions to really support generalized capacity building for Marylanders.

I think the highlight of my time was moving towards the end of my two years where, through the support of the Town Creek Foundation and our partners at Waterkeepers Chesapeake, Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin, the Generations' Movement and our energy partners in Maryland, Energy Advocates and the Maryland Climate Coalition. We focused the 2019 General Assembly on a constitutional amendment on climate and health. It's called the Healthy Green Maryland amendment. It's coming back in the 20 session for the Maryland General Assembly. And we're able to get it supported by a delegate, Steven Lafferty, delegate Robbyn Lewis, and it made it on its own along with the Health Impact Assessment bill, both of which are aimed at sussing out how we talk about human health impacts of choices that we make at the meta level.



So the Health Impacts Assessment Bill made it across the general assembly on its own without a favor or friends because it was about asking the Public Service Commission, when do you consider health? Of all the things that you way, you talk about what it costs to do something, what it costs to undo something, what it costs to taxpayers and what might happen to their rate base. But at what point are you and the public law judge that are weighing that information really looking at the human health cost? What does it mean to someone to suddenly wake up next to a thing they didn't know about that has impacts on their health? When does a person who files the permit presents an informational packet saying they've done all their research, ever weigh in on what the health consequences are going to be.

So, through multiple years of lobbying, building momentum, talking to our neighbors, we were able to work with a coalition of folks across the state who said, "Yeah, if you're going to pay for permits to say all sorts of things, you could at least look at the local health records for where I am because you all know what my community and myself is exposed to, what kinds of illnesses we already have, which means you can probably project out pretty quickly what kinds of harm people will experience based on what your activities they're going to do. Why isn't that a part of the Public Service Commission's work of certifying that a project is good to go? It can't be shovel-ready if it destroys the community that the shovel goes into.

And then following onto that with the constitutional amendment and the Healthy Green Amendment work, it's just been an extension of what does it mean to have a right to not be harmed when you've invested all of your resources as a part of a larger community and that community is allowed to make decisions without your impact? All of this really is connected to a longstanding narratives of justice and equity, which are really popular now but mean a lot to people who have not been invited to the table of decision making. I think our greatest strength at the Maryland Environmental Health Network was educating elected officials who wanted to know, who wanted to be empowered, talking to community members first and combining their efforts with really welcoming and interested health advocates from doctors, professionals, nurses for a healthy environment, Chesapeake positions with social responsibility and connecting them to energy advocates and folks who have really been thinking about the same problem from lots of different angles.

And what did it mean to be able to say, "Here are the impacted people, here are the harms." We worked really closely with the University of Maryland. Dr. Sacoby Wilson and at Johns Hopkins University, Dr. Keshia Pollack Porter, to demonstrate that health impact assessments fit into the state's portfolio of health and all policies, which is a really cool thing that shouldn't be subversive



because of what it means is that we're looking at the laws, regulations and statutes to find out when we factored in that human beings are experiencing their lives in between these different rule makings. And so, to put in front of the General Assembly that they had already invested in a health and all policies program to look at all of these different arms of the government and whether or not they're factoring health, whether they're sharing data so that the Census Bureau and the local health department have the same information about a population, which allows everybody to make better decisions, it was much easier with that foundation to say, "So now that you've invested in that, the next step should be health impact assessments."

Following that you should create doors of opportunity for people to enforce when their rights are violated, which means they have to have a right vested in the state. So, that work will continue despite the fact that the Maryland Environmental Health Network is no longer, for a number of reasons. One, because it matters. Two, because we haven't won yet. And three, because we still live here.

Eve Austin: It sounds like it must've been a lot of work. I wonder if you could ... oh my gosh. Luckily, we edit these for the bad sound. Could you say a little bit more about some of the challenges you faced while you were doing that work?

Tamara Toles. O: Well, one I think is perception. Everybody's perception that they're the only one who cares and our isolation and siloing of our work. As human beings, we generally want to see the better things and avoid the things that are hard. And some of that has shown up in the idea that I've ... in the entire time we lobbied for different things, pushed for different policies, supported partners and coalitions, the thing that I noticed over and over again is that all the things we rely on, all the laws, rules, regulations and statutes are like going to a party. And you go to a party, and you come back home, and you're like, "I feel exhausted. I had a great time." Pull out your Polaroids. After you've shaken them, and you realize, I'm not in any of these photos.

So I took really great photos of other people having a great time from my vantage point, but I'm not in them. So, if you look at laws for transportation, roadway safety, how we defined whether or not something is a good place to live or what to invest in, we very rarely, if ever, take up the human lens on any of those experiences. And so, looking at all of what currently exists, we now have to go back and re-insert what we know happens when people are stacked between four different kinds of energy development, highway and a byway, whether or not they have access to public transportation, if they have food, and how far is it for them to get it, and how long out of their way do they have to commute to get to a job. Building all of those things without thinking about the experience as a mistake.



So much of this work has been about letting people know whose careers are invested in keeping the trains running on time, sometimes literally, that if the trains aren't running on time with people who have agency, who have the ability to participate, who can bring their experience to the development of projects, you really can build a nightmare where you could have built something that works for everybody. I would say writ large, the challenges have been educating folks who are entrenched in systems that are already built, encouraging them to undo some things when called for, creating space to build better things by allowing and voices they aren't really familiar with, and trusting that a collaborative participatory processes make the outcomes better in a way that is tangible, that is meaningful.

And then, the universe where we're thinking about climate, it really pits our interests in keeping things the same and keeping things sustainable into sharp relief. So I think the challenges have been finding folks who have the courage of their convictions. I think across all of these different mediums, folks who have courage are the hardest to find. So, we have never had any problems because we've created learning tables, we've created digests where we educated people and reports where we say, here's information. Here are all the ways that intersects. Here are different voices from people who can tell you what it feels like to experience these things.

The folks who have come to be supportive of that, our legislators who are like, "Well, I didn't get into this work to have this desk and to work here three months a year. I got here because I want to solve things and see some things happen in my backyard." So, we've been able to form relationships with people who are real health champions across the environment, across energy, who are sitting in different seats across the city council, state level and even the federal government, who are able to say, "I didn't know that." So, if they're willing to learn, we're willing to teach. That's been a challenge that has been really supported.

The other thing I think is barriers and understanding about how much people are willing to learn and what they're willing to do to solve their own problems. We were able to create community of communities. My predecessor, Rebecca Ruggles, started that particular intervention. She's an amazing human being who is just really great with people and asking the kinds of questions that really expose how things are connected. And so, taking up with the work that she started years before, and taking over the position, I was able to help that group to weigh in on investments in fossil fuel infrastructure from Southern Maryland to the Eastern shore, to Western Maryland and really looking at what are the communities in Talbot, in Garrett County, in Solomon, what are their



perspectives? And how do those relationships cross over with impacts in Baltimore City?

I think we got to spend a lot of time looking at urban and rural people experiencing the same things, and through a health lens, which is currently less politicized than an environmental lens, able to say the flooding that's happening in your basement in Baltimore is the same flooding that's ruined the Baseball Diamond in Talbot County or Dorchester. And we aren't having a conversation about how those things are happening for the same reasons, we're missing out on allies, which means we're making less dynamic choices, which means our investments stay the same because they are related to silos that we created separate and apart from the way our problems actually happen. So, it's just been really challenging to hold that space. I find it that regulators, state agency heads often think that people don't care, but I don't know that they actually apply a learning lens, or a capacity towards thinking about making changes in the system that attract people.

Because as a small nonprofit, we met people who totally understood what we were doing and we would. We would ask, how was your beauty regiment, your commute to work, your job, your food all related to your health? I never met a community member who didn't totally instantly get that it was possible. I just think that they didn't have the faith that the folks who are in charge would do anything. And the folks who were in charge didn't have any faith that people would take it up. And so, I have had really accomplished legislators say, "What you want to do is the right thing to do, but until somebody show up in the street to tell people, "Get out and say they want to do this," I'm not going to put my neck out." Because I'm already entrenched in the two or three things I can do as a person.

And so, really a part of my decision to leave the network have had much more to do with the idea that fine, then we need to get more people. So, it isn't really about ending the work, but continuing it in a different way, using so much of what has been built in a state full of people who actually do care about how it ends up.

Eve Austin: That's great. Can you remember a particular story of when a community member that you can share, and if not, that's okay.

Tamara Toles. O: I think most of my great memories are about individuals inside of community of communities, they're like my family. Annie Bristow, who was a board member for our organization is from Garrett County and has spent so much of her life being a person who came from a medical background where really sincere interest in how the environment makes what's showing up at her door show up. I inherited her as a board member and she was a real firebrand who went out and



got community members from Baltimore City to Frostburg and she had no blinders on about the fact that the impacts hit us in the same way. Our interpretation of that is very different.

There are many days where I felt exhausted by regulators who would say, "Yeah, we recognize that methane is really troublesome, but we have relationships and investments from the people who are going to keep that going." And so, while we know it's really important and it's an accelerant to climate, we just don't feel like we have to force them as regulators to do the right thing. We're just going to talk to them. We have a big carrot. We have a big stick. So, we don't really need to push them. We just need to get into agreement. She, along with Mr. Len Zuza and Ruth Alice White and Kelly [Canvian 00:20:18] and just a whole bunch of community members got up in front of the Maryland climate commission, which operates on an off schedule from the General Assembly, and showed up in meeting after meeting to say, "Actually you want to talk about energy infrastructure, you want to talk about the bridge to nowhere that is natural gas infrastructure. We want to talk to you about the fact that compressor stations, well pads and pipelines are hurting our health today."

"While you are not sending anyone into study to health impacts because your only assessment is how much money does it make to get things from cove point Maryland to the rest of the planet, what are you doing about the communities, the bedroom communities, the working communities, the people who live all along that footprint? Who not only did not ask for this, but they have not been consulted on it. Who are experiencing a ton of adverse health impacts. And it's happening too quickly to be documented and too slowly to be taken seriously." They stood up over and over again in meeting after meeting and forum after forum, really raising this. They fought for and devised the Health Impact Assessment Bill.

Because one day, two or three years ago, we asked them, "What's keeping you up at night?" And he said, "Actually, the Public Service Commission website is really difficult to read. You have to be a lawyer who has a lawyer to understand it and it says Public Service Commission." And so, I thought, "Well, wow, of all the things that's wrong in the world, that's a pretty specific thing we could probably do something about." The Health Impact Assessment Bill was a part of a two suite intervention. The first was please make the Public Service Commission website in plain English. The first thing that happened as a result of that is our Spanish language access partners were like, "And if you can't read it in English, how are we going to have a chance in Spanish to understand any of what's happening?"

So then Chispa, Maryland, Ramon Palencia-Calvo came in and said, "I also want to participate in creating an alarm that this is happening. Because if the Public



Service Commission website doesn't work for the intended user, it does not work for all the other uses that it does not calculate. And so, it became a multi organizational effort. The folks from Energy Advocates joined in and said, "Actually there are proceedings going on in the Public Service Commission for years where we've tried to say that is so unintelligible and moves so quickly, you have to be such a specialist." Can't you just create a basic system where people can track what's going on by zip code? Where the website is in plain English, where if you wanted to follow a specific thing, you could sign up to get alerts about when something is happening so that you don't find out two years into a thing already happening and having been zoned that it's going to impact your future, your ability to accumulate wealth, your health and your happiness.

So, I have many memories connected to people who are actively finding ways to stand up where they are and whose lives are about making connections for a future that they're not necessarily going to participate in.

Eve Austin: Two things. I think you said Chispa. Could you just say ... spell that out? What is that?

Tamara Toles. O: C-H-I-S-P-A. It means spark in Spanish. Chispa is the Latin X serving arm of the Maryland League of Conservation Voters. Their leader, Ramon, is just a real advocate for connectivity, and our work together, we've been able to connect the Baltimore Spanish speaking health professionals to his work. That way, it isn't just folks experiencing things, but a whole community of folks who have crossed the language barrier to serve them. It was really just a defining moment to raise for folks who are focused on health and government, these other issues that are related to the things they weigh in on all the time. Like, here's another view. It's not just, are these folks able to pay for it? Will they be able to maintain the, it? It's what does the it do to people?

Eve Austin: That was my next question. You've mentioned adverse health effects several times. Could you talk a little bit about that? What do you mean?

Tamara Toles. O: Air quality often shows up as a thing that people understand in the Baltimore context and the Maryland context specifically because it's a thing that can be tracked through the Ohio River Valley. What's happening in Pennsylvania really becomes our problem, right? So, natural gas infrastructure. The other side business of that is plastics. Ethane crackers in Pennsylvania relate to pipelines running from Canada all the way to West Virginia. Maryland's smack dab in the middle of that. So the health impacts that show up are asthma, COPD, other chronic pulmonary issues, including heart attacks. The number one killer of African-American women and men is heart attacks.



Very few people track how a lifetime of air quality issues creates a longterm chronic illness, which could lead to it. So, some of our work has been raising up the stories, the reports, the case studies, information that's rapidly being done by Dr. Ana Rule at John Hopkins and Dr. Sacoby Wilson on community health impacts. One thing we worked on together during my time was community science. We stopped calling it citizen science because you have to be a citizen, which creates liability issues, especially in a really hostile environment around who is a citizen. So we thought, "Well, why don't we say community science?"

Ramon and I discussed it, sat around in some chairs and talked about if we are not creating ways for people to understand that they can take air quality samples, that even if they don't have a scientific scintilla of evidence that would have forced someone to make a decision immediately, they can say, "Here's what I think is happening. Here's my health officer of that I talked to and they helped or did not help me. Here are the ways that 14 people on my street have developed COPD, even though we've lived here for 40 years or 15 people have developed asthma or every child in this community has asthma. Someone needs to talk about what that means.

Often that came from wheelabrater, burning trash. It comes from proximity to highways. It comes from investments that are made in Annapolis and decisions that are made with the governor about where pipelines are gonna go or what's going to be turned into a natural gas and infrastructure plant. The Crane Plant in Bowleys Quarters is a really good example of it. How many folks in Baltimore recognize that a really silent plant that used to do a lot of dirty coal business because very quietly getting transferred over to natural gas? How many folks are aware of that when they're just looking to have a job and that plant close down and they want to be employed? So, lifting up the long-term implications of the thing that's happening now and connecting that for people who are here now has been just a really key part of the work that happened at the Maryland environmental health network with our various partners who are still at the universities wanting to get out of just writing papers for other academics to see.

They want it to be applicable to people. They hold symposiums where they make information more available. When I left Johns Hopkins, and I had been talking, they had some investments and they wanted to know, "What do we do? You should create a community science clinic where people can learn to do the thing they can do." So that they partner with folks who want that information as opposed to trying to create things that turn more people into academics. Why not bring academia to people so that it matters? And so, being able to be a part of a hub that brought together these many parts of the work is really fun and creative nexus for a bunch of caring people working separately who need to work better together.



Eve Austin: Can you share some of your expectations for the way you think that the environmental work is going to need to evolve in the future? What kind of challenges and opportunities do you anticipate are going to confront environmental advocacy in the decades to come and any advice you would have for younger environmental leaders to support further advancement of the field?

Tamara Toles. O: Wow. I think the future is stopping extinction. If we can get that right, then we have some room. In the Meta context outside of Maryland, the green new deal is on everyone's lips. Maryland is actually, I've said it for the last few years, ahead of the game in terms of doing what the nation is talking about. And looking at the constitutional amendment and putting climate and environmental health and making the government of steward, making them responsible for what they do on public lands, it means you can't drill, because you might destroy my future interest in being able to enjoy clean water, clean air and green space. That's a big part of the conversation is what kind of legal frameworks, bumpers and safeguards are we putting on what we have now to protect it for the future? That includes health impact assessments.

That means we have to weigh what we have now. We have to look at it all from an intersectional lens. AI think the work of climate, the work of the environment is intersectional, is connected to 40 or 50 years of social justice work. Climate and environment is a leaf on the branch of social justice. And until we relate back to that longer work and finish what we started by including everyone, we will only have siloed solutions that are temporary, given that the youth are rising up. Just as we are speaking, September 20th will be the largest climate mobilization in history. That's a bunch of young people pushing and asking adults who have been in this work, in the shadows of this work, to think about the fact that if we don't get the next 18 months right, we will be in a spiral that will undo everything we've ever tried to do.

And that's regardless of partisanship or where you sit or where you stand. Unless you ever take it to another planet, this is the one that we need to fix. And so, I think greater integration for multi-generational and multi-racial climate work is what's next. I think the future is young folks not thinking they know everything and folks in the middle being comfortable with the tension that comes from being in the middle of that space. And folks who have been doing work since before environmental work, when it was zoning and land use, and a handful of things that people did that amounted to stewardship, conservation work, but it wasn't seen as under the umbrella of environment, that work will only become sexier because rare things become exciting to people.

But we need to do a better job of integrating our air quality, water quality and human health energy infrastructure systems, and looking at them as an equation that adds up to healthy people in a healthy planet or unhealthy people in an



unhealthy planet. Managing that from the perspective of folks who are afraid that we're not going to win is not a good strategy. I think looking at the old ways and trying to figure out what things have worked and what new innovations we have to amplify, boost and do the good things better is a really great way for young activists, young organizers, young campaigners to think about their work, is that they're not reinventing the wheel.

I am actually a little concerned about all the narrative that has come from young folks saying that other people have failed, that you have not done this work. There are people who have spent their entire lives to protect one waterway, their entire lives to protect one air shed. And so I do think we have to get over the ageism. Right now, relativism of thinking that the work that we have to do isn't entirely tied to things that have been keeping the status quo for better and for worse. I think we need to investigate together through this multi-generational, multi-racial lens what we're going to do to solve it because no group can do it on their own. Not a single part of our culture can exist if all of it fails and not a single part of our infrastructure can be successful if we can't deliver to it and from it people who are healthy and happy.

So, I'm really excited to see the language around what we've done wrong, filter through all the works that what we've done right can emerge in a more unified way.

Eve Austin: Thank you. I guess I want to ask you, how do you stay hopeful and optimistic in the face of all of this?

Tamara Toles. O: I think, as a middle-aged person in the middle of my career, I feel like I have the benefit of being in the middle. I was raised by people who were social activists and cultural agents and people who always thought change was coming. And so, to some extent, I am very clear that the thing, the inklings that we have are not new. Being someone who is still young enough to keep up with my nieces who are seven, 10 and one, I do think it gives me some hope when I spend time with organizers who are 26 or 27 and their strategies are ... they're so excited about them. I'm like, "Yeah, these are good ideas. You can flatten your ability to speak to someone." Thanks to the Internet and thanks to social media, you can have an idea and tweet it at the person who you want to be impacted by what you've done in the same day, in an hour, and then have that person respond to you or hundreds of other people respond to you.

So, I think there are some real positives in the way that we're able to communicate because it means the right things could be communicated more quickly. I also think their energy around wanting to see change is what some of us who are a little more exhausted could ... we feel like we have ideas, you have ideas and energy. Let's roll. I think that there's some real hope and the idea that



some of the things that we have taken for granted, some of the things that are wrong, some of the social injustice and the isms that have held us back, the new generation rejects flatly. So, just as their starting point, while they're learning things, they're like, "Oh yeah, race is a social construct. Yeah, class is are social construct."

So, if we decided, we can undo it. I think where I go into rooms and explain that to people who are deeply entrenched in keeping things sort of the same to move forward, it is really hopeful for me to go into a room where people have crossed boundaries that were illegal, have made ways that were not accepted, have built things that stand in contradiction to the ways we've decided life has to be. And so, in standing in this gap, I really do get to enjoy the best of both worlds and it keeps me hopeful. As I see kids who couldn't sit together or gerrymandered out of living in the same districts or have parents who would never run into each other in the most segregated hours of our week, which are, and when we are in our religious services and when we're eating meals.

To see them cross all those boundaries, use all the transportation in the world to get to each other or talk across the Internet and have friends on other sides of the planet that they play, video games with, I am genuinely inspired by their refusal to accept our boundaries as their problem. So it is pretty inspiring.

Eve Austin: I have so many more questions, but I don't know if you have time. Well, I guess I am curious to talk to just a little bit more about race and racism and how that fits into ... you've touched on it a bit, especially as you're saying, as a social contract, but I guess if you could, yeah, just talk a bit more about race and the equity work you've done.

Tamara Toles. O: Sure. I think a race is the first and last bastion of holding power in the US. For as long as the United States has existed, we created a social construct that served a very specific purpose, which is to separate people from resources. And every generation, we have invested, made more investments in those lies, in those lanes so that we could travel along lanes of commerce and decide who has and who doesn't. We created a zero sum pie out of nothing, and race is the finest thing we've ever produced along that construction. In the work that I do now, I spend a lot of time talking to young folks who are dismantling people's understanding of the idea that we have to be wedded to fossil fuels to do our work.

That the ways we've built, that the engines that we run on that run our whole lives are the only things that could be. I have still had the challenge, the folks who do this work to say, so we're going to disabuse people of fossil fuels to save climate, well, are we going to leave them with race? That seems like an odd form of intervention. So, even as I'm speaking to you, I'm in the middle of lots of



conversations with really thoughtful people who are trying to figure out how to have the courage it takes to let people walk in the fullness of understanding that we have decided that people are different. We have made decisions about what that means, that they are entitled to. We have made decisions about how other folks experience the pain and suffering and joy and everything that fits in life based on a category that only ever serves to put them in or out of the receipt of resources, responsibility and capacity for agency.

And so, talking about race, you end up talking about everything, but especially in the context of climate and environment, this work is undergoing a real revolution in thinking about the fact that even the work of the environment has been decided upon a bunch of lines that don't make sense. That conservation is about preserving a field of grass after you've murdered an entire group of people and that it is too late to keep having a conversation from that perspective that we have to start thinking about what does it mean to have people whose land was taken from them and never seeded by them be the basis of an entire culture and strata that we have built? And what does it mean to continue to operate in silos of race and class and culture to keep those things going? And how bold would it be, how much closer would we get to the things we need to do to preserve our species if we dismantle that on our way?

Eve Austin: Is the challenge primarily from, I guess white folks listening to this or you find people resistant also people of color, African-Americans, native Americans also kind of stuck in their old ways of thinking?

Tamara Toles. O: No, I usually end up talking to black, indigenous and people of color who are like, "If you keep talking like that, it's going to be hard for you to keep doing your job." Mostly what I've said is that I'm not in this work for the job. I'm in this work because it would be obscene to disabuse people of the idea that Henry Ford built an engine that runs off fossil fuels that also could have run on peanut oil, but didn't because that's not what we had in a surplus. And then say, oh, also these rules, you've come up about who you could love and who you could marry and who is able to do work and who appreciates the environment, whether it shows up in a park or a pond, or a puddle, or an alley, or a field or a desert.

If we decide that all of those things are immutable characteristics while we disabuse people of the whole world we built around them, we're failing to do our work. I really do find that there's just a real emergence in wanting to reconnect across the work. So, the movement for black lives has so many ideas about how to resurface joy and happiness and the utility of people across lines they did not create. There are unlearning whiteness groups happening all over the country where people are really inspecting what race is, who it serves, and who agreed to it in the first place. And so, I do think we're at a moment of convergence where everybody has something to do in undoing what we have done along the



lines of developing a nation that it absorbs the most resources in the history of the world and still owes a debt to the planet.

Eve Austin: Thank you. I think we can finish up. I want to give you the chance if there's anything else that you would like to say to share for future listeners to this Town Creek stories.

Tamara Toles. O: I think my journey to the Maryland Environmental Health Network and the Town Creek Foundation was one where for a cluster of years at a time I had to swallow a lot of lies about who I am. Am I right to be in this work or my understanding of myself? And the investments that I received through my relationship with Town Creek Foundation in my personal leadership really helped me to think through what I had always known, which is that those limitations were given to me, that I don't have to accept them. The experiments that we were allowed to conduct, bringing people together who aren't usually in the same rooms, from funders to folks who are working on the street to try to solve things, to educate their communities, to be a part of building solutions, to learning everything they could learn about a problem so that they could stand up for themselves and for their relationships.

I think all of those things being able to come together, really wide open playing fields alongside other experiments. The Maryland climate coalition, the work of LCV. There are so many other Chispa. There are Chesapeake Physicians for Social Responsibility, nurses for a healthy environment. There are just so many different groups who, by being able to work in their best interest to save small communities, we're able together to do really dynamic work. By the time we organized our appeal to the Maryland General Assembly for the Healthy Green Maryland Amendment, there were 38 organizations from across the state, totally different perspectives who said, "We're not sure where this is going to go, but we think we have a better chance if we do it together."

I just want to express my gratitude for creating some space for us to think together and for saying no a lot less than you needed to give us the opportunity to try out our craft and take the work home with us. I just really appreciate the investments that have been made. I see those leaders all across the work. A few of them have come over with me as of this date of this recording to my new shop. And so, there are plans for Maryland even in the North American work that I'm doing. So, I guess I won't say goodbye. I'll say, I'll see you later.

Eve Austin: Thank you so much. That was a fantastic way to end, and yet I want to ask you one more question [crosstalk 00:43:45].

Tamara Toles. O: Sure.



Eve Austin: Because there's something that you just said that you initially had to deny or hide who you are. I don't know, because some people will just be listening, can you say who you are and how you identify yourself?

Tamara Toles. O: Sure. My name is Tamara Toles O'Laughlin. I am 40 years old. I'm an African-American. People say I have a little bit of a southern way about me. I'm from Brooklyn, New York. I live in Baltimore. And when people ask me about myself, they say, "Are you a southern person?" I say, "If you've ever heard of the great migration, we're all southern people. We built cities to go to them." I think showing up as an African-American woman in these days and in the 20 years that preceded it in environmental work, has taken me from North Dakota, South Dakota, Wyoming to DC to New York, to London, to the US Virgin Islands, and back again.

Mostly because working with tribes, working with communities, working with unseen people, invisible people over and over again really help me to think about ways to do my work outside of government, outside of nongovernmental organizations and really figure out where is the place where all of these different interventions meet up. And it's been, because I show up looking like the most invisible form of human, that this particular set of constructions has decided being a woman really makes me invisible. Being an African-American woman makes you the most invisible person that has ever existed in the history of the US because so much is built on the relationships and communities that come from black women's bodies. Because we do not talk about that, because America exists on not talking about what that has meant, it has been really interesting and possible for me to be fairly invisible across this work, especially when I was younger because people didn't think I had anything to contribute.

So I could be in a room and learn something or get skills or make allies or learn from people who wanted to be mentors and accumulate that knowledge over time, such that when an opportunity came for me to take up the leadership of my own shop, I had all of that cumulative knowledge that I gathered when no one was looking at me. And so, it's just been a really incredible journey to be the person who, as the North America director at 350, I'm responsible for all of the US and all of Canada programs for one of the largest climate mobilization organizations in the history of the world. So, there's never been a person who looks like me who's ever had a job that could do this much good, and it came from being invisible for so long that I can build things that people want to ask me about.

So, I often get a question, "How did you learn this? Or how can I do what you were doing?" I don't know what it's like to say be invisible long enough to emerge. But that's sort of where I am. In my work, I'm also the vote for the US and Canada and all of our global work, which means the most invisible kind of



American is determining what our policy is relative to 188 other countries where we work. And that wouldn't have happened if the place I hadn't gone first was the Maryland Environmental Health Network, such a small little shop that I learned how to budget, take care of staff, meet deadlines, fill out all the millions of pieces of paperwork that you have to fill to be able to get people to find creative ideas and to package it so that you don't have to change people on the ground to do work that can be funded.

I think if I had not learned those skills, the work I'm doing now would seem much more challenging because it's pretty difficult to get investments in invisible people when they're at the entry level.

Eve Austin: This leads me to, I promise, last question, maybe. What are your thoughts about, what's the best way then to encourage a young population, especially of young black girls who could get into the work or young girls of color?

Tamara Toles. O: Just in the last two months, I've hired six black women. And not to be environmental justice activists or to be outreach folks, but to do technical work. They do oceans work, they do air quality work, they mobilize their political change agents. Part of that work is because I know that those people exist. Some of it is knowing that where other people look in their hiring pools and they're just like, "We just can't find a qualified person who looks ..." like anyone other than a really nice old white man. And over and over again, throughout my career, I've been able to say, actually I know 25 black women lawyers who only work in environment.

I know 15 different women who only work in oceans who are women of color. I know 17 folks who work across the tribes they exist in, and jobs and the environment and raising up the voices of their communities. And that came from my decades of experience collecting people like myself so that I know when I need to get something done through an invisible network to service the needs of invisible people, those things exist. I think the next challenge of this work, and even if changing seats, if not, because I'm not changing my vocation, is surfacing the lie that those networks don't exist, surfacing the lie that those resources are not available and surfacing that those resources can be funded. That those are experiments that are proven, that investments in black women make entire communities able to survive, able to subsist.

That if you focus on people who you do not see and treat them as if they are anybody else, they will thrive under the same conditions. I do think leveling the playing field, partnering with people who will invest in you and making investments in people over ideas, I think it's probably the future of being able to create more people. I look forward to a time when there are so many people in this work whose experiences are similar or parallel or adjacent to mine to not



knowing them. There's a young woman named Mary Annaise Heglar who came to a talk I give on women of color as the last hurdle for leadership in the environment two years ago at The People of The Global Majority Summit. And she said that my three hour workshop helped her to keep her job at NRDC. She was apparently going to quit. She was not feeling appreciated. She was afraid to express herself as an individual separate from the organization.

To date, she has 700 women, African-American women, women of color in her Twitter feed who're all working on the environment. Because one of her projects was, I'm going to collect the names of all these people. She is the director of publications at NRDC. And when she was afraid to use her own voice two years ago for fear of losing her job, her office asked her if they can follow her on social media because she's been writing some of the most incredible, impactful essays about the lie of forcing individuals to pay for what corporations have delivered us. And so, my having a small impact in a session where mostly 50 women cried for three hours about their experiences and watching them go out in the world and do other things is about investments.

They came from all kinds of people who looked like every kind of person at different continuums in our lives. I feel like there's hope if people keep having courage and making investments that follow it.

Eve Austin: Well, I want to thank you so much for all of your work, amazing, incredible work, and for this conversation.

Tamara Toles. O: Yeah. Thank you.

Eve Austin: So, just signing out, again, this is Eve Austin and I have been speaking to Tamara Toles O'Laughlin. We're in Baltimore, Maryland. It is August 8th, 2019.