



- Dru S. Perkins: I'm Dru Schmidt-Perkins. I'm currently a consultant working on advocacy, so I'm a consulting lobbyist for environmental and other white-hat issues in Annapolis.
- Eve: Probably all your listeners, except for me, will know what that means of white hat. I don't know what that means. Can you explain that to me?
- Dru S. Perkins: It's just not a black hat. In other words, I only work for good causes, for environmental groups, for other progressive issues. I don't work for oil companies or big pharma or those kinds of things. I'm really representing the people who are often underrepresented in Annapolis.
- Eve: So, today's interview is for the Town Creek Foundation. And I guess just a general question I can ask of you, as a way to start out would be, if you could share a story about some important or meaningful work that you've undertaken through the course of your career, that was funded by the Town Creek Foundation. If you have any particular story or information about the work you've done like that.
- Dru S. Perkins: It's hard to just say one because they funded so much over the years, but they were early in on funding what is now called Smart Growth. They recognized early on that where we grow and how we grow has a profound impact on not only our environment, but also on society and our economy.
- And they were very generous at funding our efforts to really focus growth and development into existing areas, bring back areas that were no longer thriving, bring them back to life. And by doing so, help to keep growth and development out of our rural areas where it was very expensive to develop and very harmful to the environment.
- Eve: Like you said, there's so much you've done. Let me give you a minute to think. If you can, think about a time or some specific work that had particular meaning.
- Dru S. Perkins: One of the things, as I was thinking about this project and about the history and I actually went and I asked some old friends I used to work with a lot. Yeah, we were like the three Musketeers, and I said, "How would you answer this question about the environmental history?"
- And much of that will not be part of this recording, a lot of antics over the times. But the stories that we were shooting back and forth, really were a lot around how Maryland was unusual in the environmental community work, very early on in broad-based coalitions.



So we realized that, for example, when we were working on policy shifts and Annapolis, we would be played against each other. And so the Audubon would be played off against the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, which would be played against the Sierra Club and against Clean Water Action and we were not getting many victories.

And in the early '80s an organization was formed, a very loose coalition called the Citizens Campaign for the Environment. It was never formalized, it didn't have a building, it didn't have a budget, but anybody who was involved in environmental policy change in Annapolis sat around the table and we worked things out around the table. And our fights were around the table, they weren't out in public.

And we were able to learn from each other, we were able to share information, share and figure out strategy together, hold each other accountable and not be played off against one another. And so we went from not many victories and many, many losses to being one of the most powerful forces in Annapolis that people would say, "Well, the environmentalists have to be contended with," rather than some group that really was of no consequence.

And over many, many years we got smaller and smaller about how to do that and more and more effective. Not that we didn't have disastrous times and times that things didn't work but it was a real model for other states. And when I go and I talk to my counterparts in other states, they were like, "What? You do what?"

And it was very unusual and very, very effective, especially at the time when I came back to work in Annapolis after working at the national level for many years. It was what was called the race to the bottom, where every environmental law was under attack in Annapolis. And it was horrendous. But we were able to very quickly call it as, dub it the race to the bottom and come up with some clever, this was before social media and so we had paper documents that were, I think it was a stoplight image.

It was legislation that was, you have to stop it with the red light, caution; we've got to fix this and green light; this is good legislation. And we just put everything into a very simple stop the race to the bottom and then this image. And we were able to turn things around and hold our own, by working in this collaboration.

And that began our ability to actually move major pieces of legislation forward. So it was, since the early '80s, that organization has existed. It still meets once a week during legislative session. It's very different than how it was when I first



started. It's evolved, but it still is that poor place for a conversation around key issues so that we stay much more organized than we had in the past.

And I think that, that's a story that is useful to remember, that together we win. Separately, there are too many challenges to win often that way.

Eve: Tell me the name again of that group.

Dru S. Perkins: Yeah, it's known as the Citizens Campaign for the Environment, but you won't find that on anything. I mean, that was just what we call ourselves, and it's internal organizing process, not an externally focused. Now, it holds two events a year, a reception for the beginning of each legislative session and a legislative summit about priority environmental issues, early on in the session. And we've collaboratively put those on.

But the organization itself is, nobody testifies on behalf of it. Whoever is the chair, I was a chair a couple of times. It's a thankless task to coordinate, with no pay, nothing but extra work. So it's an internally focused organization that really is quite remarkable over its years. And the fact that it's kept going since the early '80s.

Eve: Is it secret by design?

Dru S. Perkins: It's not secret. I mean, people know that this is how we operate. And every once in a while people have tried to influence it and skew the voting process of whatever, which is humorous. No, it's just, it was a decision to keep this internally focused and it didn't need all those other externally focused processes like other coalitions do, partners for open space or a climate coalition or team septic, are externally focused.

And therefore, there was a little bit more infrastructure around them to be public and to be testify on behalf of or those. This is just an internal organizing system. There are many ways it could be done. This is one way that has worked really well for this environmental community. Hiccups along the way, of course, but quite an interesting process.

Eve: You mentioned that you figured out that different organizations were being played off against each other. And I wonder if you could say a little bit more about that. I'm thinking that might be a good piece of information, advice for younger, newer leaders coming up to know what to look for. How did you guys figure that out?



Dru S. Perkins: Well, it was very obvious. You'd be in a conversation about a bill to protect the Chesapeake Bay and all of a sudden, you would hear that a certain organization had agreed to these weakening amendments and you were blindsided. You're like, what do you mean they did? Why would they do that? And then that organization was being told that you had agreed to that.

In some cases, organizations did agree to a weakening amendment or a bad bill in exchange for something else. And by taking the game out of their play pen and moving it into our sandbox, we were able to say what is the best strategy to get the most powerful bill, strongest bill or the best strategy to stop this bad bill and what is each of our roles to do that?

And sometimes, it was this organization's really good on research, let's get that research. These people have the contacts with the progressive Republicans. There used to be a time we had progressive republicans, 100% on the environment. They are going to go talk to them. This group has great contacts with folks on the Eastern shore. And so we figure it out. Who knew who, who has the information, who could talk to whom and work through all these issues that way, by having our own conversation. And that was a big change from having the conversation led by legislators or our opponents.

Eve: The way you describe it, it sounds like a cop show where the police tell the suspect, your buddy turned you in.

Dru S. Perkins: Your buddy just turned you in. There was a lot of that and because we didn't have good communication. Now sometimes that would still happen. You'd all have an agreement and then you'd learn an organization didn't stick with it. And then there was some internal accountability, usually loudly working that out.

And sometimes it was just individuals who are just not comfortable in saying no. And so it was a learning process on who can do this kind of tough negotiations, when we were in that, who were able to stick to talking points and who wasn't. And then so we knew who needed to be front and center on each of those, who was a better negotiator, who was a better communicator, what organizations had different assets they could bring.

And it was always a fluid, complicated process. It wasn't so linear is what I'm saying because it's real people, real issues happening in real time. But it made a huge difference as we started to rack up real victories and prevent lots of rollbacks, at a time that most of the rest of the country was facing severe environmental rollbacks and very few environmental victories.



Maryland was passing the first phosphate in detergent bands and the Bay Agreement that began the Bay clean up and all these bills, Forest Conservation Act, that were real models for other parts of the country to look at and see it can be done.

Eve: So when you look at, now it's 2019 and you look at the way things are today, what kind of challenges do you imagine young environmental leaders are going to face? And yeah, what do you think that they'll have to be able to do to figure out how to make change and be leaders?

Dru S. Perkins: Well, I think it's probably fairly similar to what we've had to do, but you have a whole new aspect of this very immediate communications beam that's going on, with the 24 hour news media, the social media, all these different platforms that you're trying to be present on and feed and monitor and manage and correct. And that is mind-blowingly complicated and time consuming.

And I think that we're going to have to figure out how to manage that in a way that doesn't just take away everybody's time. I know that when I was leaving an organization I'd been with for so many years, I was like, I can't do Facebook and Twitter and monitor these sites. There wasn't enough time for me to be able to do the work. So I think that's a real challenge, moving ahead.

At the same time, a challenge and a real opportunity is this real understanding that our solutions have to be based in ways that are not only environmentally sound, but economically just, and socially mutually beneficial. It's not okay just to, you know, clean up a pollution, but you want to make sure it's being cleaned up by the people who have been left out of the solution and that they get to help determine the how and how much and where, so it most benefits them.

And so, this is really being ingrained now into the environmental movement, whether you call it environmental justice or that we have to be thinking the 360 degree way. Now we've always have said that a clean environment benefits everybody.

It's better for your health. It's good for the economy, but we're having to prove it more and we're having to engage with these communities. Not just expect them to turn out to our rallies on an issue, but really go into their communities with them and hear, what are they seeing, what are they working on, what can we do to help them? Which is a really complicated and difficult approach that we're learning how to do now.

Sadly, too often, good work is done in communities and you hear about the really important issues and you invite them to join in and pledge that you're



going to support them. And when that final negotiation happens at a tense time, their issue is the one that's left off the table and that then sets the whole movement back and it's hard to see that happening.

Last year, Maryland passed what was dubbed CEJA, the Clean Energy Jobs Act, and this said that Maryland would generate 50% of its electrical use by renewable energy and that includes wind, solar, and a lot of work was done in communities around incinerators. To say that the incinerators would not be considered clean energy because they're not, one of the dirtiest forms of energy and that they would be taken off that clean energy list.

And at the end of the day, the proponents of the bill, the environmental community said to get the main bill passed, we're going to walk away from those communities and we're going to have incineration still be dubbed clean energy, part of the clean energy future.

Eve: When you say walk away from the communities, do you mean walk away from the communities that are within a certain distance from the incinerators themselves, or what do you mean walk away from-

Dru S. Perkins: Walk away from the communities that were advocating for the Clean Energy Jobs Act Bill, with the incineration being removed. They wanted a better climate future, but they also wanted the direct improvements to their communities. They were the ones who was in the air shed of these highly polluting factories, industries and were suffering as a result.

And a significant portion of the environmental community, just when it came down to pass this bill or don't pass this bill or they thought that was a conversation, they said we're walking. We're not going to fight that fight anymore. And it caused a huge riff for the organizations that were still working with the communities around the incinerators. And we're still bringing those issues forward and saying it was important to have [inaudible 00:17:07] members of the community walk away.

And at the same time, it caused I think serious problems with, "Hey, environmental community, that big amorphous thing, are you really interested in equity, are you really interested in environmental justice, are you really looking at inclusion, if that's what you do."

So this is hard. You have an opportunity to pass this major piece of legislation. This could be a hiccup. What do you do? What do you do? And I think for me, and the same thing had happened on another part of the bill, which is on way or should large scale solar go and where should it not go? The environmental



community walked away from that issue totally and said, we're not going to fight that fight and leaving other communities high and dry.

So this is going to be more and more critical as we move forward to figure out this process of inclusion, of not tokenism. Oh look, we have all these communities standing together at the press conference and then kicked off the stage. It's hard. It's hard to do it and in the future, we're going to have to be doing that a whole lot better. We're going to have to figure out how to do it better. It's going to take a lot of work.

Eve: I mean, what you just described makes me think it'll help to have the environmental leaders come directly from those communities.

Dru S. Perkins: Yes, more leaders from those communities, but it's not bringing those leaders to work on our issues. It's elevating their issues to be the priority issues that the rest of the community joins and supports. Too often we're asking the others to join our issue. Look, we have somebody from East Baltimore, look, we have an African American, look, we have a Hispanic working out our issues. And we're able very easily to say why these are critical issues to their communities too.

But at the end of the day, it's we're inviting them to our table. Important, but not the same as us joining their table and being part of their process to a victory. That's tough because we're all really busy on our own agendas, which are critical and timely and important.

And now, it's a challenge going forward. A really fascinating challenge that I don't have a magic wand for at all. And I've struggled with my whole career and figuring out how to set those tables. I think the term has been and who are we to set the table. It's complicated and there's a lot of good work being done on this, but a lot more ahead.

Eve: I wanted to ask you because today is September 18, 2019. And tomorrow is this big worldwide climate strike, I believe it's called. So I was wondering if you have any thoughts about that happening tomorrow and just the movement in general?

Dru S. Perkins: I was somebody who was working on climate issues when we were naming it. That's how old I am. So back in the '80s I was working in Washington for a national organization and working in [inaudible 00:20:35] and on energy policy and we were like, there is this climate issue and should it be called the greenhouse effect or climate change or climatic change or a number of us, just to be on the record, are vehemently against greenhouse effect because it's under two nights? And we're going for the more dire.



I think it was climactic changes was the term that many of us wanted. So that was back in the mid '80s and that was a time that we could have taken major steps to avoid where we are today. Specifically, I was working on fuel economy of cars. We had the techniques, we had everything but the political will to pass a higher fuel economy standards then.

But we were advocating for at that time, are not yet in law now. And more recently, even worse was [inaudible 00:21:30] in the administration. So I am both really heartened by the youth movement in this and the incredible energy and also incredibly frustrated that we failed that generation collectively and let the planet, get to what can only be said to be dire.

And then our compounding it with this rapid fire rollback of all the national environmental standards, across everything from pesticides, to climate, to water, energy, toxins, all being rolled back. And the selfish part of me went, well there went five years of my life. There went two years.

I mean, I see these things that I worked on, either locally or nationally and it meant I wasn't home for dinner or I missed the school play. There was family sacrifices and in order to move this forward, and then to see it just rolled back with no justification and with great, great glee, is really hard emotionally.

But then I got bolstered by hearing the conversations of the folks in their teens, twenties, thirties and how smart they are and how they're not taking this and they're fighting and they're doing it differently and better and I'm hopeful. And then seeing big business suddenly say, oh, wait a minute, we like those rules. And then just now beginning to engage their collective voice, whether it was on guns or on fuel economy standards or these other, they're like, no, no, don't do this. And I'm hoping to see a lot more leadership from them.

Eve: Before we wrap up today, is there anything else that you would like to share at all about your career, about anything?

Dru S. Perkins: When I started working on the environmental issues, there was Ralph Nader, was out there and Ralph believed that to be an effective advocate you couldn't be married, you couldn't have relationships, you had to work 24 hours a day. You shouldn't get paid. You should take it on the chin, that's what I meant to be an advocate.

And I had an opportunity to have a little dialogue with him and saying, "Well, that doesn't make sense." The moral majority, IT was that long ago, our breeding like rabbits, and if we don't have children, if we don't have the next



generation, if we don't have enough of a personal life to be able to support this, then we're just going to lose because we're outnumbered.

And so I think that while this work is hard, I think the environmental community and the nonprofit world has gotten much better about, in many cases, about better pay, better benefits, better life balances. I think we have to keep working on that because this is tough work. But you need to be able to have that balance in your life to continue to do the fight.

It doesn't help us to have somebody who burns out after two years. It doesn't help us to have somebody who can only be an executive director for four years and then they're done. We have to figure out how to support this community more, so that you can have the long career and have people be able to do it for a long time.

I was a very unusual executive director, having done one for 19 years. That's almost unheard of in this. I'm only stubborn. It's no claim of any kind of great talent, just pure stubbornness. But I think we have to figure out how we have people in this fight and I encourage people, come to the fight because it's really something to be able to look back and say, I affected this kind of change. I made this kind of difference. I've mentored these kinds of people. They're now doing these incredible things and it's well worth the investment and time, as long as you've had properly paid, those kinds of things.

One of the things that I encourage, people who want to have a family or have a young family, is not to change careers out of this. It's an incredible privilege to bring your kids up in this movement. All three of my kids spend a lot of time in Annapolis or were props at congressional press conferences or had to play quietly for endless meetings and "Hey, we're just go into Annapolis for an hour," and six hours later and lots of food from vending machines as bribes later, we would finally leave.

So as a result, they're all very engaged in politics and in their communities, which is terrific to see. But the stories that I was asked to, was said and I quote, "No history about the environmental movement would be complete without the time your daughter slowly undressed herself during a very important meeting. Then came in stark naked and peed on the office floor."

It did happen, great hilarity ensued. But yeah, she's now a responsible adult, so no scars for life. I'm seeing more and more kids in the hall, people having to bring their kids down on a snow day or school vacation or whatever. And I think it's really important that they see where the parents work, what they're doing, where they go, what a hearing looks like and be a part of it.



And my kids, especially my older, testified on bills effecting driver's license times out of his own request, to go to Annapolis and have a say on what should be part of the driver's license process. So that was as a result of them spending way too much time in the halls of Annapolis with me.

Eve: Ralph Nader wouldn't have approved.

Dru S. Perkins: No, no. And as a result, we have three more citizens working hard in this country for things that are better. Yes, three different approaches and yeah, Ralph still doesn't have any, so I win.

Eve: Okay, now that's just leading me to ask you another question. I guess as a woman, I mean things are certainly different now in 2019 than they were in the '80s but I am pretty sure most women still struggle with the balancing of, it still falls I think disproportionately on women about that balance of family and kids and having a full on career and the way you're describing this work, it takes a lot. So I don't know, what are your-

Dru S. Perkins: It is hard, but on the other hand, I think that we're seeing more of the village. And I see certainly that when somebody, their childcare provider is sick and suddenly the two year old needs to come to work, that there's somebody who grabs that two year old for 15 minutes, so the parent can then go meet with that senator or takes the cranky baby out of the hearing room so that the parent can testify or is just sympathetic. Oh been there, done that.

And I think, that kind of support is growing. It is a challenge. I mean, when your kid has, I guess they don't get chicken pox anymore, and you have to be an Annapolis and what do you do? It's not easy and it will never, those challenges will never be easy on any parent. But it can be done and people will understand also, I can't be here for this hearing, my kid has whatever.

So it is a process. Things have gotten better for women. But just last year we had a lot of problems and Annapolis was a couple of legislators who are still of the old school sexist, problematic people. And so these fights go on. You got to just keep taking that on too and being professional, [inaudible 00:00:29:32] and ultimately, getting the votes you need in order to pass your bills. It's not always easy with some of the lingering issues, sexism or racism or classism that are out there still.

Eve: Again, thank you for that story. We don't have to let your daughter know that you shared it. So signing off again with Dru Schmidt-Perkins on September 18th, 2019.

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