

Climate Change Action Campaign Oral History Project, UC San Diego

Narrator: MALEEKA MARSDEN

Interviewer: Pichly Chea

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Length of Interview: 00:43:25

PC: I want to introduce myself first in our interview. My name is Crystal, so I'm a senior undergraduate, from UCSD and today is May 6th, 2020, So I'm interviewing Maleeka Marsden, the Co-Director of Policy and climate action campaign through Zoom for the UCSD Race and Oral History course project for San Diego Climate Change Action Campaign. So, before we start the interview, may I request you to say the statement of consent? Can you see it?

MM: Yes!

PC: Awesome!

MM: I the interviewee, Malika Myerson, hereby transfer to the University the rights to publish duplicate or otherwise use their recordings and transcribed interviews and any photographs and or videotape footage taken during the interview. This includes publication rights and print and electronic forms such as on the internet, the right to rebroadcast the interview or portions thereof, and permission to transfer the interview to a future media.

PC: Awesome. Thank you so much. Um, yeah. So, um, yeah. So, how are you doing today?

MM: I'm doing well. Thanks for asking. It is a beautiful day.

PC: So yeah, this will be great so then we can start our interview. If so, can you give me a brief introduction about yourself.

MM: Yeah, so I am originally I was born in Tucson, Arizona, but moved here when I was 10 because my grandmother lived in San Diego, lived here for about 10 years, and then I went, Oh, and then after that, I taught English abroad in Asia, and in, sorry there's an airplane above me. Um, and in Brazil. And then when I came back, I had a few different jobs teaching, and in the service sector. But ultimately, I wanted to do something really meaningful, so I started volunteering with climate action campaign, and ultimately got hired which was really exciting, so I've been there for almost two years now. And my role is focused around climate action plans and making sure our cities pass strong climate action plans, as well as pushing for a San Diego green New Deal, which is an effort to achieve zero carbon in a way that creates communities that I want jobs and equitable and create lots of good green jobs as well.

PC: Oh my God, that's wonderful. I mean, so can you also tell us more like why do you have interest in doing this community leadership? Also, would you like to tell us more about like your experience in works and how does your daily work look like?

MM: Yeah, so I love my job. I love waking up every day and not only fighting for kind of this bigger cause of stopping the climate crisis. But just getting to work with a lot of different partner organizations that are advocating for such as transportation justice, social justice, jobs for people. And it's just this amazing space for, for people with really big hearts that really want to make the world a better place, so I love that part of my job. I love also getting to do some organizing and getting people empowered to be part of the political process and shape policies that are going to

affect their daily lives. In terms of my daily work, it's very different every day and very unpredictable because a lot of the time we are responding to what city councils and city governments are doing, so that changes a lot, and usually cities don't tell you what they're going to do with. Um, but so sometimes we're down at City Hall is giving public comment about things they're doing. Sometimes we're organizing people to also help influence the decisions, spend a lot of time sending emails and coordinating groups of people. And we write a lot of letters to offices governmental offices, urging to do things. And we're always thinking, thinking and reading and trying to learn more of like what best practices are and what others of us doing are around the world, because the climate crisis is this really new unfolding thing and we're all kind of in this together trying to figure out the best approach and best strategies. So, it's your question about the daily stuff it's different every day.

PC: Yeah. I could see that, yeah well that's a wonderful work. Thank you so much. So how would I would like to know what's your relationship and relation with organizations and your current position?

MM: Yeah, so I am a co-director policy, so I have another co director, and our role is really thinking about policy impacts a local climate action. And so that has to do everything with transportation with energy with trees with biking and walking and making sure that all of those policies and policies around those strategies are equitable that they are helping communities that have been historically left behind marginalized, making sure that they benefit first from these investments and these strategies so making sure they're the first to get new trees in their neighborhood which pull carbon out of the air, and also cool our streets as temperatures rise, things like that. So.

PC: So, based on that like, who do you know like that is the most important to take action successfully for the climate change, action campaign?

MM: What is it, what is the most important thing. Like, for us? Or

PC: For like the plan. Who do you think like the person. Like is it the whole like is it the government, the community, like everyone's. You think like equally important to take the actions to be like successful to succeed the plan?

MM: Yeah, yeah. So, we have a saying in our organization that, like, our elected leaders our politicians don't lead they follow. They don't do something until there's really enough community pressure, or pressure from others that can be lobbyists or others who are pushing them to do something, so it's we strongly believe that we have to build the community support and help these leaders make the right decisions around. Key climate action policies, so it is really critical that every everybody be a part of this and start talking about the importance of climate action, start talking about the importance of systemic policies that will help us meet, meet our climate goals and start getting involved in in local government, we've seen so many examples where sometimes 10 of us show up to a meeting and we are able to influence the decision and change what our elected leaders are planning to do, so it's really great. It really at the local level if you do get involved you can really see meaningful change which is really wonderful.

PC: Awesome, so can you list all the solution to mitigate climate change or global warming across the globe, or to swimming in San Diego specifically?

MM: Sure, yeah. Yeah, I'll do San Diego because that's where we're focused, so, our solutions reflect where the most emissions come from, so transportation is the largest source of emissions, accounting for about 55%. So, that is because we have over emphasized sprawl development,

rather than density, so we've built really far out so people have to drive really far to get to jobs and schools and other things that they need to access and also that we have under, under invested in cheap, affordable, sorry, not cheap, affordable efficient infrastructure for biking walking and taking transit, so the solution is we really need to invest in in a world class transit system like cities around the world have such as Tokyo, Seoul, Barcelona, which shows, you know, shows people that you can get around in an efficient way. And then we also need to invest in protected bike lanes that make people feel safe and comfortable by being on the street and sharing the road. And then we also need to do things to make people feel comfortable walking so making sure we have really safe crosswalks and things like that, so it's really about shifting our mindset which is so car centric. And, and, like, shifting it towards this idea that cars are not the only users of our roads. There's also bikers and walkers and they should be able to use roads safely as well. So, to answer your question. So the first is transportation it's the biggest one it's the most important and it is really hard because people are very entrenched in this car culture. And you also have to change the way you build, which is really hard. But then the second one is electricity so about 24% of our electricity. I'm sorry. 24% of our greenhouse gas emissions come from electricity, and most of our electricity right now is 33, so the solution is what we've been fighting for which are public utilities that provide much more clean energy, and lower rates, which is called Community Choice energy. It also means government supporting people helping them afford to buy solar panels putting solar panels in communities, things like that. And then another thing is natural gas, a source of emissions in the region, so we have gas stoves gas water heaters, things like that. And we've also learned that burning gas in your house is also really bad for your health. So transitioning people away from gas to all electric appliance and then also other strategies are zero waste, so wouldn't you put trash in our landfills it releases methane and other pollutants. Remove those items from our waste stream entirely, such as banning single use plastics and things like that. And then also trees are really great because they not only as I said like pull carbon dioxide out of the air, but they're all adaptation strategy, so as our temperatures rise. It's going to be hotter and hotter. And if we want people to continue to be able to walk, they're going to need shade structures and also trees to keep to stay healthy, so those are the main strategies, there are other ones as well, community gardens, I think I mentioned that lots of other things to make sure that we, we keep our emissions down and create really sustainable practices.

PC: I mean, those also solution like sounds like wonderful like sounds like doable like people shoot like, like we all have to like taking it seriously and make it happen, because it's doable like. But my question is, I was wondering like in San Diego particularly like the trolley. Like, why it takes so long to like construct the trolley. I mean, yeah.

MM: Yeah um, I don't know how the construction compares to other places. But yeah, we're just really catching up in San Diego and in Southern California cities around the world have had good transit for a very very long time. And it's very hard in San Diego where people are so used to their cars and transit so far is not very efficient to convince people that this is what we need to do and then it can actually, it can actually work as an alternative to the car. Yeah, I know the trolley it feels really slow. But I'm sure it's a really big project and takes time to build it well.

PC: I mean, I cannot wait to like using the trolley to what it is. I know when it's done, like it's open to use. Yeah. That's good. So, so, is, every like mitigation is under the San Diego Green Green Deal Alliance. Did I name it correctly?

MM: Yeah, I'm sorry, I didn't hear your whole question but yeah San Diego green New Deal Alliance.

PC: Yes. Oh. So, how is it so far right now like when the goal is to achieve like a zero carbon, economic and clean electricity by 2035 is any challenging at the organization of community of this now is going well.

MM: Yeah, good question. Um, so it's somewhat new, it's about talking to organizations and community members about what kind of vision they want to see for a San Diego Green New Deal. And what people really wanted to fight for. And so now we're really kind of getting more formal and we're about to officially launch. But, yeah, there, there are always going to be a lot of obstacles, so obviously this alliance is going to be fighting for all those strategies, but in a way that is really bold that is really matches the scale and urgency of the climate crisis. So, a lot of those strategies that I told you about a lot of cities are working to implement them, but they're doing in this very piecemeal very slow approach, and it's not in line with what climate science is telling us it's necessary, so the San Diego green New Deal Alliance is like we need to go big and bold in a way that we never have before and that's going to require huge investment from the government that's going to require creation of tons and tons of good green jobs. And this actually aligns really well with the climb with the current pandemic that we're experiencing, where a lot of people are out of work, and our economy is really suffering, so this is a critical time where we are saying, if you're going to invest a lot of money back into the economy to make it work. Make sure that you are rebuilding an economy that is good for the planet, rather than going back to what we were doing before, which is building, you know, a fossil fuel economy, so it's good in that we have a lot of organizations working together, it's great and we have a lot of community members that really care. And it's going to be, they're going to be a lot of challenges. People are afraid of change, there's a lot of fossil fuel companies that want to stop us. I'm there are people who have jobs that will be affected. And they're rightfully scared, so for example, there are gas workers who helped build infrastructure and things like that, and they're really scared of losing their jobs, but that's why we are trying to combine climate jobs and justice into like one fight because we're saying we have to phase out your job. It makes sure that you still have a good job. When this is over with that you will still have health care that you will still have retirement, things like that, so I think jobs is definitely a huge concern. A lot of. There's a lot of like smaller issues about how to do things such as for example if you build a bunch of bike lanes and put in a bunch of trees. It makes the neighborhood nicer. And then that neighborhood gets more expensive, and then the people who live there might not be able to afford to live there anymore, so that's displacement, so there are a lot of issues like that how do you make sure if you're trying to invest in a low income community of color, and give them things like trees and bike lanes. How do you make sure that they quickly are not able to deliver because the neighborhood is nicer, so, a lot of things like that that are challenges for sure, and I think I don't know how urgent it is our when they hear about how urgent it is, they kind of just get scared and they don't want to think about it, and everyone has enough problems in a day. So, we have to find a way that gets everybody involved, ready to fight for this in a way that they feel dedicated passionate and they can see that this is going to be about creating a better world for them and their children.

PC: Oh. Oh my god! Yeah, those are good points. I mean, this is sound wonderful, so can you also kind of like clarify like okay so for like their clean energy investment. So, is it like at the local level or is it like, more like federal level?

MM: Um, I think it'll have to be both. So, right now, with all of the stimulus dollars that have come from the federal government and came to San Diego I think it's. I can't remember the amount, but it's a lot. This is the perfect opportunity for the local government to spend it towards a more sustainable future good job. Yeah, I think we have to respond to the reality that our local governments now have no money. And there is also there are also a lot of state grants for this kind of thing, so we have been urging cities to really come together as a region, more than just a bunch of, you know, little separate cities to collaborate, to, to build sustainable projects that are eligible for state grants. So that's another possible resource to us. But, yes, it will need to be some federal money, especially with the pandemic right now. Good question.

PC: And like how you brought up like a really strong point about like how it affects like people who lose their job and like big company they tried not to change, they're all like affect their business. And you brought up a good point like why, like we need like clean energy, economic, rather than like economically just affect the climate, like so bad like. So, is like do you see like, what's your understanding of the company they cannot shift from like, I'm like, so they don't see like any profit or any benefit like it would work if they can like, shift their company model, like from doing like business on foster bill but or gasoline but they can actually make money, and also like a clean energy?

MM: Yeah, that's a really good question. We're trying really hard to show them that. And there's a lot of data out that even investors who don't even care about the planet are already seeing that clean energy is a better thing to invest in and fossil fuels that fossil fuels are getting phased out, and then things like this crisis are seeing like airline companies not doing so well. We're where people are driving less which means there's less need for oil and gas. But I think people are scared because especially a lot of union jobs have fought really hard with their employers or a lot of unions. For example, there are Electrical Workers who also installed gas, and they have worked really hard with San Diego Gas and Electric over many years to fight for really good wages or good wages I think they're good wages and to fight for good benefits and good retirement. And if they switch over, they don't know what it's going be like they don't know, it's kind of fear of the unknown, I guess. And it's kind of like the saying the Devil You Know is better than the devil you don't know, either. There's, there's uncertainty. And so that's why it's so important for government to provide that certainty, or else people are going to be too scared to change. But yeah, we're trying to share examples some cities some gas workers have switched over to installing windmills and solar panels so there are some examples but we're trying to uplift them.

PC: I mean that's a really good. Oh my god, so I can see like, you have done a lot of works for the community. It seems like you have. It's like a lot of words, we'll have the action campaign. So, and it's how to be flexible at the same time too. But also, like how you handle like how the management in the organization, like, simply a lot of work and this seems like really flexible it's like this new thing or chain, every day it's not like, yeah, I mean like water management in organizations.

MM: Yeah. All right, well outside but, um, my neighbor has a motorcycle. It's really, um, yeah, so we have our executive director. Um, and then we have two co directors of policy so we're

thinking a lot about policy and then we have three more policy people. And then we have our development team that does the fundraising. We have an operations person that does all the systems stuff. Make sure we pay our taxes and things like that. And then we have a communications person. But even with a team of nine. Now if 11 for a moment. It's like, it's very long days, it's, it's very exhausting every day. And a lot of hours but I also love what I do. So, it's a, it's a worthwhile exchange, but it's definitely not easy.

PC: I can see Oh my God, thank you so much, appreciate like the work like it's amazing it's inspiring. Yeah to like can help change the world for. I mean, we, I mean, I mean we need a better world. And also, like right now because of the Covid-19 pandemic. It is kind of like impact everyone. Yeah. And is it kind of like, yeah, so what is the organization, kind of doing right now with the current pandemic?

MM: Yeah, good question. Um, so one of our big campaigns right now and it just passed a few days ago which is exciting and we're going to continue to keep fighting for it, is this idea of slow streets or open streets. It's gotten very popular in a lot of cities in the country in the region, which is basically as more people are fewer and fewer people are not driving, sorry, more and more people are not driving, fewer and fewer people, I'm sorry I'm confusing myself. More and more people are also biking and walking. This is an opportunity to do what we've been fighting for all along, and, and, and create streets that are safe and convenient for all users, not just people with cars, but also doing so in a way that also helps flatten the curve and help us stay safe from the coronavirus so the idea is that we're expanding sidewalks by just either blocking off some streets or putting cones on the road so that people have more space when they're trying to do essential things like, go to the pharmacy or go grocery shopping or something like that and don't have to get in really close contact with someone on the sidewalk. It also allows for more bikers to buy safely, so we did like a temporary, or like phase one rollout so we have about five streets in San Diego, that are temporarily modified to allow for more biking and walking and also exercising and playing for kids. And we're going to continue to push for more and more streets to be like that but to do so in a way that it's done with like community collaboration so that we can do it in a way that makes sense for communities.

PC: That's awesome. So, just one last question. For the Covid-19 pandemic, have you or your community experienced or witnessed any disparity, or inequality to the current pandemic?

MM: Sorry! You said the disparity and, and what? Oh, yeah. Yeah, so, um, it's very interesting to see there are a lot of maps out there so you overlay maps of kind of communities exposed to environmental pollution, and you compare it to a map that shows where the most COVID-19 cases are, you'll see that it's basically the same communities. There are studies that show that communities with worst air pollution are much more likely to die from COVID-19, so it's really all inextricably linked. And obviously, the community in both cases tend to be working class communities of color. And that also has to do with many those communities usually have many of these essential jobs, so of course there are exceptions but it's, I think COVID-19 is also revealing a lot of the, the kind of social failings of our of our communities, our, our city and our region. And that's why we continue to fight for working class communities of color or what we call communities of concern, are really the first to receive benefits both from long term investments and from the short term stimulus dollars, making sure that economic aid is directed at people goes into their pockets rather than goes into goes to companies and corporations and things like that.

PC: I mean, it's so set like how I mean, I mean like how the country the nation. It's like, it's big and it's, but it's like, it's still like a, like a gap between like our society. Like, we like the government cannot do enough, or like help everyone like equally. Yes it's kind of sad. I mean, Yeah, thank you so much for like a lot of information to learn from like the campaign into like COVID-19 pandemics, and so much information, but can I just have some cool quick question or clarifying questions to end our interview. So, I also read like some article on your campaign website. And they didn't mention about like the Carbon Farming like I catch it. Can you briefly talk about it like, no, like we like the campaign focused in urban, so is this campaign also focuses on suburban like the farming sector to the rural area? Something like that.

MM: Yeah. Um, we don't do as much, only because we only have so much capacity and a huge portion of our emissions come from the cities, but we do, especially with the green New Deal Alliance effort are partnering with kind of food justice and food systems, organizations who are passionate about Carbon Farming and regenerative agriculture and community gardens, so we're definitely going work to lift that up more and it is a huge piece of the puzzle. I think right now in the pandemic that's one of the things people are realizing like wow, we really should have our own food sources that should be local we should have. We should be able to go to a local garden and get food, so I think that that though we haven't spent a lot of time on it is a very valuable strategy because it also supports equity. Communities that are called like have like food deserts, they don't have access to affordable food or supermarkets very close to them. It's really important to, to, to fight for this as a part of the case, a key climate strategy. And I think it speaks to just this more general way of living. That is just more sustainable and gets you like along the lines of thinking of like we need to live more collaborative collaboratively within our communities. And, and things shouldn't just be shipped all over the world and so that's very similar to energy as well we shouldn't be buying a bunch of energy in Arizona, we have the sun here we can make our own energy right here. Everyone in San Diego should have solar on their rooftops. We should have all kinds of community solar that makes energy cheaper for everyone. So local, local, local think is a huge component of, like, climate solution.

PC: I just come up with like a, like a new, they have, talking about like the farming in California, like, it's like farming on California so wrong like we should not have agriculture in the in California. What do you, what is your perspective, what do you think, do you agree about it?

MM: Hmm, I don't, I honestly don't know a lot about agriculture. I do know that we have very kind of extractive ways of farming, that really kind of just take from the land, and don't, kind of, they're not part of this more regenerative process. And so part of our San Diego green New Deal Alliance is also about learning from amplifying and elevating kind of indigenous knowledge as well, so learning from some of the tribes in the region so the Kumeyaay and the Payoomkawichum who have a lot, they know, they knew how they know how to treat the land in a way, and, and, and farm and whatnot in a way that is regenerative and respectful to the earth.

PC: Awesome. Oh my god. So, I, I mean, I have learned so much like during our interview. Thank you so much for, like, providing a really like. I learned a lot like, so thank you so much.

MM: Good. Yeah, my pleasure.

PC: Yeah, so to end our interview because it's already like an almost an hour, so I respect your time and so much information in our interview I appreciate it. I learned a lot.

MM: Good!

PC: Do you have any ending conclusion or like any statement to give like out about like you campaign or like, how will people can like get involved more into the climate change? Or with the organization.

MM: Yeah, great question. So, we need everyone to be part of this fight, we can't do it alone. There are a lot of really powerful people on the other side fighting to maintain their power and their greed and continue a fossil fuel economy, so we're the only way you're going to be able to beat them is through people power, so we need everyone involved. There are a couple different ways you can obviously, follow us on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and try to work to elevate our message, right, like your networks, but also on www. Green New Deal SD, um, you can also sign up for some of our working groups and we have a lot of great groups for individuals to get involved and take action with us.

PC: Wow, that's amazing like, yeah, I did follow your page on Facebook. Okay, for sure like I want to keep up with all the updates on like all the actions. Yeah, ewth the organization regularly, because this is like, amazing he's like up change the world for better place like and we all like, how to get involved in this. Like, we have we all have to take action together. But, but, I mean, you do a lot of work like am I like this is amazing.

MM: Oh, thank you. Well, thank you for your interest and for interviewing me today.

PC: Yeah, um, yeah thank you so much. So, I mean, I would just end the interview like with all the questions. But yea do you have any other things you want to add on to this?

MM: I don't think so