



Episode 8:

Sussan: Today I have the pleasure of interviewing Efraín Chávez Delgado, who is the Grantmaking and Program Manager for the Pacific Northwest and California Coast. Thank you Efraín for joining us today. We're so happy to have you.

Efraín: Hola Sussan, thanks so much, I was very humbled to get the invitation and I'm I'm excited to to hold this conversation with you.

Sussan: Same, I'm very excited! So to kick us off on this very rich discussion, first tell us about you.

Efraín: Yeah yeah of course, sí sí thank you for that invitation. So again, my my name is Efraín Chavez Delgado, I use he/him pronouns currently calling in from ancestral lands of the Tongva or otherwise known as a greater Los Angeles area.

I'm I'm the son of a Lily and Margarito Delgado with a couple of siblings, I'm the eldest of three. I have an amazing wife and a little one who joined us in this world about a year and a half ago. Prior to living here in the Southern California area, I grew up in the Central Valley of California and for those of y'all who are maybe a little more familiar, Stockton, 209, which is specifically ancestral Miwok land. My father and the majority of my extended family were and are farm laborers who live in the outskirts of Stockton and my mom was a paraprofessional at the school I attended from preschool through eighth grade which was situated out in the cuts is what we call them, so the outskirts of Stockton. I have Mexican ancestry with ties to the states of Michoacán and Jalisco. My father was born in Mexico and my mother was born in the States and me and my siblings were born here. So we're kind of like that 1.5 generation. But I'll pause there, that's kind of like in a nutshell who I am. Thank you.

Sussan: Thank you so much for sharing that, Efraín. Can you tell us a little bit more about your childhood memories of the outdoors?

Efraín: Yeah, definitely. Probably my favorite question when I was reviewing the list. So in Stockton, we have this cool body of water called the Delta, this area where like the Pacific

Ocean and salt water meets some of the fresh water and points for a lot of the rivers running through California, and I had a lot of family members who lived out there and my school was adjacent to it and so I frequented it quite a bit. For those of you who aren't super familiar, there's a lot of levees constructed to kind of like corral the waterways and so, a lot of the homes that family members lived in were right adjacent to them or below the levee line and so I have fun going up on the levee on my bike, throwing rocks, visiting family members of course, and playing with them on that road, super sweet memories.

Also growing up in Stockton there's a lot of agriculture, and like I mentioned, the majority of my family worked in the farms and as farm laborers and my school was situated like with crop fields all around it and so, throughout the year I got to see rotating crops of fields. So I got to see a lot of sunflowers, tomatoes, alfalfa, you can really smell them when workers were picking or tending to the plants which was really sweet and something I used to take for granted and I now really miss being able to see that changing of the season with the crops, which I really enjoyed and then, I think maybe a little when I was a little older, maybe like high school age, I got the opportunity to do some backpacking trips in Yosemite. So really fortunate. I got to participate in some high school outings where I did some backcountry backpacking a couple of times which really flipped my world upside down and growing up in Stockton which does have like a farm and outdoors on the outskirts of it, but the urban setting which is where I lived, 300,000 plus people a lot of concrete and so not a ton of like backcountry settings out there and I never really had access to the Sierra Nevadas and those backpacking trips I have several several core memories from those trips and are really core to some of those childhood memories I have in the outdoors.

Sussan: Wow, that sounds really nice firstly to have growing up. I totally feel that taking for granted when you're a child because now looking back. It sounds you know, cycles to appreciate and even you know knowledge that you can learn from watching, watching that, and these backpacking opportunities does do transformative. I similarly grew up in like grew up in Jamaica Queens which is again very concrete. It's in New York City, and I took, I've only done one backpacking trip in the Andes in the mountains, and I just realized mountains are worlds, so and still you know reckoning with that. So I'm hoping to do some more of that.

Moving on, you know, after childhood, how has your relationship with the outdoors evolved in adulthood?

Efrain: Yeah, so it's been, it's been a lot more complex I'd say. I think when I was younger, it was pretty simple in the sense that I thought it was like a really one way relationship or 2 way relationship, me and this tree, me and me and this body of water and it was really novel, really sweet and I always felt really safe around, I was really fortunate to have pretty safe access to the outdoors.

But I think what really happened as I grew up is, as with many other kind of like moments in our lives, especially as People of Color who live in a society that exploits us in many many capacities, I started just noticing the power attached to like access and exclusion in the outdoors

and so I got almost like almost like a little angry, I'm not sure what the exact like word is to describe my relationship, maybe not directly with the outdoors, but access to it and my community's relation and access to it, changed a lot and there was a lot of like a little fire, kind of lit in my tummy a little bit where I really wanted to be able to work towards folks being able to have more access to it because I quickly realized that even though I didn't have a ton of access growing up, I had relatively more than a lot of my own peers, and and so it added this layer of of desired advocacy and so when I go to outdoor spaces I of course get to unplug and disattach the stressors of day-to-day life but also really do my best to bring in any opportunities I have to to bridge any access gaps, both in my personal life and in the work I'm doing with Justice Outside, which I'm sure I can speak to a little bit more in some upcoming questions. But yeah, I hope I spoke to that question.

Sussan: Yeah, yeah, you did very beautifully, and like you said, we'll get more into how you do this at Justice Outside. Kind of more focusing on the personal, and I guess I'm sure probably adds even, it's less simple right than when you're a child. As an adult and new parent, how do you work to remain connect with ancestral practices and outdoors and share that knowledge?

Efraín: Oof, yeah, that's an awesome question and it's one that I'm like actively trying to get better at and so, it's a really great reflection moment for myself, but I would say like the the primary way I've been doing it is trying to maintain my relationship with with plants. The people I come from in Michoacán and Jalisco, the Purépecha and several other Indigenous groups kind of had teachings and practices that for generations you know of course dwindled down, but there's some that really remained in my my family members. My grandmother and grandfather were were farmers. That's how they sustained themselves but aside from that they also had gardens of their own which they really really tended to.

I remember I'd visit my grandmother. She'd have dozens and dozens and dozens of plants in pots reshaped or repurposed old tires from the tractors that were on the farm. Planting directly into the soil, being in California the soil was pretty decent as an aside. But, that's something I try to carry on.

I also try to sustain and maintain a little garden for the sake of being able to be in relationship with them because I think you get to learn a lot from plants when you really pay attention, learn about their legacies and roles in our people's histories and legacies, in terms of how they supported medicinally, for for, economically really uplifted communities and provided avenues for consistent and healthy food. You know we don't really get to experience that level of relationship in a really industrialized world and so I try to actively try to have elements of that by having a garden. I recently moved and so I'm still mourning my past garden but I will build a new one for the spring.

And then, one of the other cool kind of connections I've recently made with like Indigenous practices or at least derivations of it, is in Michoacán there's a practice of making *corundas* it's called, a little triangle thing made out of masa from corn, typically use the leaves from the corn plant to to wrap them up and then you put them in a big pot and you steam them and then you

have like a really spicy salsa on the side. For the past maybe like two or three years, I have grown corn and I have been able to bring my family together or at least my nuclear family, and we come together and make corundas. This past year we're able to do it with the little one observing us, and it's something I want to continue doing because it's a really beautiful practice and it's something I hope Atzi, my my little one can kind of steward and lead for our nuclear family in the future.

And then the last thing I would share is that I think I've learned that my role in the larger community when it comes to upholding ancestral practices is doing my best to pass along everything I learned, everything I learned has really come from mentors and elders, and have to do my best to kind of pass it off to the next generation in my personal life and in in the workspace.

Sussan: Thank you for sharing Efraín. So now going to the second part of the previous question, tell us what you do at Justice Outside.

Efraín: Yes so what do I do? I'll do a quick refresher on my title so Grantmaking and Program Manager with the Liberated Paths program and I specifically focus in on the Pacific Northwest and California Coast and so the Liberated Paths Grantmaking program works to shift resources to organizations and initiatives that are BIPOC-led and serving, who are looking to build or make create racial and social justice at the intersection of the outdoors and environment, and how that looks like in a big picture Liberated Paths, we we give out grants. We fundraise it from foundations and we distribute it out to folks who we know are doing great work on the on the ground. Our annual gifts are about 20,000 a year, two year commitments and so all of the the administrative nitty-gritty work that needs to be done to get to the point where we're depositing the money requires a lot of outreach, a lot of recruitment, a lot of relationship building with potential grantees as part of our programming and in partnership with grantees.

We also strive to provide more support beyond the check. So we're not just parachuting in for the deposit and the report, so we sustain or provide rather a capacity building series. So every region, we try to host 4 sessions a year so there's a lot of relationship building with potential facilitators who have expertise in lived experience and some of the topics we identify that are of interest for grantees. Super exciting.

We're just now in 2023 started experimenting with in-person capacity building sessions which have been a really beautiful opportunity. Some really great success stories in the Bay Area and the Southwest most recently which I hope at one point can get elevated in a podcast episode. And so let's see what else? Really doing our best to stay in touch with grantees, so once I'm in partnership with folks, there's a really steady amount of communicating and back and forth with emails, phone calls about random topics like "how do I find a certified personal accountant to help me scale up?" "What do we need to take care of when as we're growing our organization?" to things like "I use need someone to vent to cause I at just had a really tough meeting with a really tough funder and I need an affinity space to just like vent" and thankfully I think that's something Justice Outside is uniquely positioned or not uniquely, it's increasingly more available

but we have like a a largely BIPOC, women staff and that brings an element of lived experience and cultural relevancy to these conversations where we're much more readily available or willing to diffuse power dynamics in our relationships with with grantees which in traditional philanthropy is a really toxic kind of like dynamic that gets perpetuated in in the way we hold relationships with our partners and so that's really the crux of like what we do every day is just holding our our relationships with all partners through a trust lens to the best of our ability.

Sussan: Yeah, there's so many moving parts to this really important role that you hold and I mean, I know that this team has recently expanded, but you know before you even came to Justice Outside I'm aware that you held various roles in the outdoors and environmental movement. How do these experiences inform your current role now as Liberated Paths Grantmaking and Program Manager?

Efraín: Took me down a road memory lane when I read this question so I tried to remember all the things I've done which is not too many really in retrospect. But as a quick refresher for the listeners prior to this role I mostly was involved in community organizing and a variety of different topics. So most recently before Justice Outside, doing civic engagement work in Santa Clara County in the Bay Area of California and then prior to that community organizing related to food justice and urban agriculture, and then a little bit of environmental education. So kind of shifted through those 3 roles and those fields of work and they've definitely informed the way I approach this work.

A core memory I have of many of those roles is always having conversations with leadership regarding the viability of my work as it relates to the incoming money from funders and so it was always this repeated message of like, the work maybe's gonna continue, we'll see what the funder says next week, which has always created like a psychologically pretty unstable environment for when I was doing the work on the ground and and that's something that as as a grantmaker now I have the ability to be able to be much more transparent and clear in my commitments to folks on the ground doing work and not leaving them in limbo which is something I recall as a line staff, really really impacted my my ability to show up for the work. So something I'm really proud that we're able to do through this the grantmaking and program manager role.

I think another thing I also recall from my time in those roles is I kind of alluded to it a little bit but almost like the sense of isolation when you're in the field of work. Just like many other fields, the outdoor and environment is like pretty white dominant. A lot of money goes towards white white led organizations and and and staff is largely white, etc, etc and I remember just moments where I'd have to go to the restroom, where I'd have to go run to my car, have lunch I can have a moment of solace and not have to be around the white gaze or or or subject to ridicule for things that maybe aren't super understood across racial lines.

With Justice Outside and Liberated Paths, we're able to make networking opportunities, actually I forgot to mention that in the prior question we curate virtual and in-person convenings for folks to be in community with each other with no other intention other than to be with each other and

in relation, because it can be quite exhausting being in the racial justice, social justice field that constantly tells you that you should stop and that you're the only one and it's not really worth it, and so really doing my best to uplift people's spirits and kind of provide them moments of being heard.

Sussan:

Yeah, it is fascinating because this is my first job in the environmental field, I mean I'm very young in my career is my second job to begin with, so it's really interesting and I guess reviewing you know hearing how your prior experience as a worker, linr worker as you said right? Now you are intentionally kind of trying to prevent these negative experiences from happening now in your role where is very important and kind of motivates me personally to you know, find other ways you know that we can, I can contribute to the field right? Because right now I'm in Communications, but I don't have the experience of of other roles.

Okay, so switching to who you are outside of Justice Outside, tell us about some of your hobbies and interests.

Efraín: Yeah, thanks Sussan. To your past comment though I wish you would discredit yourself less, Sussan. I think you're super experienced and well equipped for a lot of the things that I do so as an aside, but things that I do hobbies and interests I already mentioned gardening, I love gardening, I love plants.

I'm that person who will stop and take a picture of a plant, I shamelessly take clippings from people's yards constantly. So I'm that that person one of those people.

Yeah so I really into that more recently, my wife and I got back into running which I owe you a check in Sussan because I thought you were also doing that at one point

Sussan: Oh my goodness!

Efraín: And so that's been really great. My wife and I were inactive like in terms of moving our body bodies for about a year after our our young one was born. It was just, we were zombies for a year, and so this year just got back into it and it's really really fun. We got to run a half marathon a couple of weeks ago on my wife's birthday.

Sussan: Congratulations!

Efraín: Thank you Sussan! It was one of the hardest things I've ever done, I I almost cramped up so many times, but it was really really challenging but also really, it was like what I hope is gonna end up turning into like a core memory for my wife and I because that first year of being parents was really difficult and being able to accomplish something like that together where we like we trained like for four or five months and so we had to keep ourselves accountable, got out

there when it was cold, when we were tired and eventually it like bore fruit and it's something we're gonna keep doing so running is really a hobby and interest of mine.

I'll acknowledge that I I'm still like a concrete street runner, I just hit the streets, I have kind of weak ankles, so I'm scared to hit the trails. But I'm gonna do a bunch of calf raises, I'm gonna get some ankle braces and maybe hit up the trails one day but I've had a traumatic ankle injury before so trails scare me. Yeah, it's me that's unfortunate.

And then cherry on top, I tell this to everybody but I absolutely love basketball, I love love love basketball. I watch it a ton I watch, I listen to podcasts, I watch highlights. In my younger days I used to watch full games but adulthood doesn't really allow for 3 hour chunks of time to watch a full game, but it's still really great, and I like I love to go in person as much as I can.

For those of you who this is gonna be a niche community out there for all you Sacramento Kings fans I got to maybe there's some of y'all out there but I got to live in Sacramento.

Sussan: I feel like I know although I'm not part of it.

Efraim: So really whimsically and like as like a geek moment in my life, I got to live in Sacramento this past year when we actually surfaced from from what has just been a really sad like 15 years of being a fan and so I got to see the beam lit in my backyard all all year which is pretty awesome, I loved it.

Sussan: Pure joy. As a New York Mets fan, I hope that one day I could see that day just living vicariously through you.

At Justice Outside, we have been blessed to receive pictures of baby Atzi in your old garden, and you kind of you know, talked a little bit about this ish in your earlier response, but wanted to ask about why it's so important for you to strengthen Atzi's bond to nature?

Efraim: Yeah, thank you for that question. It always feels so nice to share them. They they are really, they're a big sweetheart and I love dropping the pictures. But yeah, this is something I've been recently kind of ruminating with my wife a little bit and it's, it's slowly becoming like a pretty big thing I'm trying to grapple with as a new parent in terms of how I get them to connect with nature because I think my hope or something I wrote myself in terms of my relationship to so to supporting Atzi's relationship is I recently read a book that lots of us in this field have read. Fresh Banana Leaves by I think Doctora Jessica Hernandez in in that book I think yeah she mentioned something something of, I think I try to take the quote down, something around the like, we take if we take care of nature, nature will take care of us.

It's like a reiterating kind of phenomenon she had in her book and it's something I want to continue imparting on Atzi, and ultimately for for the for the end or I guess my end goal as somebody who who who grew up Catholic, strayed away from it, and never found myself being able to get rooted in faith in that sense. For like the better half of last half of my life, I've been

unrooted in a sense, in terms of like my to like this greater power greater being, whatever we want to describe it as I've slowly been realizing that I think what I'm I want Atzi to be exposed to is is is a lifestyle and a commitment or even like a social identity attachment to land, to the to to the water in a way that it can be interwoven in their self-identity to ultimately kind of give them an inherent motivation to be in positive relationship with the land and the people who are who are living on it.

I'm not gonna take my kid to church I'm not gonna take them to do those kinds of things that's not up my alley but I ultimately still want them to be rooted and have a purpose in life in terms of like a larger larger purpose, and I think having them connected and exposed consistently to plants, to nature, and and ancestral ways of being in a relationship is what I hope will will make them like a vicious advocate for the land and their people.

Sussan: That's beautiful Efraín, thank you for sharing that with us. So we're at our last question which we have asked everyone: what is one outdoors tip that you have?

Efraín: Yeah, that's a great one. My wife and I took Atzi to camp for the first time this past summer and I re I absolutely regret not buying a blackout tent. If you all have little ones, I didn't realize that the sun comes up and it's gonna go right through the tent so homie was waking up at 5 am which was a terrible time. They were so grumpy they were so mad and so get a blackout tent or I don't know if you maybe put a baseball cap on your baby's head, I've heard people do that to block the light, it can be really supportive for waking up out in the camping world and then the biggest takeaway I would give, and this is again directed towards other parents out there or caregivers rather, if you, if you make plans, but then be okay with them getting, them shifting for the little ones needs and interests because they're going to do and gravitate towards whatever they want and I think it's like the caregivers' duty to kind of be flexible in that sense and I remember when I didn't have that framework, I got really disappointed one of the first times I took Atzi out, but that was on me because I didn't set myself up for success in that framework. So be flexible.

Sussan: Thank you for sharing your wisdom Efraín. Is there anything else that we didn't, you know I didn't ask, or that you would like to share, before we say goodbye?

Efraín: Ah, no I think I'm feeling good and whole. Thanks so much Sussan, I hope the listeners get something out of this conversation and thanks so much Sussan for holding the space and time with me.

Sussan: Yes, of course, thank you Efraín for joining us today!