

Episode 9: Peggy Shepard The godmother of the environmental justice movement speaks out

Yesh (00:09):

I'm Yesh Pavlik Slenk, and this is Degrees: real talk about planet-saving careers from Environmental Defense Fund.

News clips (00:17):

Reserve lies in the heart of what's called cancer alley. It's a corridor 85 miles long in between New Orleans and Baton Rouge dominated by more than 150 chemical plants... urban planning projects led several decades ago by the late master planner, Robert Moses, ultimately in circled the South Bronx inside a ring of major highways... They're polluting our air, polluting our water. They're polluting our soil.... And the census tract where he lives. It actually has a cancerous 50 times above average. That is according to the EPA. It's the highest risk in America...

Yesh (00:51):

As we release this episode today is Martin Luther King Jr. Day. 35 years ago on the same holiday. Our guest Peggy Shepard was arrested when her new organization stopped traffic on a New York city highway to protest the sewage pollution plaguing Harlem. It was one of the first initiatives to call the placing of an abundance of toxic industry in minority communities exactly what it is: environmental racism. Since then, Peggy has devoted her life to battling it and stopping low-income communities from being what she calls sacrifice zones-- areas, where residents are subject to disproportionately high rates of pollution. It's a civil rights issue that Peggy has never stopped fighting. And Peggy's 40 plus years of experience makes her well-qualified to serve as one of the several leaders advising president elect Biden on his climate change plan. Listeners. If you're working in sustainability, an understanding and a commitment to environmental justice is just as important as your grasp on greenhouse gas emissions. And that understanding will set you apart as a genuine environmental leader. Folks pull up a chair, grab a cup of tea. Here's my conversation with Peggy Shepard, one of the best mentors anyone could ask for. Peggy Shepherd, welcome to Degrees.

Peggy Shepard (02:14):

Thank you so much. Glad to be here.

Yesh (02:16):

I want to go back in time for a moment to the start of your career and to the start of the path that you're on. What drew you to this work?



Episode 9: Peggy Shepard The godmother of the environmental justice movement speaks out

Peggy Shepard (02:25):

Oh gosh. Uh, growing up, I wanted to be a writer. I always wanted to come to New York city. I wanted to, uh, be a magazine editor and, uh, I was working at Black Enterprise magazine, starting a new black lifestyle magazine. Uh, we were a month away from publication. I thought I was at the top of my dream. And, um, the publisher decided to buy radio stations in Baltimore instead of publishing the magazine. And so he asked me to stay and work in public relations, and I decided, um, that I didn't want to do that. And I began looking at other options. I decided, well, maybe, uh, there's something more important I could be doing than writing about lifestyle. And so I took a job as a speech writer, uh, in a state agency in the State Division of Housing here in New York. And, um, you know, worked with other political appointees at the usual government agency, you know, political appointees abound.

Yesh (03:39):

Reverend Jesse Jackson was running for president at the time. He formed the rainbow coalition to demand social justice for groups neglected under Reaganomics. At the time Peggy was quiet and introverted and she surprised herself by getting involved with the group and the gregarious outspoken Jackson.

Peggy Shepard (03:59):

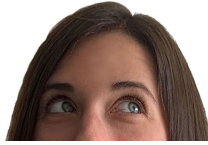
So this was like an amazing, uh, uh, opportunity. He was, uh, organizing by congressional district and young people all over New York city were engaged in the campaign and coming together and running as delegates. And so part of my job was to promote all of these young people running, uh, running as delegates. And so it was just a really exciting time. And that's when I really began to understand the level of advocacy and the level of benefits that certain communities had and others did not.

Yesh (04:39):

And then an opportunity to make a difference-- a big audacious one presented itself. The city was planning to build a massive sewage treatment plant on the banks of the Hudson River in Harlem and the local volunteer recruited Peggy to help ensure that local residents would get jobs at the new sewage plant.

Peggy Shepard (04:56):

I didn't even know there was a sewage treatment plant, uh, opening. I just moved to West Harlem. And of course, you know, the plant was out in the Hudson River and, um, it was still under construction. And this sounds like an important issue. Um, let's get people jobs. So we in fact got 30 people hired.



Episode 9: Peggy Shepard The godmother of the environmental justice movement speaks out

Yesh (05:18):

But then what had appeared to be a good economic opportunity began turning dark. About six months after Peggy's organization managed to get a few dozen people hired, the plant started operating and it began spewing odors and emissions for blocks across the whole community was suffering people on Riverside drive near the river, right across the street from the plant. All of them had to keep their windows closed. And if you had a balcony, forget it, the balcony was no good anymore. Several of Peggy's members live there on Riverside Drive and they were angry. So for the next years, Peggy used all of her vacation from her day job to organize residents and work on the sewage treatment project, which was snowballing. In addition to treating sewage officials were planning to build a park on top of it. Peggy knew that she needed evidence to persuade officials to solve the problem. So she looked for experts. She looked for experts who could give her hard data that would either get public officials to do something about it, or be held accountable.

Peggy Shepard (06:27):

That was so important because it gave us for the first time, some real facts. Um, because literally I was spending months calling engineers and calling companies around the city to find out well, what was the sewage treatment plant and what did it do? What did it emit and how should it be maintained? So over a six year period of time, we had a hundred residents coming out every month. And this became a cadre of really educated people about air quality, air monitoring. And so that was really a, a very strong beginning for a community like West Harlem, beginning to engage on, uh, an important air quality environmental issue.

Yesh (07:17):

But her organization faced powerful political opposition.

Peggy Shepard (07:22):

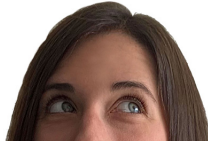
Mayor Koch was the mayor at that point, he said, Oh, there's no problem. You're imagining.

Yesh (07:27):

Imagining it. That's just blatant gaslighting.

Peggy Shepard (07:33):

Peggy, you lived there. What was it like? Yeah. Um, so I'm four blocks East of Riverside Drive, and so I could smell it right outside my door. There's always this odor and then there's emissions that are causing you to, to have more difficulty in breathing. Many of the folks living near the plant and Riverside drive had either had asthma or children or grandchildren with asthma, and it seemed to be exacerbating that problem. And so we reached out to, uh, Harlem hospital and Columbia school of public health and said,



Episode 9: Peggy Shepard The godmother of the environmental justice movement speaks out

do you see any more people with asthma from this step code coming into the emergency room? And, uh, as, as you know, research takes a while. So two years later, I got a call from, uh, Dr. John Ford, who was head of pulmonary medicine at Harlem hospital and also, uh, affiliated with the Mailman School of Public Health. And he said, Peggy, I've got this incredible news. We finished the study. And we're finding that Harlem prevalence of asthma is three times that of any other neighborhood in New York City.

Yesh (09:04):

Here was the evidence linking pollution to health that Peggy needed in order to prove to officials that the plant was dangerous. Remember when I said that not only did the residents have to keep their windows closed, but people with balconies couldn't use them? That balcony problem turned out to be a surprising key to victory.

Peggy Shepard (09:31):

We ended up suing the city based on a nuisance suit, basically alleging that people could not have the use of their property because of this plant. On the last day of the Dinkins administration in 1994, our lawsuit was settled against the city for \$1.1 million Environmental Benefits Fund,

Yesh (09:54):

But that wasn't all settling that lawsuit gave the organization, the leverage, it needed to hold New York city to a big promise-- a big promise, a \$55 million fix up of the despised North river sewage treatment plant. It was such major news that the New York times covered it on the front page. Peggy, how did this fight and this win change the way that you saw things in your community?

Peggy Shepard (10:26):

Um, once I realized there was a sewage treatment, my neighborhood, I quickly began to see all of these other things that I walked past and never really noticed. And I think most of us do that. You, we bought past a parking lot of trucks and we don't notice that that that parking lot might be right under people's apartment windows or next to a playground or next to a playground or school. We have bus depots across from swimming pools, from the parks department with buses idling outside. When we walk into our dry cleaner, do you smell that that chemical perchloroethylene, you shouldn't be smelling it. That means that, uh, there are emission levels. So these are all things that happen every day that we don't notice.



Episode 9: Peggy Shepard The godmother of the environmental justice movement speaks out

Yesh ([11:14](#)):

The other thing Peggy realized, and this is a thing that people still don't think enough about was that the committees making policy affecting Harlem residents, almost never included those residents. She started to become aware that in order to fight for local communities, you had to have the right people in the room. That's a really big deal for her today. And something that she wants you listener to take action on.

Peggy Shepard ([11:45](#)):

When we go to a meeting and you see no people of color in a meeting around an that impacts everyone, do you say at the next meeting, let's make sure that we have further outreach. And we bring in the voices that need to be here. These are all things that each one of us can do that each one of us can constantly affirm the kinds of values that we believe in. And that we think are shared values across community, across city or across state.

Yesh ([12:25](#)):

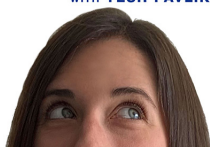
I wanted to know more about her career. So I asked her whether there was one moment over the last 35 years with WE ACT that she is most proud of. And there are many, she said, but she pointed to an especially quiet one, an unsung victory that most surprised her opponents.

Peggy Shepard ([12:44](#)):

It's a moment of victory when you can walk into a room month after month, and there are a hundred people they're committed to working on something that the whole country says, people of color aren't interested in and feeling wonderful that I've been a part of this

Yesh ([13:04](#)):

Later. There would be other groundbreaking victories. Peggy's group had been renamed. We act in 1988, it would be the thorn in the side of the city's powerful transportation department, the metropolitan transit authority. We act pushed the MTA to green, New York city's bus fleet. Getting rid of dirty diesel, showed millions of new Yorkers that environmental justice absolutely helps targeted neighborhoods, but it also benefits everyone more recent victories did the same. We act that the state of New York to ban the toxic chemical BPA in children's products with partners, it convinced lawmakers to mandate lead testing in every public school in the state of New York today is trying to reduce illness and death from excessive heat. As temperatures warm, more people die. Black and Brown people represent half of all those deaths in New York city, but they make up only a quarter of the population. But let's go back to Peggy's history. Even as the sewage battle was waging, WE ACT took on another pollutant that was equally dangerous, especially to Harlem children. The neighborhood already housed six of the seven bus depots in New York city. Nobody else would take them. And now the city was trying



Episode 9: Peggy Shepard The godmother of the environmental justice movement speaks out

to bring a seventh one yet one more source of disease causing diesel fumes officials thought Harlem residents didn't care, didn't vote and wouldn't fight. They were wrong.

Peggy Shepard (14:43):

Uh, we stood up at a press conference and said we're West Harlem Environmental Action and we're suing the Metropolitan Authority for building the seventh depot in Harlem, seven of eight in Manhattan. The new one was going to be across the street from a junior high school and one of the largest apartment buildings in the city. And that was the moment when we began raising the issue of environmental racism and environmental justice to New York city. They never heard the word

Yesh (15:20):

As we release this, we're only two days away from inauguration. President-elect Biden has said that clean energy jobs are a big part of his concept to rebuild better, but good intentions are not enough to fix climate policy, especially around these really deep seated problems of environmental injustice. Always, always good data is needed. And fortunately new evidence supporting the connection between pollution and disease has arisen in just the past year. A landmark Harvard study linked higher mortality and morbidity from COVID to air pollution in the sacrifice zone communities, and EDF has shown that carbon emissions are causing similar elevated asthma rates in Oakland, California. That sounds really dark. But this new research actually makes Peggy feel hopeful because it's powerful new fuel for the fight.

Peggy Shepard (16:19):

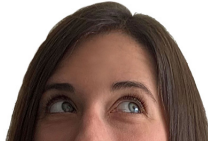
That's been a pivotal moment in the past year for the environmental justice community. It really achieved more discussion in the media around these issues. And I think combined with the Black Lives Matter series of demonstrations and police brutality issues of the past year, I think that has all aligned to raise people's consciousness about the impacts in frontline communities.

Yesh (16:50):

It is a shame that it took witnessing and experiencing the tragedies of the last year for folks to finally really start paying attention to environmental justice. But the movement is now getting an unprecedented amount of attention. What more do you think is needed to push it farther ahead?

Peggy Shepard (17:14):

Um, certainly there's more work because there's more demand. Um, we have always, in fact, been requested to be part of numerous government advisory boards and initiatives and hearings. Um, it's just that that was done quietly. Nobody realized we were there, but we were doing it now. There are many more requests for us to be part of so many discussions, issue areas, uh, congressional visits candidate



Episode 9: Peggy Shepard The godmother of the environmental justice movement speaks out

meetings, but we don't have the resources to engage when we go to the banking or appropriations committee and they say, okay, well, how many millions or billions is this going to cost? We don't have an economist or scientists back in our office to immediately respond. Um, we're being asked to weigh in around a variety of carbon reduction measures. And again, for us to go back to our offices, get up to speed on the array of energy and carbon strategies that are being discussed is overwhelming. Yet we know we need to be in those discussions. Um, we have allies and partners who now are asking us to be part of that. We don't really have the resources to engage at the quality level and at an equity level.

Yesh (18:47):

What can you tell us about the Biden administration plans and whether they will make more green jobs available?

Peggy Shepard (18:53):

Well, we certainly been making recommendations to some of the team and we made recommendations to the campaign as well, but we certainly know that there's got to be a new paradigm for green jobs for the most under employed people, um, in, in our country and especially those living in frontline communities. And so we've been making recommendations, uh, around job training around the kinds of services and technical assistance. We're making recommendations about how environmental justice needs to be infused in all of policy, uh, how we need environmental justice expertise in many of the federal agencies and the white house as well.

Yesh (19:43):

One of our concepts here on our podcast is that anyone wearing any hat in any job can make a positive environmental impact. What does this mean for this moment in time? How can our listeners ensure that they're also supporting the environmental justice movement with their jobs and as individuals?

Peggy Shepard (20:04):

Well, you know, I've been speaking to a number of corporations lately. That's very new and I've talked to many of their staff and their numbers of things you can do when you're focused on any kind of policy. Are you really looking through a filter of who does this policy impact, who is the most effected, who might be impacted negatively by this? How do we engage all of those voices? You can be in just a regular staff person in an organization and their organizational issues, their issues in your particular department that you can look and say is justice happening here. And how can I take some initiative to ensure that the voices are heard.



Episode 9: Peggy Shepard The godmother of the environmental justice movement speaks out

Yesh (20:53):

As you reflect on your career, I wonder if you can share with us any advice that you would give to your younger self, and this would be an immediate piece of wisdom that you could share with people who are, who are just getting started.

Peggy Shepard (21:09):

I think I would say that the job you think you are seeking today may not be the one you actually achieve. The job that you may actually achieve may not have even been thought of today. And also that you can make your own job. I think the experience, you begin to understand what you're good at and what you're really passionate about, and that will lead you to innovate and find your niche in the world.

Yesh (21:39):

And there's one more thing, listeners. She wants everyone to know that environmental injustice may be most prevalent in Harlem and the South Bronx and Bakersfield, California, and Reserve Louisiana. They're the places mentioned in those news clips. We shared with you at the beginning of the show, but Peggy says that environmental injustice happens everywhere,

Peggy Shepard (22:00):

Whether it's air quality, whether it's soil contamination, whatever it is, there is going to be an issue that you think compromises your environment, that you could be working on no matter where you live.

Yesh (22:15):

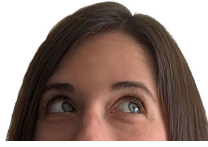
I am so grateful for the time that we've had to spend together today. And, uh, for your contribution of your wisdom and sharing it with our audience, I'd like to close with a question that I'm asking all of our guests. Uh, if you could have a personal board of directors, the group of people that you lean on when you're faced with big decisions or roadblocks, maybe, you know, these people, maybe you don't. So I'm wondering who would be on the Peggy Shepard personal board of directors.

Peggy Shepard (22:46):

Oh, wow. Uh, Hillary Clinton, uh, Gale Brewer, the Manhattan borough president, uh, here in New York city, Fred Krupp!

Yesh (23:06):

Fred Krupp. He's the president of Environmental Defense Fund.



Episode 9: Peggy Shepard The godmother of the environmental justice movement speaks out

Peggy Shepard (23:10):

He's such an innovator. Um, Dr. Bob Bullard, um, down in Texas.

Yesh (23:19):

Dr. Bullard listeners, if Peggy Shepard is the godmother of environmental justice, Dr. Bullard is the godfather.

Peggy Shepard (23:29):

Um, Lisa Jackson, former EPA administrator, and, uh, Derek Hamilton, the economist over at the new school. He's an incredible person.

Yesh (23:43):

And, and why, why choose of those folks? Can you give me one example,

Peggy Shepard (23:48):

Um, strong experience. It's always great to have people around who have gone through challenges, gone through political challenges, um, organizational challenges, and can help you not have to recreate the wheel or make the same mistakes. I think it's always important to have that strong, you know, political savvy, because so much of what we do in the environmental field is political. Um, and having a strong network into philanthropy, into technical innovation, into how government works is really important for the kind of work that I do and the things I want.

Yesh (24:31):

Well, Peggy Shepard, I want to thank you so much for spending time with me today.

Peggy Shepard (24:36):

Thank you.

Yesh (24:37):

That's our show for today. Thank you listeners for tuning in to Degrees. We've linked to Peggy Shepard's WE ACT website in the show notes. And remember, this interview is part two of our series on environmental justice. So if you miss part one, take a listen. It was a really interesting conversation with Michelle Romero of Green for All. I think of her as a leader in the new generation fighting for environmental justice. If you liked what you heard today, share this episode with friends and family and ask them to subscribe. Also point them to our website degreespodcast.org, where we posted our favorite sustainability job boards. And talk to me, I'm on Twitter @yeshsays, Oh, and one other thing



REAL TALK ABOUT
PLANET-SAVING CAREERS

Degrees

WITH YESH PAVLIK SLENK



Episode 9: Peggy Shepard The godmother of the environmental justice movement speaks out

that IKEA furniture you recently had delivered. There are a lot of trucks and that is a lot of carbon emissions, but tune in next week for my conversation with Steve Moelk, the guy who's charged with making your next IKEA delivery, clean green and powered by EVs. Degrees is presented by Environmental Defense Fund. Our producers are Rick Velleu and Amy Morse. Our executive producer is Christina Mestre. Our production company is Podcast Allies with Elaine Appleton Grant and Lindsey O'Connor. Our editor is Karen Lowe. Engineering by sound genius, Matthew Simonson, and theme music by Lake Street Dive I'm your host Yesh Pavlik Slenk. Stay fired up. Y'all