A TEI Project

Interview of Elina Green

Contents

1. Transcript

1.1. Session 1 (November 5, 2008)

Collings
: Good morning, Elina. This is Jane Collings interviewing Elina Green, November 5, 2008, in her office at the Long Beach Alliance for Children with asthma. And here we are on a historic day--

Green
: Very historic.

Collings
: --getting ready to start an oral history dealing with your environmental-activist career. Why don't we just start out at the beginning of your life and just tell me where you were born, when you were born if you care to.

Green
: Sure. No, no problem. I was actually born in Fresno. I was born at home.

Collings
: Really.

Green
: Yes. My parents were total hippies, and my dad is a physician and my mom a nurse, so they wanted to do a home birth.

Collings
: I see.

Green
: But we only stayed in California for a couple of years. I don't know why we ended up moving up to Oregon, which is where I spent most of my formative years, moving a lot, but mostly throughout the Portland area in Oregon.

Collings

Oh, I see.

Green

I was born in 1978, so I'm thirty, which I feel that that's a historic age for me. I've been feeling like I've been looking forward to being thirty for a long time.

Collings

Oh, why is that?

Green

I don't know. I just really felt like this was going to be my year, and it's been my year in a lot of ways. I just felt like it was kind of something I've been looking forward to, so I was saying the other day, I'm very happy about my age. I'm not one of those people that's like, "I want to be older," or, "I want to be younger." I'm totally pleased with where I'm at.

Collings

Yes. Now, why did your family move up to Oregon?

Green

We moved up there--my dad was really interested in the concept of communal living, and there was a communal-living group outside of Portland in a small town called Aurora [Two Rivers Farm], and so although for a lot of the families who participated, they actually lived on this thirty-five-acre farm, we lived just outside, and my parents maintained a life kind of outside in the sense that they both had their own jobs. But then we went to school on this communal-living group--they had sort of almost like a Montessori-type school, and then we worked Saturdays and Sundays at the farm, so as a family, we really kind of committed a lot of our time to participating.

Collings

Were there other families involved in the community that lived outside of it, as you did?

Green

Yes. I would say at the peak--it's still in existence now, but I would say at the peak there were about 300 people participating, and only about ten families that lived on the farm, and the majority lived in small towns just outside of that.

Collings

How long did your family participate in the farm?

Green

Twelve years, so the majority--

Collings

That's quite a while.

Green

Yes, I was three when we started participating, and I went to school from age three to age twelve and participated just even when I went--I ended up going to private school for a couple of years, mostly to sort of catch up academically,

because I had had this very crazy academic experience. My academic experience was mostly experiential, and so my parents sent me to a very strict, private Catholic school, of all things, although we're not Catholic, to kind of catch up. But during that time, I still had my friends. I still participated on the weekends in activities and things like that.

Collings

Right. Do you have brothers and sisters?

Green

I do. I have an older sister and a younger brother, and then my dad remarried and has two siblings, so I have a half sister and a half brother, and there's a huge age spread. My sister is thirty-five, and my youngest half sibling is thirteen, so it's a huge difference. I almost kind of feel like they're my nieces and nephews, I think because they're so much younger.

Collings

Yes. You said that your father was a physician and your mother a nurse. Did they practice what you might call traditional medicine, like in a hospital, or how did they handle their work situation?

Green

My dad has always owned his own practice. He was a general practitioner for a long time in our small town and was kind of sort of the town doctor in that very small-town kind of way.

Collings

In Fresno?

Green

Actually, he did practice in Fresno, but when we actually got up to Aurora, just outside Portland, that's where he had his practice.

Collings

I see.

Green

Then he's really--he's kind of a fringy guy. He's very interested in alternative medicine and alternative ideas, and so has always had these different practitioners work with him, people like osteopaths or homeopathic doctors or this type of thing. And then I think that really sparked his interest in the concept of environmental causes, too, to help, and I think largely because he was kind of getting patients that had chronic fatigue syndrome or had these very strange things that they'd been to every specialist that they could go to, and they finally ended up in my dad's office. So he was treating people in sort of alternative methods of medicine, and then has since about eight years ago eliminated the adult portion of his practice and has really focused on alternative interventions for kids with autism, and has had quite a successful career in the last--I'd say he kind of floated around and has this incredible love for biochemistry and a real

understanding of just sort of how environmental insults can impact the body, but finally found his niche at, I think at the time, fifty-two. This autism movement is growing and is very large, and he's really found kind of his place there in working with autistic kids, and has had a lot of success in helping kids become verbal again, primarily just through dietary modifications and things like that.

Collings

That's wonderful.

Green

So that's kind of his world, and it's definitely impacted all of us in a big way. And then my mom sort of mostly was a stay-at-home mom, but did practice kind of periodically and has tended to be drawn towards--I mean, she worked in the prison system for a long time, and now has spent about seventeen years working in the mental health field. She's a psychiatric nurse for the criminally insane, so she's got one of those sort of soul-sucking jobs, I think. But she sort of feels like she's someone who can handle it, so she's been doing that.

Collings

Wow, yes, that sounds like a really soul-sucking job, as you say. Interesting. What kinds of things do your siblings do now?

Green

My sister is an ER physician and has taken the straight and narrow and has been quite unsatisfied, I think, with just practicing traditional medicine and is trying to figure out a way to find a world for herself in medicine. She loves--she's like my dad. She loves the study of medicine, but didn't quite--is kind of overwhelmed by how it actually plays out in the real world. My younger brother is in school. He's struggled a lot, and he's had a lot of severe depression and things like that and so is kind of limping along, and our family is trying to figure out ways to support him. He's twenty-six and is kind of trying to find his way in life. And then my little siblings are in school--

Collings

Too young, yes.

Green

--yes, doing whatever high school students do.

Collings

Right. So how did your father--just to sort of backtrack a little bit, how did he--he was presumably trained as a physician in a fairly traditional manner, but how did he become involved in what you might call the counterculture in the seventies, and your mother as well?

Green

Yes. I think, I mean, my parents were never really that engaged politically, which is really, I think, an interesting thing about them, that they found kind of

their counter cultural life was really about being tied to the Earth. So they did a lot of kind of, when they were first in their early parts of their lives together, they did things like spend a summer in the middle of the wilderness looking for forest fires. My dad was a smoke jumper for another number of years, things like that, where they just felt like they wanted to really kind of stay close to the ground, kind of that kind of--and I think that that's what ended up eventually being attractive for sort of the counterculture back in the seventies. Folks sort of started to go back to the land, that kind of a thing. I don't think they went into it really to be counter cultural. I think that was just sort of what they were drawn to do.

Green

And then I think, you know, they've kind of maintained a lack of sort of political involvement. My mom is not a U.S. citizen, so she has maintained her--

Collings

Where is she from?

Green

She's from Finland. So she's maintained her Finnish citizenship and sort of is very, very intellectually interested in politics, but doesn't obviously engage. I mean, I was astounded, my dad told me last night that he not only voted, but he gave Obama a bunch of money, and I was like, "I didn't even know you'd vote." I mean, we talk a lot about it, but it's not something that I think he's--for a long time I think he just sort of didn't participate. Did I answer a question?

Collings

Yes, absolutely. Did your father grow up like on a farm or something, or in the middle of New York City, or what?

Green

He grew up in Idaho, in Moscow, Idaho. They were kind of a typical fifties household in that Grandma was a secretary, and my grandfather was a dean of a college, and their boys always kind of grew up hiking and hunting and backpacking, and I think it just came--he's just always been sort of interested in the land and the Earth and the planet and things like that, mostly from personal experience, and then ended up kind of avoiding the draft by staying in school and so got a degree in psychology and got a degree in Spanish and got a degree in music, so I think he just became this Renaissance man more by chance and by his own sort of personal interests.

Collings

Yes. Now, where did your parents meet?

Green

They met I think at U of I, University of Idaho in school. My mom had just come to this country and really didn't know what was going on, and I have now

learned that my dad thought marriage would--all of a sudden it sounded like a good idea. He met my mom and three weeks later they were married.

Collings

Oh, are you kidding me? Wow.

Green

And they were both in school, and so they just kind of stayed in school and just did this marriage thing. It was just kind of like, oh, this is kind of nice. I think--I've been doing--talk about sort of this oral history, I've been doing a photo history. I've got all these slides of my parents when they were young, and I've been scanning these and looking at just their life was so simple and so--I mean, they lived in these cabins in the middle of nowhere for summers, and they were just totally tied to the land. Their hobbies involved cross-country skiing and backpacking, that was about it.

Collings

Yes. Sounds really nice.

Green

It's a really nice life. I'm like, how have things gotten so complicated?

Collings

Yes. So whose idea was it that you would go to this school for working on your academic skills? That was your parents' idea, I presume?

Green

Yes. I don't know--I say this kind of to--I don't mean to actually sound funny. My sister is just brilliant, and she's one of those people, and she was the first child, so I think that--I mean, we joke about it as a family, like my sister met all her milestones way in advance than most normal kids do, and I was quite normal in my development, so they sort of thought I was not smart for a while, you know, for the early years, because they were like, "Wow. This child isn't speaking and she's one already," or whatever it was. So I think that they kind of always maintained that concern that I wouldn't catch onto things, whereas my sister just flew through things. And so I'm actually quite grateful that they sent me. I mean, it was pretty traumatic to just go to this--I mean, I was a non-Catholic in a Catholic school with nuns and the whole bit, all girls, uniforms, the whole thing, and felt like I just totally didn't belong.

Collings

How old were you at that time?

Green

Seventh grade, so I guess you're twelve or thirteen, so, you know, those formative years. But I mean, I remember getting like a 2.2 GPA my first pre-whatever they call them, like your mid-semester report, and having no idea what a GPA was. I mean, I was like, "Is that good?" And all my girlfriends are like, "That's not good." But it was the perfect experience. I mean, I completely

excelled by the end of the two years and really once I entered regular high school, I was in AP classes and I was able to kind of maneuver the system.

Collings

So what are your memories of when you were younger than that, participating in the communal--Aurora, you called it?

Green

The farm, Two Rivers Farm. Well, in some strange way I think--I mean, first of all, from the standpoint of a child, it was incredible. I mean, we had thirty-five acres where we literally roamed completely free. It was a fully sustainable organic farm, so we sort of inadvertently learned about how regular farming happens. I mean, we did things like if it was time to butcher, that was our biology class was going to help butcher a cow, and that whole process made me a vegetarian, number one. But it also made me kind of understand sort of where things come from and this whole connection to eating and food and that whole process.

Green

And there was a lot of--I mean, we learned how to sew. We had cooking classes. By the time I was going through, the gender things started to break down. It used to be that the guys did mechanics and woodworking, and the girls did cooking and sewing, and by the time--we were sort of the fourth or fifth class of kids, we were like, "This is an outrage. We want to learn how to change our oil, too, and have woodworking and the guys learn how to cook." So they started to kind of break down those gender barriers.

Green

But, I mean, I totally credit that to having incredible hobbies and having sort of a concept of the world that's quite different. Like I do come from this small farming community, but I've managed to sort of move on to, quote, unquote, "normal urban life," I guess in that sense. But also, just being part of a community, it's really challenging. Like having--I mean, the people came together around sort of a spiritual ideology which, frankly, as a kid I never really learned, because we were just sort of--we were just kids. We weren't inundated with anything. And so it was really around the time when I was about fourteen where they would invite children to participate in the ideology, and I felt very uninterested in participating in anything that was sort of put onto me. And so in a sense, as much as it was difficult, it was really where I developed my own voice, and I was one of the only kids--my sister and I were both sort of strongly disliked by many of the adults, because we were the only kids that said, "No," or, "Why?" or, "What is this process?" We were respected in terms of we were allowed to make our own decisions, but we weren't really looked upon favorably, because we questioned what was happening.

Collings

Well, you had kind of a dual situation, where you were actually living outside of the community.

Green

Yes.

Collings

Did the other kids who lived outside of the community have this kind of questioning attitude, do you think?

Green

I don't think so, largely because--I mean, my mom didn't subscribe to the ideology. She loved, I mean, what parent wouldn't love that their kids are getting--sort of the experiences that we were getting were so great, and so she loved that aspect, but didn't agree, didn't subscribe to the ideology at all, and so she never participated. So I think in that sense, we had a window into sort of real life, and she saw the group as sort of degrading the family structure, because many of the people would devote their entire seven days a week to this community, and so it wasn't prioritizing family time. My mom demanded that we had dinners together as a family and things like that, and after a while we started spending every other weekend with my mom in Portland and going to opera. She would take us to Finnish language classes and things like that, so we kind of had a world view that was expanding, while everyone else was sort of staying entrenched in this community, so I think that was where we kind of developed our ability to say, "You know, there's more out there than just this."

Collings

Yes. It's almost like being bilingual in a sense.

Green

Yes. Yes, it was that way. And my dad was pretty--bless his heart, he was pretty clueless. I mean, he was like playing the piano for the choir, which he loved, and he was the lead organic gardener, which he loved, and he kind of had two best friends there, which he loved, and other than that didn't really subscribe much to--he just kind of liked being around people. I don't think he really thought about like, "What does this community really mean to me?" Whereas some people were really inundated.

Collings

Now, you said you didn't really subscribe to the philosophy. Was there sort of a mission statement, a stated philosophy?

Green

Yes. I mean, I can tell you what I know. A lot of it, like I said, as kids we had a point where we were allowed to be sort of entered in as a young adult.

Collings

Is that what they called it?

Green

Yes. Okay, so it was based on the teachings of a man named [G.I.] Gurdjieff, and there are a number of groups around, really I think around the world that have developed based on this man's teachings.

Collings

What was his name again?

Green

Gurdjieff.

Collings

Okay, is that the last name?

Green

Yes, and I don't even know--I think I just was picking my mom's brain a couple of months ago, like, "What was his whole scoop?" He's a mystic. He kind of believed in Sufism a little bit, but I think he was a writer and according to my mom he was a total crackpot, but that's because she didn't believe in a lot of the stuff. The only exposure that I really had was that when they would start to--the first invitation as a child was that on the work days, they would do this thing called theme and discussion, so in the mornings they would pull kids together and do groups and talk about, "The theme today is going to be about awareness, and so notice how many times you're doing your work for the day and you are unaware in what you're doing," or whatever. That might be an example. Then we would discuss at the end of the day, "What were the things that you learned today in being aware?" So, I mean, I think in concept it was good to have young people start to develop this awareness about whatever in life, but it just felt like there was--I think I've always just been really anti-dogmatic, and I think partly my Catholic school experience of just seeing so much hypocrisy and kind of feeling like I didn't want to be a part of any religious teachings.

Green

And I always have felt like children have such insight into what adults do, and adults often don't know. I remember as a kid, you know, knowing that this man had left his wife for this woman. Then he was the man standing up and telling us that we should be good people, and I'm thinking like whatever, you left your wife and your kids, so why am I supposed to listen to you? So I think that was kind of where I developed that questioning and really a total aversion to participating in the other side of things. But I maintained my friends. I kept going, because I loved like just so much of the experience of what we did and just being able to interact with young adults in a different way.

Collings

Did you ever go and visit with your mother's family in Finland?

Green

Yes. I actually have kind of been the emissary of sorts. I've gone back really every three years since I was eighteen. I actually just went back for a family

reunion. I finally drove my mom and my sister with me. My mom went back for the first time in twenty-six years this summer.

Collings

Really.

Green

There was a very strong connection with the family, because my mom's niece and nephew stayed with us for a year their senior year in high school, so we have a strong connection there. But yes, I mean, the whole family is there, and I think as an adult I'm kind of making a stronger connection. Knowing I have the ability to fly out, and we have e-mail, and we can call and things like that, it's been a stronger connection.

Collings

That's wonderful. Did she come from some kind of farming community in Finland?

Green

Her mom was a butcher. She's typical of World War II, really extremely poor. Finland was really, really impacted by the war, because they were kind of caught in this struggle in the middle and sort of in essence dumped on, and nobody really picked them up. So they pride themselves by being the first country in all of the European countries to pay their war debt back in its entirety, and the way that they did that was they sent women to work. So women in Finland got the vote before any other European country did. Women started working and there's really--the glass ceiling thing, I mean, it exists there, but for women there's more equal pay. They've had a woman president for years and years there. In terms of culture, women really play a strong role, so I think that was maybe what she sort of took from her experience. But it's kind of that bootstraps kind of culture. It's very stoic and hard working. They value like hard work and education and people who don't say much.

Collings

Yes. Did she ever talk about why she came to study in the United States?

Green

You know, she's told her side of the story, and I've heard the family's side of the story, so I kind of have pieced together what I understand to be true, which is there's a lot of trauma in that family. I think that my mom's oldest sister, the oldest of the family, was born out of wedlock, which, of course, in that time was horrible, unheard of, and then my mom's dad was a drunk, which a lot of Finns drink a lot. But he was like sort of over the edge, which says a lot for Finnish people, and then they got divorced, so it was like this triple whammy on this family. And there's a lot of shame in Finnish culture. It's very--I would kind of talk about it almost like Japanese culture, that really kind of stoic Asian

culture where you have these certain rules that you abide by, and so if you're not within the box, it's really hard to kind of operate in that culture.

Green

So I think also my mom is kind of--she's very intellectual. She's always read a lot. She's someone who questions authority and questions things, and that just doesn't really fly with the culture. So I think that's the best way I've been able to kind of understand it. She just has always seen education as your key to anywhere.

Collings

Yes, because it seems unusual for a young woman in the seventies to go abroad by herself to study.

Green

Yes. And what's I think even more intriguing about this whole thing is Mormonism totally swept through all the Lapland, all the Nordic states or countries. So my mom--I don't know, would you say signed on--became a Mormon and essentially did kind of her mission to come to the States, connected with this family in Idaho and lived with this family. I just wonder what--she must have been so impressionable in some ways--came to live with this family, and actually the family that she lived with, they had been trying to get the daughter to meet my dad. So when the daughter and my dad met, my dad had already said, "Oh, I'm in love with this woman Lena ." And they were like, "That's our host daughter." So my mom was kind of kicked out at that point, and that was when she left the Mormon church. So she had this little stint with the Mormon church that kind of got her to this country.

Collings

I see.

Green

So whenever people--I mean, sadly in a lot of circles that I travel in, Mormons are pretty picked on, and my mom's always the first one to say, "Hush. They got me to this country. They gave me the key to this--."

Collings

Okay, so just kind of one more little question about the community. Do you remember anything about the discussion or the struggle or the controversy in terms of breaking down those gender roles that you were discussing? Because it seems unusual that a progressive community would have those to start with, so that's curious.

Green

Yes. This has actually always been my biggest complaint about the community, was one that women were--I mean, I say that they started to break down gender roles amongst the children, but women still were working alongside men in the

garden, but wearing rubber boots and skirts. And women had to have their hair long--

Collings

So there were--

Green

There were those gender roles.

Collings

--rules about dress?

Green

It's funny, because I was just a kid. You aren't aware of them. But there were things like, you know, my mom always kept my hair really short, because we were dirty kids around the farm all the time, and people were always sort of like, "Oh, how could you cut your daughter's hair? It should be long." So in some senses, like when I've seen these communities that have come out on the news recently, where there's these women dressed in these very kind of old--

Collings

Right, right the one in Texas.

Green

Yes. I'm totally startled at the fact that there are components of what I was raised in that had that, although I think it was kind of the older, kind of longer-term people, and as new people came to join, it was more progressive in that way. So I would say that's one complaint that I've had, and I've seen that kind of exist in a lot of the women that are my age now, in the way that they live their lives. And secondly, that there wasn't a service component. I mean, we had 300 people donating all of this time and building beautiful things, I mean, just the crafts and the commitment to the Earth, I mean, just amazing things happening, and all of it was just to sort of go back into the community. None of it left.

Collings

I see.

Green

And so I think I always kind of felt like, you know, what's the point of all this if we're not lifting other people around us up? I mean, there are a lot of poor--I mean, that area of Oregon is pretty poor, there are sections. And I think a lot of people just didn't have that--you know, they were kind of self-serving to me, it felt like.

Collings

Did you have any sense of where the other people were from geographically?

Green

All over, I mean, really all over the world. Lots of people came from England. These groups exist throughout--this idea, this concept of, they call it "the

work." Usually they tend to be kind of more like evening meetings that people go to that's not associated with a community like this, but the founder [A.L. Staveley] I think kind of had something to prove and so pulled together people from all over the world that she would invite to come and participate. I think a lot of people were really drawn to the actual piece of property and what had been created there, and maybe not necessarily subscribed to all of the stuff either, but kind of felt like there's this nice community that developed. And then some people got stuck and some people finally realized that they wanted to go back to having a regular life and left. So there was a lot of movement through, and so in terms of being a kid there, we got a lot of exposure to all sorts of people from all over the world.

Collings

Have you ever visited there? Do you ever go back?

Green

Yes. I think the last time was in college, so maybe eight years ago, ten years, gosh, yes, ten years ago. I've started to just kind of connect back with--I mean, in essence, the children that I grew up with are almost like family, so I have like there's one girlfriend who's here in L.A., and we've kind of connected. It's this weird--it's almost like this language that we speak that nobody else knows, and it's so strange. Even my partner, he's always sort of like, "Wow. When I see you interact with these people that you were raised on the farm with, like it's this piece of you that I don't know." It's almost like it's so formative to who I am, at the same time I kind of left it. There was a time I just decided I was moving on and that was it, so it's there, kind of.

Collings

Yes. Is there any sort of commonality in terms of the kinds of things that those people have done professionally?

Green

Yes. I would say there are these different kind of almost like classes. So my class of kids, maybe I'd be included in the class before and the class below, because there were only six kids in my age group, all of us have traveled extensively, and all of us have ended up in some sort of either--there's a lot of teachers, there's a lot of kind of agricultural type of work, and I would say most of the women have become kind of teachers, social-worker-type things, and then the men have done these agriculture kind of jobs.

Green

But then there's a subset of kids that just kind of never made it academically and so work, really blue-collar workers, I don't think by choice, because I think that they had bigger ideas for what they wanted to do, but I think academically so many people suffered and never really got the attention they needed, and so just ended up running a tree-trimming business or something.

Collings

Right. But also I can hear those gender roles, too, when you say the teacher and the social worker versus the manual labor.

Green

Yes, that's very true. Yes. And there was, I think, some crossover on either side, but very, very little.

Collings

And when people do leave, are they sort of considered to be like outcasts, or is it more like you graduate and now you're like a valued alumni?

Green

I think it varies. There was a huge like splintering. There was this huge moment that happened once when the founder died, and then there was sort of the power struggle that happened. This is all after we left, or after I left. But that occurred, and so I think after that, the people who stayed who sort of like, "Come back," and welcoming, so it was different. But I would say when my parents, like when my mom left and my dad was still participating, she was very much an outcast. But then over time, I think that they realized that that wasn't serving them. Part of having a community is being open. So that definitely existed, and I'm not sure to what extent that that exists now. I think now it's operating on a much smaller scale.

Green

But there is--you know, like a lot of the adults that I'll see from my childhood, because I still go home and see them every once in a while, there's this sort of, I would say maybe it's perceived kind of a judgment about, like, "So whatever did you do? What made you leave?" and kind of this interest and intrigue about, like, how has the farm impacted my life, and do I still think of it as a negative thing or as a positive thing.

Collings

Well, is it still possible to maintain an isolated community of that sort in the age of the Internet? I mean, how do they navigate that?

Green

You know, I don't know. I mean, not knowing what exists there now, I get the sense that it's become much more progressive. It's kind of become the hippies of the now, where people are sort of casting off the traditional whatever it is to go back to the Earth, so I think that that's kind of what more exists. My mom always jokes--there was a funeral recently, and she went, and everybody was driving really nice cars. And she said, "You know, gosh, back in the days, people drove these beaters. Nobody had any money. It was kind of like letting everything go in terms of what your regular life would be." So I'm sure--it sounds to me like it's kind of they found a different balance that exists, but back then, that was what I just found so astounding is, you know, our escape was

reading, and there was a lot of openness there, but nobody had television. I mean, I grew up with no TV, and nobody had a TV. People were very up to date on world news in that sense and really engaged in that in a progressive way, but it wasn't part of the dialogue that happened at the farm.

Collings

Where did you get the books that you would read?

Green

We had kind of a weekly trip with this old school bus that our kind of headmaster would drive us around in, and we'd drive up to Portland and go to the library, and we had complete, full access. My mom's always been a huge reader, and so we just read a lot. Then at the end of the day we were read to, so I had this like super--to me, books are this very emotional, romantic, wonderful way of connecting, both with other people, but also kind of connecting to this other world, because that was the big escape for all of us.

Collings

And what was the founder's name?

Green

I don't remember her first name. Mrs. Staveley. She was this older--we always thought she was British, actually just found out like last month that she was not British. She was married to a British guy, and she adopted this British accent. She was just very strange. And she, to me, she was the perfect example of what I thought was wrong with the community at a very young age, which was that people would almost kind of worship her, and I just felt like that wasn't right. You know, I kind of had this instinct about--and maybe it's because my nanny growing up was this Mennonite lady, and she was always sort of like the traditional Bible stories, is like, "Thou shall not worship false idols," or whatever it is. And I was like, "That's not right." So maybe I have sort of this fundamentals of sort of an Old Testament Christian beliefs or something, but for whatever reason, I felt like that wasn't--

Collings

Yes. So you lived outside of the community, but your mother had like a nanny or something for you?

Green

Yes. I think when my mom was working nights, she would drop us off sometimes after school, or someone would drop us off until she would come and pick us up or something. For a couple of months we had this connection to--there was a strong Mennonite community around there, so we had a connection to them.

Collings

Okay. So did you go to the Catholic school for high school as well?

Green

No, just seventh and eighth grade.

Collings

Okay. What did you do for high school?

Green

I went to a straight-up public school, thought I was going to--I don't know. I didn't think I was going to survive, and ended up totally finding my way and finding great friends and was a very traditional, typical high school kid.

Collings

A local high school?

Green

Yes. The communities around there are very typical small-town hyper--they're extremely Christian, primarily white communities, it's interesting. And then there's been kind of these immigrants that have come in. So at the time that I went, the exposure in terms of diversity--I mean, Oregon is not necessarily that diverse of a state, but my exposure to diverse communities was pretty limited. It was largely just because my family traveled a lot that we were able to--we'd leave and see other places.

Collings

Where would you go?

Green

Everywhere. My dad loved to just like get in the car and drive. That was his big thing. So we did a lot of trips to Canada and to Mexico and traveled through Europe quite a bit, just seeing family. And we did go as a family a couple of times to Finland and do those trips. Hawaii. You know, mostly kind of--I saw a lot of the United States. We'd go to big cities, because my mom loves big cities.

Collings

So as a physician, he was able to afford that kind of thing?

Green

Not really. My dad never really figured out the financial side of medicine, which I admire him for, because he's always had that service component. I think I got kind of a service element from him. But he did well enough that he was able to kind of pinch something together every once in a while, but most of our travel was pretty budget.

Collings

But the fact that you were able to go at all--

Green

But we were able to travel, yes.

Collings

Yes, that's not bad.

Green

No. I mean, now he's sixty-five and has no retirement and was never able to pay for our school, but I admire what he--he's always been someone who lives in the now.

Collings

Okay. So why did you leave the Catholic school and go to the public high school?

Green

I think that was always my parents' intention. I'm honestly not quite sure. I was really miserable there. I mean, I had no friends. It was this life of almost like a robot. Maybe my parents saw that, too, where it was almost like school was work, and then I would do my athletics and come home and study until ten and then school, so it was very regimented, which, in retrospect, I'm so grateful for. I really--it was the right decision, albeit kind of strange.

Collings

But you didn't question it the way you questioned the stuff that was going on in the community?

Green

Oh, that's interesting. Yes, so, I mean, my first year I was totally--I would go to classes where they would say, "Everyone that's a Catholic is going to heaven, and everybody else is going to hell," and everyone would kind of look at me and the one Jewish girl in my class and be like, "Oh, that's too bad." Yes, too bad for you. And we had to go to Mass, and we were not allowed to take the sacrament, so we'd be the only ones sitting in this huge cathedral, and we're just sitting in the audience while everyone's lining up. So there were a lot of those moments, and this was one thing my dad handled really well. So by my eighth grade I was like, "I really want to convert. This is like what I want to do." So my dad was like, "You know, if this is what you want to do, I will 100 percent support it, but I ask that you wait until you've left school, and you go to public school and then we'll--I'll drive you to your confirmation. I'll do whatever you want to do, and I'll totally support this decision." Well, of course, once I started high school, I was like, Catholic what? So I think he at least had enough insight to recognize that it was completely a peer pressure thing. But I remember leaving, like, "I'm going to become a nun. This is what I'm going to--."

Collings

So is that why they switched you, do you think?

Green

Maybe that was part of it. It was also really expensive, and I think that they finally saw that I was doing really well in school by the end, and I'm sure they felt kind of like, "Okay. She's going to be all right." I don't really think my parents ever thought many things that far ahead. Like my dad's living-in-the-

now thing kind of played out for us, too, so I'm sure he was like, "Okay. Mission accomplished, back to something else."

Collings

Did they ever talk to you and your sister and brother about what you might do when you grew up?

Green

Never. It's so funny, I was just telling a girlfriend this the other day. The message that I got as a kid was, no matter what we did, it would be great, and I think the more important thing to them was the type of person that we were. And so my dad used to say, "You can be a mechanic, but as long as you're the best mechanic and you're a good person, that's what's the most important thing." And I think a lot of that came from the fact that he was the first--he was the only physician in the family. He's the first physician in the family, and so my grandfather had this kind of like achievement thing that he really pushed, and I think my dad felt like pushing your kids to achieve was like an evil thing, like you shouldn't have those really high expectations, because it sets up the wrong precedent of parenting. So it was kind of like they never really encouraged us in any direction. If anything, I think he was really like, "Don't do something just to achieve something, like do it because you love it."

Collings

And what about your friends at high school, did they ever talk about what they might want to do or what they were interested in?

Green

No. You know, a lot of people have those conversations about, "When I grow up, I want to--." I always wanted to do service work. Like I think I always felt a calling to serving--like kind of like having a mission for other people; that was not necessarily like my own, you know, protecting my own. So I always knew I wanted to have a component of that, but I never really knew--and I totally had this idealistic idea which in a sense kind of carried me, but that I could achieve anything I wanted to. I just hadn't quite figured out what that was. So in some senses, my parents were able to instill that much.

Collings

And what about, like, college, like counselors at high school, did they--

Green

They were worthless. Yes, it was very--Mr. Farmer, he was this like waiting-to-retire guy who was kind of like, "You could enroll in this community college or this one. Which one do you want? Sign here," kind of a thing.

Collings

I see.

Green

So thankfully, a lot of the friends I had had parents who really pushed their kids, so I started doing tours of colleges with my friends and their parents, so I was able to kind of get that and get excited about that, and then found a local liberal arts college in the area that I was accepted to.

Collings

Which one was that?

Green

Willamette University. It's a small liberal arts. It's since kind of developing a name for itself, but a very small community, really sweet college. I was really lucky. I got a pretty good scholarship and so was able to afford it, and really it was close enough to home but far enough away, so I had that--wasn't totally escaping.

Collings

Did you ever think of Reed College at that time?

Green

You know, it's funny. We had a lot of people that went to Reed, but it's extremely competitive and academically, I don't know. I think I kind of felt like academically I wouldn't have been--rather than having had the parents that are like, "Apply everywhere. It doesn't matter." I was really sort of like, "Well, I don't want to apply here, because I might not get in." I think I might have been paying for my applications, too, so that might have factored in.

Collings

Yes. I was just wondering if the idea of it attracted you.

Green

The idea of it. Reed was out there. I remember when I was applying for undergrad really wanting to go to Berkeley, and my mom saying like, "Oh, Berkeley will be great for grad school, but for undergrad you need to go someplace that's kind of more supportive," or whatever. And there's probably something to that. I went to a school where it was like thirteen people in a class and very hand holding, and you knew your professors by their first name and where they lived and those kind of things, so there wasn't a whole lot of liberal--it wasn't like a Reed or a Berkeley in terms of promoting that kind of service idea or liberal ideas in that sense.

Collings

What was your major?

Green

I majored in Spanish, largely just by chance. I really wanted to study abroad, ended up going to Argentina and when I came back they said--I had been pursuing a biology major, and they said, "You are going to have to stay an extra semester to do a biology major." So I wanted to get out of there and so I was like, "What's the easiest way to finish this degree?" I remember thinking, like,

it's important to have a tool when you leave, because I had heard enough people who had graduated with, like, a philosophy major and felt like, great, I don't have, like, a tool that I can--so I thought, well, okay, Spanish, that's kind of a tool I'll be able to use in the future.

Collings

Why did you decided you wanted to go to Argentina?

Green

Why did I decide Argentina? I think it really came down--I wanted to learn how to speak Spanish. My dad speaks Spanish, and we had a lot of Spanish-speaking people in our community, actually a number of people from Colombia, and so I always felt really drawn to learn how to speak--

Collings

In the sort of communal community--

Green

In the farm.

Collings

--there were a lot of people from Colombia?

Green

Yes.

Collings

That's interesting.

Green

And two people I really admire that were just maybe in their early twenties when they came, so they were kind of that, like, ideal that I looked up to, and so I always wanted to speak another language. That was part of it, and then our study abroad program basically was like, "We don't have a program in Argentina, but if you, we'll pay, and you can just write it up and help establish this connection." So since I was paying I was like, "This sounds good. I'll go for free."

Collings

What did you do in Argentina?

Green

I studied, sort of. Mostly I just--I actually had traveled the summer before with a girlfriend throughout South America. We backpacked around for three months and had met quite a few friends and ended up meeting two people in Argentina that I ended up connecting with when I was down there, and so had a pretty quick social network. I lived with my family for the first couple of months, the host family, and then ended up moving in with this guy and this other girl and their two brothers, so kind of had a social network and mostly just was there to learn the language and travel around, and that's basically what

I did. I mean, it was all pass-fail, so I passed all my classes, but it was more about learning the language.

Collings

Yes, okay. So you came back and graduated, and what were you planning to do at that time?

Green

I was laughing at all of my friends who were taking the GRE. I don't know why now, in retrospect. My sister was living in Atlanta at the time, and my goal was to take a year off and waitress and live in Atlanta and see what the South had to offer.

Collings

Why the South? Just because your sister was there?

Green

Because my sister was there. I convinced her to move out there, and she said she would only do it if I spent a year after college, so I did and ended up moving out there, and lo and behold, getting tuberculosis because of all of my travels in South America, and so was really sick and couldn't work. But as chance would have it, when I first got there, I met this guy on the plane as we were landing who had just gotten an interview for an AmeriCorps Program and was like, "You should meet the director," and then ended up getting accepted to this AmeriCorps Program, but then getting sick and having to take so much time off that I couldn't complete it, so kind of patched together work until the following year. Then did AmeriCorps service for--I did one full year of service, and then I ended up connecting to another AmeriCorps Program in the area and running an AmeriCorps Program for two years. So I ended up kind of finding that service link, but I think I had thirteen jobs that first year when I was like trying--I was nannying and waitressing and working at a law firm and doing all these things and feeling very lost, like most twenty-two-year-olds do, I think, when they realize their B.A. isn't like the key that unlocks the door to everything.

Collings

What about your treatment? I mean, was that covered by health insurance or what?

Green

Oh, my god. That's actually one of the big reasons, I thought, I learned about public health. I had to do daily observed therapy, which means that they have to watch you take every dose that you take, because there's such a high--I guess in Atlanta, Atlanta has a really high tuberculosis rate. A number of the people are Laotian, and so they don't maybe understand the medications and why you should be consistent, and then there's a huge percentage of just sort of noncompliance in general in the community, and so they have a mandate on the

state level to do daily observed therapy. So for seven months, five days a week I was going in and getting my daily medication in front of this nurse, and because I didn't really fit the racial-ethnic-socioeconomic profile of a lot of the people who get tuberculosis in that community, I got to know the nurses really well on kind of a different level, and there wasn't a language barrier, because a lot of them were fresh immigrants from a Latin American country and barely spoke English , or Laotian, like I mentioned.

Green

And so I got to know my two nurses really well and then kind of asked them one day, like, "What do you do, and how did you get into this job?" So I thought the concept of public health sounded good, but I wasn't really sure exactly what that meant, and liked that they got to connect with so many people from different communities. I thought that was interesting. So maybe that was a window into how the whole public health thing--

Collings

Yes, and your mom being a nurse, your dad being a doctor.

Green

Yes. I definitely was drawn to the medical field. I mean, that was, I think, my biology thing. There was probably something like wanting to prove that I could do it, and realizing that medicine wasn't my path, although I did at periodic times during that sort of like, what am I doing with my life, twenty-two to twenty-three, did try to enroll and finish my biology degree, did try to get into medical school, because I was--

Collings

Oh, you were thinking of that.

Green

I was really strongly thinking that, and again, I think it might have been more of kind of an escape in the standpoint that all my friends that I'd gotten to know were friends of my sister's, who were all in medical school.

Collings

Oh, they were?

Green

So it was sort of this thing of, like, ooh, that would be nice to just pick a path that you work hard to get there, and then you just don't really think about it anymore. You just have to stay on this path. It's a very easy way out. So I probably had a couple of moments in my life where I'd sort of considered it, and my sister gave me very sound advice, which I still quote to this day, which is, "If you can't imagine yourself doing anything else but medicine, then you pick medicine. But if there's other things you can imagine yourself doing, then I don't think it's the path."

Collings

And she meant because it requires such a commitment?

Green

Yes. And I think she was starting to get disillusioned with--I mean, she loves the study of medicine, which is the way the medical system has developed and how--I think she, too, has this service component and just felt like, this isn't the way you serve people, by giving the medications. You need to go back to the root source of things. So I think she started to kind of get to that place in her career.

Collings

Okay. Well, let's hear a little bit more about the AmeriCorps work that you [unclear] while you were out in Atlanta.

Green

Okay. So I worked at--there was this hospital called the Inner Harbor Hospital. It's a psychiatric hospital for youth who have been severely either abused, sexually abused, or have severe mental retardation, and so they're an extremely difficult population. And then they had another subset that was kind of like just at-risk troubled youth. So I did my first three or four months in the main hospital, the psychiatric side, and then ended up getting sick, and so when I came back, they needed someone to start an after school program in the city for the more troubled youth as they were transitioning out. So I kind of had some exposure to the extreme mental-health thing and have developed this supreme appreciation for people who do it, because they're just a special type of person that can do it, and I don't think I have that skill.

Green

But then the after school program was interesting, because it was really--I mean, it was very stereotypical urban, predominantly African American youth, boys fourteen to seventeen who had usually had a single-parent family, and usually it was their grandmother that was raising them, or an auntie, and these kids just had no way out. They were completely--they totally fit the stereotype of what you see. They went to bad schools, they got a crappy education, they had no models of what their life could look like, and we were trying to instill in them some sort of service ethics that might help serve them. I think we spent most of the time going, "We're planting seeds, we're planting seeds, and maybe one day they'll get there." But I don't know. I think it kind of made me feel like the direct services are really hard. You can't just Band-aid or patch. You've got to get these kids way before they're seventeen and they've already committed their first petty crime. You've got to get them way earlier and go back to the source of what's going on.

Collings

And what kinds of other people were involved in AmeriCorps that you met? Where did they come from?

Green

They were mostly from the South, which I ended up living in Atlanta for five years, and I was pretty much constantly reminded that I wasn't from there, and partly because I was in these kind of subgroups of the community that were not as metropolitan. You know, parts of Atlanta are very metropolitan, and you could be anywhere in the United States. But then there are parts that extremely Southern. So when I was like in rural Georgia, doing lots of service work, the white community was very, like, "Ooh, you're not like us," and obviously there's this huge racial tension between African Americans and whites, and so I didn't fit in there either. So there was a lot of that tension that I didn't really realize that existed until I left, and it was just like this kind of heavy cloth on at all times.

Green

But, I mean, the whole concept of AmeriCorps is great in that you bring together a really diverse group of people and have them work together on something, which I had a lot of experience with from my past, so I could flow with that. But I definitely felt pretty disillusioned with how service projects were set up and kind of like, does it really help to go pick up trash in a community when you aren't going to the source of educating people about why they're littering to begin with, things like that. And in some ways, I think there are AmeriCorps Programs that are better designed than the one that I was participating in. It was three years old. It was very new.

Collings

Yes, okay. But you stayed with AmeriCorps for quite some time.

Green

Yes. I ended up going to run a program out of the Atlanta Outward Bound Center and got to do lots of outdoor stuff, which I loved, and mostly because I didn't really know what to do. Then I kind of made this plan that I was going to go to medical school, got this job, and I was going to take classes at night, and then realized I really didn't want to do that either. Around the time I started working fulltime managing this program, I met this woman who was in public health, and she was telling me about her job, and I was like, "That sounds pretty good. I think I'll do that." So then I knew I had like whatever, eighteen months to kind of get the schooling stuff sorted out before I could go, so then I basically just kind of kept the job because I enjoyed it, until I knew that I would get into school.

Collings

And where did you go to school?

Green

So I went to Emory for Public Health School and continued to work at my Outward Bound job at the same time, and so stayed with that and finished in 2005.

Collings

And what were you planning to do with your degree at that time?

Green

I was really drawn to sort of environmental work, but it was kind of that the environmental programming there is not as strong. I mean, CDC [Center For Disease Control], the American Lung Association, and the Care Project have a huge impact on Emory, and so they're really into like very traditional public health work, so it was really hard for me to kind of find a path there. There weren't a lot of models of things that were different. I did find my thesis advisor, who was completely fringy, which I loved. Everybody hated him, and I loved him. I mean, he would just have these off-the-wall wacky ideas about where diseases came from, and I just thought he was great. So he kind of helped me kind of get a window into--there's a lot of other ways to do this. I mean, I think Emory is really great in giving the fundamentals of public health. Like my research methods are really strong, a lot of those things that typical kind of more environmental-health programs you don't get, because they focus so much on these other causational ideas. But because so much of the science of public health is about epidemiology, and epidemiology doesn't really serve environmental exposure and this whole concept of cumulative impacts and all of that, I really wasn't able to find my way.

Green

So when I left, or when I started looking for jobs I really thought, I just want a job that will help me continue to practice the skills that I've learned, in terms of research methods and epi and biostats and all of these things, and I was like really open to what would come my way.

Collings

So with the AmeriCorps stuff it was really more social work in a sense, and focusing on the environmental research methods happened at the graduate school level, it sounds like.

Green

Yes, yes. And I feel like, I mean, when I look back, and people have said, "Oh, how did you find--?" you know, people who are Public Health School now, I just feel personally that I've been totally guided to here, because none of this would have happened if I'd tried to plan it. I mean, now when I tell the story, and I've had it in various moments of my life, like people have said, "Oh, how did you find public health?" And when I kind of figure out how I got here, I think, I don't know. I met a girl at a swimming pool once who told me what her

job was, and I said, "That's sounds interesting," and it just kind of ended up happening that way.

Collings

Who was the girl at the swimming pool?

Green

She worked for the CDC. She was just a friend of a friend, and we were out at a friend's pool on a Saturday afternoon hanging out, and she was talking about her job, and I said, "What is it that you do?" Now I think about CDC jobs and I'm not remotely interested, but it was at least a window into the idea of prevention.

Collings

Right. Okay.

[End of interview]

1.2. Session 2 (November 14, 2008)

Collings

It's November 14 [2008], Jane Collings interviewing Elina Green in her office in Long Beach. We were going to just kind of like pick back up a little bit. You said that you had seen a program on CNN about Jonestown, and it made you think again about some of the--

Green

Communal living experiences. Well, actually it was even further back, which is I just connected with a girlfriend that moved to L.A. that I grew up with, and we haven't seen each other in fifteen years, but instantly there is that connection, and so we started talking and we went right there to what the community was all about. So then I just Googled it, because I thought, you know, I've never even looked to see if there's any reference to it, and they have just a description of what their mission is and kind of what they're all about. I was telling her, because when we were kids, I had probably mentioned before, the whole spiritual component of it or the religious, whatever the spiritual basis of it all was, you know, we were kids. We never really were exposed to much of that. I'm sure there was some of it sort of infused in what we were doing, but it wasn't really the purpose of it all.

Green

So now as an adult and kind of reflecting on it, I was reading it, and I thought, I've explored a lot of different sort of spiritual paths and those kinds of things, but it doesn't make any sense to me. I told her it was like reading, it was almost like reading Old English, like the way that they describe the spiritual work, and I was like, "I didn't even understand what they were trying to get across." So I just think it's so interesting how, I mean, of course, there's probably some of

that that's probably engrained in me that I'm not even aware of that I learned, some spiritual component of it, but I don't know. I still think it's crazy.

Collings

But as you were saying, you lived out--you didn't live on the grounds, and your mother was always a little bit--

Green

Separated.

Collings

--separated from it.

Green

Yes. I mean, she was talking, the woman that I connected with was talking about her experience, because her dad was one of the founders, but then was ousted.

Collings

Oh, interesting.

Green

And so she had a really different experience, and then her mom kind of came onboard, and then her parents split, really because of that, you know. Once her dad was ousted, of course, like how could you keep the family together, and so she has a really different perspective of the good and the bad in that they were in the highlight of it, and then they were also in sort of the worst of it. So it's just really--I just think any community that you try to bring together like that, I mean, everyone is impacted in such a different way. But I would say there is one common theme, which is that the sort of like--I mean, she just picked up and moved to L.A. to become an actress, which I know a lot of people do, but she had a steady, solid thing going. I think there's that sort of willingness to explore and expand that kind of comes from that upbringing, and also just there's definitely an arts and craft kind of thing that comes from that that's really evident.

Green

And actually, on the website when I was looking, I mean, they talk about all the different sort of ways that they live off the land in a way that's very old-fashioned and I think still quite beautiful, in terms of being an organic farm and being very sustainable and things that I think now it's kind of in vogue to get back into, and we were raised just sort of, you know, you always make everything from scratch, and from scratch meant something entirely different than not using a brownie mix, but actually it's very--and so I think that there is that connection that we probably all still maintain.

Collings

Well, I'm just sort of guessing that perhaps for your mother, being from Finland, the idea of not living in a consumer society would be something that was more of a given for her, and it wouldn't necessarily be a lifestyle.

Green

Right. Yes, and I think also coming from--I mean, Finnish life is very simple, and there is that kind of sense. It's like the whole environmental-green movement, it's like just how they life their life there, so it's very different, that's true. I also think that her, having grown up really poor, that whole consumer lifestyle never really kind of caught on in her, in her mindset.

Collings

Right. Well, did you ever get a sense that she found a lot of discussion about this lifestyle to be unnecessary?

Green

You know, I think the way that she's articulated it to me is that the one thing my parents definitely both are is like spiritual seekers. I kind of call them spiritual junkies. They'll move from one thing to the next, and I appreciate that about them, because I think that they're willing to be open and explore different paths. And so I think that for her it was more about the spiritual, I think, because she was interested in the spiritual thing, and then she said after about a year, she noticed that people were sort of repeating the same things they had repeated the prior year, and she was kind of like, "When do we get to the meat of this?" And then that was when she left. So I think she always loved the lifestyle things. I mean, I'm sure the general-rule stuff played--I've never actually talked to her about that. That's my next homework, is to kind of reflect on that.

Collings

All right. You said that you thought that the upbringing encouraged people to sort of expand and try new things. Why do you think that is?

Green

There definitely was this sort of--I mean, a lot of the activities that we did were very--I mean, we roamed a farm of thirty-five acres, and we had our own things to do, and we did just--I mean, now when I think about what parents are worried about, I mean, we never wore sunscreen. You know, all the things that parents are completely freaked out about, those weren't even remotely something. We were jumping in silos and playing with cows and sheep and doing all those different things, so I think that there was just this initial sort of childhood thing that was very sparked and encouraged and that a lot of us have kind of maintained.

Collings

That's interesting.

Green

But it's played out in different ways, because I think some people, the vast majority of the kids my age sort of stayed close by, and they expressed that in different ways. Like, I mean, a lot of them got married really young and had lots of kids and have these like great, crazy kids that are doing amazing things, so I think it's more in the way that they've raised their children, and others have just done a lot of traveling or whatever, that kind of thing. But generally, there aren't--I always say that there aren't that many of us that actually, like, truly escaped from the standpoint of like really leaving-leaving, and so that's why I'm always interested in like this friend of mine that just up and decided one day, she's like, "I'm going to be an actress," and moved, you know? And she had a steady job, and her family was there, and she was settled in, and just kind of that willingness to uproot.

Collings

So do you think that you and perhaps other people who have completely left, do you think of yourselves as survivors of the experience?

Green

I think in some way, I mean, more from the standpoint of that, like, I feel personally that I was able to take all the really incredibly good things about it and leave the bad behind, and be able to like integrate the good into my life and move forward. So I've seen that happen with a couple of, I would say like a couple of kids every class, and maybe that's my judgment, to say that those that haven't left didn't "survive," quote, unquote. Maybe they like what they've been able to continue, but from my perspective, it seems like they're in the cycle of--one thing, there's kind of a cycle of poverty that's established, I think, when you choose to not really get a college degree and move on, and have kids young. I mean, you're accepting sort of an understanding that you're going to be working low-wage jobs and those kinds of things. And so when I think about sort of success, it's not that it's about--I mean, [unclear]. It's not that it's about finances, but it's about, like, being able to contribute in a way that, you know, if you're stuck in this kind of poverty cycle, that you can't. You know, being able to buy a home and pay for your kids' college, just those basic things where in that way there's a lot of folks that kind of just stayed close by and are still living in this very small town and never got a college degree, and still kind of working the same sort of manual-labor jobs that don't pay enough to probably put their kids through college.

Collings

Do they have any ties to the local city government?

Green

None, none. I mean, a couple of the guys in my sister's class are firefighters, so in that sense. But, I mean, we're talking about a town of 500, so it's not like being a firefighter is really that--

Collings

So they don't get involved in--

Green

Politics.

Collings

--like zoning with regard to--

Green

Nothing.

Collings

--you know, plumbing, anything at all--

Green

Nothing.

Collings

--even of the most practical nature.

Green

Nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing. I mean, I think a lot of them--I mean, again, I don't keep in touch with everyone, but I mean, those that I know, they're just sort of like living their quiet lives in this quiet town kind of a thing. And there area couple who, like I say, have--strangely, a lot of them have ended up in California, have just completely blasted through and gone on and done different things with their lives. But there's this quiet--it's interesting, because there's this understanding when we run into each other--I mean, my boyfriend was watching me interact with this woman who I haven't seen in fifteen years, and he was like, "It's almost like she's your sister or something." We do--there's this weird just really strong bond that's established just from having been raised in such a strange but yet similar experience, the two of us.

Collings

I mean, sometimes when people have shared a really bad experience, they--

Green

They have that bond.

Collings

--have that bond, and other times it just has to do with just the intimacy of having spent a lot of time together.

Green

I think it would be both. But it's interesting, because I was talking to her about the gender-role stuff, and you know, like I was telling her how, "Don't you remember everybody had really long hair?" And I remember this being a problem, because there was a lice outbreak and all these women, all these girls had really long hair. So my mom, of course, kept our hair really short and was like, "This is ridiculous. Like if you have thirty girls wandering around with hair down their backs and a lice outbreak, you've got to cut their hair." And the

women were like, "No. Whatever we do, we've got to save their hair." It's like this really important thing. And my mom was like, "Whatever. Here's your Rit." Everybody else was doing like lavender and whatever. She's like, "We're getting rid of this," you know, cut my hair off and that was it, we're done. And she was like, "Really? I just thought we had long hair because we liked it." And I was like, "Oh, maybe that's--." So this just showed that everybody takes a different--I was under the impression that they were sort of forced to keep their hair long, because maybe that was how my mom explained it to me. I don't know. So it's really, I think, an interesting--you know, we take away different things from it.

Green

And I think her sort of negative experiences mostly had to do with the fact of her family dynamic, and whether that's really because of the community or not, it's hard to say. It's hard to separate. So I feel like we went through it and we came through the other end, and she's like, "Oh, yeah, it was a great experience. Anyway, moving on to the next." She's kind of got this different perspective.

Collings

Now, how is the land managed? I mean, who actually owns the land?

Green

That's a little confusing to me. What I know is there was a man who was kind of part of the inner circle in the beginning, who I think they made a lot of money in oil. Yes, I think it was like oil in Alaska or something, and basically he just was completely loaded and was like, "Here," you know, bought this piece of property. We all had to pay, I mean, minimal amounts. I think everybody paid $50 a month to send their kids to the school, which was literally just for pencils and supplies or whatever. And then everybody had to work on Sundays, all day, so that was, I think, some payment that we did. So other people did more work. So I think it was kind of that combination of sort of the in-kind support and then the land was bought outright, so then everything else was just supported by little financial things here and there.

Collings

I see.

Green

And I think like the people who lived there probably paid some rent of some sort. But it's interesting. A lot of the people who were part of it were these trust-fund kids, so they were these adults who had grown up and never worked a day in their life, and so then the whole concept of "the work," as I have now learned through looking at this website, is like coming in touch with your spiritual self by doing physical work. So I was kind of reflecting on that, like isn't that interesting that these trust-fund kids, who never would have to work a

day in their lives ever again, chose to come to this farm to, like, learn their spiritual life through the concept of manual labor.

Collings

Yes, I was wondering about that when you talk about the cycle of poverty, because I was wondering if perhaps there was other money flowing through as well.

Green

Yes. I think there were these two levels. There were the people who just never had to work and would never have had to work anyway, but kind of maintained--like I said, everybody drove really ratty cars. I mean, everyone maintained this very sort of quiet existence. But then there were other people, I think, really, like I just could never really figure out. I mean, there are still girls, women my age who I went to the farm with, and like they just can't quite get it together. And I always am kind of surprised, like, you know, one of my really good friends is a nurse, and nursing is a great line of work, and you can make a decent living, and she just can't quite get it together. I don't know if it's just that--that's what I've kind of noticed, is this sort of cycle of poverty that happens, where maybe that's my insight about, you know, "I'm never going to be able to buy a house because my parents didn't own a house," those kind of things. And we're talking a small town. It's not like trying to buy a house in California. It's a small, very small town, a very inexpensive existence, so it's interesting. And that's, again, my perspective on maybe what I felt like we had to try to get out of or whatever. I don't know.

Collings

Now, like once kids started to become teenagers and stuff, how was like stuff like dating handled?

Green

Terribly. That's actually, I think, the most--I think that may be where some trauma is, where, well, because I left when I was twelve and then went to Catholic school, and actually it was an all-girls' school, but we had incredible sex ed and all of that, and we did when we were kids have a--what was she like, an au pair or whatever, do sex education with us, and it was taught in this very biology, very comprehensive manner. But in terms of sort of the inter-dynamics of--you know, my class there were four boys and three girls, and those four boys were like my brothers, so there wasn't any sort of like interest in--it wasn't like the environment fostered that, so that it was more that it was like later when the shock came of being in public school and you're like, oh, wow, wait a minute. All right, this is kind of like what I know happens, but--but so there was that kind of component of just being an adolescent, which I think in some capacity is probably traumatic for everyone in some way or another, because

like how do you maneuver your way through, how do you deal with the hormones, how do you interact with the opposite sex, all of that stuff.

Green

But then that gender stuff, you know, I remember one of my girlfriends giving me like little Mary Kay cosmetic lipsticks and bringing them to school and being like, "I'm pretty," you know, and then being like, "We don't wear makeup here," and taking them away. And my parents didn't care. I mean, they were like, "Do whatever you want." So there were definitely those--that's where I think the gender stuff came through, like this concept, and so I really responded that way. I became this very super-tomboy. It wasn't until college that I started like even kind of accepting the more girly sides of myself, and I had this fabulous college roommate, who was like as girly as they come and kind of was like, "This is what you do. You get your nails done. You get your--," you know, this whole thing, so I kind of was able--that's the survival piece, I think. I was able to--so now I feel very balanced. Like I have this sort of burly, mountain-woman side of me that's my whole upbringing, and then I was able to kind of accept the other piece, and I was lucky enough to kind of interact with people that way.

Green

But, yes, I mean, the dating thing, I mean, I think in some ways they did address it. It wasn't like they didn't address it, but it wasn't from parents, it was from the community. So you might have someone else's parent telling you something, and their concept of that might be very different than what your parents are telling you at home, so how do you manage that? And yet, I think it's probably hard enough for parents alone to just have those conversations with their kids, and then to have like four or five other parents telling you something totally different, that was very weird.

Collings

Yes. And when the kids did get married, I mean, would they marry people from outside the community, I assume?

Green

Yes, sometimes, and sometimes not. I mean, I would say actually mostly outside. But it's interesting, because even to this day, the weddings are really kind of almost like if you'd watch an old-timey movie, where it's like the whole community comes out to the wedding. It's just an open invitation. Like when somebody in the farm has a wedding, you can go. I mean, I was home recently, and they were like, "So-and-so is getting married." I was like, "I wasn't invited," and they were like, "You just show up." So I think that and having as a child, which I think I talked about last time, just I think that children have so much insight that adults don't give them credit for, and so as a child, having seen so many marriages break up, we knew what was going on. I mean, we

were like, "Wait. You guys were married, and now you guys are married?" We're like, "That's strange." So this whole concept of marriage has really changed for me. It's kind of been degraded, and so I'm like anti-wedding, anti-all of that, and so I definitely think that that's a product.

Collings

So most of the adults were divorced and remarried and so on, in the community?

Green

Yes, weird. Yes. And I actually wonder if that's part of, like, the kids that did okay. I mean, despite the fact that my parents later got divorced, I don't think it was really because of the farm. It was because of incompatibility on their part. I mean, they stuck it out for twenty-one years. I give them credit for the time that they did. But a lot of people there would get married, have a couple of kids, get divorced, marry somebody else, have a couple of kids--

Collings

Somebody else from the community?

Green

Somebody else from the community. And so I think that's very confusing for children, like, "Wait. You're my cousin, but you're also my half--," you know? And I don't know if that's just typical of--that's what I see. That's like a really common theme that I see through a lot of communities is that kind of like the struggle for power and the unwillingness to kind of look outside what your community is, and so then you end up sort of naturally reaching for someone. If you connect with them on some way, then you're like, "Oh, we understand this piece that we're experiencing," and then you go for that, and it's like how tired and old is this and cliched is this theme.

Collings

Yes. It almost sounds like kind of an extended sort of liberal arts college experience, you know, where--

Green

Yes. It's so strange. And this woman that I've reconnected with was saying that every time she sees, because she goes home, and her aunt still participates, like half of her family is really active still, and she was saying that when she connects with them that all the adults are really intrigued, like, "What are you doing now with your life?" I think they kind of want to feel like, "We did it right, we raised good kids," or whatever. And she's always like, "Anything I did wasn't because of you guys, like, I did this on my own."

Collings

Now, did they have any prohibitions against watching TV?

Green

Yes. TV was completely prohibited.

Collings

I see.

Green

And I don't think it was because about information. It was kind of a cultural decision. I mean, we had complete access to books. I mean, books were like, reading was encouraged, and we were read to every day at school at the end of the day. We had a reading hour in the middle of the day that we did, so reading was very much encouraged. I remember we had this huge collection of National Geographic, like from 1900 to 1970 that we had access to, so it wasn't about information. And we would go to movies, but it was sort of like this concept of like, "TV is bad for your brain," so, yes, that was a big part of it.

Collings

So nobody owned a TV at all?

Green

Some people did, but not very--if they did, they definitely didn't admit it.

Collings

Okay. What about radio, were you allowed to listen to the radio?

Green

Yes. In fact, our headmaster always had NPR on in the morning, so I have this very, like, nostalgic--I listen to NPR every morning, and I have this really sweet connection to it because of that.

Collings

What about local popular stations and that kind of thing?

Green

No, music, I don't know how music was really approached. It wasn't really a part of our lives. I mean, it was a part of my life, because we had my mom's nieces and nephews, who were teenagers, coming to live with us, but it wasn't really, I would say, neither here nor there. It was just sort of--

Collings

So kids weren't kind of like getting into the latest rock bands or anything like that?

Green

No. We were all really into--I guess now I would say like we would be into Harry Potter or something. You know, we were all into kind of like nerdy stuff or outdoorsy stuff and sports and things like that.

Collings

How are they handling the Internet now, do you have any idea?

Green

No, I have no idea. That's why I was so intrigued to see that they have a website.

Collings

Right.

Green

And actually, this woman that I've reconnected with, her dad, who was ousted many years ago, has been kind of mentoring the next phase of young adults that are there. There's a new group of adults there in their early twenties. But I was like, "Well, that doesn't make sense, because they go to the farm and they connect with this man who's sort of been ousted." And she was like, "I just think the whole thing's creepy." So it's interesting to me that there's still a hunger in society for kind of that kind of connection with people and with the land and whatever, but I have a feeling that it's more kind of in vogue now, where it's this green revolution that's happened.

Collings

Right, yes.

Green

And so who knows what it's become? I'm sure it's something entirely different than--we were there in the heyday of it all, you know. It's much smaller and it's, I mean, some of the same old guys still wandering around there, but I'm sure they've--

Collings

And the original founder has died?

Green

She died, yes. I think she died, like, when I was twelve or thirteen, and that was really the time that things started to kind of crumble. That power struggle was--I imagine. I mean, I wasn't kind of aware of it, but I imagine that there was a really big power struggle, which happens in every--it's just amazing, happens in every community.

Collings

Yes, it is. It's a fascinating upbringing, really.

Green

Yes. Yes. But I do think a lot of that is kind of--like my mom really encouraging us to develop our voice and to try to speak to power in that way, and really being discouraged to speak to power has been kind of a big theme for me, and especially in things like policy work, where so much of what you're doing is confronting these big powers that be, and if you're remotely--I mean, it's so like if you show any fear, they'll go for the jugular. You have to find that space to be like so strong and so sure of yourself that I definitely think that that's been something that I kind of worked on as a kid and then didn't work on for a while, and it's been reemerging in the work now, I think. That's something that I really see a lot of.

Collings

Yes. Oh, that's so interesting, to see how that upbringing has influenced your current work.

Green

Yes.

Collings

Okay, why don't we skip ahead to you were finishing up your graduate work, and you were thinking about the kinds of jobs you might want to do. At one point, you were thinking about Centers for Disease Control.

Green

Yes. Then I got smart and realized that they don't really do anything I'm that interested in. I guess that's like any government job, you know. You're constrained. Yes, I think I always wanted to do--I mean, my dad's really been a model in one way, in that he's very willing to sort of challenge the status quo in a way that's quiet and scientifically driven and very effective, but also kind of frustrating, because you see like you move an inch in a lifetime, you know. But I think the thing that I've seen in him is this power thing, like his unwillingness to really stand up and be center stage. You know, he gets a lot of requests for like, "Oh, come and speak at this or that, or this or that really important thing." And he's sort of like, "No, I'll write a letter." So I think that that's been kind of my--I knew I wanted to do something a little bit, but not really like--I don't mean it from the ego standpoint anymore, from kind of like helping motivate a larger-sounding voice against whatever it is or for whatever it is that we're promoting.

Green

And I've always been really interested just in--I think kind of my growing up around nature and just kind of being able to appreciate that and have that--I've always been interested in environmental work because of that. But I had no idea how to connect that to public health.

Collings

Right, exactly, exactly.

Green

I was like, how do you make this possible?

Collings

Okay. So let's about sort of the waning days of your public health education experience and what kinds of things you were thinking that you might get into once you graduated.

Green

Yes. So I really struggled with just in general the public health degree. I mean, I was lucky that I got into a school that has a really high caliber of just basic sciences that are the public health sciences. But really, I think a lot of times those more upper-echelon universities, the professors are more focused on

getting grants and doing research and doing their stuff, and so they're sort of like, "Student who?" So I did find a mentor there who I really kind of walked in and I said--I was in my third or my second year, and I said something like, "I think this whole program is a bunch of bull. I don't think anything here--I think that what we were learning in terms of the fundamentals is great, but kind of like aren't you supposed to be creating leaders?" And he was sort of like, "Well, okay, if you think this is bull, then come work with me."

Green

And he was, of course, like the one--he happened to be the chair of our department, but he was not very well liked, because he was kind of a stodgy old guy, but he's also brilliant and talented [unclear], so it wouldn't be, sort of fit in with that whole thing. He helped me establish my thesis and, of course, this is so my personality, that thesis that I chose, like they weren't going to approve it, because it was such a different style. They'd always done this sort of like, "We always have students do this type of thesis," and I was always like, "Well, research for the sake of doing research doesn't make sense to me. I'd rather do something that's more meaningful and has a contribution."

Green

So I ended up working with him and battling my way through the system, and actually it was great, because with his help ended up changing the way in which students can do their theses now, which is that you can design them in more different--I mean, without getting into too much detail, rather than just getting a dataset, doing some statistical analyses and writing that up, which to me is completely meaningless, you can actually do qualitative research studies. You can do needs assessments and different types of work, and it was me and another girl in school that we really fought to have that be the case, because it just seemed so silly, the whole thing.

Collings

So previously, these were studies that contributed to the body of existing research, sort of contributions to knowledge, whereas you were more interested in working with a particular community?

Green

Yes, well, even the vast majority didn't even contribute to the body of research. I mean, there would be a professor who maybe gathered data on some issue and had this dataset, and a student would beg and plead and say, "Can I get a subset of that data, ask a research question, do analysis and then write it up?"

Collings

I see.

Green

And to me it seemed like a violation of what the intention of the data collection was about, and it also seemed like research for the sake of doing research and

not really a meaningful thing. The vast majority of students didn't publish, so it was just kind of like, yes, check that box. Not to say you don't learn something, but that's only one piece of what public health is about. So what I did was I did an analysis of all the literature on secondhand smoke and the connection that's been made, and it wasn't that popular at first, but then basically what I was doing was, you know, there's been all this research that's been done on the connection between secondhand smoke and heart attacks. But although a lot of what environmental health is about and the science is about, it's really hard to prove causality. You know that if you take a pill and it makes you sick, you can connect it to that pill. If it's something longer term and chronic, then it's harder to make that connection.

Green

So I looked at the connection between those two things and how we, as public health professionals and researchers, can strengthen our arguments, because what I was finding is that a lot of the research would be done on, like, seven participants. And so as much as we're not looking at causality, if you have seven participants studied about, "Okay, we had seven participants sit in a smoke chamber and three of them got heart attacks," well, then there's a whatever x chance of getting a heart attack. Well, that's really bad research. So I had a whole analysis, and I had some that were really well done, but the body was very small of those that were really well done, and, like, 85 or 90 percent of them were really poorly designed studies.

Green

And so it was this whole concept of like if you make politics drive your science, because everyone wanted so badly to prove that secondhand smoke was bad, because we don't want people smoking, it's bad for your health, but if you let politics drive your science, then what happens if one day it gets co-opted for the other side, which happens in our work now. So I had a lot of professors who were really upset and angry about my choice, because they were thinking, "This is completely degrading what we as public health practitioners are all about." And I'm sort of like, "No, the point is that for me to say that I don't think we should try to look at this as an issue, I think it's important. I don't want to be in a room where there is cigarette smoke either. But I think we need to make sure that when we're doing our science, it's clear." But I ended up getting an award for it.

Collings

What was the award for?

Green

Advancement in scientific achievement. So the irony came out, but it was not without a big battle.

Collings

So the battle was over the fact that--

Green

The topic.

Collings

--the topic could have been used by the tobacco companies to show, if, in fact, the data showed that it was not harmful.

Green

Right. And I didn't publish. I mean, the intention was--I mean, what I learned from that was how to analyze science to challenge its--I mean, I read, I don't know, four or five hundred articles, which I wanted to learn how to read scientific articles, and I did--how to, kind of the political side of doing public health work and specifically around environmental health. So a lot of times I read the science that we do now on air-pollution exposure with a level of--I'm sort of like, "How credible is this?" And I've been so impressed at the quality of the work that comes out of USC and UCLA, which is the basis of a lot of our policy work, in that they have recognized that if you do a study that's based on seven participants and their exposure once, you can't say anything about that. So they've done these prospective studies for fourteen years. They have 1500 kids from ten communities. They have all of this expansive--so to me, I'm like, that's the point, right. That was the point I was trying to make.

Green

But it was definitely a battle. I don't know what it is about me that I always try to pick these, like to prove the point that I should do it some way. I mean, it ultimately ended up being a good experience, but it was--talk about speaking to power and finding your voice. It was definitely a challenge for me, especially being a student where--

Collings

Right, absolutely.

Green

I had the dean at first not happy, and then I had a meeting with him and the chair of my department, and they were both really supportive of my work, and they were like, "We totally agree with it." And then he ended up participating in the review process for my award, so it was a good experience, but it was pretty painful throughout the whole thing. So anyway, that was, I think, kind of where the foundation for this idea about environmental stuff, but I hadn't really figured that out, and I was just kind of, frankly, I was just applying for anything. At the end of it all, I was so exhausted I thought, I just want a job. I just want a job that pays. And then the second I would kind of interview for something, I would think, there's no way I can do that, you know, a public health department somewhere, doing I don't know, whatever, sexual health

education. I thought, okay, that's important, but I'm not going to be happy doing that.

Green

The way it ended up just playing out, I mean, I was only applying for jobs on the East Coast. I wanted to live in New York or D.C. I knew I wanted to be in a big city and potentially kind of work up and get--I felt like that climate would be a good place to be, and then applied for this one job in California in this one little organization, and it was here. I came here and everything felt so right and so lined up.

Collings

Why did you think you wanted to live in a big city?

Green

I don't know. I've always really liked big--it's probably just the complete opposite of what I was raised in. I definitely like the exchange of ideas. I really like a diverse community, that's really important to me, and I sold my car, so I had no car, and I thought, I'm going to move to a big city, and I'm not going to have to have a car, kind of that commitment on my own personal level. And then, of course, I got a job in L.A., the one state where you can't not have a car. Yes, I did a study abroad in Buenos Aires, Argentina. I think I kind of got that love for being just around lots and lots of people. I mean, that's a city of 14 million, and you're crowded and it's interesting and it's gritty, and it's kind of the beauties and the uglies of everything all at once.

Collings

Yes. Now, was that part of your graduate work when you did that study abroad?

Green

No, that was undergrad.

Collings

Oh, that was the undergrad, okay, yes.

Green

Yes. So I definitely was clear I wanted to be around lots of people, and I just also felt like public health will be way more interesting if it's diverse communities and lots of different things. I think that kind of the social determinants of health to me was always interesting. I didn't have a way to articulate now what I understand to be the social determinants of health, but I thought, you know, if you're in some rural, predominantly white town, what can you really say about whatever work you're doing? Not that it's not--

Collings

Yes. Well, it sounds like you wanted to do some of the work that maybe perhaps your parents had talked about, which was more preventative.

Green

Definitely. Definitely. And I think my own experience of being raised where we grew our own food, and we ate very healthy, and we exercised, it was just part of our lives, just all of the concepts of health were a given, and there are things now that we struggle with in public health like kids watch too much TV and play video games. I mean, those weren't even in my paradigm. Kids are not learning to read in time, and we were reading. That's all we did was read. So all of these things that were kind of given for me that I thought, oh, wow, that's such a--I am so blessed to have had that, and so to kind of understand what's heading kids in that direction now, and realizing that it's all these other components of violence in neighborhoods and parents working two jobs in poverty, and all the social determinants of health that really contribute to that, and it's more prevalent, or it's more obvious, I think, in big cities, and you sort of get to see the mix of that in all the different races.

Collings

Yes. So when you came out to interview for this job, what was it that felt so right?

Green

A couple of things. One was the really strong--I have to back up. When I was in Atlanta right before moving to Boston, I took--this might sound crazy, but I took this course with my sister, kind of like a personal-development course, but the facilitator was just this really dynamic, interesting woman. She wasn't a psychic, but she's like kind of an intuitive, and we spent three solid days with her and got to know her really well. At the end she was like, "If you ever want to do a session, I'm always open to doing a session." So I did a session with her, kind of like, "I need some direction about where I'm going, because I realized there's this thing in me, which is that I don't really plan." I mean, I plan in the sense of I start to kind of formulate what it is, and I'm an organized person. I'll start to apply for jobs and do that kind of thing, but it's not like I've ever been like, "I'm going to do this," and I do whatever it takes to get there. It's kind of like I'll kind of go with the wind a little bit.

Green

And so I thought maybe she could give me some direction, and she told me that, she's like--I said, "I'm going to apply on the East Coast," and she said, "No, you'll be on the West Coast." And she said, "You'll be part of a movement, but you won't be the leader. You'll be helping other people find their leadership abilities." And so when I got here, I kind of always had that in the back of my mind, I guess, and when I got here I was like, "Wow, I'm on the West Coast. That's so strange." And then my interview was nine solid hours, with all the different collaboratives that we've made, and part of my interview was an hour and a half with two of the community leaders, all in Spanish. I remember being exhausted through the whole thing. They were just talking

about how the program had changed their lives, and how through the past project managers' sort of mentoring, they'd been able to kind of find their voice and had been testifying in front of boards, and I thought, "Oh, my gosh. This is it. There's no question."

Green

I mean, it was completely not remotely in my paradigm to move to L.A. My partner was living in Boston, and I was just on and on. So I accepted it on the spot. I mean, it was just kind of this gut feeling.

Collings

Wow.

Green

And Long Beach is exactly that--it's a big city but it's kind of small town, and it's extremely diverse, and it's got some incredible things going on in terms of the school system's amazing, but they have all this poverty, and so it's the perfect example of all these different ideas of what we'd kind of seen in public health, and then the ports and all the things that were challenged by that. And then my exposure-assessment interest, like that whole concept of environmental health and the science, and I loved everything that the director was saying, "You know, we always do everything based on science. We're not going to be crossing a line unless we know that there's been a scientific study that has demonstrated something is happening." So yes, it was kind of just the gut, I guess.

Collings

Yes. Okay, so why don't you just sort of sketch out what the organization does, from your perspective and your role within it?

Green

Sure. So we have direct-services components, which is to provide community health worker services for families of children with severe asthma, and I think that was what we were initially--and then asthma classes for the community, and that was what we started out doing, but realized really quickly that you can't just educate one on one to get your way out of this problem. So then we started to expand. We did physician trainings, because we're finding a lot of times that it's the providers of these families also who are not managing the asthma correctly, and so there's a need to help them understand, "These are the asthma guidelines that are established, and you need to prescribe certain medications to get kids' asthma under control." And then we also train their staff, so there's this sort of very direct-services piece that is very important. It's a huge driver of a lot of the connections we make in the community. It's a credibility that we have. It's the clinical component, and I think it's incredibly important. But it's not really where my passions lie.

Green

So then kind of on the outside of that, we have the, "How do we change systems that these people are living in that's causing asthma?" And so that's included in the past--we just lost our housing funding, but in the past three years, we've been doing housing-policy work, so we've been trying to link up code enforcement in a more meaningful way, and more importantly, we've been doing affordable-housing work, which in this city has been incredibly challenging. There's really a lot of racism and classism that prevents production of affordable housing and supportive housing for families that live here. There's this concept that if you build it, people will come, so we struggle with that.

Green

And then more importantly, I think, and more interestingly, from my perspective, is the goods-movement work, which is, you know, we have these ports here which contribute 20 percent of the particulate matter in the basin, but also are really extending their impacts beyond port property, not only from the standpoint of the pollution, but there's railyards that they have in West Long Beach, and another one that they want to build that are within a mile of eight schools. The majority of those schools are, and the majority of the kids that go to those schools are low-income kids of color, so it's this environmental injustice that plays in. And it's just a perfect, classic example of how business is trumping community health, and it's so blatantly environmental racism. It's like such a perfect example.

Green

And, I think, the lack of awareness of the direction that our--and it's really a federal issue, you know, the health impacts of global trade. But, you know, we're supposed to just think that these global-trade agreements that we establish are so great, and it's so wonderful. We can ship our jobs out to Honduras and pay them fifty cents an hour in horrible working conditions, and we should be excited about that. And then I think it really gets to this issue of consumerism. I haven't quite resolved that. I really feel like it's such a hard thing to get away from, when we're completely inundated with all that.

Green

So really when I came on, we had started the goods-movement work, and I just felt so connected to it, that it's the piece that's really grown since I've been here, and we've actually outgrown ourselves in a lot of ways, in that these issues are so big and so complex and complicated that when we've been engaging community members in that, they're sort of like, "You know, I can't feed my kids. Like how do I engage in this issue?"

Collings

Right. Yes.

Green

So it's been harder and harder, and I think in the last six months, we've been trying to figure out, how do we scale back and still continue to engage community members, yet maintain this important voice, because we have really found a strong voice in the issue. I think what's compelling is having community members share their story within the context of this sort of economic engine that we're faced with.

Collings

Right. So the organization really started trying to educate people about asthma control--

Green

Their personal, yes.

Collings

--how to manage symptoms and so on?

Green

Yes. There's always been an in-home environmental piece, where we've always done a home assessment for them, and a huge component of asthma is the indoor triggers, so cockroaches and mold and dust mites, and sort of like things that the families can do to change their in-home environment, but a lot of them then live in substandard housing, so they may keep the neatest house and have non-toxic integrated pest-management strategies that are in place, and they have mattress and pillow covers, all of which we provide, and we teach them how to do non-toxic cleaning, so they're not using all these crazy Windex and whatever in front of their kids and their kids are having an attack.

Green

But the housing that they're living in is completely substandard, so it's continuing to contribute to the detriment of their children's health. And then the affordability piece is really that a lot of families are doubling and tripling up, because that's all they can afford, and so kids are sleeping on the floor of the kitchen on a mattress at the end of the day, and how good is that for their health? So, yes, so the direct-services piece is incredibly important, but we have to think about things more systematically, and I think something I struggle with in terms of the future of the organization, because we want to continue with both, but the direct-services piece is being so under funded. It's really hard to continue to get funding for that, yet everyone loves, like, "Oh, community engagement and policy work, we love that." So that's also, it's both my interest and my passion and also the availability of funds, which is the perpetual problem with public health, that has led us into sort of playing a larger role in the policy end of things. We've been able to maintain the direct services to the degree that we did when I came on, but it's getting harder and harder.

Collings

And so the community-engagement piece has to do with organizing groups to put continual pressure on the ports in terms of their growth and in terms of their output.

Green

Operation, yes, exactly. And we have tended to have--we're sort of famous for our LBACA Moms, who are mothers of kids with asthma, who go and testify and share their stories. We just hired--three months ago, we hired two moms who had been volunteering with us forever, on staff now to do our organizing, which I think will be way more effective that way, because they know what it's like and they can share their story. But they're the first ones telling me now--I mean, it's great to have them here, because they're the ones saying, "We can't do this project. Nobody's ever going to connect to this." Because I'm like trying to involve people in things that are, frankly, more complicated than we need to. So we've been trying to--that's when I say we've scaled back, like, "Let's pick two campaigns that are very local, that impact people, that they can see that even though they may be struggling to pay their bills and their kid's having an asthma attack, they at least can connect with this issue that will help to kind of move the policy forward, and then the three of us are kind of involved in the higher-level, more esoteric arguments and components.

Collings

Yes. And of the community people that you're trying to organize, I mean, how many of them do you think are actually employed at the port?

Green

Zero. But actually, of the moms, zero. But perhaps some of their husbands are employed there. I wouldn't say very many. They are predominantly Latino families, and so a lot of the husbands do a lot of--they're all low income, so a lot of the husbands are getting manual labor type jobs, and so some of them have said, "Oh, my husband works at a refinery." And one of them, her husband's a trucker, which, he's a port trucker, but he does other types of work. So there's sometimes a connection to port activities, but the vast majority don't. I mean, frankly, a lot of the jobs at the port are, if they're administrative jobs, they're higher education, higher-pay jobs. If they're the kind of manual labor jobs, they're either ILWU [International Longshore and Warehouse Union] jobs, which are really hard to get and they're high-paying jobs, or they're truckers, who are low-income, low-wage independent contractors, who basically are the bottom of the food chain, so they're not really that great of jobs for them to want to get anyway. They'd probably make more money doing something else.

Collings

Okay. So what was the campaign that you worked on when you first arrived in the position?

Green

The same one we're still working on. There's these railyards in West Long Beach. There's one in existence that was built in '84, that they service three-quarters of a million trucks, truck trips a year, that go to this facility, and it's literally within a mile of these eight schools. There were these health risk assessments recently completed. In fact, last night I wasn't able to go, but there was a meeting talking about what mitigation they'll now do, because this railyard is causing between 1200 and 1800 in a million cancer risk, so what that means is the quote, unquote, "acceptable" risk of cancer from any facility is one in a million. So this is 1200 to 1800 in a million, so 1200 times what's acceptable. And when you look at the community of West Long Beach, it's incredibly diverse. It's predominantly, I would say, lower-middle class, but families, people who own their homes. It's just kind of been--it's this community on the edge of a light-industrial area, and that's just tended to be where lower-income families end up being able to afford homes.

Green

So it's a perfect case study, and it's very much connected to the regional issues that are going on in that ports are expanding operations to continue growing, but not thinking about community health in the process. We've been able to, through collaboration with a number of other neighborhood associations and universities and groups who are really concerned about this as a case study for what's happening in other communities in southern California, we've been able to put off the project. I mean, the notice of preparation was September of '05, which was my first month here, and they were saying that environmental documents would come out by January of '06, and here we are, November of '08, and they're now saying, "Maybe next summer." And it's really been because of political pressure.

Green

I mean, now that the way the project is proposed, it's the greenest, cleanest project that you've ever heard of. But we're saying, "It doesn't matter how clean you make it. You still can't get it clean enough to be next to where kids are going to school." So it's a perfect case study, and it's also a really great project around which to engage community members, but there's also been a lot of sort of political--the community itself is very--it took a long time for us to even get to the place where everybody's in agreement that we should just flat out oppose.

Collings

Well, let's talk a little bit about that process and how that all played out. So what was your sort of initial effort going in, to contact community groups in this?

Green

Let me think about this. We participate in a number of different collaborations that talk about just goods-movement projects in general, and so really, I think, part of my, when I first came onboard, my mentor really has been Andrea Hricko from USC, who's really helped me understand kind of like how these local things become regional issues. So she took me to a couple of community meetings. I mean, you just go to a couple of meetings. You get a really quick sense of the lay of the land, who's really pissed off and who's really excited, and you make your connections that way. And then the second you give testimony, people want to connect to you in the same way, or don't want to. So I think it was just going to a couple of community meetings that Andrea really sort of pointed out, and then it's just been kind of learning along the way.

Collings

Do you remember the names of those groups?

Green

Yes. The West Long Beach Neighborhood Association is incredibly opposed.[Interruption, not transcribed.]

Green

The West Long Beach Neighborhood Association. There's a group called Interfaith Community Organization. It's a group of churches in that area, and a lot of the church members were really opposed, but then the railyards got to them and kind of started to convince them that a community benefits agreement would be possible, and I don't really think they had access to all of the health data. So it took about two years for all of us to kind of get to the table before we were able to say, "Look. Even if they make this the greenest, cleanest project, you're still talking about majorly increased cancer risks, and is that really what the community members want?" And so as the health information has gotten out there, then people are waking up to what the railyards--what we've been calling "the railyard con." So I don't even remotely proclaim to say that LBACA has taken--this is not just our campaign. I mean, we've been working with other groups, as all campaigns tend to be.

Green

But I think the role that we've tended to play has been to connect to the health piece and kind of continually bring that information forward, and when we have constituents come and speak, they're sharing their health information. Not to say that other groups are not, but that's predominantly our focus. And then personally, my piece has been more that a lot of times I'll go and represent the health voice or Long Beach or families of kids with asthma at industry conferences or public health conferences, and to just kind of continue to share this case study as a perfect example of kind of the ugly underbelly of what the ports are, as part of just sort of regionally shifting the dialogue. I would say there are--which I know you're now interacting with many of them--there are

probably fifteen kind of public health, environmental justice or academic leaders that are doing that in come capacity, and each of us have a slightly different story to tell that kind of gets the same message across.

Collings

Yes. So a lot of what your group is doing is presenting this data about the prevalence of asthma--

Green

Yes.

Collings

--and making the link between the toxins and--

Green

And children's health, yes. And we use--we have a contract with USC. We have a really strong relationship with them, so we use the results of their scientific studies to then--you know, it'll kind of be a one-two punch, where maybe I'll share some of the health data and talk about our organization, and then I'll have a community mom with us, who will share her personal story. "I live in this community. I have two kids with asthma, and," blah, blah, blah, blah. So it's been really effective. I would say for the last three years it's been really effective, and then now what's kind of happening is the ports are now saying, "We know the health data. We know there are health impacts. We don't want to hear any more of that." And so there has been a major shift in the way that they talk, but it's starting to now be a little bit co-opted, it feels like, where the way that they talk about health is sort of like, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, we know." But, "Yeah, yeah, we know we cause 3700 premature deaths a year. Anyway, let's move on to the next thing," and then it's business as usual. So it's kind of like, acceptance is the first step.

Collings

It's almost like they've been inoculated against hearing about it.

Green

Yes, exactly. Well, because they hear it so much, and then it's really easy to kind of get a deaf ear, and that's where I think the community stories are so important, because a lot of the moms that come and testify become very emotional when they speak. You know, asthma is kind of perceived to be this sort of like slightly irritating disease that you have, but I mean, for a lot of our families, they literally cannot work because their kids have such bad asthma. Or one of--our past co-chair was a mother of five, and four of her kids had asthma, and she had asthma. You know, that's not something to be taken lightly. So you kind of have to remind them of what we're talking about. It's not just a couple--

Collings

So you specifically use mothers of kids with asthma, rather than individuals who have asthma themselves?

Green

Right, because we work with kids and usually it's an evening meeting, and the kids are not available. I don't know why it's just--really, I think a lot of it is this, is that a lot of low-income families in this community, the mothers tend to be, especially for Latino families, the mothers tend to be the ones who stay at home. They drop their kids off at school, and they feel very isolated, and there's a lot of kind of lack of connection, either linguistic isolation or lack of connection to their community, for whatever reason. So our meetings tend to be a social space for them. We provide transportation, we provide interpretation, and we always provide food or snacks and childcare if they have a child that's too young to be in school. So it's an opportunity for them to come and kind of interact and connect with other women in the community.

Green

The sort of sub-goal of that for us is, "Hey, come and join our policy work." Maybe we'll have twenty-five or thirty women come to a meeting, and one or two will come and be interested in testifying, but it's not to say that just having the meeting alone is not effective, which is just to be kind of connecting community members to what's actually happening in their community, and that's, I think, where a lot of the empowerment and leadership development happens.

Collings

And how often do these meetings take place?

Green

Our coalition meets every other month, and then we have this kind of just the community meetings that happen once a month, and the two new women that I just hired were part of our community meetings in the past, have been volunteering for many years and were part of our--we did this community-based participatory research project where we had--under the direction of USC, we had moms doing traffic counting and particulate-matter monitoring with this machine that we have.

Collings

Oh, interesting.

Green

And so as an empowerment tool for them, they really got kind of woken up about, "Wow, I have skills. I can do something with this," and so did a lot of public speaking and lots of interaction with the community, and so now are part of our staff, to help kind of motivate other moms to do the same thing. So we're the new chapter. I definitely think--I'm struggling with whether or not my vision for where I want to go aligns with where our board is and where our director is, because I think they're very much still really--their main focus, they're clinicians primarily, and their main focus is this direct-services piece,

which again, it's very important, but not entirely where my passions are. So we'll see how all of this kind of resolves itself, because you go to one of these community meetings, and you see just the blatant disregard for community health that happens, and it's enough to kind of get someone like me excited about wanting to continue [unclear].

Collings

Do you coach the women who go to testify in speaking skills, presentation skills, or how does that work?

Green

Yes. I mean, some of them, who have been with us forever, don't need any help. And some of it, I think, is just an innate ability. I mean, just in general, some people are more comfortable with public speaking than others. And then we've done a lot of leadership training within that context, do public speaking, and definitely at times we try--I mean, where we've been struggling and why we've hired community moms to do our outreach now is I started feeling like a talent agency, where they'd say, "We need a mom here to come and speak at this press conference," and she'd be standing there going, "What's the issue? Who am I talking in front of?" and just that whole feeling of really plopping people and using them as props, it just started to feel really not what we're about.

Green

So we had maybe six or eight months of that, like, "Aah, we're moving too far too fast," and that's where we've really kind of pulled back. So I've spent a lot of time working with these two women on helping them understand the legislative process, the governing agencies that we are in front of. We've done toxic tours of all of our communities. We just actually got back from Sacramento, and they went and lobbied our local representatives here, so within the context of sharing it with them and training them, they're kind of giving me the [inaudible] test, like, "This is feasible for us to bring community moms, and this piece, let's just have this be more of a staff-driven agenda, because we know it's fed by the community need, but it's just too complicated to try to pull volunteers into." So we're separating that piece out.

Collings

So who would call you and say, "Oh, I need a mom to come"? What's an example of somebody who would call you to say that?

Green

A lot of the other applicants we work with.

Collings

A lot of the other organizations?

Green

Yes. So Coalition for Clean Air and Natural Resources Defense Council. Other community groups, a lot of times they'll be able to present their community's perspective, and other people will say, "Well, is that happening anywhere else than here?" And they'll be like, "Yes, yes." "LBACA, we need a mom," you know. So, yes, the things that they have been engaged in, these moms, I mean, we've had moms interviewed by the New York Times, we've had them by The Wall Street Journal, by local news media, I mean, just really incredible opportunities. I mean, our local senator and Assembly member know them very well and attend their coalition meetings and recognize the importance of our ability to kind of sway things. So I think there is a voice there that's present in the dialogue. The question is, how do we use it and how do we do it effectively, because like I said, we grew so fast in the last two and a half years that it was like, ah, all of a sudden we're involved in everything, and when all of a sudden you're at an EPA meeting with a mom who's saying, "Who's the EPA?" you realize, okay, we've taken this a little too far.

Collings

So among this group of mothers, are there any particular individuals who've sort of emerged as leaders?

Green

Yes. They kind of have come in cycles, because I think what we've realized also is we have tended to burn them out, because they're volunteers. So we had two women in the beginning, Evangelina and Sylvia, Sylvia who finally ended up leaving California really because of the knowledge of what the pollution was doing to her kids' health, so she moved out to the country somewhere in Arizona. And then Eva, who finally got a job, which was one of her big goals, and ended up leaving us. But they were really groundbreaking. I mean, they served on our board. One of them still serves on the children's clinic board, the local clinic over here, just blew everyone out of the water and became really quite famous. I mean, they traveled all over the country with our director, doing site visits and helping funders understand this issue.

Green

And then sort of the next wave came through, and we realized the way that we've been able to kind of create strong leaders have been through our neighborhood assessment teams, those teams of moms that do the traffic counting and the particulate-matter monitoring. So it's really been as those teams come through, those are our next crop of leaders. So the next team was Martha Cota, Oti, and Laura Rodriguez. Laura is the mom with five kids, four of whom have asthma and finally ended up having to--she worked with us a lot for a year and finally just said, "You know, I'm the mother of five. I can't hang," and is really committed to the issue, but she finally got a job and has

been able to kind of help her family move forward. Oti moved back to Mexico, and Martha is one of the women that we hired.

Green

And then our last crop, there were four other women that were part of our A team, and one of them got sick, but one of them we hired, and the other two are undocumented, so just kind of continue to volunteer with us. I would hire them in a heartbeat, but obviously since they didn't have their paperwork, so.

Collings

Right. Is that a particular issue in this organizing work?

Green

Yes, it is. It's in part because not all the women that we work with are undocumented, but there's this perception that, like, this community doesn't matter because they're not voting, whatever, taxpaying members of society, just because they're lacking a--and so that's where this sort of racist mindset sort of comes into play, and so we've been really challenged by that, because we've always tended to just be Latina mothers. That's just our base. And I'd say 90 percent of the families that we serve are Latino families, and that is for whatever reason it is. Who knows. The Cambodian community has been really shy to come out and participate, and that's just not culturally in their mindset, and then predominantly the African American families that we serve tend to be single moms, and so they work fulltime when their kids are at school and so don't have any capacity to come and participate in our community events. So that's kind of the reality of this struggle, is trying to find ways to represent other aspects of the community while predominantly bringing Latina women forward.

Collings

Okay. So what are some of the ways that you sort of would work with community groups that had different perspectives on the future of the port? What's an example of one of those particular struggles?

Green

Well, all of us I mentioned, probably fifteen leaders, there's probably fifteen academic, community-based environmental-justice organizations that are engaged in this work specifically in southern California, and it's a constant challenge, because there's this spectrum and there's, "Let's grow the ports green," and there are some people who are like, "We won't grow at all." And then there are some people who are very much for green growth. But then when you get into the concept of how do you define green growth, you know, does greening up a railyard in the middle of a community define green growth? I mean, in my concept, no, because you still have dramatic health impacts on a community with already existing health impacts from another railyard. But

really innovative alternatives are feasible, and so I think that that's something that we could get behind.

Green

But that's where I talk about, like, I don't know what the future of this organization is within the concept of this dialogue, because on our board we have that spectrum, and I think people have tended to shy away from having that discussion. So it's really been, we'll bring the health impacts forward of all of these projects, and it's kind of been up to my discretion, and it's been a really fuzzy line, and I've crossed it sometimes and known that I've crossed it and had to kind of backpedal, and other times I've felt like we don't know where we stand on this, so it's the challenge of being a coalition, and it's also the challenge of being a coalition working within other coalitions. It's like, how do you find that--so we've just tended to approach it kind of project by project, and it's not the way to go. It means we're always reacting to the issue, and we're never able to kind of get out there in terms of preventive to say, "This is where these communities draw the line," and then the industry can know where they start. Really what happens is the industry puts their best project in their mind out, and we say, "This is so bad," and we help them backpedal.

Collings

So it's always reacting to port.

Green

Always reacting, always, always, and to me, you're not effective that way. I mean, part of building community empowerment is having them establish, "This is what our vision for our community is," and promoting that. But it's like we can't keep up. We're a small, community-based organization, fighting probably the biggest economic engine in the country, you know, the WalMarts and the Targets.

Collings

Right. But there are members of the coalition who are in favor of no growth whatsoever?

Green

I don't know if in our coalition there are, and I'll tell you why. I think we're particularly challenged in this way, that a lot of our members of our coalition are heath department staff, and the health department is a department of the city and thus cannot advocate, and, frankly, has been very silent on the issue, which I find to be perturbing and surprising and frustrating and something that I've been trying to work on really a lot the last couple of months, which is that, yes, they cannot lobby, and they're a department of the city just like the port is, and their boss is the mayor of Long Beach just like for the port, but they can educate the community about what the impacts are, and they've decided, I think largely because of the direction of the leadership has just decided to not

participate in the dialogue at all. So there's this huge health voice that's missing, and they sort of say, "Well, we do that through LBACA." And so their staff members that kind of participate and love to learn about it, they're totally interested. It's sort of, I think, more individual, but, you know, completely silent. They don't say anything on these issues, because I think the fear of God has been put in them to really even participate at all.

Green

So it ends up being really defined by a select few groups, again those fifteen. We have Coalition for Clean Air participate in our coalition meetings, and they're really vocal, because that's part of their mission. And so it ends--our coalition, LBACA as a coalition's mission ends up being defined by a select few, because largely the rest of the people feel like they have to be silent. Same for the school district, who are very active and very concerned about children's health, but not remotely interested in getting involved in anything political. It's become so divisive and so political, I mean, even to the point where we've requested going out and giving presentations to the school nurses, and it's been sort of like, "Well, this is too political. Let's wait a while," things like that, which is just, "Let me tell you what this facility would do." Not even like, you know, "You make the decision about where you guys will stand." So that's the challenge.

Green

I mean, I don't know. It's amazing the PR that has been coming out for the last, I think, two years. Once we started to get a foothold with the health data and it really became indisputable, and we had all these state agencies supporting us and all of the body of research, and everybody kind of becoming a coward, it's like the industry and the ports were able to sort of say, "Okay, okay. We know the health information. Now we're going to green the ports." And there's been this PR about, "We're greening the ports," when really it's business as usual, with sort of greenwashing. And again, I don't know to what capacity LBACA's role will continue to play in that, in terms of once things start to get really political.

Green

I mean, we've had the ports try to--the ports have offered us money. They've tried to do what they can to sort of silence us. I've started to notice we've been excluded from certain public processes, which is a sign, I think, of having gained some sort of political power, but at the same also feels like very challenging and frustrating, and it causes a lot more work. I don't know. It's just the whole--it's the cycle of sort of feeling really energized and then feeling really--I'm kind of in a moment right now where even I just got back from this conference, and they were sort of like, "Oh, we're going to put you on the successes panel." And I thought, "Can we be on the challenges panel?" because

that's all I'm feeling that we're experiencing right now, and that just cycles through. I think that's just part of the work.

Collings

Do you have any sense of momentum within the community that you're working with? I mean, do you have a sort of a sense that knowledge is building and that interest is building, or do you think that that's kind of cycling down as well?

Green

I think that's cycling down. I think the first two years we were just, like, it was amazing what we were able to do, and then like I said, I think that--both ports just hired--I think they spent each over a million dollars in PR, I mean, just a million dollars in PR alone. How do we as a small, community organization, confront that? And so then they have a press release going out every couple of days saying all the great things they're doing. You know, "We know we cause all these health impacts, so we're doing this," and really they're not doing anything really that substantial. How do we combat that? So that's why I'm feeling like, okay, we took two steps forward and one step back, and we're reevaluating. And also I think, like I was saying, we grew so much, that that's kind of why, by hiring these two women in the last couple of months I thought, you know, we need to go back to the roots, which is, our power is in our base, and our power is in knowing that the community members are aware of what's happening, and they're educated. Beyond that, who knows what will happen, but like at the very least we need to have empowered, educated community moms. That's our biggest mission. So we've kind of stepped out of the policy arena a little bit, for that reason, just to kind of collect our energy, lick our wounds a little bit.

Collings

Yes. So then the role of these educated moms is primarily to testify at hearings?

Green

Yes, and do presentations for other small groups, like the two women we just hired, they've been connecting to local churches and daycare centers and other--they've worked at schools, so they have other sort of after-school connections, those kinds of things, to just sort share what our campaigns are and get them motivated, at least. I mean, we sort of see it at this point that we don't want--I mean, the rail companies or the ports are very savvy, and they're also community organizers, and they know how to share in this information. So at the minimum, we want people to have the right information, which we believe that we have, which is this health data. And we don't have anything financial to gain by sharing that information, unlike the ports and the railyards, so I think that that's where the integrity of our message does get through more than theirs. It's just a lot of work.

Collings

Do you ever hear back from these grassroots participants that you're sort of training, what they might be hearing back from the community as counter arguments?

Green

It comes through. I mean, I think the women that stay with us are really just so committed. I mean, I can just tell this incredible story that happened last night. I took these two women with me, that we just hired, to Sacramento, and on the flight back I guess they were sitting next to the vice president for URL [Consulting Group], which is a consulting company that's doing the environmental documents for the 710 Freeway expansion, which is one of the biggest things we've been fighting, as well as helping to develop a port in Punta Colonet, where there doesn't exist one. And these women who barely speak English, I mean, they start dialoguing with him, and then before you know it--and when they got off the flight--this all happened unbeknownst to me--we met outside the plane and they said, "Be really nice to this guy. Say hi." He gave me his card, and I'm looking at it going--and he said, you know--I guess they explained to me that their conversation with him was they were expressing what the communities are experiencing, and he has a daughter with asthma, and they were saying, "Think about your daughter when you do these projects." Then he was like, "Well, now you're going to kill me, because I'm developing this port in Punta Colonet." But he said, "But it won't impact your families here." And they said, "We don't care who it impacts. If it impacts anyone's family, if it impacts a single human being, then it's wrong."

Green

And so, who knows what they got through to him, but I'm sure that he'll remember those conversations, and that's the power that they--I mean, I was so blown away, and they were kind of joking around like, "Oh, you didn't think we speak English." It was just like it completely blew my mind. This is the vice president of the consulting company that we've been fighting with this project on, and they just randomly met him, so that's to me--they are so willing to talk to power. They have no problems, because it's like I think that's part of the cultural thing of Latina women, too, is that they're like lionesses when it comes to their kids. If they have sick kids, they will talk to and yell at and fight with whomever when it comes to protecting their kids' health. So that's the strength, I have to remember. I mean, I was really kind of depressed after just the last couple of months, and then after last night I was like, oh, those are the moments when you're like, "Yeah, okay. We're doing the right thing. We do have the strength on our side. It's a just a matter of kind of harnessing it."

Collings

Yes. Do you have any sense that the port in Punta Colonet is being developed in response to any of this pressure?

Green

It very much is. Yes. They want to take business, and the vast majority of the cargo that will go to Punta Colonet will come to the States. And the contracting companies that they're looking at, the rail lines, etc., they're mostly American companies, and there are records of people saying, "Part of the reason we went to develop it in Punta Colonet is because of all the environmental pressures that there are in L.A. and Long Beach are kind of--it's too much. We can just do business as usual in Mexico, so we'll just go down there." And Punta Colonet is a completely gorgeous, untouched, beautiful landscape. There does not exist a single infrastructure there, and they're talking about taking what we have here and shipping it down there. What a mess.

Collings

To augment what's here, not really to--

Green

Some of it would be diversion, because the growth hasn't succeeded in the way that they thought, because of the economy, but then in future years, once that picks back up, assuming the economy picks back up and we continue to buy cheap crap from China, which we probably still will, then there will be that need.

Collings

And the consumer element of this, is that anything that your group touches in any way?

Green

We're starting to. Annie Leonard did this incredible video called "The Story of Stuff," that shot through You Tube last year that just blew me away, and it's all about sort of the health impacts of consumerism in general, and the way the media was done was so interesting, and so we've contacted them through a partnership that we have with USC, to do a video explaining our issues in the same kind of colloquial, interesting, funny, cute way, because that's the challenge that we have, is that everything is so complicated. The second someone asks me--I mean, nobody in my family really knows what I do for my job, because it's too complicated to explain to sort of get the general idea. So, yes, we need to make the connection.

Green

I mean, the reason we are experiencing--I mean, the way we describe it is that Californians experience all of these impacts, because we're subsidizing this sector with our health. We're subsidizing it for other people outside of the region. And so when you're buying your TV in, whatever, Chicago, you're not paying the true cost of what it costs, because it actually costs this community in

health and quality of life and all of these other issues. So we have to get that message out there. I think that there's just a lack of awareness, and I think if more people knew what was really going on--I mean, I didn't know any of this stuff before I started working in it. I always thought ports were kind of quaint and sweet.

Collings

Right. Well, one of the things that the Lung Association was doing early on, when just the idea--they were trying to sort of link air pollution to lung disease, because that was a new idea in the sixties--was actually to try to bring in some of those healthcare costs and show how expensive this was.

Green

Yes. That's been done. It's amazing. That has been done, and actually it's been shown that this is--I don't remember the number, 60 or 80 billion a year that the state pays and that its residents pay in health costs. And then the state [California] Air [Resource] Board did this study that showed the economic costs, and despite that, there's still not a recognition, and I think it's largely because the health departments haven't weighed in, which is what sort of my next mission is. I've been working closely with USC to try to make this happen. We have a training coming up in January where both health departments will be there with community groups and academicians, to say, "Yes, you can't lobby, but you can do a lot in terms of swaying public opinion, helping them recognize that you as a health department are paying, we as taxpayers are paying." We're paying like four or five times, because we pay with our tax dollars. We actually literally pay with bonds, dollars that go to subsidize building the infrastructure. We pay with our health and the quality of life, and then we pay for health costs of other people who don't have health insurance to go and get their health needs met. So we pay four or five times to get these cheap goods, when really if that was calculated, it would be very different.

Green

So that's what I'm saying, like, about us needing to be proactive and get our message out in a way that hasn't--we've been so reactive. And it means that we're going to have to probably take a setback on some projects and just let them be what they will be. But it's very clear. I mean, there are so many documented--there's so much evidence that if we don't engage in the process, it's business as usual.

Collings

Can you give an example of something that you think that you have had a really clear impact in mitigating?

Green

Yes, there are a lot of examples. And I don't want to--you know, it's all through collaboration. It's all of the ten to fifteen groups, the various combinations

working together. But, I mean, there's five or six projects where they would have been very different if we hadn't been in the mix. This railyard project is a great example. Both the expansion of the existing facility and the building of this new proposed facility in West Long Beach were on the port's project list and were slated for completion in 2006, 2007, and they haven't even been able to release their environmental documents in the last three years. And no matter who you talk to in the political world, they do, "Oh, they're scared. Yeah, yeah, we've heard about that." Like it's this kind of like, nobody wants to touch the project.

Green

And there's now rumors that likely the mayor of L.A. will wait to sort of introduce it until he's on his way out, so he knows it's that politically hot that he doesn't even want to be involved at all himself, until he knows he's on his way out. So those kinds of things are very clear. The second that there's--because on its face, they can't win, when you look at it that way, as long as the information is out there. I would say it's restored my faith in the concept of community pressure, and the biggest force, I do believe, is communities who are engaged. I truly believe that. The problem is that what governmental or industrial agencies have on their side, not to mention money and power and access, that all aside, I still think we could win. It's that families are just exhausted. Quality of life is just--you know, people are so focused on their own inner world that it's really hard for them to step outside and be a leader on the outside.

Collings

Do you have any sense that it's been harder to organize people around the port issue since the economy started to falter a bit?

Green

Well, perhaps. I mean, it's always been hard for us to organize, because the communities that we're organizing are always experiencing those impacts. These families, the majority--I think we looked at our data recently--the vast majority of the families we service, like they're in the lowest echelon of income, so it's 22,500 for a family of four per year. So these are incredibly low-income families, so for them, I mean, bad economy, good economy, it's kind of all the same.

Collings

Okay, so that hadn't really been an issue.

Green

Not entirely. I think the only thing that's perhaps difficult is that the ports are saying, "Well, now the economy has slowed down, so we're going to see less of these impacts." And we keep saying, "Well, great. It's an opportunity for us to really make some changes while things are slow."

Collings

So who are some of the community-organizing groups that have been like particularly vital for the outreach work?

Green

You mean other groups we collaborate with?

Collings

Yes.

Green

East Yard Communities for Environmental Justice. They're incredible, and they do great work up in Commerce, East L.A. around the railyard issues there, so they've been helpful in sharing their experiences with us locally. The Coalition for a Safe Environment in Wilmington. Jesse Marquez has been really great about pushing alternatives and just kind of being really vocal. Let me think. There's kind of more traditional environmental organizations that just play a role, I think, in setting the tone for things, so like Coalition for Clean Air, and Natural Resources Defense Council in providing legal-advocacy work. I'm sure I'm forgetting people, and I'm completely blanking. Locally, like different issues have different collaborative partners, so like on the railyard issue, the West Long Beach Neighborhood Association has done the vast majority of organizing. We've just brought the health information forward.

Green

On the 710 Freeway expansion, there are a number of groups up and down the 710, Communities for a Better Environment, the Community Partners Council, which is a small group of moms out of the children's clinic, so depending on the issue, there's different groups that emerge. But it's not very many of us. I mean, there are so few of us, and people are always sort of like, "Oh, you guys have that handled." And we're like, "No, we don't. We need more people." And it's not only that we need more capacity to organize. We need more organizations in the mix, because it tends to be the same faces. We all go to these meetings together, and there's between five and fifteen of us, and we're sort of like, "Hey, hey, hey." And then we stand up and they're like, "You again. I know what's going to come out of your mouth." They just don't listen. So it's hard, it's really hard. And yet they're so complicated, it's really hard to get new people in the mix.

Green

Oh, my gosh. The American Lung Association has also played a really large role. I just forgot to mention them.

Collings

Okay.

[End of interview]

1.3. Session 3 (November 24, 2008)

Collings

Today is November 24, 2008. Jane Collings interviewing Elina Green in her office in Long Beach. Hi, Elina.

Green

Hi. [laughter]

Collings

Okay. I just wanted to go back to some of the things that you were saying last time. You were talking about how you had come out here and things had really clicked when you were interviewed for this position, and that you mentioned specifically that you had been interviewed for the job by community members as well. I wondered, is that something unique to this organization?

Green

Yes. I think it's something that a lot of public health groups talk about how they have community participation and community involvement, and it's usually one community member who stands there and says, "I represent the community," whereas everything we do is really from the ground up. Like, I mean, a perfect example is that I was interviewed by two community members, who are part of our--the structure of our coalition has a place for community representation as part of our board and as part of like the directed leadership of the coalition, so it was just part of the whole thing to also get interviewed by them.

Collings

Right. Do you remember sort of what observations you made at that time, how that struck you?

Green

I think that was actually what kind of sold me on the job, was this realization that these were just two mothers of kids with asthma, who had been working on these issues as volunteers for years and saw knowing me as being a really important part of their work, even though they were volunteers. I wasn't going to be their boss or anything like that. I think they felt such a vested interest in this coalition. They were part of building it. They were a part of the implementation grant. They were the ones who developed all the different intricacies as LBACA, and so I think that they just wanted to make sure that I understood what was going on, which was just so astounding. I'd never seen that before.

Collings

Yes. And how does the organization maintain that kind of continuity with volunteers?

Green

We don't actually have continuity with volunteers, which I think is a challenge and it's our strength. We've had sort of a core group of I'd say maybe twenty women who have kind of come in and out, depending on what's going on with their lives. But one of the things I think that makes us really unique also is that we spend a lot of time doing leadership training and helping give them real skills to then go off and do other things in life, and a lot of them have gone on to get jobs, or have become--one mom who got really aware of what was happening in terms of pollution and has all these kids with asthma, and so moved to Arizona, because she was like, "I don't want to expose my kids to this." So each of them has obviously their own story, and for some of them they see it as--I think I talked about this last time, just how much linguistic isolation there is, how much of the culture, especially for Latina women is to be at home with the children and just kind of feeling isolated in general, and so for many of them sort of a social network, and they come in and out of it like you would any other social network.

Green

So there isn't continuity, and I think it's kind of why we have to constantly remake ourselves. While the issue we work on gets more complicated and more complex, we have new people coming in at all times, so it's like we have to constantly revisit the trainings.

Collings

Right. But the community members that you saw were involved in the intricacies of building the organization, those would have been actual staff then?

Green

They never were staff. We got a planning grant from Robert Wood Johnson [Foundation], and then we had the implementation years that followed, and they all played a really intricate part of that. I'm sure they were reimbursed for childcare and transportation, and transportation was provided, like we do at all things, but I know they weren't paid staff as part of the regular thing. So there's a lot of community ownership, and that core group of moms, some of them are still around, but I think a lot of them have kind of moved on to other health issues, or have gotten whatever services they needed for their child with asthma, and so they're around. They're just not really involved anymore in the same way that they were. And so it's more new moms, who have just had a child diagnosed with asthma, or have just attended a training and gotten excited, that come in. There's a couple of folks that have been here for, like, fifteen years and so have been participating with us for the last nine.

Collings

Was that a requirement of the grant, that you have that kind of participation?

Green

I think it's kind of the requirement of most public health grants, but you can sort of check that box with ease by having one focus group and then being done with it. Our director [Elisa Nicholas] really wanted--like, she's always seen, just had this vision for coalition building really being the community sharing their wisdom with doctors and public health practitioners, as opposed to the reverse. So it's really her vision.

Green

And then it's worth mentioning that there was a lot of leadership building that happened in Long Beach with a lot of these community members, between twelve and fifteen years ago. The California Endowment funded something called the Partnership for the Public's Health. It was when there was a lot of money in this kind of field, and it was a year-long leadership-training program that I think about a hundred people were enrolled in and then participated in, and one of the sort of mandates when they graduated from that was to go out and be active in their communities. That was around the time that we started forming our group and another community group that we partner with here in Long Beach, the Community Partners Council, so we sort of had this built base of really motivated people, and that's, I think, our struggle now, is that we've done the health-leadership training since, but we obviously never have the money. We never have a year. I think it was like $75,000 or something that they got to do this luxurious, wonderful thing, and now we're sort of like, "We've got $2,000. What can we do?" So it's a perpetual challenge.

Collings

Yes. I mean, in a way, because you are bringing in, as you say, mothers of children with asthma, I mean, that gives a number of community people unfortunately a very strong motivation to participate.

Green

Yes.

Collings

It's not just that they're doing it out of some sort of--

Green

The goodness of their heart.

Collings

Yes, exactly, a political alliance or something like that.

Green

It's very personal. Yes, it's very personal. And I think the fact that now, you know, it's worth mentioning our community health workers were all hired from--a lot of them were just community moms that participated in those trainings and we've hired on as staff that are now our promotoras. But also, then, we recently hired two of our community volunteers who were part of our neighborhood assessment team, who were volunteering for years with us doing

testifying and going to all of these events, and we were sort of dragging them around town. Now we've had the opportunity to hire them, and they are--it's so incredible, because they understand. They know what it's like to be a mom, a low-income mom, a Latina mom with a kid with asthma. They know what it would take for us to get moms involved, and so I think we're kind of entering a new chapter of community engagement in a way that things that I would think, like, "Oh, we'll just do this and they'll come," and they're like, "No, no, no. You have to have--." I mean, little details that you don't think about.

Collings

What's an example of that?

Green

Well, so we provide child watch at all of our events, and there were just these little things where our child-watch providers, who are also mothers who've been trained in first aid and CPR and are under the auspices of the clinic, so have this sort of like that's another community-engagement piece, and they were just not really recognizing that that is the most important thing for these women to come to these meetings, to know that their child is well taken care of. There were just little conflicts here and there about how the child-watch ladies were sort of treating the moms. And our new staff or the moms pointed that out and said, "You know, frankly, I wouldn't come to a LBACA meeting if I didn't feel secure about where my kids were being taken care of, and if the woman who is sort of registering your child is not very friendly to you, it doesn't really give you that much excitement to, like, leave your child with them."

Green

And so we did this big training with all of the child-watch ladies last month and basically kind of got them to understand that that's the most important thing for us in terms of community engagement, is that these women see it as like a time off from kids and an opportunity to socialize and to learn something, and if their kid's not well taken care of, they're not going to come back.

Collings

Well, were there any problems with the kids not wanting to go to these, like they got in there and there was nothing to do, or anything like that?

Green

No, I think the structure is pretty good. I mean, I think that it's fun for them. There's always activities and movies and whatever. I mean, I'm sure there are kids that don't enjoy going.

Collings

No, I just wondered, because you know, if your kid doesn't want to go to it, then--

Green

Yes, and I'm sure that happens. I mean, we had some really concrete examples of women bringing their kids, and then the child-watch lady sort of overreacting about certain things that their child was doing. Like we have a rule you can't bring food, and so like the mom would provide a snack for their child, and then the child would pull the snack out and the child-watch lady was like, "No snacks. It's a big deal," which, of course, in theory it's a really big deal, but to make it something that would push a community member away from coming was not so good. So we're ironing out those things, and I think we wouldn't have been as aware if we didn't hire people from the community to share that with us.

Collings

Right. Yes, absolutely. You had mentioned that--you said that the women that you were working with were, you used the word "like lionesses" in terms of protecting their kids, and you sort of pointed to that as being an aspect for these Latina women coming from their culture.

Green

Yes.

Collings

I mean, can you point to anything else that might be cultural that you think has been beneficial in terms of bringing the women in to do this community work?

Green

Yes. I mean, I guess speaking in generalizations, there seems to be a lot of--I mean, a lot of these women are very low-income, and their husbands are working two and three jobs to take of them, and often we're finding that a lot of these women also have experienced domestic violence. So for them, there's like this empowerment piece that happens to them, where they really learn how to--they kind of learn their value and their worth. And when they come to our meetings, I mean, every voice is completely honored and valued, and I think that there's that escape for a lot of them, and also really the social networking that happens. I mean, they become--we have a community member who's our co-president of our coalition, and she has her sort of list of accomplishments, and she has on there "co-president of LBACA." A lot of times we'll send them to trainings and just the simplest thing like getting a certificate is transformative for them.

Green

I mean, there's one woman, poor woman, gave a training three years ago on lead poisoning and was like, "Oh, I'll mail your certificates later," and never did, and every time this woman's name comes up, they're like, "Oh, we hate her," because she never mailed the certificates. And the training was great, they loved the training. So it's that piece, that it's like the recognition of what their worth is I think is a really big part of it. And then I think a lot of them just

come to this country, and a lot of them are recent immigrants from Mexico or Central America and come to this country and are not aware of how to navigate the systems, and so by linking up with the health-promotion group, they get to know people who help them understand, "Oh, for you to get Medical you do this." And then they share those experiences with each other. So it really becomes--on a lot of levels, it's social networking, but it's also helping them kind of get services for their families.

Collings

Right. So all the women involved have direct experience with children with asthma, because now you're sort of pointing to ways that other women might benefit from being involved as well.

Green

Yes. I would say when I first came on, 100 percent of the women had kids with asthma. But we've since--there are a lot of people who have either worked with kids with asthma--I mean, everybody knows a kid with asthma for sure--or who were just really motivated by their friends to get involved and do community work, and so we're starting to have some people who don't have kids with asthma. Like one of the staff members that we hired, she lives in an impacted community. Her kids have not been diagnosed with asthma, but she lives in West Long Beach, where there are these two railyard projects that we've been working to clean up, so she connects to that piece of the puzzle, which changes the way in which we can fight for communities, but at the same time, the goal is to bring forward those stories anyway. You know, she can still represent what it's like to live in that community and the quality of life issues and all of that.

Collings

Sure. Well, speaking of sort of broadening the coalition, there's like other community groups out there, like just, for example, how the Communities for a Safe Environment, based in Wilmington, uses a lot of community people. Are there sort of ways that your group interacts with groups from other organizations and perhaps maintains its own sense of identity as being part of your group, or is there cross-pollination? How does that work?

Green

Yes. There's a lot of cross-pollination that's been--I would say it first and foremost was fostered by the fact that we all, within this network of goods-movement advocacy groups, we're all tired. We all need each other for that sort of emotional stability and support, but also we've become very close. And so when, for example, last week Angelo Logan from East Yard Communities for Environmental Justice had a public-speaking training, and I said, "Oh, my gosh, that would be so great," and sent our two staffers, and they are in turn going to come and do one for us in Long Beach. So there's a lot of just sort of like

sharing resources, and a lot of the resources they use were things I had developed, so it's kind of this funny crossover. So some of it is just from time saving and wanting to share best practices, but a lot of it, too, is very formalized.

Green

We're part of the [Trade Health and Environment] Impact Project, which is--THE, standing for Trade Health and Environment--is a group of two academic institutions, USC and Occidental College, Angelo Logan's group, East Yard Communities for Environmental Justice, Coalition for a Safe Environment, Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice in Riverside and our group. This established group has--actually, we just recently wrote a couple of grants where we will very specifically engage in collaborative projects. And some of it has just been sort of here or there, but we recognize that when that happens, people get really inspired and really motivated and these friendships form, and it helps energize us in Long Beach to know that there are people in Riverside that are dealing with the same stuff.

Collings

Right, right, because it's the whole sort of corridor.

Green

Yes.

Collings

What are your recommendations, like just based on your experience, for mobilizing and sustaining community involvement on an issue?

Green

It's so hard. It is the one thing that I feel like we've tried everything, and sometimes something amazing just works, and sometimes not. I mean, I would say minimally you have to find out what the barriers are for people's participation and eliminate those, and sometimes it could be--

Collings

Like you were pointing out the childcare issue.

Green

Childcare. I mean, it could be something so simple that you think like, oh, my gosh. You know, you might be doing some elaborate training and paying all this money to have someone come, when really you should be just paying their taxi to get there. So like I said, everything--we always do interpretation, transportation. I'll always provide something to eat, and--

Collings

Interpretation, transportation, food.

Green

--food, food and snacks, and child watch for every training. And then that pretty much--if someone is motivated, it's an opportunity for them to

participate. And then I think we're trying new things out with our new staff about how we want to do outreach. Some of it's door to door, some of it's going to their churches, some of it's going to schools, and each one has their own strategy, and I think we're entering into a new phase of real potential for increased success, by having impacted community members rather than staffers who are sort of hired to do this job. It's women who are impacted, who live in this community, that can go door to door and do that. It's so much more powerful.

Collings

Yes. Yes, I think that's really interesting that the childcare is just like an absolute piece of it, because it's hard to imagine how that would work otherwise.

Green

Yes, I know. It is, yes. And I'm sure there's other barriers that we haven't yet come across, but that's been pretty much what we would have gotten people in the door.

Collings

What kinds of problems come across in terms of transportation?

Green

Well, as we've expanded our clinical and direct-services programming outside of Long Beach--we have service groups in Wilmington, Carson, and San Pedro--we have a lot of people who are interested in coming, and our taxi service just happens to be in Long Beach, so we're always like--we haven't come up against it yet, but I think with this new group, there are a lot of Wilmington residents that are interested, and so we're starting to--next week, actually, we have a meeting with CBE, Community for a Better Environment and their Wilmington organizer, to say, "Hey, as we encounter Wilmington people, can we connect them to you, or can you somehow support our work in getting Wilmington residents to this group?" So we're trying to be strategic in how we do that.

Collings

So is this like a thing where you actually pay for people's taxi fare?

Green

Yes. Yes, we pay their taxi.

Collings

So you use an actual taxi service?

Green

Yes, that the hospital has a contract with.

Collings

Oh, I see.

Green

So we have to grant write for that and make sure we have the finances to cover it, and so we've always been thinking of things in Long Beach. When we start to get outside of the City of Long Beach, it obviously gets more expensive. And I would say maybe half the people have transportation anyway, so it's not always a problem. And taxi drivers don't like when we use--they don't really like us that much, because we don't tip them.

Collings

I was going to ask about that.

Green

Yes. I mean, I don't think we--every once in a while, I try to remember to, but usually it's a staffer who's not thinking, or just thinking like, "You got the person here." They also get paid after the fact, so they get these vouchers and then they get their pay at the end of the month.

Collings

Oh, so you actually travel along with the community person?

Green

No. We give them the number. They call the taxi and come to the location, and then we give the voucher to the taxi driver when they arrive. And we have someone whose job it is to like--

Collings

Okay, and then there's the tipping, or not.

Green

Yes. So it's kind of, I think people feel uncomfortable tipping, because they feel like that's such a personal thing. How do you know how much to tip? And so staffers obviously, I think, feel kind of like that's not their job, to tip. Some of the moms are conscious of it and will give a little money, but it's not really something we do.

Collings

That's interesting. Okay. Now, another thing. You mentioned the lack of success in bringing in Laotian or African American women. You just used those as examples of groups here in the Long Beach area. Do you think that there is any energy among the community group that comes from the fact that the volunteers are ethnically homogeneous?

Green

Interesting. That's a good question. Yes. Well, okay, here's my thoughts. I think in one part, people feel really comfortable coming--a lot of these Latina women feel extremely comfortable that almost everybody speaks their language, and we'll serve Mexican food a lot of times, because they get to choose the food and so they choose Mexican food, those kinds of things. But there's a greater awareness amongst the group. People feel like, "We really should be bringing more of these other cultures and other races," so there's this really big push, and

there's this constant call for, "Why don't we have better representation racially and ethnically?" And we actually, when we hired our three staffers, we hired an African American woman who ended up not being able to take the position after all, and so we felt like, oh, we were so close to having some representation to start helping us reach out to that community.

Green

But what's clear in our direct services is that the African American community and the Asian Pacific Islander community, which here in Long Beach is incredibly diverse, because we've got Cambodians, a huge Cambodian population, Laotian, Korean, Filipino, so there's diversity there, too, in how you reach out to them. And so it's not just having an Asian representative. It's this whole diversity of what that looks like. So it's kind of like, like attracts like. We end up getting Latina women who end up having Latina friends, who end up bringing in more Latina women and then the cycle starts.

Collings

Right. So, in fact, those kinds of social networks are really important for bringing people in.

Green

Definitely. Definitely. I mean, they go to their aerobics classes, their gyms, their churches and hand out fliers. I mean, they go door to door and they just tend to--I mean, if Spanish is the only language they speak, they're going to be friends with primarily Hispanics.

Collings

Sure, yes. Okay, well, just switching gears slightly, let me just ask you. You've got this thing on the website with the profiles of the A-team members, and I was just kind of curious that in the little blurbs it consistently mentioned, like, which activities were the most fun, and I was just kind of struck by that, because I was wondering what was really intended there.

Green

We let them write their bios. That's actually our old A-team. That's one of the projects [unclear]. I'm like, oh yes, that's still up there--because those A-team members have graduated. That was one of the things we talked about this morning, is we want to have a team of about ten instead of a team of three, so we have more moms to call upon. But yes, I mean, they saw it as educational, as even Martha [Cota] was saying this morning, even as a privilege to participate in this group. I mean, we hired them like they were getting hired as staffers. We had interviews, the whole thing. So I think that they expected it to be sort of serious, this thing that they did, but we made sure and kind of kept it light and also fun, so that they want to continue being engaged. So maybe that's why they felt like they could share that.

Collings

Yes, I was just kind of curious.

Green

I don't know, that's funny. That was all their--we said, "You guys get a page. You just do what you want to do."

Collings

Yes, because it did almost seem like it was possibly reaching out to other interested persons.

Green

Yes. I think, too, we've been trying to get into this thing of documenting what the A-team's--we have no documentation anywhere about their stories, and so we're going to be taking a class at the end of December in digital storytelling, so we can start to document what the stories are of these women and share what they learned, because I think that it will be surprising. Each one of them probably took something so different--

Collings

Oh, absolutely.

Green

For us, we're like, "Oh, they came and testified at all these different things," which is a success for us, but there's all these internal things that have shifted for them, undeniably.

Collings

Yes. That sounds really important.

Green

Yes. So I think the A-teams have been this incredible thing that's motivated our policy work, but they've also sort of been forgotten in that we kind of shuffle through each crew and go, "Thank you for your time," and then move on to the next and not really think about, "We need to reflect. We need to process. We need to evaluate." It's just been kind of like something we do.

Collings

Right. And the A-teams are the ones that do all the collecting of the particulate matter. Why is it called A-team? Maybe we talked about that.

Green

They're the Neighborhood Assessment Team--

Collings

Assessment, yes, okay.

Green

--so then they nicknamed themselves the A-team, which I think is really cute.

Collings

It is cute.

Green

And there are A-teams in each of the groups in the Impact Project, and so that's kind of our next thing is these new grants we wrote was to evaluate the success of each of the projects, and also do a P-track summit [particulate matter], where we have all of the A-teams come together from each of these organizations, share best practices, share their data, just to kind of that cross-pollination and re-inspire and re-motivate them, so they've been successful across the board for everyone. I think anytime you do a university-community partnership, there's always something incredible that comes out of it.

Collings

Yes. Okay. You were mentioning how the port was getting to be like more and more successful at presenting what you called greenwashing and just sort of accepting the fact that they were having an impact, and then just sort of saying, "Okay, and let's move on." How have your tactics changed, or how might you be thinking about changing them to address this greenwashing on the part of the port?

Green

We, as part of a larger collaboration, have hired a media consultant, and I set up some trainings in January with some other groups to do collaboratively--

Collings

Next January? This coming January?

Green

Yes, this coming January--to do media training, because we're realizing we really need to be savvy. I mean, there was a time where just sharing the information mattered--

Collings

Right, right.

Green

--and it doesn't matter anymore.

Collings

Yes. You mentioned that they had kind of stepped ahead.

Green

They co-opted our language, yes. They co-opted our language, and so everything--in essence, they use our language and then say, "These are all the great things we're doing." It's like anything. You can say, "We've reduced particulates by 50 percent," but when they're still five times higher than they should be even after reducing by 50 percent, that doesn't matter.

Collings

Yes. They've got a lot of, as you say, greenwashing information out there. Everything you hear in the public media about the port makes you think it's the most progressive, greenest, cleanest port that you ever heard of.

Green

I mean, it may be moving faster than any other port in the country, but it's also--I mean, this is off the top of my head. This isn't necessarily based in fact, but by the fact that it's the largest port in the United States, it's undeniably the dirtiest port in the United States, so they have farther to go. I mean, it's worth mentioning that when they passed their Clean Air Action Plan, which was the plan to decrease particulates by 45 percent over the course of five years, every politician got up and was patting each other on the back and saying all these amazing things. There were a couple of representatives that said, "If it weren't for the community groups pushing us, we wouldn't be here today." So there is recognition that if it weren't for us, we wouldn't be where we are, yet there's resistance all along the way. So it's just an interesting dynamic.

Green

So in terms of changing tactics, I mean, having a media consultant is a big thing. Frankly, we're struggling. I mean, it's really hard when the data that you--you know, the health data starts to lose its power. I think part of it is to start documenting what--one of the grants we just wrote, we were getting an economic consultant brought in, so we can start to document more of the dollars and cents and stuff. That's what speaks to people during economic hardship. We're also starting to recognize that we need consultants who are experts in things like modeling, because often what will happen is they'll show a project and they'll model it, and I've heard this before, you know, in essence, garbage in, garbage out, but that you can also model something to look really clean. So you could say, "Well, this project--," you know, things that just don't logically make sense, like, "We'll double the capacity of this facility, yet we'll halve the pollution." And you think, "How does that make sense, if you're going to have twice as many trucks, if the pollution is going to be half as much as it is today?" Like that just doesn't logically make sense, but they'll say, "Well, the model showed it." So we just have to get more technical, and it's hard, because we're not--I didn't go to school for that.

Collings

Right.

Green

And, you know, we all learn. There's some groups that have just become experts in alternative technology, and other groups who are passionate about theoretical ways to sort of talk our way out of this, and each of us kind of has our own little area that we kind of make our own. I think for us, we just have to--I've kind of taken health-impact assessments as my baby that I want to have happen, which is that an additional analysis of health beyond just air-pollution impacts, so if you start to look at other health impacts and you start to broaden the issue, rather than just a couple of kids get asthma [unclear], but more, "What impact does this really have on quality of life and real estate values in

certain neighborhoods," and things like that, that have real impacts but are never part of the dialogue.

Collings

So is that going to affect the way that you use community members, do you think, if you have to change your message?

Green

No, because I still think that a personal story has a lot of impact. It's more about the way I change my messaging, which is, you know, undeniably, when moms come to speak, the room goes quiet. But if I'm saying, "I'm here on behalf of the many moms who have kids with asthma, who experience this and that," it's less powerful. So it's more about me being more technical and them being the community voice.

Collings

Okay. So do you want to introduce a little bit about the 710?

Green

Sure.

Collings

Your coalitions members are, as I understand it, LBACA, East Yard Communities for Environmental Justice, CBE, Communite Pro Uno , Physicians for Social Responsibility, and then the supporting organizations NRDC and Coalition for Clean Air. And how did it all begin?

Green

Okay. Well, I'll do my best to fill in the blanks, because some of this happened before I came on staff, but I know enough of the history. Depending on who you talk to, but I think this is about as accurate as it gets--I've been trying to rewrite this history a little bit. In 2002, Andrea Hricko from USC found out about, kind of heard on the street, heard through documents--the woman used to work in new media, and so she has a way of just getting information--that Metro, which at the time was MTA, had all these plans to expand the 710 Freeway. So she went to a meeting sometime in late 2003 of this committee that was talking about all these expansions and all the different designs, and they didn't have a single--in all these documents, the word health was never once mentioned in any of these documents.

Green

And so she started to kind of share it with different groups up and down the corridor to say, "This is going to impact you, and I think that we should be more aware." And she sent some--early in the history, she sent a bunch of letters to folks, to key decision makers around the project, saying, "What was the community outreach that you did? Everyone I've spoken to doesn't know anything about this." So it took a while, but I think a lot of groups finally recognized, like, the massiveness of this project, and then when the designs

were starting to be released, especially in Long Beach, there were a huge number of houses that would have been demolished, in the original designs. So, of course, that got the attention of a ton of people, including council members and the mayor and everyone.

Green

So basically Metro and Gateway Cities Council government recognized that they couldn't--they had kind of messed up. So at the time, now, in retrospect, having learned about the project, 2003 was the year that the federal transportation bill was going to be, I guess, passed. I think that happens every six years, and so they were pushing to try to get this project designed and ready for 2003, so that they could get these federal transportation dollars to do this project. Well, so once they started realizing that they couldn't--this is my theory, because when you kind of look at the way the history goes--I have all these articles. But basically they kind of said, "Okay, we can't do this in time."

Green

So now we're entering into 2009 and the new transportation bill's coming forward, and it's this kind of connection of, "Oh, yeah, they probably recognized at that point that they couldn't do what they wanted to do, couldn't get it through in time."[Interruption, not transcribed.]

Green

So basically 2003, when they kind of scrapped all the plans that Metro and Gateway Cities was doing, they recognized that they had to have this very complex community-participation framework. I don't know how much detail to go into. It gets extremely complicated. But essentially, what they did was they established a framework that allowed for each of the individual cities to weigh in on what they wanted this project to be. Instead of naming it an expansion project, it became an improvement project, and I think that there's been--in the history of L.A., there's this huge thirty-year fight up in the north in Pasadena about this 710 Freeway extension that they've been successful in completely not allowing to happen. So I think that there was a lot of fear on the part of all these governing agencies, like, "Oh, gosh, this could become another Pasadena experience."

Green

So there's fifteen cities that are from Long Beach all the way up to the East Yards in Commerce in East L.A. that would be impacted by this expansion project. And so they had this structure where each city had a representative, and then that was known as the Tier 1, and then they had a Tier 2, which was set up as community, business, environment, public health, all these other representatives, that our project director sat on. So by pulling together all of these people, and they met over the course of six months, they developed this document known as the Tier 2 Report. And essentially, in design it's been a

really interesting thing, because they did fully vet community ideas. They created this document. It did give some guidance as to how the project would proceed, and I think it gave community members some power in terms of how the decisions about this project would be.

Green

What subsequently ended up happening, and again, all of this is over the course of basically 2003 to about April of 2006, so over the course of three years, they sort of slowly kind of pulled together all this information, had the Tier 2 Report, made a recommendation to the board who was making decisions about the project, who then kind of slightly shifted things about the project. So around 2003, when we were first finding out about this, I think that a lot of the groups up and down the corridor recognized we could fight in our one community, but there's fourteen other communities that will be impacted in a different way, and we really need to pull as many of us together. So that was how the Coalition for Environmental Health and Justice [CEHJ] was formed.

Green

I would say 90 percent of the groups there sat on the Tier 2 and were participating in that development of that Tier 2 Report and so were able to share their local community experiences, and that many of them are community organizers and have a lot of interaction with community groups, but also bring forward public health and public safety things. So none of us have ever been officially funded to participate in the coalition, which has probably been one of our biggest challenges in that this project is probably the biggest goods-movement project, definitely the biggest transportation project on the books in the country, yet the only groups participating are the few that you mentioned, and none of us have funding to support our work to do it. And the coalition itself doesn't have an official staffer or structure. I mean, we have a governing structure and by-laws and just sort of like--what do you call them--sort of a mission for collaboration, but other than that, it's pretty informal.

Green

So the idea was that as we develop our messaging in Long Beach, that East Yards and Commerce does the same thing. We're kind of preaching the same thing. So in 2006 they disbanded all of the community-participation frameworks, they being Gateway Cities Council government, said, "Thank you very much for your input. This Tier 2 Report will be the guiding--our bible for the way that this project is going to look, and we're moving forward into the environmental-impact process." So they were awarded 30 million dollars by a bunch of different governing agencies. They pulled together all this funding, and now we've just started with the environmental-impact process, and now I'm starting to realize what's happening and the timing, that 2009 is right around the

door and we've got this transportation bill that's coming forward on the federal level that likely will give funding to this project.

Green

We as CEHJ, I mean, the way that we, we being LBACA, have decided to continue our participation in CEHJ has been to really develop a strong local representation and understand what the local processes are, and try to get ourselves sat on the new community-participation framework that's been established. It's interesting, because I think this is another example of greenwashing, which is that the governing agencies have recognized the power that was developed when community members were really meaningfully engaged, and so they sort of scrapped all of that old template of who was participating and how, and they've established all of these new, very complicated names. There's the subject working groups, or SWIGs as they call them, the community advisory committees, or CACs, and the local advisory advisory committees, or LACs, and so they do this really complicated thing. It's almost like the cup and the ball, where you sort move which one has the ball under it--

Collings

The shell game.

Green

Yes, the shell game. So when they were convening their list of community members to participate in these local advisory committees, no one from CEHJ was on any of them. So they recognized that those of us who had been engaged and participating developed too much power and developed too much know-how about this project, and so they reestablished these new, fresh ideas, by pulling in fresh people, many of whom had no idea what the 710 project was.

Collings

And where did they pull the fresh people from?

Green

The different communities. So a perfect example is in Huntington Park, rather than calling upon CDE, who had been organizing there and has been there for thirty years, they asked a businessman, who I met at one of the project community members, who said, "So can you tell me, what exactly is this project? Like, what are they doing to the 710?" And I thought, you know, if they really wanted to do meaningful community participation, they would have asked prior representatives to come and participate, because it's so complicated. It's so complex. There's all these different components and moving parts and agencies involved, and structures and all of this, and so it's become very clear to us that we're being kind of stonewalled from the process. Although, of course, if we were to blatantly ask, we would be openly invited to participate, and so it's a matter of us determining what our next processes are going to be.

Green

That's why I say, for LBACA I think our focus is now to be really local, get representation on these local groups, so that we can participate in the bigger, corridor-wide structure. Where the project stands today is the scoping has happened, the first opening of community participation and these environmental-impact reports. It'll probably take them two years to draft these documents, and in the interim we're pushing really hard to get each of our local agencies represented in this community-participation framework, get more transparency about what's actually happening, educate our own bases about what the project is, the nitty gritty of that, and try to start implementing some of the board actions that were taken during the shell game of transition between community participation and the EIR process.

Green

And one of those specifically is the board took action on one of the recommendations of the Tier 2 Report, which was to say that they want a near-term air-quality action plan, which is essentially an air-quality plan to decrease pollution from this corridor prior to the start of construction. And through a series of very unfortunate circumstances, largely which were not successful when we were not engaged, but became successful when we were engaged, they now have this document that's essentially, "How would you draft an air-quality action plan," or as we call it, "a plan for a plan," and no intentions of trying to get this funded or moving forward on that.

Green

So those are kind of our two strategies is that there's the action from this board to create an air-quality action plan prior to the start of construction, which would happen in the next probably two or three years, and this local game of getting community members back engaged in this process.

Collings

But you're kind of doing a different thing, because prior to this, you've been trying to mitigate something that has already had a measurable impact, whereas now you're trying to prevent something from taking place. Does that present any challenges, in terms of organizing the community?

Green

Well, so here's what's interesting is that when you talk about green growth or you talk about just port expansion in general, there's this really wide spectrum about where community groups fall. Some of them feel like, "Let's just get the best project we can, so using the 710 as an example, let's get the cleanest technology, let's have them mitigate all construction impacts, let's have them," whatever, fill in the blanks. Whereas other groups are like, "Don't expand the 710. We're against the 710 expansion," and then there's groups in between. So that's really been the challenge of CEHJ. One is the capacity, two is the lack of

funding, three is really the complexity of this project. I mean, I gave you the real quick brush once over, but there are actually all of these different terms and all of these different structures and all of these different participation processes. It's so complicated that it really prevents meaningful participation.

Green

And CEHJ hadn't really been able to hammer out exactly where we stand. We started as the Coalition for Environmental Health and Justice, working towards the prevention of the 710 Freeway expansion. That was our letterhead. And one day, someone accidentally sent a letter out without having that on there, and we started getting more access to the powers that be, the governing agencies. You know, I did this history once where I looked back at when we sent letters, what actions the board took, and it was so clear. When we went and sent a letter and then testified, the board took an action towards our favor, and when we all got overwhelmed and caught up in other campaigns, and we didn't oversee what was going on, the board started to head in the wrong direction. So when we sent a letter that had a different letterhead than what we'd been using, and we got generally more access to the governing agencies, we recognized that they were willing to work on mitigation, but they were going to move forward on this project no matter what.

Collings

So what do you know about the fact that--why don't you kind of like go over that, because we talked about that a little bit off tape. So what happened now, with the letterhead?

Green

So one of the CEHJ members--I mean, that's the other challenge, is when you have nine or ten people working to work on a letter, and usually we've got a one-day turnaround, and you're e-mailing different drafts back and forth. It was completely an oversight.

Collings

You had an actual letterhead on printed stationery?

Green

No. I mean, it was very low-budge. But we had decided on what our name would be and what the letterhead would be and what our mission is, and the participating organizations down the side of the letterhead. So, I mean, it's all a Word document, so it was completely a deletion oversight. It had nothing to with anyone intentionally--and I don't think we realized this until maybe six months later, that someone said, "Wait a minute. When did we stop becoming the project that was against the 710 Freeway expansion, the coalition that was against the 710 Freeway expansion, and we were just Coalition for Environmental Health and Justice?" maybe working towards healthier communities or something. And so that was when--and again, the capacity

thing comes into play. All of us are stretched. All of us are way overworked. We've got all of our base building to do, we have to sustain our own internal projects. Imagine all of these things that we have no dedicated funding to sit down and hash these things out, so everything happens in a much slower pace. Not to mention we've been meeting monthly and trying to get to these project committee meetings and all of these other things, participating in Tier 2.

Green

So by the time we really recognized it, we sort of said, "Well, we kind of have a problem here. We can't take that back, number one. And number two, the EIR and EIS has already moved forward. So what we can do is try to make recommendations about what we think the project should be." And rather than kind of come up with CEHJ's own dreams about what we think it should be, we've always gone back to the Tier 2 document and its recommendations, and it has, I think, ten or twelve recommendations in there, which, frankly, one of them is that the project result in the corridor achieving federal and state air-quality standards. And if they were to expand the freeway how they initially had talked about, whether it be ten general-purpose lanes, four truck-only lanes, I don't understand how you could possibly under any circumstance achieve federal and state air-quality standards.

Green

So although we've had to now not overtly state that we're against the 710 Freeway expansion, we are pushing these recommendations which include things that make a meaningful look at alternatives be mandatory. So that's kind of how we've pushed our game. And it's really such a great example of how when you do form coalitions, and you're organized and you have capacity, you can meaningfully change the course of a project. I mean, that timeline that I did that showed we all went to this meeting, we testified, then we followed up with a letter and had a meeting with someone, and the project went the direction we wanted it to, and then we didn't for a couple of months, because we were all overwhelmed--the project starts to slip back on what the governing agencies want. So it's such a perfect example of the community's power. And the fact that we've been excluded from this new process is also an example of how they recognize that the community groups have power, but without funding, without capacity, without dedicated staff to work on these things, it's so quickly becomes like the second-tier thing that you have to work on, and so then how do you carry forward this project and this campaign?

Collings

Yes. Now, the success that you had, was that before or after that phrase was missing from the letterhead?

Green

Both before and after. It actually didn't change. It really didn't change our ability to continue advocating. I think it just maybe made CEHJ have a little midlife crisis, like, "Oh, my gosh, what are we for? If we're not against the expansion, what are we for?"

Collings

Yes. Now, at least one of the groups is totally against the expansion, right?

Green

Yes.

Collings

I mean, the group out in Riverside [CCAEJ] is the one that comes to my mind.

Green

They're not part of our coalition, but guaranteed they are like East Yard Communities for Environmental Justice is--frankly, I don't know where LBACA stands on this, except to say that where we've always--the last time it was brought to our board was that we're really concerned about the health impacts, and so we're for a project that eliminates any health impacts. So that's when we all went back to the Tier 2. We said, "You know, the Tier 2 really is the governing document. It's the most fully vetted document that has groups and members from all communities with all different perspectives," industry, business, physicians, whatever, public health, etc. So like I said, we could come up with our own vision of what it is, but we should really go back to what the community wants, because that's what we always advocate for, is what the community wants. And so that's why we've just made these recommendations our base, essentially.

Collings

Now, in terms of, like, the economic contribution of a project like this, I'm sort of guessing that most of the positive economic impact would come at the start, at the source of the freeway, I mean, in terms of possible jobs, selling to truckers, being a trucker, what have you, whereas as you go farther along the corridor, those kinds of benefits would disappear. Has there been any discussion along those lines?

Green

Actually, how it works is this corridor--the trucks that are coming from both ports go a number of different places. One, they go up the 710 to various, what are called transloading facilities, which are essentially big distribution centers, where they'll take their cargo in a forty-foot container from the ports to a transload facility, empty the container and re-package it into a fifty-three-foot container, which allows them to take more goods. Then they'll get back on the 710 and go up to the railyards, which are in East L.A.-Commerce area, and then they'll put those on a train which will head out of the region. Or they'll just head straight up to Commerce-East L.A. and put them on a train and head out. Or

they'll up and then they'll head up the 60 [Freeway] to Riverside, where there are distribution centers out there, and sometimes come back and go back down to L.A.

Green

So the expansion of the project is 100 percent absolutely all about expanding capacity at the ports. If you were to eliminate all the truck traffic, which there's an estimated 25 percent of the traffic on there is truck traffic, heavy-duty diesel trucks, if you were to eliminate that traffic, there would be no issues with public safety. There wouldn't be the accidents that we're seeing. There wouldn't be the pollution to the degree that we're seeing, and there really wouldn't be the need to expand, and that's been demonstrated. In 2003 there was a port lockout when the ILWU was in their contract renegotiation, and there were groups from various agencies that did air-quality monitoring along the 710, and CALTRANS did their truck counts, and there were so few trucks on the road that the traffic was flowing it doesn't normally flow, number one. But number two, it was over a week, over the course of the week, because people started to recognize that there wasn't truck traffic, all of that space filled in with car traffic, and that's significant from the standpoint which is that this concept that if you expand the freeway you'll have a faster flow of goods. Well, the reality is that people know that once you expand a freeway, there's more capacity, so more people start to use that road. It's a term called induced traffic. So it really disputes their argument that if we expand this, we'll have a freer flow of goods. What we know is that it'll be freer flow for a couple of years, until that capacity is filled back up again. And so really it's our argument for, "What are we going to do then, expand it again and expand it again, until all of a sudden we have nothing but roads?"

Green

No, we have to be creative, innovative in the way that we move our goods, so that we can look at different ways of doing business, rather than just constantly expanding freeways. But I mean, look how long that took me to explain to you. You get two minutes in front of a board. I can't nearly get that across. So it's this kind of stuff, where I would say the biggest thing that they hang their hat on is this concept that faster freight equals cleaner air, that if we get freight moving faster, the air will automatically be cleaner. And so if we expand from an eight-lane freeway to a ten-lane plus four truck-only lanes, we will automatically have everybody going faster, which means cleaner air. Which if you use your logic hat and you think about if you have ten cars going down the road versus twenty cars going down the road, you're going to have more pollution with the twenty cars, whether or not they're going faster or slower.

Green

And then the science has shown that trucks going between forty and sixty miles per hour really are the only ones that you get that slight pollution gain, so what happens when trucks are going slower than that, what happens if they are going faster than that, and what if there's twice as many? So it's all these kind of complicated arguments that we--you know, they'll come out with something and we'll go, "Gosh, on its face that's so ridiculous." And then we're going to--I mean, it took me a year. We had USC students do an analysis of induced traffic and do a review of all the literature from planning and policy. We had two meetings with AQMD [Air Quality Management District] scientists and CARB scientists, to try to understand this induced traffic, faster freight, cleaner air thing. We came out with a fact sheet, and then despite all of this work, I mean, two years later we finally have all of this together, we hear the governor saying, "Faster freight equals cleaner air." We're like, we can't win.

Green

So it's this energy behind expanding and this economic engine as being so incredibly powerful that even that we're willing to just accept this concept that this is how you fix the problem, and it's completely--

Collings

Well, they don't care if you're right.

Green

Right.

Collings

It's the greenwashing that you were talking about.

Green

Exactly. And I think what's interesting is I've thought about this a lot, because I just keep thinking, like, how do you intervene? Even when we have a good city council member, they're thinking about their upward mobility, and they're thinking, "I want to be in the legislature," or, "I might want to run for mayor or governor," and so they don't want to say anything that's going to make them stick out. That's one part of the problem, in terms of changing political will, because that's all it's about. I mean, as someone at CEHJ who gave a presentation about the 710 said, she said, "If we can put a man on the Moon, we could come up with something better than a freeway expansion for this project. We have the innovation. It's just that there's no political will to really do that."

Green

And so I think about, "How do we change this concept? How do we gain the political will that we need?" And term limits have made challenges in that people really want to say that, "I did something during my two terms," in whatever House, and so the fastest way is not to be innovative and take time to figure out what the thing is. The fastest way is to just do what we know, and so I think that's really the challenge of, how do we get this political will to be

something different than it is? And with community groups, it's with a lot of time and energy that we invest in helping people understand what's going on and maybe they move a millimeter. But it's something, you know. So it's really a transition over time.

Collings

But what do you see as the payback of the community-group involvement at this point? Because earlier, you were having a lot of success with, as you were saying, people speaking truth to power and putting out all of this information about the health effects. But now you're saying that information about health effects, information about how faster does not equal cleaner is just being pushed aside and disregarded. How do you get past that?

Green

I think where we're all at right now, all of us groups that are involved in this is that we're having a midlife crisis, where we're almost recognizing that we have to play their game, but we have to play it in a way--we have less money and less capacity and less ability and less access to information, so the media piece and building public opinion is huge. We've really kind of largely sort of ignored that as a possibility, and when we found out that the ports have hired these million-dollar contractors to do their PR we thought, "Oh, my god. We can never get a million-dollar contractor." But we do have community on our side, and so there's power in that. It maybe not a million dollars worth, but it's something.

Green

And we've started to get smarter about technical expertise. We've started to hire more contractors like this media consultant, like we have attorneys that are helping us understand, I mean, legalese that happens around EIR, EIS, and suing, which is the one thing that we do have. There is the threat of lawsuits a lot, which gets us somewhere. But it's hard. I mean, it's really--and I don't think many people understand how much time and energy it takes to do community organizing, especially around something as complex as this. So I think some of us feel like when things get really rough out there, we sort of retreat back into our community and say, "Let's just build our base. Let's just build our power." So I hear a lot of people saying that, like, "Okay, you know what? I can't get involved in that, because I have to go back and build my base," which is incredibly important and incredibly time consuming, but then they'll sort of drop off the grid, and then they can't be responsible for what they're not giving oversight to.

Green

So I think we all sort of deal with it in different ways. I mean, I laugh, because every meeting we have, there's a lot of collaboratives that we all sort of form, and I feel like every collaborative meeting there's someone who's banging on

the table saying, "Why aren't you involved in this?" And we're all sort of like, "Yeah, I've been there, too," like where you're the one person who is like really upset or pissed off about something that's happening, and wondering why everyone else isn't engaged, and you realize it's because they're so overworked and they just don't have the capacity to handle it. And so you feel like you become the champion all of a sudden of, like, southern California's Prop 1B community participation, and you're like talking to the CTC board, going, how did I get to be this person? And all of a sudden, everyone gets excited at the last minute, and you're like, "You needed to be here months and months ago." So that's what happens a lot is we kind of all cycle through and in and out of what this work is, but I think that's where we rely on each other. We say, "Thank God you're doing that, because I don't have the capacity." And then eventually you say, "Okay. Sit down with me and explain to me what's really going on." So that's where the collaboration piece is really important.

Collings

Yes. It's kind of almost like a tag team in that sense.

Green

Yes, yes.

Collings

I'm thinking about some interviews that I did on the Ballona wetlands, the Playa Vista development and how much local news coverage there was.

Green

Yes. It's so important. But the thing that's so hard--this is really the next step, which is I'm working really--just kind of a personal passion is the way that--let's see how to explain this. See, here's the perfect example. My family doesn't know what I'm doing. They sort of know what I'm doing, but if my own family, who loves me and is interested and cares, can't quite get what I'm doing, how can somebody else who is impacted get what I'm doing? And so it's kind of like, I've heard it be called, like, the Mom test, like can you explain it to your mom and have her understand it? And it's developing your elevator speech. It's developing the way that--even things like we calls this goods movement, and what an unfriendly term. I mean, we've thought, well, maybe we should call it freight transport. No, that's kind of unfriendly, too.

Green

Someone said something, Andrea [Hricko] said something like, "Urban freight transport," and I was like, "That's better, but then we have to change everybody's terminology." So this all gets back to the media and messaging.

Collings

That's a really good point, yes.

Green

So we've all recognized that for one, we don't have enough documentation in very familiar and fun forms. I mean, if you wanted to know the health impacts, I could send you a fifty-page letter that we wrote that has all of them documented with citations, but if you're a community member, you're like, "I'm not going to read that." So it's getting back to more colloquializing what we're seeing, and we have all the data we need now. It's just like, how do we package it and make it meaningful for other people? That's really where we're at right now, and I think my interest is in doing like this digital-media work, and this is [unclear] because I'm artistic and I like to do kind of things with photos and things like that, and I think that that catches people's eyes. But also to allow us to have more capacity, because a lot of us are going around doing all these presentations everywhere, and that's half of my day gone, whereas if we had something online, or a You Tube video, or something that we could sort of send out, that would give me back my time. So it's that, too, building our own capacity to be around for more things, relying on experts and developing a media messaging game, which none of us are--I mean, (a), nobody has capacity in their staffing to do that. None of us have like a communications person. A couple of the bigger groups, CCA, [unclear] does, but we don't have a communications person, and I didn't go to communications school. I don't know any--I mean, as a consumer I do, but other than that I don't.

Collings

But you're right. I mean, it's not even widely understood that the port is here, let alone that it's such a huge economic engine, and let alone that it's--

Green

A polluting force.

Collings

Yes. And just that alone, I think, is not even particularly understood by your average Angeleno.

Green

Yes. I was in San Francisco this weekend, and there was a huge Hanjin freightliner that came through that had typical, huge boxes. It was passing right underneath the Golden Gate Bridge, and everyone was like, "Oh, that's so cute and so cool." And I was, of course, taking pictures for work. I was thinking, this is such a powerful display of this Golden Gate Park, Golden Gate Bridge, beautiful, beautiful, and then all of a sudden comes this huge freightliner with like these puffs of smoke coming out the top, and I was thinking, like, isn't that amazing that this is passing by and people are not making the connection that this is crap coming from China that we buy and we consume, that there's never that--it's the same thing as food movement and food-justice movement, where people don't ever think about, "Where does all this come from?" It's the same thing.

Green

But I think that society is ready for it. I think there have been enough scares from like the dog food and the toothpaste from China and lead poisoning from China. People are starting to wake up to, like, "Oh, wow. This whole concept of shipping our jobs across seas has all these other implications, too," and where are they getting shipped through but ports. But I mean, again, these are things I think about all the time. Like when you see little boys and girls playing with toys, what do they play with? They play with trucks and with trains and with boats, and they have this very childhood longing, isn't that sweet kind of connection that people feel, and a port is just more of those kind of sweet memories.

Collings

Right. It's very romantic and it's very connected to the idea of progress and building the economy and jobs, and it's very, very difficult to break through that kind of image.

Green

Yes, yes. And I think, sadly, I don't know that I necessarily subscribe much to this, but I think that 9/11 has given us an opportunity in that there is a very real terrorism threat, but there's not very much oversight of what's coming in and out. So we have not capitalized on that, and I think, frankly, it's kind of one of those things where like we see ourselves as the good guys, and why would we ever summon up something so horrible as 9/11 to help us? But then at the same time, I think we could give--a lot of people are freaked out about security, and a lot of the workers there are freaked out about security, so that's a real--

Collings

So how would concerns about security work into mitigating health impacts?

Green

For one, what comes through these ports is not being checked. I mean, they do these random checks on containers, but it's so minimal, and so a lot of the legislation that we've pushed in the past have been to increase oversight of what's coming through, which also, you know, if you're going to add a tax on that, you can add a tax on for environmental quality as well. It's like a recognition that the stuff that we're bringing through here needs more oversight, and I think it's about bringing awareness to what's coming through, but also that they go really nicely hand in hand. If you're going to do this--I think the container bill that we've been working on, I think the prior--I can't remember which year it was, but one of the drafts of the bill had--it was $30 per box, $10 for port security, $10 for environmental mitigation, and $10 for infrastructure improvements. Then Bush passed his port securities bill, and so they removed the security (sic) piece. And that's not really been trickling down that well.

Green

But yes, and the other thing is a big piece of port security is who's working at the ports, and them wanting to do background checks on everyone and start to get a handle on the workforce. What part of that piece is in getting a handle on who's working there, there is an opening for unionization, increased oversight of the labor standards. I mean, there's essentially [unclear]--

Collings

And how clean the trucks are.

Green

And how clean the trucks are. And what we're actually putting, what standards we have on the work that people are doing, which ties back into health in so many ways. I mean, social justice and environmental justice are interlinked in so many ways. So yes, I mean, it's all really connected. We just haven't capitalized on it, I don't know why. We're too busy. We don't have the time to think about it.

Collings

Yes. Well, does the coalition have a shared vision in that regard?

Green

I would say that's my biggest challenge. I may have talked about it before, which is being the one who's in the front lines--

Collings

Because you're closest to the port, is that what you're saying?

Green

No. When you say the coalition, are you talking about LBACA?

Collings

No. I'm talking about the larger coalition that deals with the goods--the corridor.

Green

No. We all have very different capacities and abilities to sort of think about and frame this issue, and I think it ties back into sort of where LBACA stands with it, which is if you ask your community mom who's participating, they're like, "Shut it down."

Collings

Shut down the whole port.

Green

Shut down the whole thing, or let's just stop growing and we'll just work with what we have. Let's deal with what we have. Whereas there are likely some folks in our coalition who feel very differently.

Collings

Like who?

Green

Perhaps--I mean, I would just think politically some people feel like--I can't tell you how many times I hear this, that, "Global trade is here to stay, and it's going to come, and take it or leave it." Or, you know, "Like it or not, it's here. It's here to stay. This is the realities." And I just don't feel like that's a very American way of thinking, like I think that we've done some incredible things in our history that are not that way, and so that's, I think, what always surprises me, is that how you can acquiesce so quickly and just get over it and move on, when we can demand more from our companies, from our government. We have that ability, and if you just sort of acquiesce and say, "Oh, it's here." So I wouldn't say it's specific organizations per se. It's specific people within various organizations who are part of our coalition that just their politics don't align with being fringy or radical as they see it, when really what we're demanding are very normal, basic human rights.

Green

So that challenges our ability to participate in the dialogue in that I constantly feel like I'm tempering. You know, if I could, I would stand out and say the following things. We should put a moratorium on port growth until we can get a handle on what we have and clean up what we have. There should be public health benefits. From what we have existing, there should be a tax just for public health. The container bill should have nothing to do with infrastructure. We shouldn't be subsidizing this with taxpayer dollars, all of these things, but I don't know if that's where LBACA stands, and all the coalitions that we work with, I don't know that that's where everyone stands. And that's my personal feeling. That's not necessarily that of our board and our mission.

Green

So I'm also sort of hamstrung by that and feel sort of confused sometimes, like how can we be really pushing to clean up the 710 Freeway when we should just really not let it happen. We should think of something more innovative than expanding a freeway to move goods around. So that's the hardest thing, I think, is not only, you know, I spend a lot of time reading this stuff and getting excited, and then I think, how do I break this down to make this meaningful to a mom who has a kid with asthma? How do I help my board understand that this is a critical thing, when they're sort of like once a quarter meeting with me about all the different things that LBACA is doing? It's really, again, the capacity.

Collings

I mean, it almost seems like it kind of like goes back to your upbringing a little bit, where like your family just said, "Well, we don't have to live in our nuclear-family house in the suburbs, because it doesn't suit our needs. We can go and do this--"

Green

Communal living?

Collings

"--communal living, because it's going to work better for us," which is a radical departure from the status quo. So perhaps it gives you the intellectual courage to step forward and say that the port should not grow--

Green

Should be different.

Collings

--until it gets cleaned up, whereas probably the more standard response would be, in fact, that the American way of life demands growth, demands goods, demands commerce.

Green

It's true. It's a really good point. I think it does give me pause when sort of people think, like, this is--I've got to interrupt myself and say there's this great expose that somebody did, Annie Leonard did. It's called "The Story of Stuff," I think I may have mentioned it before. She does this really cute kind of graphics that talks about sort of where the consumer products come from and what health impacts do they cause and what detriment to the environment. And you watch it and you think--the most poignant part of it is there's this very obvious departure in the 1950s that economists made to frame our economy, which is this whole concept of--how does she describe it--obsolescence, that all of the things that we make should either have perceived obsolescence or actual obsolescence. And I can't tell you how many times when I've gone to Target and bought some crappy thing, the highest-priced thing there, but mind you, it's whatever it is, something crappy made in China, and it breaks two months later, and I keep thinking, this is why we have what we have. It was very well-thought out. It was a completely academic and intellectual decision that was made in the fifties to have this occur in our economy. So if they could have done that and created this mess, then we can undo it, and that's really her thesis, and that's really the thesis that kind of I feel I believe in. And yet, what's standing in our way is political will and sort of consumer will to really recognize that.

Green

And so that's where the base building and the political side kind of come in, is that you try to base build to share a different way of thinking about things, and then try to build the political will to help them understand that there are people who would support those who are brave enough to change that.

Collings

So the challenge with regard to the 710 Freeway is to actually change the thinking of the coalition members--

Green

Well, or help us--I mean, like I said, it's capacity, fundraising, all that kind of stuff, just in terms of our ability to participate. But in a more esoteric way, I think we're all more or less aligned. There are probably differences in our opinions of how things should happen, or maybe we're a little bit on one side of the spectrum or not, but generally we're all aligned in our thinking. The biggest challenge is to help decision makers understand that doing the status quo is not going to get us somewhere different. They keep saying in these project committee meetings for the 710 that, "This is the most interesting and unique and new way of doing a freeway project." What they mean by that is that, "We had to go through hell to get here, and now we're finally able to go back to the status quo."

Green

Since the EIR contracts were given to these contractors, there's been no change of course from anything other than just a regular paved road expansion, other than that they keep saying that it's really different and innovative. I have yet to see what's innovative about it yet. Still ten lanes, still four truck lanes, nothing different. So I don't know what we've done. Like, I'm just like, "What have we done?" We gave them our talking points, basically. Now what? So it's really like--I mean, I was on the phone last night with one of our partners who just called and was like, "A new EIR came out," on a specific project, this bridge expansion that they want to do, "and they didn't talk about this or that." She's like, "It's so bad." She's like, "How many times do you have to get another one of these documents and be like, how have we been--?" You know, this is like the thirteenth document she's read in its entirety, these thousand-page documents, and she's like, "Nothing is different. Nothing's changed. Yet here we are beating our drum and people are changing their talk," so it's this hope that, I think, things come in phases, that you get people talking your language and recognizing the impacts, and then maybe they start to actually make the changes. It's just change is so slow.

Collings

Okay.

[End of interview]

1.4. Session 4 (December 22, 2008)

Collings

Today is December 22, 2008, Jane Collings interviewing Elina Green in her office in Long Beach. When we left last time, you were expressing a sense of despondency.

Green

[laughs] I'm like, I don't even remember what we talked about last time.

Collings

Well, it was some sort of despondency about the efforts to prevent and mitigate the 710 expansion project, how the port had taken on the language of the activist groups and was saying things like, "We've cut emissions by 50 percent," but as you were pointing out, if that makes the emissions still eight times higher than they should be, to the untutored ear it sounds great, but they have just kind of like taken on your language. I was just wondering, first of all, if you had anything to add to that, and then I also wanted to ask you if you felt just from a more philosophical standpoint if it's important to do this kind of work that you're doing, even if it fails?

Green

Oh, that's a good question. Well, it's worth clarifying that in this case with the 710, it's not the port. It's Cal Trans, Metro, Gateway cities, and I think in terms of what to add, it's been really interesting to see the current events with the newest package and the way that Obama's new incoming administration is kind of trying to handle this issue, where there's a huge lobbying force for road building, and there's a huge lobbying force on the--well, not as huge, but eight--

Collings

Right, infrastructure projects.

Green

Right. And then there are those who are saying, "We know that what we've been doing hasn't been working, and it's time for us to sort of change our ways, and this is our opportunity, and so let's really invest in alternative transportation and green jobs and green technology." But what's interesting is, I think this is what we run into when we're trying to sort of advocate for the alternatives, is that we don't really know what that is or what that means, and because it's more of a question, it kind of sets you up for a losing battle, if that makes sense. Like often we're saying, "We don't want that," instead of, "We do want this."

Collings

Right.

Green

And so I think it will be really interesting what happens in terms of this project specifically. I mean, there's going to be completely ramifications based on the federal stimulus package what ends up happening with this project, not that this project is eligible for those monies, but just that if the administration decides to really change the way we do business with this stimulus package, then likely that will play out in the way that the 710 receives its funding, because it's sort of counting on federal funds. So I do think what's been really nice to hear is that on the federal level, the lobby that is sort of on the community and green jobs and green growth thing is they're saying the same stuff we're saying here. And it's sort of like, "Yeah, it's the logical thing." And the reason we're not

winning here, or haven't yet thus far won here is because this is like a huge machine that's bigger than Long Beach.

Collings

Right. Well, Jesse Marquez talks about mag-lev trains for moving freight.

Green

Yes. And that's one of the big things we've actually--I don't know if I mentioned before, we got a million-dollar additional money from Port of L.A., and I met with the harbor commissioner, one of the harbor commissioners from L.A. last week about the million dollars, to sort of say, "Hey, where does that stand?" And she said that basically, kind of confidentially but not entirely, she said Cal Trans was sort of saying, "Hey, what happens if we weren't to follow up on that million dollars?" And she said, "You guys would be in a whole lot of trouble." So I guess the way the Port of L.A. added their money in, if Cal Trans doesn't follow up on that million dollars to look at something like mag-lev, then they'll lose the 5 million that Port of L.A. put in for the EIR, so they'll be 5 million dollars short of that, and they'll have lost a big partner.

Green

So there are still some avenues. I mean, it's not like we've gotten to that place. Plus I think what's been--I was just on a call this morning with a statewide group that does trainings in health-impact assessments, and we've managed to pull together this pretty phenomenal training coming up in January, with EPA, South Coast Air Quality Management District, all the community groups that are working on this, a bunch of university partners, UCLA, USC, Occidental College, to come together and be trained on health-impact assessments as it relates to this project, to try to figure out an avenue to have a meaningful look at what the health impacts of this project would be. So there's a lot of opportunity still.

Green

And I would say, to get back to your follow-up question of whether or not our work is meaningful whether or not we lose, I think absolutely yes, because I think, for example, if you look at the dialogue that's happening on the federal level, it wouldn't be happening if it weren't for local projects being questioned like this, not just ours, obviously, throughout the country. And secondly, the partnerships that are formed, you know, we may lose on the 710, but then we may have an advocate in EPA that we've never really had before, or South Coast Air Quality Management District or whatever. And I think it does help community members feel like they want to continue. Sometimes when you lose, that's kind of what--

Collings

Oh, yes.[Interruption, not transcribed.]

Collings

So have their been instances where a project didn't have the hoped for outcome, and it affected the morale of the community members that were involved?

Green

I would say, well, because of the way that our community members look at things, they don't look at them as project by project, they sort of think of things as their community. And so I may feel that way, like that there's a specific project that we don't get the mitigations we want. There's a project at Port of Long Beach called Middle Harbor , and just that terminal expansion itself is larger than the entire Port of Oakland. It's this huge project, and we've, frankly, been completely losing ground. But because it's so complicated and because--it's the perfect example of how the language has been co-opted, and that they're using all these monitoring things, that the community is just in general pissed at the port. They don't really get that it's like--and not to say that they're not savvy. I'm just saying that the details of the project have not necessarily been communicated to the extent that, like, I'm in these conversations.

Green

That being said, I think the thing I always hear them say is like, "Hay que luchar," "you have to keep fighting," you have to keep fighting. So I think that their perspective is more about like when the air is cleaner and we feel like we are part of the dialogue, then we'll feel like a good job was done. Until then, the job's never done.

Collings

Okay. So keeping people motivated beyond that, the next battle has not really been a problem.

Green

Well, it has and it hasn't. I mean, I think one thing is that with policy work in general--I just did a training two weeks ago with the new staff we hired that were community volunteers in the past, and I was kind of helping them understand the policy-making process. No, maybe it was a month ago, because then we were at a meeting a week or so later, and they were explaining to other community members at this meeting that, "You might think that the staff are not doing anything on your issue, but actually, they're working really hard behind the scenes, and the process is what takes so long. It's not the staff dragging their feet." And so I think for them that was this big eye-opening thing, like, "Oh, yeah, policy making is a really long process." And so they've asked to do some more concrete small projects, where you kind of have a good warm fuzzy in the middle, so they're going to be working on the next year a legacy project, where they'll do something really sort of typical volunteer, like clean up the park or do a beach clean up or something, just to kind of keep people engaged, because I think that they also want to have those moments

where we're like, "Oh, lookit. We left and it's cleaner than when we came," things like that. So it's kind of a constant struggle.

Collings

Yes. That sounds like it would be an important balance to maintain.

Green

Yes, yes.

Collings

I was going to ask you if there were times when, like, the community members that you work with have brought a project to you.

Green

Yes, last week. There's this project, it's the Schuyler Heim Bridge, and then it moves into the State Route 47 [Expressway] Project. It's been a little bit on my radar, but, frankly, it's kind of the one of the many, and I knew some advocates were already sort of, quote, unquote, "covering" that project. But then one of my staffers, one of the moms that's newly been hired, came in and she sort of handed me this flyer and said, "Do you know what this flyer is?" It was such a great moment of her having worked with us to be aware enough to recognize that this might be important. I mean, the project is hugely important. It's a huge project that's going to have a major health impact, so much so that they're going to actually have to put H-VAC systems in people's home that live near this project, because it's got so many health impacts.

Collings

Wow.

Green

And they're not really acknowledging the degree to which the health impacts will be, so recognizing that they're vastly underestimating, and yet still having to put H-VAC systems in homes. So I thought, okay, this is an opportunity for us to get involved, so actually today I'm working on a letter to ask for a public meeting, because the way that the agency did their outreach was to sort of thrust these--at the begging of the other advocates who have been working on this, they sort of thrust these flyers in people's mailboxes, Spanish and English, that say, "This is what this project is. If you're interested in learning more, we've put on reference at the library, at the following six libraries, the 300-page or 500-page draft EIR." And that's it. No mention of health, no mention of what the design would be, no mention of what it actually is.

Green

And then she went to the library and followed up and found out that they only have it there in English. And she lives in the neighborhood right by where this expressway would be expanded, so she's very much interested. She's personally impacted. She didn't even know anything about these issues before sort of volunteering with us, so it's kind of a great example of how they get engaged

and how having local ties to the community can really impact the way that you do that.

Collings

Right. And do you think that there will be more momentum among community members because this is something that came out of--

Green

Her?

Collings

Yes.

Green

I think--well, so I'm writing this letter to request a public meeting, and I think that if we get a public meeting, then she'll be able to be a better advocate than I would be normally without her, and that she'll be able to go to her neighbors and say, "Hey, you got that flyer. So did I. There's this meeting now that they're doing about the project." And it kind of gave us legitimacy in terms of reaching out to other agencies that we want to have sign onto the letter, in that other community-based organizations who have a base also were like, "Oh, some of our members also got that flyer. Yeah, we'd like to sign on." So that's how we've been able to--we got four groups to sign onto the letter.

Collings

Right. So this is the only time that somebody has brought something to your attention, is that--

Green

I mean, that I can think of. Not that it--I mean, I would say in terms of a project that I had no idea what the status was on it. Definitely there's been notices about public meetings that I knew about, that community members had said, "Hey, I got the 710 scoping comment notice letter," and I'm like, "Okay, great." But usually, we've been to enough of these public meetings that our e-mail is on there, so we'll usually get a copy at the office, too.

Collings

I guess I was also sort of wondering if like over the time of doing this and with all of the kind of like consciousness raising and education that's going on among the community, if you were starting to sort of sense that--

Green

An awareness on their part.

Collings

--that there was an awareness out there that was growing.

Green

Yes. I think that this is part of the problem with where we're at in our lifecycle is that--and our grantor, most recent grantor that funds our policy work recognized this in the way that they phrased the last RFP, where they said,

"We're really looking towards community investment." So instead of re-funding the staffer who I had who was doing outreach, we closed her position and we've hired two community members. They're leading our outreach efforts. They're leading our community meetings. And the recognition that so much often stays with the organization and the staff, that community members sort of sit back and go, "Okay, what's next?" instead of really taking that next step, active role. And not that they won't, of course, come to a meeting and go and testify. It's not to say that they aren't engaged, it's just that they don't take that step of sort of finding out about it on their own. So they look to us as the experts, instead of really them sort of recognizing that they have that.

Green

And there are exceptions, which are often the neighborhood assessment team members. They sort of learn to be watchdogs of their community, and then just sort of exceptional leaders who kind of get it in a different way. So yes, I mean, I think that that's what our goal is for this next round of funding the next two years, is to really, by having hired these women, to really push them to take the lead on things and then help others understand how to do that.

Collings

Right. I wanted to ask just a little bit more about some of your meeting situations, you know, just kind of piggybacking on that discussion, because you were talking about how, well, you have the monthly Health and Housing meetings, and you had been talking about how working on the A-team, for example, was very empowering for women. I was just wondering just really kind of what goes on at the Health and Housing meetings. Is there any kind of what you might call consciousness-raising component to those meetings?

Green

Yes.

Collings

What is really the dynamic in these monthly community meetings?

Green

Well, so I can talk about how it's been and also how it's going to change, because I think that having now community moms, we now have our new community moms leading the meetings, and they've done a really comprehensive kind of strategic-planning process that they're embarking on, so it'll be a little bit different. But how it has been is it was started as a combined effort between us and the Community Partners Council [CPC], which is another leadership group here in Long Beach, because we've been working on housing policy and outdoor air-pollution policy work, and they were doing the same, and so a lot of times it was the same women going to both meetings, and we thought, well, we'll just combine them and do this monthly meeting.

Green

The design was to have an hour of housing and an hour of outdoor air-pollution issues, so sometimes it's a training, sometimes it's sort of a quick overview of, "Remember, we've been trained on this project. Well, there's this meeting coming up and they really need people to come and testify," and kind of the coordination of how we get people there. And then to kind of keep people engaged, we also opened it up to other issues that they're interested in, like we did a domestic violence training, I want to say in September.

Collings

And that was an issue that members asked for?

Green

Yes.

Collings

Okay.

Green

And then we kind of closed it out with the ending of our grant when we had the last, the staffer, and then we hired these two new women who are kind of, they're tasked with running this group. And so they've called, I don't know, they've called maybe 200 people that have been involved in all the different trainings and sessions and everything that we and CPC have done, and they've developed this list of people, and they did door-to-door outreach, and we have our first meeting in January, and they're kind of starting fresh. They've mapped out twelve months again. And really, we see the group as where our community base comes together, how they stay connected to the issues that we're working on, and how they get trained on any other issues that we feel like are important to their ability to kind of participate in policy and community work in general.

Green

We do a lot of that at our LBACA Coalition meetings as well, but this is really meant for community members, so agency people really don't go, and I think that that makes them feel a lot more comfortable in asking questions and feeling like it's their space to kind of dialogue. It's also, like I was saying, I'm sure I've said before where it's also kind of their social network and their social outlet, and that we provide interpretation and transportation and food and ChildWatch, so that they can kind of just come and take in whatever it is that they want to take in. But so when they did the strategic planning, when our two new staff did this strategic planning, they basically surveyed all these women and asked them what their interests were, and, of course, we have our I guess ulterior motives of what we want to engage them in ultimately.

Green

But some of them are brand new, and some of them go back twelve years, so there's varying levels of understanding, so we're kind of starting 2009 again fresh with a new group, and some of the issues will be kind of outside of what

we normally work on, so we'll do some trainings on things like obesity, healthy lifestyles, and we'll retrain on asthma and air pollution and those impacts, and we'll do all of that. But then within the context of that group, as we start to kind of get them engaged and get them re-engaged, I should say, we'll also be inviting them to participate in opportunities to testify, and from that group, we'll also interview and select our new A-team for 2009. And then again, it's usually the A-team members who are the ones who get really involved in the policy work. We have between three and five people that we'll pick, and they're the ones who go to every hearing and testify at everything, not that occasionally some other groups [unclear] how they don't come, but generally that's how it is.

Collings

Do you have any, like, sense or examples of how these meetings and these discussions of various topics have maybe impacted the personal lives of particular members?

Green

I think some come and, I mean, it really depends on the topic. People will really be interested in their one issue, and so when it's their one issue, like housing, they get super fired up. Like I can speak to two members in particular, who are really, really passionate about the issue of housing policy, so they've been asking time and time again, "Can we have a tenant rights and responsibilities, and can we have policy solutions for affordable housing trainings?" And we finally did both of those, and they have both since joined an affordable housing board and are really active in the low-income tenant board and have been helping kind of form the work of a coalition that works in Long Beach. And they're less involved in our air-pollution work, and that's fine. As far as we're concerned, that's a success, because they're doing something that they're volunteering their time, they're actively participating in the community, and that's what we try to bring out.

Green

I mean, of course, we want to see the air-pollution levels go down, and we see an impact when community members come and participate, but we're not going to do that unless they're passionate about it, you know? So those who are excited about it usually join the A-team and then usually become excited about testifying and see those moments to--that kind of keeps them going. So, yes, does that answer the question?

Collings

Yes, absolutely. You know, you said one thing in the session last time. You said, "They go to their aerobics classes, their gyms, and hand out flyers." And I was just thinking that sounded kind of--that didn't sound right.

Green

It is right.

Collings

It is right, okay.

Green

Yes. Like I think that's again, they're community members and they're volunteers, so LBACA and CPC in this case with Health and Housing, is a social outlet for them, and so like our co-chair, who is a volunteer co-chair of the coalition, she works out at this gym. A lot of her friends work out at the same gym, and so she's always inviting them to trainings that we do, and I think that speaks to the fact that it is a social outlet for them. But she's also the one who joined the board and who's our co-chair and who was co-chair of CPC for a while, so just because it's a social outlet doesn't also mean that they don't take things to the next level. I mean, I think part of it is that a lot of them are not documented, and so they have a real drive and an interest in learning and participating in community work, and because they can't work, or because they cannot attend school, they see this as their outlet to kind of take their education to the next level, too. So I think that they kind of want to spread the love, and they love it when there's lots of people around and there's this feeling of like a lot of energy.

Green

It's been frustrating, like towards the end of like our August Health and Housing meeting, the numbers had dwindled down to like ten. Normally we have twenty-five to thirty-five. It's just that the outreach was kind of like not happening. Our staffer was leaving, so she sort of let that part go, so that's why this big push for 2009, and I think that a lot of people get really energized when there's more people there.

Collings

Yes. But, I mean, aerobics classes and gyms, I mean, it sounds like so West L.A., I guess.

Green

Isn't it funny? Well, CPC does--they do aerobics classes for free. They have this big obesity intervention, so they do--I should have mentioned that part. They do nutrition classes and exercise classes, because a lot of the community moms live in pretty violent, dangerous neighborhoods, and so CPC provides safe spaces for them to exercise, and they do aerobics classes. They have a little gym and they do salsa classes and meringue and folklorico classes as a way to kind of--really, CPC, they're very smart about this, too, because it's their way to keep them engaged, keep the network going, but also provide a health service for them. So that's the clarification, I guess.

Collings

That's the context. Okay, I was just wondering about that.

Green

Yes, yes, yes. You're like, "Wow."

Collings

I guess we weren't talking about the people I thought we were talking about.

Green

Yes. So it's all funded and provided by CPC.

Collings

Yes. And the women who do testify and put a public face on this, do they tend to be documented, or is that not an issue for them?

Green

It's not something we ask.

Collings

You never ask.

Green

And the only time I ever find out is like when we had these job opportunities that came up. Of course we can't hire anyone unless they're documented, and so I had a lot of people ask me, like, what's the--so, of course, I got an inkling about who is and who isn't, but it's not something we ask. And I think the other thing is that we've had people who--actually, Marta is a great example--came in on a visa and did a lot of community work and had a work visa, and then ended up getting her citizenship about fifteen years ago, twelve years ago. She's one of the women we just hired. And Elena's here on a work permit, so there's varying kind of levels of that. But I think the thing that is like the most outstanding is that all of these women work in some capacity, in terms of volunteer or maybe they do some work for somebody, watch kids or something like that. But their drive to participate in this community is like way more than anyone, I mean, anyone of my friends or my colleagues, and I just am totally impressed that, like, they want to be involved. They want to become citizens, they want to assimilate, they want to participate in their community. All of them are active in their kids' schools, I mean, much more than I sort of think typically that we as documented whatever, American-born folks really kind of tend to think about. I guess they feel so grateful for the chance to be here that they want to give back to whatever degree they can, and we're sort of like, "Yeah, yeah, we were born here."

Collings

Is there ever and discussion of making immigration-rights' issues a unifying organizing tool?

Green

We actually have been--in 2009, one of the themes we will do is sort of immigrant rights, an immigrant rights' workshop, partly because we've had some members be harassed, and even members who have documentation have been harassed, so they want to just sort of understand what their rights are. But

I think that there's, to be completely honest, kind of a fear on our part in that we are often perceived as being an advocacy group for undocumented Latina immigrants, and although there's power in that, there's also a lot of loss of power, and so we really try to focus on, well, for one, we've really been trying to outreach to the Cambodian community and to the African American community. I can't tell you how much time we've spent doing that, and we had some success, but the bigger thing is that we really try to focus on how long people have lived here. The majority of the people we work with have been residents in Long Beach for twelve to fifteen years, and that's, to me, more important than the fact that they're immigrants.

Green

So it's hard. I mean, we've had city council members who we have relationships with tell us, "You know, you'd be really more powerful if you had your members come up and present their testimony in English." And I just sort of feel like, that's kind of a racist statement, you know. Like just because they speak Spanish doesn't necessarily mean that their experience of living in this community is any less valuable. But I understand sort of their fear, which is that people will sort of write them off and that, "Oh, this person is not documented," just because they don't speak the language, which is completely not true. I mean, there's a lot of language isolation in this community, not only for Spanish but for other languages as well.

Collings

There was a big L.A. Times article, I'm sure you saw it, on the Air Resource Board ruling.

Green

Oh, the truck rule.

Collings

The truck rule. And then there was a long section about a woman, a community activist--

Green

In Merced, I think.

Collings

--in the Riverside area, who was associated with the--

Green

Oh, yes.

Collings

And I wondered, I was just wondering sort of why, perhaps maybe--

Green

Why not here?

Collings

Yes.

Green

Okay. So I spent probably four hours with that reporter--

Collings

Oh, did you?

Green

--and, frankly, just got to the point where I hung up on her.

Collings

Really?

Green

She was really disrespectful, and we actually had one of our A-team members who was willing to be interviewed. She'd e-mailed me and asked if she could have kind of an interest story from a community member who lived near the 710 who had a kid with asthma.

Collings

Right, because this is exactly who she used, but out in Riverside, and I was just curious to know why out there.

Green

Right. I have no idea. I explained to her--so I got one of our A-team members, who was really excited about the story. She's a great example, because she's a mom with two kids with asthma. She lives like a hundred feet from the 710. She's been trained in traffic counting and particulate matter monitoring. She totally gets how to speak about this stuff, and she's done public testimony, and so was really excited and called the reporter, and the reporter just couldn't--I don't think really understood the issues, and so I spent a long time trying to help her educate her, to help her understand that this was the right way to pitch the story. And then she finally just said, "I totally disagree, and you need to find me someone in another community." And I was like, "I don't need to find you anything. I've found you someone." But she was really--and then I sent her to a couple of other community activists here, who had the same experience with her and got really frustrated. But then finally I think she somehow connected with the Riverside folks. I mean, I sent her some contact information out there, but she just didn't want it to be confused somehow with the port's clean trucks program, but they're such different programs it was clear that she didn't understand the issues very well.

Collings

Yes, it's interesting to wonder why she wouldn't use that--

Green

Especially when she asked me for it?

Collings

--community member, and then, in effect, ends up using somebody who has a very similar story.

Green

Yes, it was really weird. I don't know. Maybe she was under a deadline, but she was really awful to work with. I spent a long time with her, too. A lot of us spent a long time with her, trying to help her understand the issues, and she just obviously didn't. I mean, that's the hard thing is a lot of the media outlets are--you know, they used to have like a ports' person who just did the ports' beat, and now they sort of throw anyone on it, and then it's so complicated, how do they kind of get up to speed? And usually they've got three days to write the story and connect with someone, and it was like, aah. So, that's the background.

Collings

So what did you think of that article overall?

Green

It was pretty good. There was a lot of inaccuracies in the data, and that was also evidence of her sort of I think unwillingness to listen or unwillingness to learn. Andrea Hricko from USC was quite surprised and slightly chagrined at some of the things that ended up being printed, because she'd sent Andrea some questions about data, and Andrea had clarified them for her, and the ultimate data in there is not correct, so, you know, it's too bad.

Collings

Yes, okay.

Green

But, I mean, it still got the message out, which is the most important thing.

Collings

Yes, it did get the message out. And I was struck by the fact that the personal story of the community activist out in the Riverside area was, like, one of the more powerful parts of the story, and it really sort of validated what you were saying about how important it is to have the community members stand up and say, "Look. We're having all of these health impacts."

Green

And at the actual hearing, the ARB hearing, the thing that was most reported was the testimony of a mother with kids with asthma from Merced-Mariposa, who actually started crying when she was testifying, and it was like on the set channels of the news, it was like what went out with all the press releases afterwards when the ruling was passed, so it does really speak to the power of that. I mean, she just stood up and had pictures of her kids wearing a nebulizer and having an inhaler and shared her story. So I totally think that's the most important piece of the policy, how it will impact us.

Collings

Yes. Those images sort of resonate with the fear of like chemical and biological weapons attacks as well.

Green

Definitely. Definitely. And I think that's something that we recognize like in terms of doing actions, like Barbara Boxer did a hearing on ports and goods movement I think last May, and Jesse Marquez actually had the idea, oh, actually, no, someone he works with had the idea of everybody who sat in the front wear masks, and that was what the L.A. Times took pictures of, was all these people wearing masks.

Collings

Right, right. This kind of theater is so effective.

Green

Yes, yes, it really is. It really, really is.

Collings

Is there anything that you would like to do with community groups that is impossible right now?

Green

Yes, there's a lot of things I'd love to do. Well, it's funny. We were having this conversation on Saturday, because we went to kind of a closing the year event with East Yard Communities for Environmental Justice, and on the way back, a number of us were talking about kind of the realities of community-based organizations and that there may be--there was someone in the car who had done a number of years of organizing in, like, the sixties in I want to say Vermont or New Hampshire, no, Connecticut, I don't know, someone on the East Coast, and was talking about his experience of how much power they built and how much change that they started to make, and then the second that they lost their funding, he's like, "I bet if you were to look in that community now, none of that would exist, maybe some, maybe some inklings here or there, but that--and you know, not to say that there wasn't value to what we did." He's like, "I'm sure a lot of those people that participated probably took their knowledge to the next level and maybe went on and got a degree or took a job as a teacher or a social worker or something in their community that they may not have chosen earlier."

Green

And I was thinking about this book that a friend has told me about that I haven't yet read, called "The Revolution Will Not Be Funded," just about how foundation funding really defines the way that we do our work, sadly, instead of the reverse, and there are very few foundations that--which is largely the source of our organization even existing. There are few foundations who sort of look to the community groups to help them define how to fund, and so all this to say that it feels like there's this kind of ever-present worry about, like, how the funding will impact the work that we do. And so I think for me, from my standpoint, the most important thing that we can do is kind of this next step that we're taking of investing it all back in the community and planting those seeds,

rather than hiring staff and training them to be the leaders, making the community members be the leaders and have it come from there, because I feel like there's so much stuff that I've learned in this process that I now know how to do that's not really that much use. I don't anymore live in Long Beach, and if I were to leave, then that goes with me. That doesn't stay with them.

Collings

Are there any possibilities for private donors within these communities? I mean, people who have made their fortune?

Green

Yes. The problem is, a lot of them have made their fortune off of the things that we're fighting, so it's tough.

Collings

Are there any examples that you can think of, particular individuals?

Green

I can think about--let me put it this way. I think Long Beach specifically is--I mean, Long Beach is known as "Iowa on the sea." It is a very conservative and very much head-in-the-sand kind of a community, just by being Democratic and whatever. And if you look at sort of the way that the wealth distribution happened and the way that, you know, we're the international city, so we've got this incredibly diverse community. All the upper-income, well-educated, college-and-above educated folks, primarily white, live on the East Side, and everybody else lives on the West Side, and there's this separation. So I think there's almost this unawareness of what's happening, or a lack of awareness I should say.

Green

Like I went to a faculty luncheon at Cal State Long Beach. I was representing the community, and I was supposed to share sort of the issues that we've been facing, and people were just like, "Really? That really happens in Long Beach?" And it was like, "Yeah. My gosh, wake up to what's really going on." So this is all to say that if there were donors, they're not going to come from Long Beach. That's just my sort of very biased opinion. I mean, it's just this kind of feeling that people want to invest in the warm fuzzy, like, "Oh, after-school program where we read to kids." Nobody really wants to invest in sort of, how do we change this monster with the economic engine in our backyard? Plus, if we're sort of perceived as--I think a lot of people, frankly, don't really get behind supporting low-income communities of color. I just think that's not that sexy of a thing. I mean, the kids' angle is good. I think lots of people care about children, no matter what they come from, but in terms of mobilizing adults to fight on behalf of their kids, it's not really that.

Collings

What about Latino community members who have made it?

Green

So here's my perspective, and I don't know--I mean, take it with a grain of salt. And we have the same experience with African American leaders as well. Because many people in Long Beach, many communities of color who have, quote, unquote, "made it" feel that--the perception I get is sort of that they've survived this potential outcome that could have been theirs, that sort of not getting educated and working a blue-collar job and sort of staying poor and staying linguistically isolated--since those who break out of that and make it, I think that there's this feeling of their wanting upward mobility, and not that they don't give back in some way, but I think that they would--many of them, the feeling that I get is that it's this desire to kind of separate from that. And I understand it. I mean, it's easy for me to sort of say what my perspective is, and it's not to say that there aren't leaders, but Ron Arias , the head of our health department, is a Latino. He calls himself a Chicano activist and has not yet stuck his neck out on these issues at all, has been, in fact, completely silent in the time I've been here.

Green

I mean, not necessarily to go through and name names, but that's the perfect example of someone, yet he's the head of the health department, and he's done a lot of incredible programs for Latino youth and is part of developing a health-leadership program to engage minority populations, and the health department has a number of programs that they do that are very incredible. But on our issue, no.

Collings

He's not going to touch the port.

Green

Right. And that's the experience that we keep having, because it really is--you know, someone said it once. I think this is what it comes down to is that this issue of ports and goods movement and international trade, it's like, "If you question anything about the way that we've set up our trade," it's almost like you're kind of considered unpatriotic. And so why would an immigrant question that? It's very tarnishing, or it's really easy for me, where I'm sort of like, "Oh, whatever, I'm from here, I can say whatever I want."

Collings

But that's not a conflict, that's not a problem for the lower-income community members who are participating in this grassroots way?

Green

No, because I think they're still so new to this American culture. I mean, I think if you're new and you have a fresh perspective, you don't have issues with questioning it because it just doesn't make sense what we're doing, and what they see on the ground, like I've said before, they're such advocates for their

children, so that anything that happens to their children, it doesn't matter what, they'll fight against. But the irony is that, of course, many of our community members are low income, so shop at WalMart and Target and the very companies that they're fighting against. So, I mean, I think it's this Catch-22 that they're in but yet don't really probably even question. I mean, I think from their standpoint that's part of--LBACA and CPC have been sort of ushering them into being an active community member. It just so happens that that's part of the angle that we've taken, and so that's part of what they've also taken on, not to say that everyone has. But I think that somebody like a Ron Arias, who's second generation, I guess, he would not question that, I think. I mean, I'm putting my own--

Collings

Would not question the underlying consumerism and trade imperative?

Green

Right. And this is, of course, completely biased in that it's my perspective and my opinion, but that's just an example to me of kind of what I see happening culturally in this city. I don't know.

Collings

Well, this is kind of going out on a limb, but I mean, is it possible that some of the community members that you're working with are not as, quote, unquote, "Americanized" in that they're not as imbued in the consumer culture?

Green

It's possible. It is possible, and I think--I mean, it's very clear that because of poverty, they're unable to participate. But I also think it's very possible, because a lot of times when they talk about their children who have grown up here, they sort of talk about it with disgust, like, "Well, my kids want all this stuff." And I keep trying to help them understand what this connection to stuff is. That's a really good point, like I think it is that as their children acculturate to the United States, then they become consumers.

Collings

So do you tend to find that you don't have like second-, third-generation community members participating in your movement?

Green

We have some, but not many.

Collings

That's interesting.

Green

That is a really--it's like that's a really good point, because I think that this whole thing about it not being patriotic, I mean, look at our economy right now. Everybody's saying how horrible it is at the ports, their growth is sort of slowing, and that people are not spending and not buying stuff and it's so bad.

And yet we're trying to stimulate the economy by, like when George Bush sent out the checks to everyone to go buy stuff, it's like that's what's so bad. Yes, it just all comes back to this, like, that's what patriotism is, is that you buy. So to question that, I guess, makes you--then must be unpatriotic.

Collings

Yes. That's a steep hill to climb for any movement.

Green

Yes. Yes.

Collings

Okay. Are there any instances where there's been conflicts between the way that the grassroots community members have wanted to approach an issue, and the professional activists have wanted to approach an issue?

Green

All the time. All the time. There's a constant conflict between the groups that have community bases and the groups that don't, in that I would say the groups that have community bases really feel like they want everything from the ground up, and the more traditional advocacy groups sort of feel like, "Well, we have the expertise. We can define the direction that we'll head in, and then you build your base around what our issue is." It's not to say one is necessarily better than the other, but I think what I've been learning is that the [unclear] process of building your base and determining a direction to go in is extremely time consuming and is extremely arduous. And so, often advocacy groups, more traditional advocacy groups get really frustrated with that, and it's completely legitimate that they get frustrated, because they're thinking like, "We've got a bill that's going to our committee hearing on x date, and we need your people. We need your mother and her baby crying with her albuterol or whatever." So that's where the conflict really lies, and I think it'll kind of always be there.

Green

And then, of course, big groups like NRDC, who have been incredible leaders on all of the issues that we care about, they're nationwide and they're actually international groups, and so they have sometimes, like the word from above is--I don't know, this is not true, but say they were to get behind something like "cap and trade," and then local community groups, EJ groups are going, "Oh, my gosh. We don't get behind cap and trade," and how do you resolve that?

Collings

Has there been any like example of how that played out at one time that you can think of?

Green

Let me think of a good one. Oh, my gosh. Yes, there are so many, I just can't think. None that we've been directly involved in. I think the NRDC is a good

example, because their L.A. or the Santa Monica office that we work with, the attorneys are unbelievable and are such our advocate, are so incredible, and I think that there are sort of national decisions that are being made on bigger, more esoteric things, not locally like this poor project, but something like a cap and trade or some global-warming solution, or what's it called, not geothermal--oh, my gosh. There is this technology. I'm totally spacing on what it's called, but there's essentially a technology where you take all the emissions of a project, and you pump them down into the ground, and a lot of the EJ groups are very opposed to the concept.

Collings

Isn't that supposed to be happening at an oil-refinery facility near here?

Green

I think so. I think in Wilmington, and I think that's Jesse Marquez had actually come out against--he did a paper. I'm totally blanking on what it's called, but he did a paper for the new environmental justice journal that just started publishing on sort of the ills of that, whereas NRDC had seen it as a really good alternative.

Collings

Yes, I think he spoke about that, about precisely--with relation to a question of this sort, that this was a perfect example for him of--

Green

It's funny.

Collings

Because on the local level, he thought that there were hazards--

Green

Yes.

Collings

--whereas for the NRDC, in terms of their larger policy, they thought it was a good way to go.

Green

And I think again it comes back to what we struggle with as advocates where we say, "We don't want that," and it takes us a really long time to get people organized then around what we don't want, that we don't often have time or luxury to be able to define what we do want, or expertise. Whereas NRDC doesn't have to go through that process of sort of like getting the community rallied around and going door to door, doing whatever it is that you have to do to get people engaged, and so they can look at an issue and think kind of really globally, like, "What are we going to advocate for?" Because that's the first question that's asked.

Collings

Yes. They're playing their chess game with different players.

Green

Exactly. And they've been incredibly successful, and if it weren't for them a lot of things would not happen, and I don't want to say--we want them here. Like I sent them money this holiday season, because I think that they're an incredible organization and they have a part to play, but it creates challenges around sort of this dialogue, and not on a local level. I mean, the attorneys we work with locally have nothing to do with this technology which has totally escaped me.

Collings

So how does that get worked out on the local level? Do you sort of have contacts with the local attorneys and--

Green

We just have a lot of relationship building. There are three attorneys that we work with from NRDC at the Santa Monica office, actually four, that we just have constant--I mean, we meet regularly. We have conference calls, we work on issues together, we build trust that way and that's there. Sometimes those issues come up in the middle of a meeting, and the attorneys kind of go, "Yeah, we see your side. We're not actually actively working on it, so if you want, I can help you contact who is and you can share your concerns," that kind of a thing.

Collings

Pretty amicable.

Green

Yes. It doesn't impede our ability to work together, it's just a very--it happens a lot.

Collings

With regard to, like, these different sort of community groups, like Jesse's group and the East Yard group and countless others, do loyalties form among community members, do loyalties form to groups or to issues?

Green

You mean, do community members join?

Collings

Yes.

Green

I think it's all based on local. Like if you live in Wilmington, you'll join Jesse's group. If you live in Commerce or East L.A., you'll join Angelo [Logan]'s group, and usually, really if you're a mother of a kid with asthma that you participate in our program, you'll be a part of this. But we've been trying to do better in the last year--I think we've done a lot more in the last year of kind of cross-pollination between members, and those are always really the most powerful events, where you have folks in Wilmington coming together with our folks, going, "Oh, wow, we have the same issues." So it's very local.

Collings

But there aren't any like particular philosophies or approaches that are specific to one group that go beyond, like, the environmental piece? Like, for example, in your group you've got a lot of, like, lifestyle stuff happening. As you were saying, the domestic violence counseling and so on.

Green

That's all because that's what our members have asked for, and that's partly because housing advocacy around air pollution has become a really big part of our program, but it's really not what we started out doing. And we still have this obligation where I would say 75 percent of our programming is health education and direct services, so I think that's where we've always kind of tried to stay rooted. So maybe that's true, that each--whereas Jesse and Angelo, they're 100 percent goods-movement policy and advocacy.

Collings

Right. I was just wondering if the different groups, you could almost say they had different personalities.

Green

Oh, completely, completely, and their members come to it for very different reasons, I think.

Collings

In what way?

Green

I mean, I think it's based somewhat on outreach strategies and somewhat on the mission of the organization. Like East Yard Communities for Environmental Justice is working in Commerce-East L.A. on their rail issues and have expanded to include other things that happen in Commerce, and so it's usually the homeowners that live in Commerce that participate in their advocacy, whereas for us, our members are those that we've served that have kids with asthma that we served in our community health-worker program, so they're parents of kids with asthma, and that's their unifying voice, if that makes sense. And others, too, that we've just interacted with, but generally that's what the base is. I'm not clear on who Jesse's base is. I mean, I've met a lot of them, but I don't know how he does his outreach, so I'm not sure how that happens.

Collings

Okay. Well, I think we're kind of getting to a wrapping-up point. Is there anything that you would like to sort of add to all of this? I also wanted to ask you about your own personal choices as an environmentalist.

Green

Yes!

Collings

But the two questions are out there.

Green

I don't know. All I can say is this process has been really, really valuable. Like I think that after we talked, then I've been able to reflect on sort of what we are doing, because I think that generally if there's anything I've learned in the almost four years I've been here, it's that it's so easy to just focus on what's right in front of you, and you never have the luxury to take a step back and really reflect on what it is that you're doing, things like the conversations that you and I have had. So thank you, it's been really, really valuable.

Collings

You're welcome.

Green

I had no idea. I thought, oh, I'll do this sweet project, and now I'm like, oh, my gosh, it's been so good.

Collings

So what about in terms of your personal life, environmentalism?

Green

It's a big part of my life. I think I struggle with the consumer piece a lot, because it's really hard to not participate. I mean, you don't have choices. If you want to go out and buy a pair of tennis shoes, it's pretty difficult to find a pair of tennis shoes that wasn't made in China.

Collings

So do you actually look at the label and try to figure that out?

Green

I try. I mean, there are some companies that are local, like for tennis shoes, for example, I think it's New Balance that's in Boston.

Collings

Oh, well, these are New Balance. Okay, good.

Green

There's a couple. And like American Apparel is made in L.A., but then I just found out about all these horrible things about--I don't know if they're true yet. I have to investigate. So when I can, I try to be--but I would say sort of clothing and consumer goods, it's very difficult. But the key thing for me is, I mean, really, I buy organic, I buy local, I bike on the weekends, because I hate the fact that I drive as far as I do, and I carpool as much as I can. But also, I think it extends beyond air pollution. I'm really conscious about not using anything in plastic and reusing paper bags, using reusable bags for the grocery. I've been in a constant fight with my partner. We're trying to buy a mattress, and I'm trying to find like a PBDE phthalate-free, all wood, latex-wool mattress, and he's like, "It's twice the price." I'm like, "It's our life we're talking about." So luckily, he's a scientist, so as long as I can get some scientific articles, usually I can advocate that we get the more expensive but the better for your health thing.

Green

You know, my dad, he does a lot of work around environmental health stuff, so he always sends me things that are kind of beyond the breadth of this, but it's hard, because as much as I think air pollution is such an important thing, it's something we don't often really have a choice about, whereas working on other kind of consumer-goods things, you do have some choice, not always a choice. You know, things like buying organic or the types of consumer goods that you participate in. My goal for 2009 is to find out how to green invest, because I actually--someone pointed out at one point that our--this is some irony--that our hospital's 403 (b) program, on there, one of the options to sort of invest in is the railyard companies, because they're actually been making a ton of money, and so Vanguard investment company has been saying, "Oh, where can we make the most bang for our buck? Oh, railyards seem to be doing well." And I thought, oh, dear Lord. This is like the worst example of how you can't escape it, you know?

Green

So things like that. I definitely feel like it's playing a big part in my life, and it makes me--and being around people who are conscious, too, I think in our work setting, that we all kind of encourage each other and give each other kudos for things that, "Oh, that's cool. I never thought about doing that. Okay, I'll start that." I was going to say, it's just more in vogue, too, I think a lot. Generally, I mean, at least here in L.A. it feels like there's a bigger, growing consciousness about it.

Collings

Yes. Now, are these ideas that you transmit to the community members that you work with?

Green

Yes, I think a little at a time. There's this incredible--just on a personal level, if you haven't seen this, there's this incredible video that Annie Leonard did, called "The Story of Stuff." I may have mentioned it before. I showed it to Marta and Elena, and they were both like completely astounded, and so, yes. And I mean, things like in the office, we've always been in the habit of when we make coffee, we'll have paper cups and plastic stirrers, and I said, "Why don't we just buy office mugs, and everybody rather than using a paper plate when you go warm up your lunch," everybody bought a bowl and left it here, and we bought a Brita filter so we weren't using bottled water, things like that, like little things. But we have a long way to go. I think they still sort of think of it as like, "Oh, that's Elina's kind of quirky, weird thing about her."

Collings

But you wouldn't have like a community workshop on these kinds of ideas?

Green

We've done a little bit. We did something on the Long Beach area recycling program, but it's really difficult, because a lot of it feels like it's still quite expensive, and the awareness that we have built, like the person who came in to do this recycling thing was talking a lot about a lot of other things that do have a cost associated with them, and so I remember prepping him to say, "We want to think about local low-or-no-cost solutions that we can do now." It kind of sent the wrong message, so it wasn't as well received. But a lot of them, actually I would say like most of them don't drive a car, and so in some ways, who am I to say like, "Oh, you should really look at your output," when I'm driving thirty miles to and from work.

Collings

Yes. Yes, that's a good point.

Green

It's really--so it's more like I try to say, "Oh, this is this cool clean canteen water bottle I got. It's twenty bucks, but now I never have to buy bottled water again," things like that, just to sort of--but I'm also still kind of in my own discovery process, and I realize like, I feel like I'm doing a campaign in my own home, where it's like every new thing, like I've been on this huge rampage to try to get composting in the City of Santa Monica. I've talked to every city council member, I've talked to all the city departments, and it's really hard sometimes to be like, "You should do this," when you realize like there's all of these barriers to sometimes making things happen. But yes, I think actually that's a good point, too. I think that part of this idea for this local--we're calling it the Legacy Project, that Elena and Martha, our new staff, will do is something like that, to pick something very local and very concrete that you do a training and day of action about, and they've been given some money to try to figure out what they want that to be.

Collings

That sounds great. All right, is there anything else that you would like to add?

Green

That's it, I think, jibber-jabbed enough, I'm sure.

Collings

No, no, not at all. Are you sure?

Green

Yes.

Collings

Okay.

[End of interview]

Date: