

Q & A WITH HANNAH AYOYAGI

TWA members and others are talking to writer Sharon Babcock about enduring inspirations, life lessons, and perspectives from their experiences on the working waterfront.

This month is the 16th installment in the series: Dr. Hannah Ayoyagi, Programs Operations Planner for Toxic Cleanup for the Washington Department of Ecology.



Dr. Hannah Ayoyagi is part of Tacoma’s emerging generation of environmental experts who have cut their professional teeth on the shores of Commencement Bay. She recently spoke at a TWA meeting in her former role as a Tacoma Smelter Plume Project Planner.

Following undergraduate studies at the University of Puget Sound and a doctoral program in Environmental Health Science and Policy at the University of California Irvine, Ayoyagi decided to return to Tacoma and its waters to live and work.

Q: What drew you back to Commencement Bay?

A: I was looking for a teaching opportunity somewhere on the west coast and had an eye on the state’s Department of Ecology. Coming out of Orange County after graduate school, I resonate with the sense of community in Tacoma—and appreciate that I do not have to get on a large freeway each time I want to go somewhere.

Q: How have you prepared for this work?

A: I had a great experience at the University of Puget Sound. I was allowed to create my own major, Environmental Policy ... (and) I did my undergraduate thesis on the Commencement Bay Superfund site and became interested in how standards are set for cleanup. My advisor was a philosophy professor with a strong interest in the environment, so you can see where the approach came from. I received a strong perspective on environmental work, most importantly that you have to interpret the science, and that depends on values. When studying at U.C. Irvine, I focused on air quality in Los Angeles County because that data was easier to get. There I grew my understanding of environmental justice and the need for addressing social problems with interdisciplinary approaches and was exposed to urban planning and criminology as part of environmental issues. The work was structured not around content but around methods and ways of thinking. I learned about how to do surveys and ethnographic studies, how people perceive the world and think, spatial patterns, how to use maps, and how to take one variable and look at it across a city or a county. Then I came back to Tacoma and was able to work with the bigger picture (nobody knew how far the contamination went or how serious it was in

Commencement Bay) with my mentor who knew the history and was able to show me the connection of the work with its larger benefits to the community. It was difficult to conceive of the scope of the contamination problem because it was not visible. Since the laws only focus on one property, this problem asked all of us to engage our imaginations beyond the air to the groundwater.

Q: What have you learned?

A: That when our environmental laws were written, the standards created were conservative, thus protective of the environment. That communities and people in the west are much more willing than those in other parts of the country to face the issue of racism regarding environmental action, i.e., (that) areas (where) people of color (live) do not see action or a drop in emissions in the same way that other areas do. That the Community Right to Know Act, created in the late 1980s, gave communities a right to know what a plant in their midst was annually producing. That it is hard to use data gathered on the environment; it is very technical and takes resources to make it useful. That cumulative impact is critical -- it is not only polluted water in an area, but also the adjacent freeway or gas station that matters. That when you are thinking with a policy hat, it may be important to look at the cumulative cancer risk of an area to help decide what facility permits to issue. That policies are difficult to make because people are protective of what exists. That you can make a difference for the environment even when the obstacles seem overwhelming. That you can make your child's life healthier if you do a bit about the environment. I have learned the towns and neighborhoods of Washington, the history of its industries, and who the interested organizations or groups are and what they want to happen. In Washington, a local tribe usually has an interest in what is occurring with the environment. People don't understand the need for education and outreach; they do fathom cleanup. All of my learnings end up showing me that policy is ultimately about people.

Q: How have you applied what you have learned?

A: I returned to UPS to teach an interdisciplinary Senior Seminar in Environmental Justice during the 2008-09 academic year that brought science, political science, economics, philosophy, and sociology together. The Washington State Department of Ecology gave me the chance to do presentations to multiple stakeholder groups. In my new position at the department, I get to put to use the opportunities I have had to work with technologists, planners, and budget people; and will now be able to develop policy.

Q: What is the best part of your job?

A: I enjoy doing things to foster a strong culture within a program. I like bringing together people with expertise and sharing knowledge with them. My favorite days get me outside the agency learning about the creative mix of projects going on, meeting someone I have not known, and getting the chance to work on the stories, data, and publications that go into giving people the information they need.

Q: What changes have you seen in Commencement Bay since you were a student here in the 1990s?

A: From my studies I was intimately familiar with photos from the 1990s of the lack of sea life present in the Thea Foss Waterway. Having a chance to recently attend a Pier Peer where we look at the existing underwater sea life, I was pleasantly surprised to see dramatic positive changes. I also observe Tacoma's waterfront development tying in to the environment.

Q: What are your hopes for Commencement Bay?

A: That this body of water continues to be a better version of what it has been, not only for tourists but for clean industry; that people come down to the working part of the waterfront.