

## Episode 9: "Invite Stories, Build Relationships, Catalyze Change"

Tamara Marcus

The Art of Climate Dialogue

Vivian:

Welcome to The Art of Climate Dialogue: Stories from Iowa, produced by myself, Vivian M. Cook, and The EcoTheatre Lab. And welcome to today's conversation with Linn County Sustainability Director and community engaged climate researcher, Tamara Marcus.

Tamara:

I was back visiting my grandparents' farm. My grandparents own a Century Farm in Eastern Iowa, which is a farm that's been in the family for over at least a hundred years. I was back in small town Iowa, visiting my family, and I ran into one of our family's friends. He was asking what I did, and I was a student at the time, and so he was asking what I was studying and I said, "climate change." And he immediately wanted to launch into this conversation, and really a debate about whether or not climate change was real. And having studied climate change at this point for over a decade, I was used to this kind of response to what it is I spend my time doing, especially in this part of the world.

So I entertained his questions and his facts that he was sharing with me for some time, and then I asked him what he did, and he told me that he was a mechanic. And I said, "Oh, okay. Well, I have a car and sometimes that car doesn't work, something's wrong with the car and I need to fix it. So kinda my first... Depending on what's wrong with it, I'll do some Googling, ask some friends, see if they have any recommendations or can help me out. But if that doesn't work, then I'll take it to mechanic because I recognize that this is the space and field that they're an expert in, and I need their help. I need their knowledge, their perspective." I offered this to the gentleman as not reason or means to take everything I said a hundred percent at face value, certainly not that, but to really demonstrate that we all are experts in our own spaces and we all need the information and knowledge of one another to really exist in this world.

It was incredible how that kind of framing was disarming, how disarming that was for that gentleman. And the conversation immediately shifted to one where it was recognizing each other's lane, so to speak, and having this newfound humility to the process and to that conversation. We left that conversation not agreeing with one another and not having changed each other's mind, but we left that conversation with exchanging contact information. So now there's this person who, every now and again will send me an article and I'll send them an article.

I don't think, again, to this point that we've convinced each other of the other way of viewing the situation or the issue, but I do think that what we have is an open conversation, an open dialogue around the topic. And one that I certainly benefit from, if only knowing what types of news information this person is reading and coming across, and I hope vice versa. I think that's just a really good example of taking that extra pause and trying to think of what are the ways that I can connect to this person who might not have had the same experiences as me, the same access to information as me? And what can I learn from them, through that process as well?

Vivian:

Addressing climate change is urgent, but in order to move toward action, we first have to find ways to talk about climate change with one another. The Art of Climate Dialogue: Stories from Iowa is a podcast series featuring 13 conversations with artists, farmers, community engaged researchers, and community organizers and activists who have all used arts and storytelling strategies to talk about climate change and agriculture. Through this podcast, they generously share these strategies so that listeners can implement them in their own communities. I'm Vivian and I invite you to explore The Art of Climate Dialogue with me.

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As we enter into these conversations around climate action, sustainable agriculture and community engaged arts in Iowa, The EcoTheatre Lab and I want to first recognize that Indigenous nations have been leaders in such conversations for centuries, and continue to be today. Iowa now occupies the homelands of Native American nations to whom we owe our commitment and dedication. Iowa is now situated on the homelands and trading routes of the Ioway, Meskwaki, and Sauk, Ojibwe, Omaha, Iowakwaki, and Santee. And because history is complex and time goes far back beyond memory, we also acknowledge the ancient connections of many other Indigenous peoples here.

The history of broken treaties and forced removal that dispossess Indigenous peoples of their homelands, was and is an act of colonization and genocide that we cannot erase. As a result, Indigenous ecosystems within Iowa have suffered from extraction, degradation, and unsustainable agricultural practices, contributing to the ongoing climate crisis. Understanding and addressing these injustices is critical as we work toward climate dialogue, action, and justice in our communities. My thanks to podcast interviewees Shelley Buffalo, enrolled member of the Meskwaki Tribe, Lance Foster, enrolled member and tribal historian of the Iowa Tribe of Kansas and Nebraska, and Sikowis Nobiss, Plains Cree/Saulteaux of the George Gordon First Nation for their collaboration in developing this acknowledgement.

Tamara Marcus currently serves as the Linn County Sustainability Director. Previously they were a Fulbright scholar where they completed two years of climate change research in the Indian Himalaya, working with local communities to translate her physical science research into local conservation policy. Tam is a PhD candidate in the Natural Resources and Earth System Sciences PhD program at the University of New Hampshire. Her research interests include using bioinformatic techniques to understand the impact of warming on microbial mediation of carbon emissions from Arctic Lakes. Additionally, she studies how Indigenous communities access weather and climate data to better understand how to make results from climate research more accessible and applicable to individuals and communities.

Using a combination of survey data and storytelling, Tam works with Sámi communities and Indigenous Australians to record environmental change observed by the traditional owners of the land. Through this work, they hope to promote collaborative development of conservation policy by both scientists and Indigenous communities. Tam has been a Switzer fellow, a NASA New Hampshire Space Grant fellow, and a National Center for Atmospheric Research fellow, and completed her BS in Biochemistry and English from the University of Minnesota Twin Cities. I'm excited to share our conversation with y'all today. Welcome Tam to the podcast, and thank you for being here today to chat with me for a little while.

Tamara:

Thank you, Vivian.

Vivian:

This story that you told us at the beginning of the episode is an example of how you approach climate communication in much of the work you do. So finding ways to meet people where they're at and to connect people to each other and to the data in a personable, applicable way. You've been doing this work in the Indian Himalayas, Australian Outback, Swedish Arctic, and in your hometown of Cedar Rapids in Iowa for many years. What drew you to study climate science and then to work with local communities to take climate action?

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Tamara:

Yeah, that's a really good question, and thank you so much for allowing me the opportunity to share some of my story with you today. It's hard to pinpoint the start of a journey or the start of a story, that's half the challenge sometimes. But I guess for today, I'll start at wanting to be able to do good in the world, that was my motivator for pursuing research as a whole. I quickly found my place in climate research because the urgency of this issue, for me, it demanded my attention, I suppose. I was very fortunate to have some research experiences internationally around this topic, which allowed me to see different perspectives on the issue as well. And I'm very thankful and fortunate for having had those experiences, I think.

I would say the way that I approach climate change research though, has been a little bit different in part because of the storytelling piece, identifying that this is a necessary part of the work. Because most people are not climate scientists, and if we want to actually take climate action, we need most people to be on board. I think when I started my PhD program, it was during the Trump presidency, and so climate change was a topic, and it had been before then, but especially then, with the US being removed from the Paris Agreement, was a topic in conversation at the forefront of most circles.

I remember being in this room with 50 climate scientists from across the world, which make up our research group that works currently in the Swedish Arctic, so scientists from Australia, Sweden, universities from across the US, all in this room, listening to Trump remove the US from the Paris Agreement. And there was very little acknowledgement of our role in that, which I found to be-

Vivian:

Wow.

Tamara:

Yeah, exactly. Especially as an early career researcher, I found that to be incredibly troubling because for one part, most of our research is funded by taxpayer dollars, you really do need people to buy into this work at some level. But then more importantly, because we're the ones who have the data and information to actually incite change, right? We're such an important part of that process, and to just not recognize that or understand it, or rise to the occasion, was just surprising to me, shocking to me. It was something that I really held with me as a reminder of, and a challenge to make this work more meaningful to people who were not scientists. That led me into more the storytelling space around climate research, specifically trying to look at how we engage communities that have often been left out of the conversation.

Vivian:

Can you tell us a little bit more about your specific research and what specific areas of climate science you study and are most interested in? And how you're working on exploring those topics in community with the people you work with?

Tamara:

Yeah, definitely. Most of my research up until the last couple of years, honestly has been more physical science focused. So looking at how microbial communities in lake sediments in the Swedish Arctic are metabolizing new carbon as a result of permafrost thaw. So you have this ancient carbon that's been locked up and frozen into the land, into these ecosystems that, as a result of an increase in rising

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temperatures near the poles, now this permafrost is thawing. So all of that old carbon can then flow into these lake systems where there are all these microbes just waiting for it to settle.

Also, there's some stuff happening in the water column, but I won't get into that. So these microbes waiting for this old carbon to flow into the lakes, and then basically eating it up and farting it out as greenhouse gases, some of which are CO2 and methane. So most of my work has been related to understanding those systems. But increasingly so, I've been shifting to trying to understand how our research group specifically, but how Western scientists as a whole can build more meaningful connections with the local Indigenous communities in Northern Sweden, so the Sámi. And so trying to find ways where we can honestly address some of these historical injustices to promote healing, to allow us to be able to do this collaborative research.

Vivian:

Thank you for giving a little bit more background on what you're doing and also who you're trying to do that research with. That is maybe a different story about research than the one that's often shown in academic settings, about who research is for, who research is with, what qualifies as research. I know you've talked a lot about recognizing and embracing that there are a lot of different perspectives and kinds of knowledge and kinds of research. And that that is all really important to be able to deal with these problems that are incredibly far-reaching and affect all of us, and connect us all to each other. What do you hope your research leads to?

Tamara:

I kind of touched on it in the last answer, but healing. I think that sometimes... And for not bad reasons, but sometimes we collectively get ahead of ourselves, so we find this problem and there's this immediate desire, if you're someone like me at least, to want to fix it. And sometimes the things that really need the attention, that really need to be fixed, a lot of times they're not problems that we personally or individually have created. But not acknowledging them and recognizing them before doing the thing that you really want to work on, not acknowledging the atmosphere and environment around that can be really damaging. And so even if your intentions are good, using myself as an example, you go in as a Western scientist, saying, "Hey, I really want to understand how some Sámi are traditionally reindeer herders." And so you can appreciate, through that process, that observational knowledge that is built throughout generations as it relates to snow cover, snow type, snow timing.

There's all of this information that would be super valuable to apply to a lot of questions that Western scientists working in those spaces have, but what do they get for doing that? More importantly, what has been taken from them in the past as a result of maybe engaging in this type of research? What trauma is there? So I guess big picture, at the end of my lifetime, maybe at the end of the next generation's lifetime, now we have a deeper understanding of snow because we've addressed some of this harm and this trauma. But realistically within where I am now in my research, I'm honestly just trying to find better ways for us, as Western scientists, to really understand that historical context in this one location. This is obviously not happening only in Northern Sweden, we know that this is happening across the globe. So I guess I just, for me personally, I want to focus on the thing that I really think needs fixing right now, and those are relationships.

Vivian:

It sounds like not only are you invested in the content of the research and climate science that you've been working with, but how you're doing it becomes the real research-

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Tamara:

Absolutely.

Vivian:

... that you want to pass on. So like you said, the major focus of your research lately has been on these relational aspects and understanding the social cultural context around gathering research in the first place. So you've been working to engage community members in climate dialogue, and developing local climate policy using storytelling as a way to build relationships with community members across the globe. Like you said, especially those who have been marginalized and whose knowledge of climate and related policy has often been ignored. Can you walk us through your storytelling-based approach to this work?

Tamara:

Yeah. I guess I'll use the example of how I started it within this, again, one more specific space. So when I started my program, my advisor had gotten her PhD working in the same location that I was working in, and her advisor had been working there for his whole life. And at no point had anyone in their research groups really engaged the Indigenous, the Sámi community, which I thought was so wild. So I came into a place where a thing that I actually wanted to do, there wasn't really a pathway that existed for me to be able to do that. So it required an incredible amount of advocacy on my part to even get senior fellows to appreciate that what I was trying to do, was worth doing.

So I've been the catalyst, I think for our research group, for starting this work. I guess I share that in the beginning because I think it gives context to why my process is what it is. In this example, it was me again advocating to my advisor, which she was supportive of, so it was less her and more of our larger research group. Then also seeking funding outside of what my research was already funded to do, to be able to spend extra time in the country to be able to develop these relationships. Again, there was no roadmap for how to do this, and so my plan, and what I did, was to go earlier, ahead of our typical sampling season. Sampling looks like taking sediment samples, for example, for those microbial analyses, things like that. Maybe some remote sensing, some flying drones, stuff like that, depending on the needs of our group at that time.

So I went ahead of that traditional sampling season and just spent a week there, and a lot of that week was really spending time connecting to the land. I would go, there's midnight sun, it's above the Arctic circle, and so I'd go on midnight hikes. I would run with the reindeer in the morning and jump into the lake. And really trying to feel what it would be like to live here, to feel that connection to the land. Then after that, I'd researched some Sámi museums, and so I started there. At one of them the gentleman was actually around at that time, and so I spoke with the staff at the museum and figured out when he would be around. I came back the next day and just let the staff know, "Hey, I'm here. I'm interested in chatting with this person. Could you just let them know that I'm here whenever, if they have time?"

They said they would, and so I waited. I saw that the woman went up and let him know, presumably told him what I had said. He had work to do and so he did what he needed to do, and I just hung around, and I got lunch and all that good stuff. Eventually he comes over, and this was after probably a couple of hours of just existing there, just patiently waiting. He comes over and he offers me coffee. And this is one of my rules of engagement, if someone offers you a hot beverage, tea, coffee, a hot goat milk, you take it, right? You take the offering. Because it's significant. That is often the first sign in so many cultures of like, "Hey, I'm offering you food or drink," right? This is basically extending an olive branch.

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So we had coffee and I introduced myself. I told him a little bit of what I was doing, but honestly it was more of just like, "Hey, I really want to just connect with you." So I asked him, "What's your story?" He laughed at that question of like, "Wow, that's a question." But people always find their way with that question, because usually they'll respond with something that means something to them, and then you just listen. You just listen to what means something to them. Then I remind people not to over complicate it because really what you're doing is just trying to be a friend to someone. That's kind of what I do.

So inevitably someone will say something that I find interesting or connects to something that I care about, or whatever. It's just like a conversation. We talked for two, three hours that afternoon, very little about the research itself, because how do I know if it's a good fit? You know what I mean? It would be inappropriate for me to go into that space and say, "Hey, I'm Tam. I'm studying microbes in the Arctic, and I want you to come out and..." I don't know, do what, right? I found out in that conversation too, actually, one of the cool takeaways was that he actually cared about permafrost thaw. He actually cared about the things I cared about, and so who would've known? Anyway, that's my process.

Vivian:

Yeah, it sounds like intentionally not making assumptions about what people care about, or that there is going to be trust without any efforts to make trust, or to discover what people's stories are, what is meaningful to them. I think you told me when we were talking earlier this week that if you just come in and say, "Here's this tool, and use it," then there is no meaningful connection to it, necessarily. You first have to build this foundation of, okay, this is what I care about, this is what I do. How do we build those connections? Then eventually you get to permafrost thaw in a conversation that wasn't intended to get to permafrost thaw, cause eventually we'll find ways to share resources and share information.

Tamara:

Absolutely.

Vivian:

Thank you for walking us through that explanation. I think that's really helpful. It's helpful for me to hear how to not over complicate it. That it takes time, that relationship building takes a lot of time, but it doesn't necessarily have to be complicated, it has to be authentic. You have to genuinely want to get to know people

Tamara:

And most research structures, funding, tenure expectations, publishing, it is very challenging to account for that time. You know what I mean? For the time it takes to even get to the point where you can start to say, "Okay, what are our research questions?" There's not a lot of funding that's just like, "Hey, do community engagement for a year or two years before you start this project." I think that's a space where funding agencies have the potential to grow around that need. Because the projects that you see coming out of those really long-term, dedicated work groups that do have that diversity, those are really impressive. That's really impressive research. So the quality, when you do it's worth it, it's just there's not a lot of incentive or structure that exists, that encourages that relationship building piece of it.

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Absolutely. I've talked to other people who are doing similar work or who are invested in community engaged, be it research or just community engaged work in any way, that are facing those kinds of barriers, where there's just not an understanding of the time it takes to build relationships. Even though I think we all can recognize in our own lives that the relationships we have did not happen overnight, and the people we trust, we didn't just trust them the first time we saw them. And that that happens in not only academic spaces, but in I think cities, and in nonprofits, and in a lot of other spaces that we're trying to do this work in. Can you talk a little bit more about the barriers you've encountered while trying to use these storytelling-based approaches, and how you've pushed against those barriers?

Tamara:

Yeah. I would say the biggest barrier, honestly, is older scientists. Honestly, I don't know if I can give strong recommendations about how to navigate that, other than there are so many researchers in every field, that you will find someone who wants to do the work that you want to do, and shares the values that you have. There was a instance, for example, where a senior fellow... And I won't say his name obviously, but I share the story even if he'll hear it, and I kind of hope he does hear it because yeah, I think it was not appropriate in any way. I don't know, this is maybe an academic horror story, but I think it's important to be aware of, as you said, some of these barriers.

I had put in a land acknowledgement, an acknowledgement of country on one of my research posters that I was presenting. And I'd sent it to my co-authors and one of the co-authors replied all and said, "I don't want the land acknowledgement on the poster, so take that off or take my name off the poster." This was a person who is highly respected in his field. Yes, just a well-known person who is definitely a decision maker, leading the field at some level, saying this to a early career, woman of color, on a reply all in the email, who's advocating for Indigenous acknowledgement.

And no other author said anything, at least to the whole group, maybe they said something to him directly and that was it. But many of them sent me personal emails and saying, "Oh, that's too bad," or, "That's not okay," expressing some kind of remorse. And then even some people I saw at the conference came up and spoke with me about it. Another important part of the story that I want to highlight is the value of speaking up, especially when you witness stuff like this. I do think that the more senior co-authors, especially the ones that were saying it to me personally, should certainly have said it to him.

I say that to say that if you're ever in a situation where something like that happens, people will remember all of that. I remember people not standing up for me. I'm sure the gentleman remembers no one standing and saying anything to him, and so that will just keep happening. Which is part of the reason why I think some of this work is side-eyed by the older scientists. But this is phenomenon isn't unique, I guess, to academia. That's a barrier that I think people should be aware of. And honestly, circling back, it's like I just found different people that did value this work, and I dug in with them. I worked with them, and the work is better, it's more fun, it's more fulfilling, you know what I mean?

I look back at that and it was awful in some ways, but also it taught me a really good lesson of the things that you believe in, you probably believe in them for good reason. So if someone is pushing back, listen, the feedback could be helpful. But once you determine if it is or not, and you have your direction that you want to go, and your conviction of the work that you want to do, there will be people who will meet you there and do that work with you. So don't feel stuck, I guess, is a recommendation, I guess I would give for how to navigate that space. And also, know that it's coming, because it's different and people always resist doing things in new ways.

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Vivian:

Thank you for that. Because I think also that one, throughout this podcast series, I think this idea of remembering that you're not alone in doing this work, is really important. Because working for climate action in general, but I think especially when we're using some of these strategies that aren't actually new per se, but are seen as new in academic settings or something, that it can feel isolating. But that there are other people who recognize the value in community engaged work and relationship building, and recognize how much time it takes, and that that time is really valuable. Thank you for sharing that story. It is, yeah, I think a little horror story, but is helpful to hear that part of this work is also advocating to tell people's stories, and to make space for other narratives.

Tamara:

Absolutely. That is the piece that, when we talk about capacity building, and especially stories and narratives from individuals that again, have been marginalized. Even in my work at the county, which I know we'll get into a little bit later, but I just think of all of the people who I ask to speak on something because they have lived through this or have been on the ground, and because they're not an elected official or a public official or whatever, you know what I mean? They think that their story doesn't matter. Sometimes it's challenging for them to see the value of having that perspective. So, yeah, you're exactly right. Part of this work is trying to encourage and help people see that what they've lived through, what they've experienced does have value, and does deserve to be shared and heard by everyone.

Vivian:

Yeah. You said earlier when you were describing your research process or, well, the storytelling process that leads to your research too, is when you were speaking to the staff member at the museum and you said, "What's your story?" Then at first he laughed and was taken aback, because maybe people don't ask that question, or we're not expected to ask that question even though it has a lot of value and can clearly lead to the conversations that are going to be most relevant in solving the problems we need to solve.

Tamara:

Yup.

Vivian:

You mentioned, okay, you work at the county, and I actually want to talk more about that as well. So you not only work as a researcher, but also in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, you work as the Linn County Sustainability Director. Can you talk a little bit about how you apply the storytelling approaches that you're using in your research, to your role as Sustainability Director?

Tamara:

I think as we all probably know who are listening to this, stories are powerful. I am a data scientist, but most people are not moved by numbers, and so Linn County Sustainability has released a greenhouse gas inventory report, for example. I suspect that most people have not read that cover to cover, which is okay, because there's a lot there, it requires a specific type of interest, and it's a tool for tracking as well. So it's not necessarily, the only benefit is just to read it, even if some people might want to do that. For a community that's experienced several natural disasters that are arguably climate driven, in less than a



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couple of decades, a very short period of time, this work needs to be made relevant in every way possible. Climate action work needs to be made relevant in every way possible for all of the reasons.

For the costs, right? \$11 billion of record breaking FEMA storm and the second record breaking FEMA storm. At one point, the flood of 2008 was on the top three, now it's not even on the top 10 because of all of the other national disasters. But we made the list again, Linn County made the list again with the derecho. So when we think about things like environmental justice, climate justice, people even in this community will say, "Oh, well, Flint, Michigan." And you're like, "No, no, no, the derecho is a terribly great example of the disproportionate impacts of disaster events on communities of color." You had some people who had a hole in their house, and then on the west side of our community, completely demolished, houses, mobile homes, apartment complexes smashed.

This goes back to, we were doing this panel about resiliency at some point, at Linn County, and we were talking about a new report that had been released. We had the author of the report as a panelist. We had someone who works for a local nonprofit as a panelist. A supervisor from the board of supervisors, Linn County board supervisor. And then I had asked... And I won't say their name because I don't know if they want me to say it, but another person who was on the ground on the west side, to be a panelist. And they said, "Why? Why me?" And I said, "Well, you were helping families on the ground and helping get them connected to resources after the storm, and walking with them the whole time. What you did, what you saw, what you heard, you know what I mean? Very few people in our community saw, heard or did that, right? People want to know what that was like, and if you are willing to share that..."

"You are under no obligation to share that because that's also traumatic, so there's work in having to do that. But if you share that, people will care. People will listen because that is a perspective that very few people had." But we've all heard about it, and so this person was like, "Oh, I've never been on a panel." So I was like, "Well, that's okay. Come into my office and we'll talk things through and see if it's a good fit." So they came in and I just started asking them questions, "So what was it like after... What did you think immediately following the storm?" And then based off of what they responded, I would ask another probing question. And just modeling what that would feel like and look like without saying, "Okay, now you're going to get this list of questions and you're going to..." Right?

Vivian:

Right.

Tamara:

"And then this person's going to ask this, and then you're going to say..." No. Starting at the place to help this person understand the power of their story. That's all I really could do and needed to do, because the story itself, you know what I mean? That was the powerful piece. We just did a little prep, and then after that I was like, "So that's what a panel would feel like." It was like, "Oh, okay. Well, this is something that's manageable, I can do this." They did a great job on the panel. As expected, that was a narrative, a perspective that would not have been included, that was desperately needed in that conversation. And hopefully the next time this person is asked to be on a panel, they'll have that newfound confidence and thinking, "Yeah, my story is worth sharing. It does matter."

Vivian:

Yeah, definitely. What was the response from the other people on the panel, or the people watching the panel, to incorporating some very direct storytelling in the conversation?

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Tamara:

Yeah, I mean, that's the piece that people don't hear enough of. So everyone was paying attention, on the edge of their seat, just because again, it was such unique information, so to speak. And I think more importantly, especially in a community that's the size of Cedar Rapids and the makeup of Cedar Rapids, it helps people who do have better access to resources see that. And then it encourages them and provides avenues for them to leverage those resources to some of these efforts that need to be addressed. I think having that more specific call to action as opposed to, "Okay, let's just talk about this topic and then go on our merry way." It's like, "Okay, here's a person who's connected to other nonprofits that probably need your help, either financial support, volunteer support, whatever."

Vivian:

The way that you've described this is also helping me see just how that story or the process of storytelling became this bridge between the call to action and connecting people to that call to action. Because you said people were on the edge of their seats listening, because there was something to be invested in. There was a person right there to be invested in, as opposed to maybe figuring out how to wade through greenhouse gas inventory data. Which is critical, but maybe doesn't feel that way for everyone if it's not directly connected to lived experiences of community members.

Tamara:

Right, exactly.

Vivian:

You talked about resources like sharing these stories as a way to connect people to resources within the community and share resources within the community. You've told me about Linn County's Resiliency Hubs and how initiatives like this can support community members as change makers of their own narrative. Can you tell us more about Resiliency Hubs themselves and how this initiative is helping the community reshape their own stories around climate change?

Tamara:

Yeah. Our Resiliency Hub here in Linn County, or at least our pilot one, has been really motivated by the derecho event. So thinking about the major needs post derecho, access to electricity obviously, access to food, and access to information. So we have these three foundational pieces of infrastructure on this green space site, so a site that was formally just being mowed, so an underutilized part of Linn County's property. In a neighborhood that has a high percentage of low income and a high percentage of households of color, and is connected to a mental health access center, and then also is near a middle school. So honestly, an ideal spot to have something like this.

So thinking about what happened post derecho, you're in your home. For me, I was in my apartment so there's a few other people that I was around, but I remember driving out after that and just seeing the destruction and you're like, "Is everyone okay? How do I talk to them? Where do I go? What am I doing?" You know what I mean? So people tend to go to the places that they've gotten help from in the past. So in between disaster times, because that's the phase, the era that we live in now, it's not if a disaster is going to happen, it's when. So in the in between disaster times, really taking the time to build up these sites, these sites of community really, by layering some of these social services over.

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Things that we've done at our site, for example, was a garden and nutrition class that was for the public. Then we also did a specific class for a local nonprofit that serves Black and Brown and biracial students, so it had some of the culturally relevant pieces to the curriculum that were incorporated as well. Bringing kids out to these sites to better understand local food systems. We've done rain barrel making events there, so people understanding upstream mitigation flood techniques, or being able to build their garden.

Then also separate from that, we've rented out some of that site to another local nonprofit, Feed Iowa First. They have their equitable land access program, which helps immigrant and refugee farmers get connected to growing space. So through that partnership, now we're increasing access to land. Then in the future there's a public health air quality monitoring site there, so we want to put an agrovoltaic system that will offset the energy of that monitoring site with the payback of 12 years to demonstrating fiscal responsibility. And then also demonstrating how ag and solar can coexist, which, if you've been reading anything about Linn County, you know that that's been a point of tension here, locally. So again, having these base critical infrastructure pieces, and then in the in between disaster times, really building that sense of community resiliency on these sites as well.

Vivian:

That's really wonderful. I've heard you talk about the Resiliency Hubs before and this initiative at... It's just, I don't know why initiatives like this don't exist in more places or why this isn't a go-to idea of how do we listen to the stories of what has happened during these disasters before, and then create this new narrative of how we can attempt to be resilient? Not just avoid the disasters, but be resilient when they do come, and build that narrative before the next one happens, ideally, so that that story changes?

Tamara:

Yeah, absolutely. Right now what we're working on... Because after we started that site, people from a few other organizations reached out and said, "Hey, we want to make our location a Resiliency Hub too, what do we have to do?" So now we're working on standardizing a model because the sites should be based off of the needs of that local community, so they're going to look a little bit different depending on what the needs are. So how do we standardize it in a way that it's doing that main goal or serving that main objective of providing that access point? But then also keep it flexible enough where again, it's serving the actual needs? So we're currently working with another nonprofit, and then had very early conversations with a hospital, but you could see how that would make tons of sense, to find avenues to really get some of these entities online, so to speak.

Part of that is against that standardization process and then also doing some mapping. So trying to use some environmental justice toolkits, for example, to figure out what parts of the county really need sites like this, and again, some of those specific needs? Then making it interactive in a way where it communicates where these locations are obviously, but then also allows other entities to opt into the work. Having an ability for a site to say, "Hey, we really need a garden, but we don't have the capacity to do it ourselves, can someone basically sign up to build that?" So master gardeners can say, "Okay, well we can build gardens. We'll sign up and do that volunteer work one weekend." So making it more interactive and making it, again, a community effort to figure out how do we help one another? How do we leverage our resources in the most efficient way?

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Vivian:

Thank you for sharing that. You mentioned when you were talking about navigating these different resources and how to share what's working so that you can expand on those initiatives, that there's been this tension between solar panels and ag, and how they can coexist. And you mentioned earlier that you grew up visiting your grandparents' farm in Eastern Iowa. So how does yours and your family's own relationship with agriculture and farming, and your own story as a farming family, how does that inform your approach to climate action and having these conversations in ag communities?

Tamara:

Yeah, that's such a good question. It's one of those things... I really hate when people assume my politics or anything about me, really. And this is, I'm sure partly why, because my grandparents' farm is my most favorite place in all of the world. I've been to how many countries? How many cool things have I seen? And there's one trip in particular that stands out to me where, one year I was coming back from India where I went from Delhi to my grandparents' farm. That was my start point to end point. Obviously it's not like I took a plane straight to the farm. And I remember going out, getting to the farm and standing in the yard, the acreage that the farmhouse is on, and just opening my arms and breathing the air and spinning around, and looking around and seeing clean air and so much space, and just feeling just at peace and grounded and home.

So I think that sometimes people think that because I'm an environmentalist or because I'm a person of color even, or because I'm a climate scientist, I don't know really what the cues are that... Sometimes people will think that I don't understand it or I don't care about it, but that's just not the case. I think on the opposite side of the coin, I guess, I can understand a lot of farmers' frustration with hearing that they're the problem. They're the problem with their water quality, they're the problem with our taxes. And that's too simplified. And I said this a couple of times and I'm sure I'll say it again, no farmer is going to grow corn and at a loss because they love it so much. They're growing corn and soybeans because that's what's incentivized. You can get into the details and the weeds about if that's good or bad or whatever, but just to be clear about that point, we shouldn't be villainizing people who literally are just trying to make a living. That doesn't mean that we don't take any action, it's just where does that action really need to be taken?

So yeah, I think for me growing up, it's still my favorite place in the world. It's my full intention at some point, to buy that and own that farm. I would not be who I am if it wasn't for my experiences growing up there, and thinking that yeah, every little kid just goes to their grandparents' farm in the summer for two weeks, and takes swimming lessons. No, that's a unique experience to you, Tam, me, and that informs and has shaped who you are. I'm really thankful for those experiences because I think it does help me be better in this role, and understand the balance of some of these issues.

Vivian:

It sounds like it goes back to you intentionally listening to where people are coming from, and meeting them where they're at. Because you have seen firsthand, as I think a lot of us maybe have in Iowa, how people who farm, or... There's a variety of things, but like people who farm, being villainized, really for something that is systematically contributing to the problems. And that you ask questions and listen to what people's stories are. How do they feel about being stuck in that system, to some degree? What do they care about? What do they love? What do they want to see changed? And that you want people to ask you the same questions so they're not making assumptions about your relationship with farming or climate action, or anything else, and how they can or cannot be connected.

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Tamara:

Yeah, and that's a hundred percent. I can't obviously control... I can't make someone ask me a question, but it is... And I want to highlight this, there is a farmer who owns quite a bit of acreage and some would probably consider to be an industrial scale farmer. I would consider him to be, I guess. And definitely conventional, pretty much down the line. I was out on their combine one day, doing this process actually, whether or not I was saying that or we were calling it... That wasn't really it, but doing this process, the storytelling relationship building process. I asked them the question, "Why do you like to farm?" And they were like, "I don't know." Kind of wrote it off, like what do you mean? Why are you asking me a stupid question?

And I just waited as he let that out of his system, he was like, "Well, my grandparents did it and my dad did it, and this is just what my family does." So it's like, "So you feel a connection to the job, the action, the land." I want to highlight that because a lot of the things that I think motivate environmentalists are not absent in people who we perceive as not giving a crap about the environment. That response was very similar to my own reasons of why I love my family's farm, and honestly the reason why I do climate research. I guess, again to really emphasize that point where it's not about the individual or person often, it is about the systems that need to be the focus, I think, of a lot of our action.

Vivian:

And it's about shared values too, that we have more shared values than we would think, because we usually don't ask the questions that lead to sharing what we care about. That's really important, can make the whole difference. Yet another thing that you've done, you've also co-founded a grassroots collective in Cedar Rapids, called Advocates for Social Justice. This group has advocated for police reform, voter accessibility, derecho relief efforts and more. Can you tell us a little bit more about the mission of this collective?

Tamara:

Yeah, sure. Our organization, Advocates for Social Justice or ASJ, formed after the murder of George Floyd in the summer of 2020. It honestly started as a protest. I don't think any of us set out to start a nonprofit, so be careful what you do, I guess is the warning or the lesson there. You might end up starting a nonprofit, surprise. It really started following this national event, but then wanting to do something locally and recognizing that police brutality is something that affects every community. Literally every community has an example of that. Especially in Iowa, in Cedar Rapids, we also have data from the ACLU that really highlights that disproportionate policing for Black people in our community. We also have a third of our general budget from the city... At least in 2020, I haven't looked at the numbers for 2022, but at least in 2020, a third of that was going to the PD, and 1% of that was going to the Civil Rights Commission.

Vivian:

Oh my gosh.

Tamara:

Yeah. So again, this I think is a space where it's about the system. It's not about the person. It's not about your friend who's a cop, who's really nice, or your mom who used to be a cop and whatever. Whatever good person you're imagining who's a cop, it's not about them. Whatever bad person you're imagining who's a cop, it's probably not about them. It's about systems that are moving towards

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conclusions that they're designed to move towards. And figuring out if we like those conclusions, and really looking at them. Really evaluating, again, back to the data, if we see that people of color are arrested at 10 times the rate of white people for using marijuana, even though we know those usages are not the same. And I forget if it's 10 or seven times, because there's two different stats that I'm mixing up, but seven or 10 times, still pretty significant, right?

So if we see this outcome, then what are we doing upstream to change that? That's really it. I would say the Black Liberation Movement, the Black Lives Matter movement oftentimes has been misunderstood for a lot of reasons. But that, to me, is such an important distinction for at least the work of ASJ, where it's really looking at our systems and creating opportunities for others to do that, not just the PD, through things like the Citizen Review Board. And then also having an honest conversation with ourselves as a city, collectively as a community, and saying, "Hey, do we care about safety in this community? Okay, do we care about safety for everyone in this community?" Because that's the question that we really need to ask ourselves.

So ASJ, we started in that lane, but we definitely have had to evolve because again, the needs of our community. Most recently, a young woman, Devonna Walker, was stabbed to death, and the person who murdered her was not arrested on site. Was not arrested, which I still have not gotten a clear answer as to why. So I am talking about this now for a couple of reasons, because I don't think that there was a lot of local media attention on it in the beginning. That changed now, thankfully, a little bit, so I'm pleased to see that change. I'm saying her name because it's important that we really understand that this is not work that we're doing for fun. We're doing it because there are literal people like me, like you, that are dying as a result of not addressing it.

I'm saying this because, though we started with some high level goals, which we did create the second Citizen Review Board in the state, the first in our community, we still have six other demands that need to be addressed. Some of which include a significant investment in DEI training for officers, which benefit the officers too. Because if officers are charged as a result of police brutality, that's not a good outcome either. That's not an outcome that people want, I think, for the most part. I don't want that.

Then also decriminalization or legalization of marijuana because of the disproportionate impacts on people of color, as a result of those charges. And to really... Again, this is important because it's not like, "Okay, now I'm..." I don't know, "I'm charged with weed or whatever." It affects your ability to get a job. It affects your ability to get housing. It's not just like a, whoops, that's not actually a big deal, it can change someone's life. Those demands are still front of mind. And also it feels like there's always, in this community, someone who is caught in the system, is stuck in the system. Is a victim of the system that's asking for help. And our organization has really done, I think, an incredible job of merging around those needs, of being flexible around those needs. And also building what I consider to be an incredible coalition of local organizations that are figuring out how to work together, which is amazing to see and be a part of.

Vivian:

And that you're doing this relationship building work and showing that it can be effective in so many spheres in the communities you're working in. Like you were talking about earlier, figuring out ways to show what's working and to show what can make us more resilient is really important. And to share that story and amplify it. You said in the work that Advocates for Social Justice is doing, that you're asking questions of community members. Again, going back to all of the other work you've done about what do we care about? What are our values? What are the outcomes of these systems and this way of doing

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things, and do we want those outcomes? What other storytelling techniques does Advocates for Social Justice use to move towards policy change?

Tamara:

We actually just recently had a town hall event this past Sunday. We had an attorney present, a person who's been really connected to the family and helping navigate the space. Because of course, there's also grief and pain around this incident, for everyone but especially the family. So being able to manage and balance the activism and advocacy with those considerations is important. This individual has been helpful for that, and so was on the panel. Then a few reps from our organization as well. It was a town hall, and so we invited the mayor of Cedar Rapids, Tiffany O'Donnell. We invited the Linn County attorney, Nick Maybanks, and we invited the chief of police, Chief Jerman. And none of them came. And we had invited them leading up to that, via email.

Yeah. And to connect this to storytelling, to your question, we had people there that had important pieces of the story. The family was there, but they weren't speaking by their own choice, but they had a rep and so he was telling that part of the story. Who is Devonna Walker? We had an attorney there to be able to tell the legal part of the story, right? Well, what does the process look like and what are some considerations? Which is an important part of the story. Then we have activists there that can contextualize this and the environment, so to speak, of policing in Cedar Rapids. And I genuinely think that the PD has an important part of the story. Which obviously there's processes that they have to follow and so there's limitations of how much of that story can come out now, but that's a part of the story.

So even if that person is there and can't say anything, it adds to the story, that physical presence adds to the narrative. It adds to the story. The same is true for the county attorney. For the mayor, to me the mayor is part of representing and telling the story of Cedar Rapids. So if you're not in this room with all of these other people, and not hearing about Devonna Walker and what's being shared in that space by concerned family members and citizens, it's going to be hard for you to tell that story to other people. So it feels like that story is in some ways, being silenced.

That might not be the intention, but that feels like a reasonable outcome. Because if you're not there, if you're not with us in this space, telling the story, understanding the story, then how can you share it to anyone else? You don't know about it? So we've done a few town halls. We did them when we were, again, trying to petition the city. Because keep in mind, none of the policy changes came easy, they came after continual protests, so that's another form of storytelling in my opinion. We have a protest this Saturday, and so that will be another opportunity for community members, for activists to tell their story, continue to create this narrative. And I sincerely hope that our elected officials, our public officials start to join in on creating this story with us.

Vivian:

Yeah. We've talked a little bit about how you're not sure whether storytelling is as effective as we would hope, with elected officials. But that stories can be a powerful way to catalyze community action for social and climate justice, that can hopefully lead to policy change. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

Tamara:

Yeah. I remember speaking pretty candidly about this topic, about stories being compelling for policy change. I'm not saying that there aren't electeds that are moved by stories and I'm sure that there are

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stories that... They're people, right? So presumably there's decisions and perspectives that they have, that come at least in part, from a story that they've heard or been told, or shared themselves. So I'm sure that that can happen. I think that the most effective way for me and for others in my circle has been to tell stories to move people. To compel people to call their elected officials, or to even do more research about the issue themselves. It doesn't necessarily even have to be an action that includes another person. I think just knowing a little bit about...

Like when I tell the story about Devonna Walker, for example, about Devonna Walker's murder, it's like you can't help but feel connected to that. It's a young woman with two kids. You know what I mean? And you can describe the video, you can describe... You can show the photos and all of that, but when you hear those details, I immediately am like, I'm 31 and I'm like, "That could've been me." And this is a person who... Anyway, I won't get into the details, but it's hard not to want to do something. And that means hopefully that action, it should ideally be constructive, right? I'm not saying go out and yell at someone or anything like that. But when you hear stuff like that, especially if you don't hear it a lot, it's super powerful. Like George Floyd. The story of George Floyd literally was enough to move literally thousands of people in our community to action.

So the Citizen Review Board would've never been passed, I'm almost a hundred percent certain of this, without those people that showed up at that protest, caring. Because when we were having conversations with our elected officials at the time, they weren't taking us seriously. They weren't listening to us. That story was not enough to move them. But having multiple people moved by that story and then saying that to their electeds, that was enough to move them unanimously. A special city council meeting on Juneteenth, in which there was a unanimous vote to approve a nonprofit's demands, that is huge. And that would not have happened without people being moved by that story, by our story.

Vivian:

That's incredibly powerful. Going back to what you were saying too, about creating a larger community narrative and that sharing one story of Devonna Walker, of George Floyd, and amplifying that story so that other people also begin to see how their own stories might connect or how they can share that story, or they can share their own story, that it does matter, can be a catalyst for action in a lot of different ways. Thank you for sharing about how those actions led to change in your community, because I think that's also really important for people to hear. This can happen. We can make choices that lead to change, and especially if we do it collectively, and figure out how to tell those stories in a more collective way.

Tamara:

I don't want to discount telling those stories directly to policy makers and electeds. I still think it's worth doing that. I still think public comment and all of that should be done, it's more of just like this and, right?

Vivian:

Right. Then we also have to share it with each other.

Tamara:

Exactly.



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Vivian:

Not operating in little bubbles of our own. How do you see the work of Advocates for Social Justice connecting to your role as a climate action leader?

Tamara:

I can't think of anything this isn't true for, really, but much like policing disproportionately impacts people of color, the same is true for the effects of climate change. And also ability to access emerging technologies as well, there's a disproportionate access there too. So I guess to me, they're super connected. But I think it goes back to just my worldview where none of these things are just operating in a vacuum, they're all interfacing with one another. So to me, that connection is really clear, whereas for others, it might not be, so the simplified thing is that disproportionality. But then also just more holistically, if you want someone to care about climate action, they have to have shelter. They have to have food. They have to feel safe. So any barriers to these basic human needs, which include over-policing, limits our ability to take action.

Because again, this isn't something that a few of us can decide to do, unless I guess all of the industries are all of a sudden going to say, "We're done." But doubting that's going to happen, so it really will take a tipping point of us, and we are by no means at that particular tipping point, unfortunately. So yeah, I think the work that ASJ does certainly contributes to creating safer communities for everyone, and helps open up space, create space for people of color to be able to even start to think about caring about climate action, which is a luxury and privilege for a lot of us, myself included.

Vivian:

Absolutely. It sounds like too, just the work you're doing is intersectional and interdisciplinary, and working with a large amount of your community. Because even talking about earlier, it's the people within your group, it's community members, and then you're also trying to bring in all of these voices from elected officials. And making sure that you're actually in communication with the leaders of the systems that need a change too. And amplifying, yeah amplifying these connections that you're talking about, that maybe we feel like are really clear about the connections between social and climate justice. That those seem really clear, but we have to continue to amplify the narrative that all of this is interconnected and we have to address all of it together.

Tamara:

Well, and I just think about, when I started at least, I was the only woman of color or Black woman in my PhD program. And there's no one... I get calls maybe once every couple of months, "Hey, do you know a person of color who would be good for this position? We're really trying to diversify our team, but we're having trouble finding or recruiting," or whatever. So that's where the capacity building comes in. For any environmental organization that wants to do this work or wants to really lean into that intersectionality, I guess, in that way, you really need to build capacity first.

If you're not creating structures and systems to do that, to provide opportunities for people of color to start to enter these spaces, then it's going to be a long time before there's a big enough pool of people of color. Because think about it, why do you want this person of color? Is your existing infrastructure set up for this person to be successful when they come into this? This person probably is going to bring some ideas about change, how comfortable are you with change? How comfortable is your organization with change? I guess I just want to highlight that point because I do feel like there's space for growth

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around creating that clearer picture of the intersectionality of the Black Liberation Movement and the Climate Action Movement.

Vivian:

Yes, and recognizing that those connections have to start with building trust. That earlier you were talking about assumptions and making assumptions about whether people trust certain environments to be a part of, or trust people, or have a relationship, and that all of those things have to come first if we're going to make change. Well, thank you, Tam. We are nearing the end so I want to ask you, first of all, to give us the three key ideas that you want people listening today to understand about the work that you do at the intersection of storytelling and climate action.

Tamara:

Okay, let's see. The first one is always take the tea, always take the coffee. That's super important. The second one is just don't stress it, you know what I mean? Don't overthink it. I feel like people get super in their head when they're like, "Hey, I really want this to go well, and I know it's really important, so I'm going to plan the crap out of it." But just the more authentic and calm and natural you are, the better you will be able to connect and build relationships, and so the better stories you'll be able to tell.

And then just listen. That is something that, it's a... I don't even want to call it a trick because I actually really like it. But if you just listen and ask questions, that'll go a long way for the person to feel like they're actually being heard. They'll probably leave that conversation being like, "I really like that person," because they just talked about themselves most of the time. And you'll learn something, right? I don't know, I think about my thoughts all the time, and so I really like hearing about other people's thoughts because it usually inspires something new within my own ways of thinking. So just listen.

Vivian:

Well, those are three great, not only takeaways, but I think recommendations. But I want to open it, what is your biggest recommendation for other people who might want to use artistic and storytelling strategies to talk about climate change, especially in agricultural communities?

Tamara:

I honestly think it's just pretend like you know nothing, I guess. Pretend like the person is the expert because it'll help you follow their path. And you might be surprised at where it leads. I'm going to end this in a story, I know it's supposed to be a takeaway, but it's connected and so I want to end it in a story. I did this with a gentleman. I was asking him about climate change and why he thought the things he did, and he was taking me down his path. And at the end of it, he was like, "Well, I'm just dumb." And I never would've guessed that that's where the conversation started.

That's what he was thinking the whole time in that conversation, and what he was trying to defend, is being afraid to say that he was dumb or to think that he was dumb, or whatever. That's what he was thinking. So I guess that would be my biggest recommendation, is just pretend like you know nothing, because you're going to leave that conversation and all your knowledge will still be there, but it might give you a really interesting glance into what is actually happening in some of these spaces. That's my biggest takeaway.

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Vivian:

That's fantastic. Yeah. You said this at the very beginning, that everyone is experts in their own way, and we have to make room for that.

Tamara:

Yep, absolutely.

Vivian:

How can people listening connect with you and your work, moving forward?

Tamara:

I have a low key social media presence, but I would say I do have a Twitter, it's @TaxpayerScience. @TaxpayerScience. I haven't really posted on there very often, so I would just say I'm a talker. I am a, "Let's meet in person." So my email is on the website, feel free to share some information. Because yeah, I'm always down for a conversation. I'm down to hear what people have to say, and if there's recommendations about how I can improve my work, then I want to welcome that too.

Vivian:

Well, great. I will make sure whatever contact information you want to share is on the podcast webpage so people can find it easily and keep up with the wonderful work you're doing. Thank you so much again, Tam, for talking with me today, and sharing all of these experiences and wisdom with our listeners.

Tamara:

Thank you so much, Vivian. This was really fun.

Vivian:

Thank you for listening to The Art of Climate Dialogue, and we hope you'll listen to the rest of the series. More information about podcast interviewees is available at [ecotheatrelab.com](http://ecotheatrelab.com). We invite you to engage in conversation with us by leaving a comment, responding to the short feedback forum in our show notes, and checking out The EcoTheatre Lab's website. We want to thank all of the organizations and individuals who made this series possible.

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