

Robin Evans-Agnew 0:00

Voices unbound is about breaking down barriers between the ways we talk about the environment, changing the conversation from just between scientists and politicians, to being between neighbors from all around the Northwest region on the most pressing environmental challenges of our times.

Nancy Simcox 0:14

The paradigm is really to just a chemist goes into the lab makes us chemicals to be, you know, to do its function, but they don't necessarily evaluate it and look at it from the health or the environmental perspective. So what we've been working on is how do we change that paradigm?

Aurora Martin 0:30

How can we actually effectuate change through green cleaning, but yet also think about the bigger picture impact?

Robin Evans-Agnew 0:40

I feel like I feel like a disc jockey right here. Welcome. I'm so excited today, guys. We have two great guests in the studio today. We have a new student research intern with me. Everybody's joining virtually we're post COVID, we're mid COVID, we're up in your arms COVID. So this is our new environment. But Doug Mackey, our engineers kindly allowed me to come into the studio to keep my mellifluous voice going. So big shout out to Doug but also welcome Nancy Simcox in Aurora Martin, and my student research intern, Madison Thackera. So just before we sort of get started, the title of this particular podcast is coping with environmental threats, clean SHiFT, chemical threats, and food trucks. Who would have thought what a crazy, crazy title but a really, really important way to launch this this second part of our podcast series. I'm going to introduce Nancy Simcox first, because Nancy has been doing environmental work and environmental and occupational health work for around 25 years. And she for the past five, she's been serving as one of the co-directors for the Northwest Center for Occupational Health and Safety. And she does a lot of community education in Region 10, which is, I don't know, it's sort of like Pacific Northwest Alaska. It's all of this sort of big EPA Region. Nancy, do you want to just tell us a little bit about yourself and what you do?

Nancy Simcox 2:13

Yeah, sure. So I'm the director of continuing education at the Department of Environmental and Occupational Health Sciences at the University of Washington. And I'm also the lecturer in the Department faculty. And for the past many years, I've been focusing my research and educational activities on chemical policy and regulations. And we do a lot of training. So we have an academic training program, which trains the next set of professionals to your occupational medicine doctors, your occupational health nurses on how to integrate and bring together concepts of occupational health in a disciplinary way. And we also have a training center that works with people once they get once they are graduated, they get to come out and back to the University of Washington and receive more training on safety and health and new,

new emerging issues that are related. And I've my focus has focused it on chemicals, chemical safety.

Robin Evans-Agnew 3:12

Fantastic. Thank you, Nancy, and occupational health is right there, one of the epicenters of the social determinants of health, right? Because we can't choose what sometimes when wherever we work, we can't necessarily we don't necessarily have control over what the bosses are putting inside our environments. Right. So it's really at that core level of worker safety and social justice. So I'm so excited to have you here. Aurora, do you want to give us a little bit of an intro about what Popup Justice is and what this kind of cool thing that you've been doing and your partnership?

Aurora Martin 3:43

Yes, yes, yes. Thank you for having me on the show and actually Popup Justice is just a creative collaborative consulting firm. It's uh focused on social justice kinds of projects. Everything from legal social justice, to public health, and other kind of creative endeavors, where there's an intersection of things like this project around food trucks is trying to do in terms of storytelling in terms of public education, public health, and also kind of environmental innovation. So Popup Justice was really kind of this idea in my head that emerged after about 20 years of working at a nonprofit legal services organization. And after kind of creating in and really meeting a lot of different people from all walks of life, from university, to community groups all over the state, and to also lawyers and judges, and health professionals. And so when I had a chance to actually first meet Nancy, we hit it off because of this idea of creative storytelling and public education and public health and occupational health interests as well, so that's what I do.

Robin Evans-Agnew 5:11

It's, that's so cool, because it's sort of like that, you know, with your background experience, you can talk to, you know, state leaders, politicians, judges, lawyers, those people that sort of like those, those sort of the, you know, the lofty towers, if you like, of our public discourse, but at the same time, I'm assuming that you became more aware that the interface between regular people communicating and understanding and being able to have their voice heard by those leaders needed some other sorts of different techniques for reaching them through storytelling or other things like that, right? I mean, it's sort of like it's one of those connectivity pieces, where, if I'm talking about something, a politician may not make, may have no way of connecting with what I'm talking about, because they're not on that committee, or they don't care about this topic. Right. So how do you actually get gravitas and grounding? That's kind of my overall impression about what what the work you've been doing? That's exciting. That's nice. So, um, how does it work then? With food trucks? Why food trucks? We need food trucks in COVID-19. We can't go inside restaurants anymore. Or we can we can we can't we can't we can. So what happened with food trucks why, why, why did you guys decide to focus on food trucks?

Nancy Simcox 6:33

It was, well, we got together, some of our group has been working together on green chemistry, the idea of having chemicals that are designed to not be toxic. And so we've been working couple years on that. And when we met Aurora, we thought, Oh, my God, this will be an awesome collaboration that we can pull together to reach other communities that we haven't reached. And so Aurora worked with us to take our science and, and put it into the hands of more people and her story, and I'll let Aurora speak for herself. But her story is how we started started talking about food trucks. And then we, we, the University of Washington had already worked with Food Truck Association. So we partnered with them as well.

Robin Evans-Agnew 7:15

Okay. What's the story?

Aurora Martin 7:17

Yeah, the story is that I grew up here in Seattle, workin' food trucks, the first big food trucks that came from Los Angeles, in the late 70s, early 80s, my family actually went down to LA and we, we thought that running a food truck would be the way to, I guess, have a slice of the American dream. And so one food truck became six food trucks, and we sell hamburgers and hotdogs and Filipino food. But an early memory was that I, I rode from LA I-5 north to Seattle, in the icemaker area, I fit really well as a seven or eight year old. And we all made it just fine. And it was an eventful time. But also, I remember just being in that space. And when we actually and also, you know, we had a commissary and essentially a, a restaurant that the food trucks were attached to. But importantly, I know that the public health piece of cleaning standards and methodologies, and all of that was important, I remember and you know, the smell, the smell of bleach, right, in terms of the heavy smell of bleach, not just generally. And so that was sort of an interesting memory and some funny ones, too. But fast forward to the initial meetings with Nancy and the rest of the team on the green chemistry idea of, you know, what could be an interesting cross section of collaboration that would actually be this bigger picture question that Earth lab asks, and that is shifting, you know, shifting to something that is, you know, greener for the planet, healthier and sustainable. And so I think this idea of actually focusing on small spaces and spaces and kind of activities that are very much about community building, which is very much what I remember and what I see today, around food trucks, how can we actually effectuate change through green cleaning, but yet also think about the kind of bigger picture impact to imagine that food trucks all over the state are now a thing. It is a sector it's a growing sector, and even in this moment, I think, actually food trucks can actually help communities where they are at to build community, given the quarantine kind of status of things,

Robin Evans-Agnew 10:06

it's a nice our circle sort of thing with that, isn't it? I mean, it's really big connects with communities?

Nancy Simcox 10:13

Well, we were, we were hoping to combine the occupational health risks along with the food safety risks. And I think a lot of times people focus on the food safety risks a lot. And sometimes

not that we ignore, but we don't think about them as much for the workers that are behind the counter, handing you your food. And so we wanted to highlight how do we integrate these two things, because yes, it's really important to use these chemicals to sanitize and keep those food trucks free of pathogens right inside in those surfaces, right that they're using the food on. But the workers that are handling those chemicals, we wanted to make sure also, so our project was kind of a neat fit, I think, because we're bringing different concepts together. And also the the Washington State retail food code rule is being updated. So it gives us all an opportunity to kind of think about this. And then when they come out with their code, we can come up with our materials. And we're also hoping to reach populations that haven't really been reached before.

Robin Evans-Agnew 11:10

So retail, back up a little second, the retail food code would include use of chemical sanitizers and all those other sorts of things.

Nancy Simcox 11:20

Yes. Food workers must use, and they have training that have to go through and get a certificate for. Our depart Washington State Department of Health, runs the program. So we've been working with them to they've been great at giving us assistance, as well as Washington Department of Ecology, because they're on the environmental side, right. And they've been working on the green chemistry issue.

Robin Evans-Agnew 11:41

So I remember early on one of our early meetings in the earth lab group, when I think you were talking about these places that are food truck, car washes, or these places that clean these private businesses that have grown up to actually clean inside and out food truck, right, you sort of drive the food truck up, you go sit down as someone else cleans it all the way through is those those things exist around the state, this sort of this industry is well developed. So this is another sort of arm of that, right?

Nancy Simcox 12:12

Oh, I'm not. So there is an arm of businesses that go around and clean the ventilation hoods, of the food trucks. So they go in, and they actually will do that. But there are some contractors as well, that can come in and clean but but we have to remember food trucks are small, they have small budgets. And so they are a lot of it, do it themselves, kind of employers, and there's about 1700 food trucks in Washington State. And our Washington State Food Truck Association only reached about 150. So there's a lot of people that we can be reaching, more.

Robin Evans-Agnew 12:45

So how did it go? How did the project go before COVID-19 came along and threw some spanners in the works?

Nancy Simcox 12:52

Well, I mean, we did a lot, we actually did an electronic survey, sent out to the Washington Food Truck Association. And then that, like I said, they were very, very busy in the fall before COVID hit. So we had a lower return than we expected. But that was okay, we got some basic information. And from that, we also tapped into our University of Washington students through one of our nutritional classes. And we had students going out into the community and interviewing some of the food trucks in their community. And we had a short very short survey that we put together with all of our different partners, giving us guidance. And then we also through Aurora's connections, and she can talk about this is with Heritage University, we decided to reach out to Yakima and take our survey and our information and get those students involved, as well. And so I'll let Aurora explain because she was the lead on that.

Robin Evans-Agnew 13:43

Yeah. Tell us about Heritage University. Not Not everybody knows about this cool place over there in Yakima.

Aurora Martin 13:50

Yes, Heritage University is really an incredibly special institution that I know the University of Washington has relationships with, but as you said, not a lot of people know. It is a university located in the actually Toppenish area of the Lower Yakima Valley. And it really was established with a vision to serve the Yakima Nation students and families and the farm worker students and their families that have, you know, recently, actually started to actually develop a community there. So I apologize that we'll have to edit that. But you know, it's a special place because I have had a chance to work with a number of the students and the faculty there. And when this opportunity came up, we wanted to see about the statewide reach and make sure that we looked at not just the Puget Sound area, but also what are food trucks operating like and providing community in in rural parts of Washington and so we were able to actually get Heritage university students to work on this project with the team. So that has been really very exciting.

Robin Evans-Agnew 15:10

Nice. I was gonna, I was just thinking, Is there a food truck class out there in any of the community colleges or anything else like that there any sort of programs like that?

Nancy Simcox 15:20

Yeah, there is actually not in the community colleges, but there is one at the University of Washington ice, and we were talking with them at Heritage about how they might be able to do a similar kind of program with procreate funding, of course,

Robin Evans-Agnew 15:33

I love America, I love it that you can have a food truck class. And that's just so cool. It's just magic. Okay, so sort of fast forward to thinking around these chemical challenges inside the workplace. How how, you know, what do you see are the sort of the looming threats now the looming threats that were existing, but also sort of switching over to what you see as looming threats now with COVID-19. And with I see photographs now of people spraying chemicals

everywhere. And doing a bunch of stuff like this, you know, what are your thoughts now in terms of cleaning practices? And has, has America gone more crazy for cleaning practices now in a good way, or a bad way? How, what's what's the sort of scene happening with that, Nancy, that you that you're aware of?

Nancy Simcox 16:22

Yeah, so we have seen an uptick in exposure calls to the poison control centers, for example, was a report that came out in March, highlighting the difference between January through March of this year and last year, and they followed up and tried to identify some of the issues that people were having. Because they were, they were going out, people are using disinfectants everywhere, not necessarily using them properly, because bleach is a disinfectant, but it's not often used that way, they often use it as a cleaner. And one big principle that we're trying to express out there to everybody is to please clean first and then disinfect. Because when you use a disinfectant, and if it's put on a dirty surface, it's not going to do the job that you want it to do. We also want to really express that people do not mix chemicals, because you put like something with ammonia together with something like bleach, and it causes a very nasty gas that people can get harmed from. So, you know, we have been really working hard on getting information in Spanish and English right now, because that's what we've been able to do to get factsheets and information out to the community. And before COVID came, we were going to go out into the fields more with the farm workers in different liaisons that we have that through our network, but unfortunately, because of that, we are unable to get out there. And one of the barriers that we came up against was because folks don't have email, right? So we couldn't necessarily do that. So it has to be done in person to get the information out or through these liaisons who are going out and are essential and still working with the communities in Yakima. So that's, that's one of the things that we've been focusing on. We did learn from them from our survey work in our in person interviews, some of the key things that they really wanted us to focus on, like they wanted to understand, like, what is a green chemical? They wanted to know How should they be using chemicals safely. So we kind of have some, some good guidance, just from our initial pilot work that we did before COVID hit and that's what we're going to be focusing our toolkit around.

Robin Evans-Agnew 18:24

Oh, my gosh, we've gotten to this part of the interview. And I haven't asked you what how you define a green chemical. So I we need to know, what is a green chemical.

Nancy Simcox 18:35

So a green chemical product is when that does not contain highly toxic compounds. And they're often called environmentally preferable products. And what that means is that there's been a third party certification. The Environmental Protection Agency, for example, has put together a program and they go in and look at all the different ingredients, and they make sure they do not cause cancer, they're not corrosive to the eyes, they're not going to cause asthma, because a lot of these disinfectants are related to asthma. And can cause asthma, such as bleach, they also they've combined it with the environmental properties. So we have the health criteria, public health as well as environment. So that's why in this cooperation, we have occupational

health specialists, and ecologists because we're bringing those two together to talk about these things. And at the same time, the criteria they look at are also performance based, because a lot of complaints in the early years because really, this has been going on for almost two decades, where we've been piloting and working on designing more chemicals. The paradigm has been really to just a chemist goes into the lab makes his chemicals to be you know, to do its function, but they don't necessarily evaluate it and look at it from the health or the environmental perspective. So what we've been working on is how do we change that paradigm we want to change we want to make sure that when chemicals

Robin Evans-Agnew 19:53

we'll hold on a second hold on a second. So so so someone making a chemical for commercial use don't necessarily look at the health or the safety side of it.

Nancy Simcox 20:07

They don't necessarily have to do that. And so they're not trained in toxicology, for example, they're not trained in occupational health principles. And so one of the biggest things we've been working on in the past, and there's been, and that's why we have the green chemistry field now, is there's been a group of scientists who have said, we need to have this kind of science so that we can start training our chemists, so they know how to do this. And so there's been a good response of academics, government, public sector, private sector, all coming together to formulate and create new chemicals.

Robin Evans-Agnew 20:37

So you say, good response. Are you getting pushback from industry at all you're getting? Or are they sort of

Nancy Simcox 20:44

Initially, but I think now it's, I'm seeing a shift, I'm seeing things are changing so that people are starting to start using safer chemicals. But it's a very slow process, as you know, government is very slow at making the regulatory changes that are needed. You know, we're we just updated our toxic chemical policies, in 2016. Europe did about 10 years before us trying to use more of a precautionary principle. So in the past, if a chemical turned up to be having harmful impacts, they pretty much just, were allowed to continue to be used and, or they got replaced with something else that we didn't really maybe know very much about. And so we're trying to change that we're trying to change as things are not guaranteed as safe, which is what was in the past kind of the thinking.

Robin Evans-Agnew 21:37

Aurora, can you help us understand the precautionary principle in terms of that? Or like, how do you explain the precautionary principle to people in food trucks?

Aurora Martin 21:48

Well, I mean, you know, what, how we have tried to actually discuss the the implications of the kind of current practices. And what we are urging for people to adopt is like, you know, how

does it feel, you know, how does it feel to actually, you know, on a practical level, you know, to your health, and that, and we started to actually think about it is, you're in enclosed space. And in places, for example, like Yakima, where we understand asthma is very high, the incidence of asthma is very high. And pollution, and heat, also kind of contribute and exacerbate that when you're in an enclosed space. And there's a lot of activity, and you're actually having to make sure that things are, are clean. And in this moment of COVID, you have to make sure that it's not just clean, but it's also safe. And so when we imagine that, and when we're talking to people, we wanted to actually start out with those questions. And that's the reason why these green, these green cleaning alternatives are actually safer, safer for health safe and safer for it just kind of like especially in these kinds of small spaces. Just even it makes you feel less toxic. Right. You know,

Robin Evans-Agnew 23:18

I love that. I love I love I love the idea that he you know, if he actually asked people I once had a conversation with with school custodians and asked him what aisle they hated to walk down in the supermarket. And everybody said, the cleaning products aisle, right, because everybody knows you can't breathe when you walk down that aisle. So I love that in terms of just making it really real for people. We've got to make it real for our listeners, because I know they're dying for us to get to more of these postcards that we collected around the sound to see how people if people how people are talking about chemicals. So Madison's been able to pick through some of the cards that we've been looking at, obviously, we have a data set of about 1000 and 1083 cards, so we have a ton of cards to look at. But we've just sort of picked a quick selection here for us. Madison is our she's doing a great job it's her first time on the podcast, everybody. But she's going to be our zip code queen. Alright, so when you call out a zip code, Madison will will have it and then read out what the environmental challenges but we really want to sort of drill down on how people are coping with or surviving the challenges. So Aurora or Nancy, do you have a particular postcard you'd like to read out from the grab bag?

Nancy Simcox 24:39

I have this one that says what environmental challenges are most important to you? And it says Garbage Water waste as the answer

Robin Evans-Agnew 24:47

what what zip code are they from there?

Nancy Simcox 24:50

Oh 98422 And

Robin Evans-Agnew 24:52

what zip code is that from Madison

Madison Thackera 24:55

98422 that's Tacoma City of Tacoma. in the county of Pierce County.



Nancy Simcox 25:03

Yes. And the thing that caught I liked it was the at the challenges, How are you coping? And she wrote, tolerating teaching my kids give a hoot, don't pollute. And so what I what I like about it is I love that she had a slogan because we're into slogans and it catches people's attention is that we, in our work, we want to design chemicals so that if they are released and they are out there, they're safer, they can biodegrade, they're not going to cause harm. So that one I thought was a good one.

Robin Evans-Agnew 25:35

And it's sort of a harbinger from years back, right, give a hoot don't pollute. That was from like, you know, the don't litter the highway kind of a thing. You know, it was way back - it's lovely. Thank you. Aurora, did you find your postcard.

Aurora Martin 25:51

Yes, the zip code is 98402,

Robin Evans-Agnew 25:55

which is where Madison

Madison Thackera 25:58

98402 That is also Tacoma. Shout out to Tacoma, and Pierce County again.

Robin Evans-Agnew 26:04

This is a T-town show.

Aurora Martin 26:08

That's awesome. The response to the question of what environmental challenges are most important to you? This person says transitioning people away from fossil fuels, conserving farmland and redlining chemicals in farming and landscapes. And how they're coping with it is like pretty active, it says voting, attending meetings and lectures and discussing these topics with others. And I think for me, it is just exactly the kind of sort of connection between the sort of everyday living in, you know, sort of experience to the practical and policy approaches that people really can be engaged in, in terms of the bigger picture of, you know, equitable and sustainable futures. So this postcard really resonated with me as somebody who is saying, you know, what, every day I see this, this is what I actually believe in. And this is how I am going to engage in that kind of change.

Robin Evans-Agnew 27:15

That's fantastic. And they had they mentioned, did they say, redlining or how do they talk about chemicals in the farms? Again,

Aurora Martin 27:26

I believe it's transitioning people away from fossil fuels, conserving farmland, maybe it's reducing chemicals to

Robin Evans-Agnew 27:34

reducing chemicals, right. So that's interesting, because it's sort of like people have the I like the idea of green chemicals, because it gives people a choice, right? People, I don't think people, people acknowledge that they have to use chemicals. But they're very uncomfortable with the use of chemicals. I mean, Nancy, I don't know how much how many, you know about what sort of research been done in sort of human behavior or farm farm worker behavior, or farming farming behavior in terms of how the use of chemicals on the farms, and whether that's been changing over time?

Nancy Simcox 28:07

Well, pesticide use is one of the key chemicals that it's used on the farms, and they they have changed in in some ways as far as their level of toxicities. And we've had used to have these acute outbreaks where people would get poisoned if they were working in the fields, for example, from the occupational end of it. And what's happened now is we don't see that as much now in this area of this region we have they've adjusted the toxicity, but we do have concerns of long term kind of chronic cancer, reproductive and other health problems that can can bring on to community.

Robin Evans-Agnew 28:42

So that's what I don't see in these postcards. I don't see necessarily people talking about human health from this. I think of them, I think of them thinking about it as pollution, which might be human health created, but not necessarily right. They're sort of like they're moving around this idea that chemicals cause pollution. But But we, you know, and when we then we have some actions for that, which is sort of like getting political. My postcard is from the 98329 area. Where's that postcard from Madison,

Madison Thackera 29:15

98329 that is from Gig Harbor, and Pierce County,

Unknown Speaker 29:18

we moved out of Tacoma, we're still in Pierce County, because we collected all of our postcards. Funnily enough, it said pollution limiting environmental challenge, not just factory output, but education, private landowners to limit the use of chemicals. And then and then coping or surviving with these challenges. I manage me in inverted commas and my farm and try to educate customers about my practices and why they are important to me. So that really that's really kind of going into this idea that as a, as a business person, you can educate consumers or customers about this and and that's actually a way to start changing the narrative to start changing the discourse. I'm wondering in the food truck world, whether, because you've got those many 1000s, you know, hundreds of food trucks out there that aren't really linked to uh the statewide organization. So how are they passing on practices to their consumers, their customers? I'm just wondering about the possibilities going forward. For for where you perhaps want to take the food truck work, if you had a crystal ball for the future. Nancy, where do

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