

## Equal Opportunity Environment

Interview by EVE DANIELS

Urban revitalization strategist MAJORA CARTER has dedicated the past decade of her life to confronting poverty, public health and climate change issues simultaneously. In 2001, she founded Sustainable South Bronx, an environmental justice organization working to improve the local environment while providing green-collar job training and placement for residents in need—most of whom relied on public assistance before joining the program. Since then, the community-led nonprofit has done wonders for both the ecological and economic wellbeing of the iconic New York borough. • Now the president of her own consulting firm, Carter is drawing on the lessons she learned in the inner city to help neighborhoods, businesses and nonprofits worldwide unlock their green economic potential to benefit everyone. Here, she offers a free consultation to *Momentum* readers.



You're a lifelong resident of the Hunts Point neighborhood in the South Bronx. What was it like growing up there and how did that experience as a child shape your beliefs today? Before the fires, I felt like this was a really beautiful community. ... My family had a long history here. I felt protected and like there was a lot going on. But when the fires started, when I was about 7, suddenly the Bronx lost nearly 60 percent of its people. Landlords were torching their own buildings in order to collect insurance money because there was no financial investment in the community. So it meant that the people I'd grown up with, literally overnight, were just gone. ...

With so many people having to move, with so much of the housing stock essentially destroyed, there was an enormous amount of economic disinvestment. I think it sort of set the stage for the environmental degradation that was to come. Suddenly there were lots of waste facilities that set up shop. And it really did take its toll on the public health around issues of asthma and other respiratory problems. ... In a neighborhood that's known for garbage, for high crime, for a sense of hopelessness and poor schools, how could it not reflect on a young person—or an older person?

You founded Sustainable South Bronx in 2001 and the Bronx Environmental Stewardship Training Program came a couple of years later. Why do you think the program has been so successful? Because we took an approach that was all about adding value. We didn't look at the folks we were attempting to serve...as problems. We recognized that they had some problems, like being formerly incarcerated or not having the benefit of seeing what a working family looks like because they've been in the public welfare system for so long.

Can you walk me through a recent project of the Majora Carter Group? Our very first project is the Elizabeth City Region Plan: It's the northeast section of North Carolina...and it's actually one of the top three places in the country that's going to be most impacted by sea level rise over the next 25, 30 years. ... And 21 counties in that region have decided they want to work with the Majora Carter Group to help them create a real green economic development and land use plan for their future.

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Is there a particular success story from one of the graduates that really illustrates the program's impact? I remember there was this one young man who, you know, this guy could quote Martin Luther King. Or Martin Luther. ... He was one of the most adorable people I've met in my entire life and one of the hardest workers. This was after he had gone through the program and we actually hired him to be on staff as a greenway steward, to basically be an ambassador to the coming South Bronx Greenway. And then there was a huge article [in *USA Today*] and he was on the front cover. And it goes on to say, "James Wells, who spent 10 years in jail..." and I was like, "My James? Wait a second. I don't think so!" And I realized that's the power of this program. That he sees himself as vital to the care and feeding of the neighborhood. And this was a kid who spent 10 years locked up on armed robbery. ... Later, in talking to him about it, he was like, "What I needed was someone who believed in me...and who led by example. Thank you. Because of that, look what I can do."



## Built to Last

"You don't have to move out of your neighborhood to live in a better one," says Majora Carter, who has made it her life's ambition to both practice and teach what she preaches. In the process, she's inspired a new generation of environmental leaders to do the same. Pictured above, ASHON LEFTENANT applies the skills he learned in the Bronx Environmental Stewardship Training Program to install a green roof on Carter's home in the South Bronx (which, incidentally, is located across the street from her childhood home). Leftenant and his fellow green roofers prepare a wall-to-wall bed of approximately 4 inches of specially mixed soil that doesn't stress the roof when it's wet. After laying down the drainage mats and root barriers, the workers clip succulent plants called sedums into 1-inch pieces and spread them over the roof. The sedums take root independently, covering the entire area within two years. This project is a shining example of what Carter calls "horticultural infrastructure," or sustainable development efforts with interrelated environmental and economic benefits. Along with extending the roof life by three to five years, green roofs clean the air, manage storm water runoff and counteract the "urban heat island" effect. All this, while creating jobs—and a better quality of life on the whole.

## The Meaning of Green

We're all counting on green to help put the U.S. economy back in the black. But there's still some gray area when it comes to what green employment actually means. Looking for answers, we spoke to **KYLE UPHOFF**, an analysis and outreach manager with the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development.

**"You can generally lump green jobs into two groups.** First, there are traditional jobs that make a green product or provide a green service, but they don't necessarily require green skills. This might include a welder, a machinist or someone who makes wind turbine parts. Second, there are jobs that require some specific green knowledge. This cuts across a broad base of occupations such as environmental engineers, conservation workers, sustainability managers and construction workers who are green-certified.

The current way that we classify workers and industries doesn't really take 'green' into account. If you're an electrician and you work in a coal-burning electrical plant, you're counted the same way as an electrician who's installing solar panels.

At least six other states have initiatives under way to measure green employment. We're all close in our definitions, but there's variability. For instance, some states are counting a thrift store job as green employment because the workers are essentially recycling clothing. But is that really a green job?

By my definition, it's whether a person's predominant job activity revolves around something that's green. The locomotive engineer who occasionally transports ethanol or the concrete worker who builds a wind turbine base from time to time is not something I'd consider to be green employment. However, the employees at a construction firm that predominantly erects wind turbines would certainly be included.

It will be interesting to see if the direction of federal investment [in green manufacturing] is determined by regional strengths or regional needs. The main thing to remember, though, is that tax incentives represent one tool to spur green job growth. Before moving or expanding, green companies will also need to consider workforce quality, education and availability, and whether the state has a strong research presence."

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... So their economy is not going to be based solely in things like mega-hog farms, which foul the water and the air and don't make life a really comfortable place for the people who live nearby. So how do we develop the capacity of all the stakeholders there, whether they're community development corporations or universities or local business leaders or elected officials? How do we bring these folks together so that everybody understands they can each get something?

**What are some of those benefits?** If they gave jobs to people, the crime rates would go down. The people who hold those jobs can actually become more stabilizing influences in their whole family, which also reduces both the corrections as well as the public service budget. You can have kids who are doing better in school as well. There are also the environmental services that cities could be saving money on, if they recognize that they can use natural storm water management techniques like developing more wetland restoration or doing green roofs on a building so that it's absorbing the storm water and doesn't have to be managed by a really expensive sewage treatment process. ... So communities are happy because they're developing jobs. ... Cities are happy because they can lower some of their environmental services costs and other municipal costs, like reducing the budgets even with corrections because people are not on the streets doing illegal crimes. They're actually being gainfully employed.

**With all of your speaking engagements and consulting work and traveling, what keeps you going?** Movement! Really. I've been really good at celebrating the small victories, even if they're ones that I haven't personally created. But knowing the U.S. House and Senate both passed a tax incentive package for renewable energy. That's progress. To know there are places in Appalachia that are still plugging away to build wind farms rather than mountaintop removal. To know there are more groups that are coming online and thinking about how they can develop their own green-collar job creation strategies. ... And the fact that when I speak out in public, I'm not preaching to the converted much of the time. I'm helping people think about a different way to do business as a country. That inspires me to keep doing it.

**Do you think the public's awareness of environmental justice issues will increase with the new Obama administration?** I've got great hope—my hope cup runneth over. It really does, because he was an organizer. He understands this stuff is hard and that people have real issues. And just the privilege that one has in being an organizer, where you get to see it and do something about it. I mean, he's like the ultimate organizer now if you ask me. Because he's got the pulpit. He's got the carrot *and* the stick. So he could do all sorts of things that really could help focus our attention to realize that we do need to green our ghettos first. Because that's where the point sources for greenhouse gases are happening.

**How do you define "ghetto"?** Frankly, the way I think [the word] was intended to be used. They're not just inner cities. I'm sorry, but I've been to some white communities where there are some ghettos. ... If you're living in Appalachia and they're cutting up the top of a mountaintop, and you're living at the base of what is essentially 2 billion gallons of sludge that could topple down on your house any given day. Or the water table is being destroyed and you can't bathe because the water that comes out of your tap is black. Or your family is suffering from all sorts of stuff, you know. They're all white. There aren't too many folks of color down there. But they're ghettos.

**What are some of the biggest challenges you've had to face in your work and how did you overcome them?** I think the biggest one was feeling that nobody cared and that I still had to fight. But just recognizing that it doesn't take a gazillion people to move a mountain. It really doesn't. Margaret Mead had it right: It is that small, thoughtful group of concerned citizens that keep beating the drum that people keep hearing in the background. And just recognizing that you're not alone. That sooner or later, whether it's an idea that's time is not right to come yet, you've just got to keep pushing.

**Do you have any advice for a big research institution like the University of Minnesota?** The thing that I think you guys should be looking at more, and I know you do it to some extent already, but thinking about what are the benefits quantitatively *and* qualitatively in having an environment that is nurturing of people...whether it's having parks and green spaces or living wage

jobs that don't degrade the environment. What does that do for the self-esteem of people? How does it keep people out of jail or in school? If you can do that level of research so it becomes much more of a qualitative measure that we're looking at. The quantitative stuff is really important, too, but I think what we're missing is the humanity that research can do.



**Majora Carter's local and global environmental solutions hinge on poverty alleviation through green economic development, since green jobs can empower communities to oppose bad decisions.**



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### PODCAST

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