



Photo: Fernando Ortiz

Interview with Philadelphia Water Expert Tiffany Ledesma

Tiffany Ledesma leads the Public Engagement Team for the Public Affairs Division at the Philadelphia Water Department, where she has spent 15 years as a contract employee, currently employed by CDM Smith. Tiffany's background is in water resources and her expertise is in public affairs, partnership development, capacity-building and strategic communications. Tiffany is especially passionate about work in urban communities. The Public Engagement Team helps facilitate the implementation of infrastructure investments in the City of Philadelphia, including Green City, Clean Waters, through creative community outreach, public participation and program development. Tiffany holds a bachelor of arts from Villanova University and a master's in environmental studies from University of Pennsylvania.

Interview: December, 2017

In a world of challenges and so many environmental issues, what influenced you to choose water as an area of focus? What is it that motivates you?

I grew up in Puerto Rico. Spent a lot of time at the beach. I was always inspired by the coast. It can have the ability to calm and wash away all worries. I also saw development impact the coast, which can be disconcerting, when it's not planned with the impacts to the natural resources in mind. I felt very connected to natural spaces in PR and just always felt motivated to understand how I could best contribute to protecting water resources. I simply want to see our coastal resources inspire all.

Water access, although an important issue, is not a subject that gains a lot of mainstream attention. How did you manage to successfully raise awareness on the issue? Tell us about your initiative to organize a fundraiser for water filter.

My fundraiser was a reaction to the devastating impact Hurricane Maria had on Puerto Rico (and other islands in the Caribbean). The entire island was (and the

majority still is!) without power. The majority of the island also didn't have access to water as treatment was intermittent due to power outages and furthermore communities with previous water access issues were now experiencing exacerbated conditions with water quality. The quick fix was of course to get bottled water to as many people as possible. However, I was interested in helping in a more sustainable way. I came across Waves for Water and I was impressed with their model. They take more of a grass-roots approach, working with local leaders on the ground, and doing whatever it takes to get water filters installed in communities that were (and still are!) in need.

I think I was successful in fundraising for this initiative because I was (and still am) a voice for those on the island. Because the media was not providing a great deal of coverage, I wanted to ensure that people in my community (in the states), at the very least, knew the true conditions and the dire need for assistance. I think people generally want to help when they realize their fellow citizens are in the dark (literally and figuratively), especially when they are suffering as a result of such a devastating natural disaster. Surviving without power is do-able although certainly not preferable; however, surviving



without water is not possible and stress-inducing, while of course life-threatening.

I also believe I was successful because I was targeting friends, family, colleagues and those in my networks. Most of them are people I have relationships with – where there exists a foundation of trust. I made it easy for them to help PR in an immediate way by offering a tangible solution. My contacts (including friends) on the ground in PR were also able to vouch for the PR team that was installing the water filters (and I was getting updates from the team on the ground regularly). The open communication provides a great deal of relief to those who want to provide further support. We need to make sure the funds are being spent as intended and knowing that this was the case was reassuring.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have a multi-dimensional approach to address water issues such as potable water, health and hygiene, and life below water. What are some of the steps that need to be taken to ensure that women are empowered to act as drivers of change to achieve the sustainable development goals?

Opportunity and leadership. I believe strongly that we need to give women the opportunity to make a difference while also providing women with leadership skills and/or training. By tapping into our leadership abilities, we become more purposeful with our goals and confident with who we are as



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“When we know our value and we’re empowered to realize our vision, we can move mountains.”

individuals. When we know our value and we’re empowered to realize our vision, we can move mountains.

What is your advice to current MES/MSAG students who are interested to pursue the field?

For those interested in water... I recommend that students take advantage of the opportunity to take technical classes and/or to interact with technical experts, if possible, in addition to writing and other communication related courses. The combination of technical skills and softer skills is powerful in our field and one that is needed in the water resources industry.