

Grace Carlin

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SPEAKERS

Van Wagner, Grace Carlin

- V** Van Wagner 00:04
Hi, this is Van Wagner with the Institute for Diversity and Civic Life. The date is July 30, 2021. Today I'm speaking with Grace Carlin over Zoom for the Voices of Change oral history project. I should note that I do know Grace. We're friends from college. So Grace to start, would you introduce yourself and tell us where you're taking this call from today in Texas?
- G** Grace Carlin 00:26
Yeah, absolutely. I'm Grace Carlin. I'm really, really glad to be here speaking with you, Van, and I am in my hometown of San Antonio up on the northwest side near UTSA [The University of Texas at San Antonio] in my lovely apartment, and I'm just so glad to be here.
- V** Van Wagner 00:45
Cool. Yeah, so I'm very excited to speak with you today. We're going to go back in time a ways, and we're gonna start with some general early life questions. I'd like to hear a little bit about your childhood, your family, formative experiences in your youth, anything in that early time period you'd like to share.

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Grace Carlin 01:09

Yeah, absolutely. So like I had mentioned a moment ago, I was born and raised here in San Antonio. I grew up in the Alamo Heights neighborhood, went to that school district all through from elementary through high school. I have one sister Annelise, she's two years older than me. I was raised with both my parents. I had several family members living in town, some of them have moved around a little bit. But I was very fortunate in that I grew up with this really great family system, this really great community, and just a lot of opportunities that I think really helped shape me to become the person I am today. And whenever I think about that, I think about the fact that I was raised in Alamo Heights. This is historically a very wealthy community. My family is not one of those, we have always been very solidly middle class, but even so, being able to attend this school district for many years really afforded me a lot of opportunities to grow and socialize and learn and become a different person than I think I might have been if I didn't have this really sort of stable and happy background. Particularly, this is how I developed my love for science and my love for singing. I got to pursue my interests in the arts as well. I just always felt so supported throughout my childhood and while I was growing up, and I really credit that to helping me get to where I am today.

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Van Wagner 03:24

Can you tell me a little bit more about some of those opportunities and experiences that you had when you were young?

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Grace Carlin 03:29

Yeah, absolutely. A couple stick out to me. The first thing I think is the family trips that I would take with my parents and with my sister every second summer up to Colorado. We would always stay in a cabin just inside Rocky Mountain National Park and that is my home away from home now. I just went back a couple weeks ago, that was my twelfth time visiting with my family. Just being up there brought us all closer together. It really instilled in each of us a sense of peace and happiness. For me especially, that was really how I started noticing the beauty of the natural world and the environment. I decided to start doing their Junior Ranger program one summer but since we were only there for a week at a time, I think I got just part of the way through it and then didn't pick it up after that when we returned two years later. It was still just a wonderful place, amazing place to be and just such a cool way to play and to hike and to get really invested first-hand in the natural environment and grow my curiosity for the environment that way.

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Grace Carlin 05:06

I think the other really big formative opportunity I had when I was younger is my history in the Alamo Heights choir programs. I credit those choir programs, essentially, for about eighty-five percent of my development into the human I am today. Being in any musical ensemble with others, it teaches you self-reliance just as much as it teaches you about the virtues of teamwork and listening and working together and breathing together to produce this just amazing piece of art that's greater than the sum of any of you on your own. Being in choir for so long - I think I started in sixth grade and continued all the way through college even - but being in choir for so long like that, it really taught me just the importance of having a good enough sense to know what you're doing on your own and being self-sufficient, like I said, but also the importance of listening to those around you who can help you, who can guide you. It fosters just a - I don't know, just a really special kind of humanity, I guess. I don't know how else to put it. But it was just a really great experience. I am always in the back of my mind thinking of my choir directors and thanking them for all the amazing opportunities they helped guide me towards.

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Van Wagner 07:03

That's so interesting. I'm so glad you had such an experience. So was that program attached to school?

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Grace Carlin 07:12

It was, yeah. These were all classes I took during during middle school and during high school. It was fully its own sort of competitive thing. We would go to UIL [University Interscholastic League] competitions every spring. We would compete in solo and ensemble competitions up at, I think, UT Austin, if I'm remembering right. We did musical theater, we did all the concerts, all the madrigals, all that great stuff. So that was, if I'm being honest, the most fun part of school for me, definitely the part I engaged with the most.

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Van Wagner 08:00

That's awesome. What a great opportunity. Speaking of education then, and school, one thing I was interested in knowing about since you've been talking about this is what, if any, engagement with the natural world, the environment, you might have had before college. I know that you were an environmental science major in college, but I'd like to hear if there were any educational opportunities you had that brought you to that point.

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Grace Carlin 08:32

Well, sort of the weird thing is that it seems like one day I just latched on to the idea of I want to be a biologist, and then I just went with that. I don't remember any sort of instigating event or any particular opportunity that stuck out to me, but I know that through high school, I really enjoyed the introductory biology class I took. I went on to take AP bio my senior year, which I think was definitely more challenging than I had necessarily anticipated. I think I really, at that point, just wanted to do the typical science kid thing, wanted to go in and study megafauna and talk about, "Let's save the whales," and all of that. That was very much not what the AP bio experience was or is designed to be, but I found joy in it anyway. I pushed through it anyway.

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Grace Carlin 09:46

Weirdly enough, as I'm sure we'll get to here soon, my education and then later my career, turned away from strict biology, more towards a human view of environmental studies. I just remember I was offered one environmental studies course in high school, again, during my senior year, took that, and was profoundly disappointed with the experience. It was not at all what I expected, the teacher was not appropriate for that position, and it reflected in the way that he taught and the way that students engaged with the class. I felt like I got absolutely nothing out of that. I thought to myself, "Oh, this is clearly not good. I've had a bad experience with this. I don't want to do environmental studies when I go to college. I want to stick with just straight, strict biology." That ended up changing, but it was just really weird to have that experience looking back, and now me sitting solidly in the field of very human-centric environmental studies, it's just weird to think about.

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Van Wagner 11:11

Moving forward in the education arena, would you tell me a bit about your college and grad school education experiences? You can talk specifically about environmental studies, but you can also talk more broadly, or even socially, if you like.

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Grace Carlin 11:28

Yeah, for sure. I stayed in San Antonio for college. I went to Trinity University. I ended up majoring in environmental biology technically, and my minor was in urban studies. But like we've been talking about, when I got to college, I was like, "Alright, biology is where it's at. I would really like to study big wildlife one day, be out in the field day in, day out." I really had this focus on moving towards the animal behavior and the ecology side of things, and that was challenging. That was a really hard course of study to pursue, I think in part

because Trinity designed some of their biology classes to double as an introductory to pre-med studies. So that was tough. Chemistry was really tough, and that was the one class that I failed in my life. I was just thinking to myself after that semester, "How am I going to do this if I can't pass general chemistry? This is really difficult for me. Something isn't clicking here."

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Grace Carlin 12:56

Then I think it was the second semester of my first year at Trinity, I took an introductory course for environmental studies, I think because it was a major requirement. Don't quote me on that. But that course and the professor who taught it, Dr. Richard Reed, it was eye opening. It really was. I made me sort of realize that, "Hey, I don't think that my passion necessarily lies in the strict science of biology. I don't know that it ever really has. What's interesting to me is where humans and nature intersect." That's really what I get excited about, what I want to talk about and learn about. It made sense to because ever since I was little, I wanted to be a national park ranger more than anything else in the world. I just thought that was the coolest job. I thought that would be so fun. And thinking back on it, yeah it makes sense. You get to talk to people, you get to interact with people, and you get to specifically show them about the environment and how they relate to it and how they interact with it. It was really kind of refreshing to discover that, hey, that actually is what I like. That is something that I can do, something that I think I would be good at.

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Grace Carlin 14:39

So that's sort of how I shifted my path of studies at Trinity. I still kept my environmental focus on biology because that's just still so interesting to me. But I wanted to bring in that social aspect as well, so I took courses to earn a minor in urban studies, talked about anthropology, talked about urban planning, did a couple of real world projects with environmental conservancy groups that are trying to do this work at the intersection of humanity and nature. It was so enriching for me to be able to have that connection. And I think too, Trinity was the right choice for me overall. I knew that I thrived a little bit better in smaller environments. I didn't think I would do well at Texas A&M for example, where you've got hundreds of students in your intro bio course. I did not think that would be the best option for me. I think I was right at the end of the day, and going to Trinity allowed me to have so many great experiences. That's where I met my current partner, I continued to sing all throughout my time at Trinity, and I made some really wonderful friends through the substance free hall on campus, the Swashbuckler residence hall. That was just so fun, just a group of people that I will take with me for the rest of my life. I'm just so glad that I had that opportunity at Trinity.

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Grace Carlin 16:33

So then, what? Then a couple of years later - I graduated a semester early from Trinity. I graduated in the winter of 2016. After that, I worked around in San Antonio for a little while, I think I held three jobs between undergraduate and grad school. I decided to pursue graduate studies, again, really closely related to how humans interact with the environment. Specifically with a focus on how we can uplift the needs of people who historically have been really disadvantaged and who have been victims of environmental injustice. That's been really interesting to me for a very long time, I think starting with some of the work that I did at the San Antonio zoo right after I graduated from Trinity. I was an interpreter in the interactive Lory Landing exhibit. Any zoo guests could come in and walk throughout our exhibit, and birds might come land on them and chew on the buttons on their shirts and play with their hair and everything.

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Grace Carlin 18:08

That really opened my eyes, not only to the fact that I really liked to teach people, especially young people, about the environment and about nature and using those birds as a specific example. But it also really opened my eyes to the fact that there are so many people who just don't get to have experiences like that. They don't get to interact with nature on a regular basis at all, and it's frequently people from lower socio-economic classes, frequently people who have challenges with language barriers. It's a really big issue, and especially with young people, there were so many kids that I saw coming into my exhibit who just had no idea what to expect out of this experience. Many of them were scared of what the birds might do, no matter how much we said, "No, they're gentle, they're gentle, you're going to be fine." That was something that really stuck with me because I felt - being so passionate about that work, I thought to myself, "Well, shouldn't every kid get to have an experience like this and get to have this close connection with nature? Not only here, but like I did when I was young at national parks and with my family." I just felt very strongly that access to nature and environmental education should be a really big part of everyone's life, especially starting at the youngest ages.

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Grace Carlin 20:11

Yeah, and so to learn more about that, I applied to graduate school at the University of Colorado Boulder, specifically I applied to the Masters of the Environment Program. I was accepted into the the third cohort to ever complete the program, so it was still very young when I went. I took a whole lot of courses and met so many people that just opened my eyes to this whole world of very human-centric environmental work that I hadn't really been exposed to before. My graduate project, what we called the capstone - the graduate program as a whole was very fast-paced, it was only a year and a half long. We started in

August of 2018, then all of 2019 we spent completing these capstone projects.

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Grace Carlin 21:12

My project specifically was in partnership with a university-affiliated nonprofit called Growing Up Boulder. It's an environmental education and advocacy organization to connect with Boulder's youth, get them more involved in civic processes and social and environmental justice. Our project there, mine and my two partners', was to help build a map of Boulder that was created by and for teens, ages middle all the way through high school, just to explore what aspects of the built and natural environment do young people gravitate towards? What does their interactions with those elements say about what we need to do more of as a society, how our values need to need to shift, and specifically how our leadership needs to respond to the needs and desires of those youth? It was a fascinating project, it was so cool. As you might not be surprised, the most popular locations, the locations that filled out a whole lot of the spots on this map were restaurants. Teens love to eat, they're growing, they need food all the time, I was there once.

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Grace Carlin 22:47

But there was so much we learned during that time about the fact that so much of the way that we as adults interact with both our built environment and the natural environment, it is very adult-centric in a way that a lot of us really don't think about. It's just kind of taken for granted. So these teens were saying, "It's really cool sometimes to be in these adult spaces and interacting with older people, but we want our own spaces, too. We want to be in these same places as older people, but we want to interact with each other and be made to feel welcome and really feel like we have our own sense of ownership over the city of Boulder and its parks and the foothills that it rests in." That was just a really fascinating project, I thought it was a very cool way to explore those voices that we do tend to - not to ignore, but to give less weight to as a society. That whole experience just made me sort of sit there and say, "This is what I want to do. I want to find ways to help improve our local environment. Wherever I am, I want to help improve a little pocket of the world by going and trying to support these people who historically have not had that kind of support that they need, whose desires are just as valid as anyone else's, and whose needs and wants and strengths should be recognized and integrated into the urban environment, the rural environment, built, natural, all of it, it all connects." I was just so thrilled to have that experience and be able to discover that passion.

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Van Wagner 24:56

That's a really cool origin story for your passions, and I really like hearing about that project with the Colorado teens. After that master's program, you came back to San Antonio, you got a job here. I'd love to hear now a little bit about your work in San Antonio, the group you work with, and what your job looks like.

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Grace Carlin 25:22

Yeah, so I work with a small San Antonio-based nonprofit called Green Spaces Alliance of South Texas. We are dedicated to preserving land and open space and getting people connected with the environment and educated about the environment, so they feel more empowered to seek out those interactions on their own and to learn on their own. The way we accomplish that is through the administration of three programs. The first and arguably the largest of those programs is our Land Conservation Program. This involves meeting with landowners who are interested in establishing what are called conservation easements on their land. These are essentially just parcels of land where we enter into a contractual agreement with the landowner and say, "Okay, this piece of land is going to be preserved as it is in perpetuity. You can do whatever you want off the land, away over there, but this is how it's going to stay. It's going to stay now as it is theoretically for the rest of time." A lot of that work is focused specifically on conserving land over the Edwards Aquifer since that is such a crucial source of drinking water for so much of South Central Texas. So very cool program there.

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Grace Carlin 27:02

The second of our programs is called the Picture Your World Program. This is a youth-based nature education program that gets kids ages eight through eighteen outdoors to explore the natural environment through photography. Especially kids from Title One schools, that's a big focus of this program is helping to bring equity to kids who might not otherwise have experiences like these. But these kids each get to borrow their own little digital camera, or they can use their iPhone camera or whatever they want to use. They go out to these natural areas around San Antonio, so Mitchell Lake, they'll go out to Confluence Park, the Missions, stuff like that, and they will learn about the nature that they're in while also learning how to photograph the nature in a way that tells a story and is deeply connected to what they're interested in and what they want the viewer on the other side of the photograph to see. They have an annual competition for this Picture Your World Program. I think the winners are still on display down at the Witte Museum, but it's always so fun just to see kiddos submit all their nature photographs just from all over the place. It's very exciting. Sorry, my throat is really dry today.

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Grace Carlin 28:43

The third program, which is the one that I administer, is called the Urban Land and Water Program. What this one does is it specifically focuses on supporting a network of community gardens all throughout San Antonio. Currently, we've got I think over two dozen gardens in this network. These community gardens range in size and shape and purpose. Just anything you can imagine. You have gardens that are in some cases as big as this room behind me, the size of a really small traffic island maybe, and then in other cases you have the the largest of our gardens, which is, I believe it's a four acre urban farm. We support all of these gardens with the hope that we can help them to be sustainable for the long term. Many of these gardens are involved with growing food for their communities, and especially in underprivileged communities, communities of color, historically redlined communities especially, this is so important in a lot of cases. This is a way of life for these people. The food you grow in this community garden is what you serve to your family at the end of the day.

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Grace Carlin 30:06

We try to encourage the diversity of all of these gardens and the unique purposes they serve for each of these neighborhoods and communities, all while helping them to improve and push on up to the next level. So that can come in a lot of forms. We help administer educational workshops in partnership with these gardens, help do some community outreach to teach more about gardening. We can help with project funding, for example, so if a garden has a need for some rain barrels so they can start harvesting rainwater with which to irrigate their plants, that's something that we can help provide. Community outreach and education and then project funding, those are probably the biggest ways that we help these gardens. And again, the goal here is just to keep getting better and better each year, so that these gardens can sustain more people for as long as possible in whatever cultural contexts they happen to exist in.

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Van Wagner 31:34

One thing I'd like to hear, I think, would be an interesting story, if you can think of one, about a day or a specific event or occurrence that you might have experienced while doing this work.

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Grace Carlin 31:45

Let me think about that for a second.

V Van Wagner 31:47

Take your time.

G Grace Carlin 31:55

Yeah, I think I've got a good one. The fun thing about this job and this work is that it's never boring. If you don't have something to do, then you're not doing the work right. A really recent example actually, that I can think of that happened on a Saturday late in June of 2021, it was a really big, really exciting day because there were three or four different events going on at community gardens who were all a part of our network. I was just trying my best to be present for each one. That meant me zipping all around the city. I don't know how long I drove to make it to all three of these and make it back home at the end of the day.

G Grace Carlin 32:51

But the day started in the morning at Lakeview Community Garden out on the West side of San Antonio. Our summer intern had designed a children's day out in the garden because this garden in particular really wants to recruit more members. Right now they're at two lead gardeners, and that's not enough to sustain a community garden, so they want to attract more participation. I went out to this garden with my intern, we painted rocks with the children who came, we planted a children's garden together, made pinwheels and set up a new custom tic-tac-toe board for the garden, and just did all of these really great activities that the kids had so much fun with. You could tell that their parents and their guardians were just so, so happy to see their kids outside and interacting with people and engaging with nature this way. It was such a fun and inspiring event.

G Grace Carlin 34:05

Right after it was done, I had to pack my car up again and go run off to central San Antonio to a town hall style meeting for the Olmos Park community garden. This is a garden that had been sort of dormant for a while, they'd had some leadership transitions, and then of course, challenges with COVID-19 came along, folks didn't feel comfortable being in the garden in close proximity with others. So they're in the middle of this garden revival process. What they wanted out of this town hall session was to understand what the neighbors and what the community members wanted to see from this garden, what they liked about it, what they wanted to see more of, what they might suggest changing. I helped lead sort of a visioning exercise all about that, where we got some really wonderful input from the community. We learned that just like over at Lakeview Community Garden,

they wanted more family activities, they wanted to see more garden events that they and their kids and people of all ages and abilities could attend. That was such helpful input as we plan how we're going to revive this garden and look towards its future for the long term.

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Grace Carlin 35:41

Then as soon as that was done, I had to pack up my car another time and go all the way to the East side of San Antonio to help with the establishment of a brand new community garden. They just opened this garden, I think the day before this event was happening, so just the Friday preceding this. But they had asked if I could come and help show kids how to plant seeds and water the garden beds and just get people excited about the fact that this garden was there. And oh my gosh, were people excited about the fact that this garden was there. There must have been well over a hundred people at this event, families and adults and kids. It was just so exciting to be able to speak with each of them and say, "Okay, so this is what we're planting right now, this is why we're planting it the way that we are, and what you want to do now is to come back and water this plant and help it grow so that in three months, you can eat the zucchini and the tomatoes that we're growing here today."

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Grace Carlin 36:59

Just being able to engage with people and really see that spark light up so much about, "Oh, this is a free resource that's right here just down my street now that can help provide more fresh fruits and veggies in this food desert where it's really hard to access those things." It was just so great to see that tangible impact being made there. I will say that days like that don't happen very frequently. That was sort of an exception to my schedule rather than the norm, but it was that good kind of busy where you can really see the results of the positive impact you're having, wherever you're going that particular day.

V

Van Wagner 37:49

Wow, that sounds both hectic and rewarding in vast measure. That's quite a day. You provided me an excellent segue here as well, because the next thing I wanted to ask was, what are some of the biggest challenges you face in your line of work?

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Grace Carlin 38:11

That's a tough question. I would say that if I had to narrow it down, I think there are a

couple of big challenges. They sort of exist at opposite ends of a spectrum. So on one end, there's this idea of community gardens that you cannot have them without that community aspect. If it's not a community garden, it's just a garden, it's just some plants growing in a box. The people are what makes the garden thrive and sustainable for the long term, and what will happen a lot of the time is that those people, they can be really, really invested in conservation and in building green spaces for the community, sort of to the point where they might over-exert themselves, I guess in a way. They might say, "Okay, I'm doing this event, this event, and this event all in one day, and then I'm doing that on repeat for the rest of the week." And sometimes that comes back around to really help the community garden, other times not so much. Sometimes it can result in folks not really having enough time to spend at the garden just because they are so committed to helping in these really great ways in other areas. While I would not say that, that sort of abundance of passion is a bad thing at all, it can be hard to manage at times, just to remember that everyone will get their turn eventually. Sometimes you just need to focus on one thing and then move on to the next.

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Grace Carlin 40:13

So that sort of exists at the opposite end of the spectrum from the other challenge that I find myself encountering sometimes, which is the fundamental question that has haunted environmentalists from the dawn of time: how do you get people to care? And there is no right answer to that question. You might get someone to care about the environment because they assign a monetary value to it. Maybe there's a resource there that is worth a lot of money that they want to protect, or to use, or something like that, something that provides value. You might get people to care in saying, "Hey, there's this really rare tarantula that lives on your property. Isn't this super cool? Wouldn't you like to protect that?" Some people will, some people won't. And still others, they might be really interested in saying, "Okay, well, what can this do for me and my family? Is this a space where we can go spend time at and play in? What's in it for me?" essentially.

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Grace Carlin 41:31

That has always been a challenge of really any sort of environmental work, just figuring out the shared values that you have with other people who may not even realize that they value these green spaces and these natural resources in that way. But really finding out how to get people to care and then getting them further along the spectrum to actually caring. Maybe not quite to the point of over-distributing their talents and their time, but really trying to find a happy middle there where people are engaged, they're interacting regularly, and they are motivated, not only to keep coming back, but to invite others into this space and educate others as well. Those are kind of the two primary challenges I see

most often.

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Van Wagner 42:31

I see, that's quite the balance you have to strike. I think I'm going to shift the tone here a little bit and ask some more internal questions. Of course, our archive is Religions Texas, so this is a relevant question for us. We want to know if religion or spirituality or any other ethical foundations have played any part in guiding the work you do. What ethical influences guide you as an environmentalist?

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Grace Carlin 43:02

That's a great question. That's one that I've found myself sort of struggling with for quite a while actually. I was raised in the Church of Christ community. I think my church to that would say, "We're not like the other Churches of Christ, we're a cool Church of Christ. We let women lead worship, the men are the ones who serve the meals on Anniversary Sunday, or what have you." Things like that. But the experiences I had growing up in that church were - again, that was a pretty formative experience for me. I met some really amazing people there, had the benefit of making lifelong friends with some really wonderful mentors and peers, and really understanding a little better who I am, and what values I hold most dear, and how I can then put them into play in the world in my own way.

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Grace Carlin 44:15

As I grew older, I think religion started to play a little less of an influence in my life. Right now, I am of no certain belief, no certain faith, anything like that, but it still remains that those values that I really latched onto in this church environment, the value of compassion and treating others the way you want to be treated. And I think especially the respect for nature and respect for community and bringing people together to help each other in whatever way you can. If I had to pin any down and say, "These are the things that really influenced me the most," I think I would say it was that. There have been times in my adult life where I've considered, "Well, what if I do want to join a religious system again? What if I want to find a community of faith to grow with and to continue learning with and evolving with?" And that's something that I still haven't really figured out for myself yet. I don't know if that's something that I'm going to end up pursuing or not. But I think that the value of community in so many faith groups is something that a lot of us really can't go without, and it's something that's just so helpful and so supportive. If you find the right community for you, then that's incredible.

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Van Wagner 46:11

I'm so glad you brought up community. I'm interested in hearing what kind of vision for community you have and how you're working to achieve that. What does community look like for you in and out of work?

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Grace Carlin 46:33

Community, to me, looks like a few different things. It looks like a place where you are empowered and enabled to pursue your own passions, your own values, your own interests. It's a place where there are others around to support you in whatever way you need and to offer guidance and say, "Hey, well, I've been in this situation myself, maybe I can share some of my experiences with you that you might find helpful." It's those two things, plus I think, something that I'm still, at age 26, kind of struggling to put into words. This respect, I guess, not only for the people that we interact with, and that we find ourselves around from day to day, but a respect for the broader systems that bring us all together, especially environmental systems.

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Grace Carlin 47:47

If there's one thing I've learned throughout my studies and my work, it's that everything, in my mind, sort of comes back to these environmental systems. The way that we interact with each other, the way that our cultures have historically grown and developed. The interests that we have, the opportunities that we can pursue, it's a question of, "What did you grow up with? What do you have? Where were you? What environment were you in?" Whether that's what natural environment were you in? What human environment were you in? It's all connected there. So I think, ultimately, this question of community to me comes down to how can we empower each other and empower ourselves in a way that's satisfying and genuinely supportive and helpful, while still being respectful and mindful towards these resources that we all share, the land, and the air, and the water, and the food, and all of these other things that we rely on together.

V

Van Wagner 49:18

That's wonderful. Thank you for sharing that. I would like to circle back to something you spoke about previously. You talked a lot about youth engagement, and I think that's just so interesting, your work with youth in the past and your interest in that continued work. One thing I'm interested in hearing about is what ideas for youth work you have for the future, for the long term, just as brain children. How do you see environmental work with youth as someone who's passionate about that category?

G Grace Carlin 50:00
If you ask me that question, this interview isn't going to end anytime soon [laughs].

V Van Wagner 50:04
I know. Well, you can stop it whenever you're comfortable.

G Grace Carlin 50:11
I'll try to wrangle things a little bit, so I don't just run all over the place, because I can and I will.

V Van Wagner 50:21
Do whatever makes you happy here.

G Grace Carlin 50:23
I'll do my best. So I think what I've experienced throughout my studies, especially my graduate work and now my career, is when we're talking about young people and their place in the environment, there really is this fundamental question of rights that comes up. I think that's a tricky topic for a lot of people, especially in the global West and the global North. It seems to be, you broach this idea of children having rights, and adults oftentimes will say, "Oh, well, what do they know? They don't need to have any responsibility outside of doing homework, doing chores, going to soccer practice, all of that. They haven't had that experience yet that will have earned them rights," essentially. Which is something that I hadn't really thought a lot about until I did this graduate work. Now I just profoundly disagree with that.

G Grace Carlin 51:53
I think there's this implicit understanding that we all have that a lot of people just don't really give voice to, or don't talk about, or acknowledge. Just this basic fact that we want children to thrive and to be successful and to go on to do greater things than our own generation was able to do, whether you have kids or not yourself. But that's just something that we haven't, to my mind, codified enough as a society. There has been work done on this issue, the United Nations - gosh, what is it? The United Nations [Convention] on the Rights of the Child, I believe. This has been a UN project that's been in the works for years and years and years. I'm far enough removed from my graduate work that I don't

remember the exact years and the exact dates, but it was introduced to UN parties several decades ago.

G

Grace Carlin 53:11

If I'm getting my numbers, right to this day, the United States and one other country are the only UN members in the world that have not signed on to this child's bill of rights that came from the UN, which is astounding if you think about it. We purport to care about our children so much and say, "Oh, well, we want all these great things for them." And then what are we actually doing to put that into action? To my mind, this sort of bill that was created by the UN, it doesn't have anything that I think most people would see as controversial. It says that children have the right to a safe and nurturing environment. Children have the right to adequate food and water and medical care. They have the right to be kept away from conflict and from war and violence and genocide. All of these very, very basic things that I think on a level we all do agree with. But it's a question of saying, "Okay, do we value this enough to actually formalize it, to put it into effect, to put our actions in front of this?"

G

Grace Carlin 54:44

And especially as it relates to the environment, I think that - and this could already be somewhere in there - but I think that just goes hand in hand with the fact that children have a right to a stable global climate, a stable and reliable food chain, unpolluted air and land and water resources. All of these things that I don't think we talk about enough. That's something that I think every person should have the right to, especially starting from birth. Every child should have the right to these basic environmental goods and these basic environmental resources. They deserve to have a planet that they can live on. I don't know, there are times when I look at our current system of governance and our current political and socio-economic divide, and these growing conflicts that are rising in modern society, and I just think to myself, "I have no idea how we're going to get there from here."

G

Grace Carlin 56:06

Everyone talks about 2030 being the global tipping point before we reach irreversible effects from climate change. I feel like it's going to be so much sooner than that. Even then, 2030 is only nine years from now. It's not far off at all. So this question of, "How do we convince ourselves and convince others to take this seriously enough so that we can pass down tools, and resources, and hopefully beneficial change for the next generation, even if that means that we ourselves won't see the effects of that change in our lifetimes?"

How do we know that it's worthwhile, and that it's enough, that we are making sure that the children who come after us are dealt a better hand than we were?" I think that's such a huge issue and something that I would really like to see played out.

G

Grace Carlin 57:12

It's difficult to do, because I think there's a huge and misplaced emphasis right now on environmental accountability that falls on the individual, rather than on the one hundred companies that produce seventy percent of the world's carbon emissions. We're focusing on the wrong thing, and that has to change. It has to change through legislation, it has to change through social pressure and education, but there really does have to be a reckoning for this to work. Until then, sometimes it does seem like the most you can do is help put these things into action in your own little pocket of the world. And that's valuable. That's laudable in and of itself, but it is sometimes very difficult to keep in perspective that, "There are these huge concerns, but what I am doing right here, right now, to support the people who will come after me is making a difference."

V

Van Wagner 58:28

Thank you for sharing all that. It's a heavy concern, but worth engaging with. Well, I want to be mindful of your time, so I'm going to ask you a closing question, and then I think we'll sign off. To close out, I'd just like to know since this is going into a public archive, if you have any message, any wisdom you'd like to share with people who are listening to this today, people who are listening to this tomorrow, or any other distant future date.

G

Grace Carlin 59:16

If I can say something to these people, I think it would probably be to encourage them to keep doing good in your part of the world, in your community, in your neighborhood, in your family, whatever that looks like, in your workplace. It can be very difficult at times to see the challenges and the social issues and the environmental justice issues and all of these challenges that lie before us, and not think to yourself, "Oh my gosh, I'm overwhelmed. How are we ever going to come out on the other side of this? How are we going to rescue ourselves from a global pandemic that's been going on for a year and a half, and also make meaningful progress towards reducing our global carbon footprint by 2030, and also heal racial divides in this country, and just all of these things?" And it is daunting, it is extremely daunting and very scary to think about. It's a lot of work.



Grace Carlin 1:00:29

But I think what matters is that anyone who feels empowered to do the work, understand that even if your work does not reach the global scale, even if you single-handedly do not stop those one hundred companies from producing seventy percent of the world's carbon emissions, you are still having a tangible positive impact on the lives of those around you. Even if it's one person, if it's your children, if it's people at your office, if it's people at a community garden and their families, the impact that you have and the positive effects that you bring to your community are irreplaceable. So be empowered by that, and don't give up the work, because it's just too important.



Van Wagner 1:01:30

Grace, thank you so much for talking with me today. This has been really wonderful.



Grace Carlin 1:01:35

Thank you so much for the opportunity.



Van Wagner 1:01:39

If you're good to go, then I think I'll stop the recording.



Grace Carlin 1:01:42

All right. I think I'm good.