

## 2020 USDN EDI Fellowship - Valencia Clement – City of Tempe AZ



My fellowship with the City of Tempe has been life changing. I started my summer with Tempe at the end of June, three months after the start of the coronavirus pandemic. It was a very ironic time to get involved in municipal government because as an activist, just a week before, I was protesting in our sister-city, Phoenix, to raise awareness on the unjust shooting death of Dion Johnson by State Trooper Cervantes. However, as I marched in 100 degree weather in Phoenix to remind this former Sundown town Black Lives Matter, I realized climate justice and social

justice were one in the same; we are all connected to one another by the environment, by this nation and through this deadly pandemic. Now more than ever, 2020, represented a year of revolution for the planet and the people on it.

As I started my work with the City of Tempe, I was given a heavy charge. I was the first Equity, Diversity, Inclusion fellow in the history of Arizona. I was asked to create an arts-based deliverable, to create a menu of pilot projects to support equitable engagement, to support the Equity in Action coalition (a coalition of community members in Tempe working to improve minority engagement with the municipality) in creating a equitable community engagement framework and host listening sessions with the community to inform Tempe's Climate Action Update for 2021. I also decided it would be important for me to create a report on the Equity in Action coalition to document the history of this initiative so the city has records of this experience to learn from and so future fellows have a starting point to contextualize their work.

As I was working with the city, I learned a lot about the role of municipal government in facilitating justice-oriented changes as well as the limitations of municipalities. One of the biggest lessons that I wanted to leave the city of Tempe with, was the importance of empathy and shifting the unit of analysis in policy making from dollars to human beings. What this means is, instead of focusing on how to maximize fiscal resources, what are ways municipal governments can learn tools from local grassroots organizations that'll help Tempe listen to and organize for marginalized people. Oftentimes, governments spend a lot of time applying for funding or listening to wealthy stakeholders, however, by shifting our hearts to empathy, we can innovate new ways to meet the short term and long term needs of those on the margins. By shifting our unit of analysis, we see climate action as more than just cleaning parks or having charging stations for cars. By shifting our perspective, municipal leaders can realize how education, youth engagement, community oversight and supporting folks on the margins is environmental justice.

As a result of working with the Equity in Action Coalition members, I learned a lot about the city. One of the important tools that I came to the city with, was a desire to actively listen and embody a listening posture. Listening seems like it is a passive act but because I've only lived in Tempe for a year, it was important for me to model listening behavior to empower community members to tell me about Tempe, through their eyes. It was important for me to constantly remind our coalition members about their invaluable expertise and how much of an asset their unique perspectives provided the city.

By listening, I learned about the history of people of the Pascua Yaqui tribe. Through interviews, I bore witness to the loss of unsheltered community members to the heat. In community meetings, I saw videos of Black Lives Matter activists being attacked by police officers. I heard of the plight of residents of the town of Guadalupe as they struggle for water and economic justice. As I carried these sacred stories in my spirit, I learned about the energetic labor it takes to facilitate institutional and interpersonal change.

I was humbled, I was enraged, I was sad but mostly, I became more radicalized. As a result of my time with Tempe City Hall & the office of Sustainability, I wrote a statement of values which included: accountability, diversity, collaboration, accessibility, service, inclusion, empathy, liberation, equity and transparency. It was important for me to articulate these values because they need to be at the heart of all governmental reparative action. I also left the City of Tempe with the weight of responsibility on my shoulders. I was blessed to be in a position to hear the issues that community members were wrestling with and although I wasn't able to address them through my fellowship, I used that privilege and power to launch a mutual aid in my community that supports unsheltered community members. I also transformed my poetic journaling into a book of poetry that will be released on Halloween 2020. I was able to bring one of the pieces to life via a spoken word film so the lessons I learned don't just sit in my heart but so they can be spread to folks who may not know what inclusive environmentalism is.

I'm really grateful to the folks at USDN who selected me and supported me. This journey has been heavy but it has been an experience that has radically transformed my identity as an academic, social justice leader and artist. I'm very thankful for USDN for creating this program so that I could be forever changed. I am not the same person that walked into City Hall this June and I'm grateful for the ways I've learned to listen and serve my community.