



# SONYA VASQUEZ

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## **Fishbowl Exercise using Episode 1 of The Equity Lookbook**

### **Can you explain your identity?**

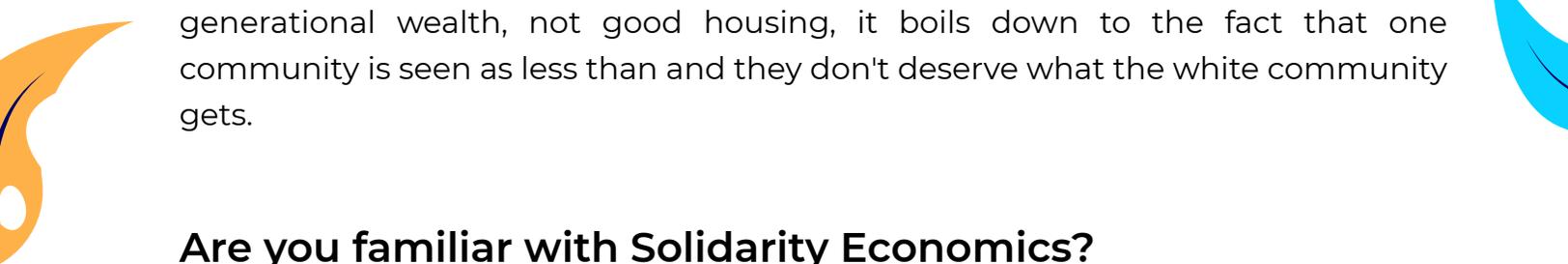
I was born and raised in Los Angeles and I lived in the Highland Park area for the majority of my youth until I went to Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine. After my Bachelor's Degree in Psychology, I came back to Highland Park and then since I was working in South Los Angeles, I purchased my first home in Jefferson Park near Baldwin Hills. I don't identify myself by my parents for reasons that I don't feel comfortable sharing. My father was the youngest of eleven, raised in East LA Boyle Heights area. My mom was half Mexican and half Puerto Rican from New York and my father was full Mexican. We also had Cuban in our lines. We didn't speak very much Spanish in our home. My grandmother spoke to us in Spanish but did not force us to respond in Spanish. It is a secondary language for us.

My mother was the primary caretaker and she had challenges in her life. When I went to college, I was determined to never come back. I went as far away as I could. I then went to grad school at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor to get my Master's Degree in Social Work. When my 14 year old sister got pregnant, I came home to support her and in the 23 years that I have helped her with what started out as one child has now become six. When I came back, I began working at the Girl's Club. I am an American but I consider myself a Latina. I struggle with saying that I am Mexican or Puerto Rican. I am a mutt.



## **What do you know about what happened in 1992 in Los Angeles?**

I was at college in Maine at the end my junior year. I couldn't get ahold of anybody because the phones were down. I eventually got ahold of my mom. The news said that there were riots but didn't say where in LA. We knew the Rodney King case but not as intensely as people followed it in LA. My knowledge of the uprising occurred much later in life and even today I feel that I am unpacking new information about what happened. It's the same thing that happened in Watts in the 60s and today in 2020, it's about how black people are treated, the lack of resources, the disinvestment in communities, the misdirection of funds, the untruths that are told about the black community. It is such a complicated and yet such a simple answer as to why the riots started. Not good education, not good jobs, not good inter generational wealth, not good housing, it boils down to the fact that one community is seen as less than and they don't deserve what the white community gets.



## **Are you familiar with Solidarity Economics?**

My understanding is that it is how you create a system that allows everybody to thrive economically and not just in terms of money and income which is a core element but what are the resources and services you provide and the policies created that allow people to get a leg up and that don't oppress or suppress people so that everybody thrives. Making sure that people who have less than us can also thrive.

## **Could you identify who would be the Top and who would be the Bottom in South LA using inspiration from the slogan, Tame the Top & Lift the Bottom?**

In South LA, we don't really have the top outside of our elected officials and our public agencies. We have wealth in South LA, we have certain sections and the houses in my neighborhood that cost 6-800,000 dollars. The true top isn't in South LA. Lifting the Bottom is a large section of residents that represent South LA but they live in Skid Row in Downtown Los Angeles where the majority of our homeless population live.





## **Focusing in on females in South LA, do you have experience with movements that call for women to generate wealth for other women?**

I know it exists but I am not involved in movements outside of work because my work is pretty radical. I support the Best Start Region 2 efforts, the South LA Building Healthy Communities efforts, the Covering Kids & Families efforts, the LA Access efforts with lots of partnerships, the leadership of the Second Supervisorial Empowerment Congress with Mark Ridley Thomas' office, and on the environmental front, the efforts to advance a community driven health study of the oil fields in Baldwin Hills.



## **Is there somebody in your life that is a contemporary woman that inspires you?**



There are a lot of people and I have a friendship with five amazing women leaders and we call ourselves the Sister Friends of South LA. Nicole Vick is the leader of the Department of Public Health and runs the Health Education department, she is African American and she is younger than me. I am always inspired by her. I have never wanted to work for a public agency but even at the most frustrating times she is always working to make sure that social determinants of health are at the forefront of the conversation. She wrote a book recently to help female empowerment. It is called Pushing Through.

## **Do you know what an Evidence Based Research Model is and why we use it?**

It is based on best practices. At the end of the day, anything that we should do should be done not just because it's a nice idea but there should be some forethought as to the due diligence or research. Are we the only ones thinking about an issue? Have others tried and failed. Whenever I talk about Research, I use a building block example. Our research is only as good as what research was done behind us and then our research helps those in front of us.





## **Do you know what convening is and why we do it?**

Convening people across sectors, across levels, if we just bring people together that all believe the same thing, it's not a very exciting conversation but when you bring together people with different perspectives about issues, then you have an opportunity to have a real dialog and learn something about the subject and you can also know if this issue is capable of moving or not.

## **How would you define wellness in the community?**

Wellness is where people have the resources they need to meet their daily challenges and to feel safe to walk down the street. They would know that nobody is going to challenge them or put obstacles in front of them because of the color of their skin or for any other arbitrary reason.

## **Do you have an opinion on whether food policy is interconnected to wellness?**



Yes, definitely. It's not the only thing but as the foundation of support to live, you have to be able to eat well to think and to be successful in life, in school, in your job, you need to have good food going into your body. At a very early age, we get addicted to salt and sugar. I have to fight to eat bland food but my superfood is Broccoli. I would eat broccoli with every meal. I do think a lot about resources that we provide to young mothers and schools to provide the right kinds of foods. You can change an individual mentality but it is also necessary to do the systems change work.

## Produced by Sergio C. Muñoz, Michelle Burton and Lisa Richardson

Sergio and Michelle are in service at *The Social Change Institute at Community Health Councils* in Los Angeles. This interview is a flower from our Leading For Equity Capacity Building Workshop created in collaboration with *First 5 LA* and *Pacific Oaks College*. Since beginning the workshops, we have initiated new collaborations with Dr Manuel Pastor at *USC's Program for Environmental and Regional Equity* and Dr Chris Benner at *UC Santa Cruz & the Santa Cruz Institute for Social Transformation*. Also with Melany De La Cruz - Viesca at *UCLA* and the *Closing the Women's Wealth Gap* initiative in San Francisco.

Lisa is the President of *Rise Communications*, the agency of record for *Community Health Councils*.

### Connect with us

To be a part of our Leading for Equity collaboration:  
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