



*In collaboration with*

**DANIELLE GETSINGER,**  
Co-founder and CEO of Community Lattice

**Date:** March 19, 2023

**Interviewer:** Dani Sullivan

- 00:00 Dani Sullivan** **We'll start with the basics. Tell me a little bit about yourself. What is your name? Where do you live? What do you do?**
- 00:10 Danielle Getsinger** OK, well, so my name is Danielle Getsinger. I live in Houston, Texas. I'm not originally from Houston, Texas, just for the record, since we're recording—I'm from northern New Hampshire, not a Texan, but it's growing on me. What do I do? I call myself a recovering environmental consultant. I started a company in 2019, after leaving environmental consulting for a 15-plus-year career, to basically provide communities better support for community development through the lens of understanding environmental liability and environmental justice issues.
- 00:55 D.S.** **OK. What motivated you to leave environmental consulting to do that?**
- 01:04 D.G.** Ooo—
- 01:06 D.S.** **We're getting deep here.**
- 01:08 D.G.** We're getting deep here. Do I need to tell you about my tarot card reading? It was really—I left a tarot card reading in New Orleans.
- 01:15 D.S.** **I'd love to hear about that, actually.**

**01:19**     **D.G.**     You know, everything comes back to New Orleans. Well, a lot of things had been pointing me in the direction of starting my own company, and I wasn't satisfied in environmental consulting because one, it was a little bit boring; Two, we're always working for industry. It was never any kind of righteous cause. It was not mission-driven. It was basically working for either the government or—the closest thing was in Brownfields Redevelopment.<sup>1</sup> So that's why I gravitated towards Brownfields Redevelopment. But I could see that we could do it better. I tried to take over our national practice—I was the National Practice Lead(er) for the consulting firm I was at. And they didn't really prioritize Brownfields because they had Department of Defense contracts, which were like \$2 billion contracts and I'm coming in with a \$100,000 contract, and they were like, "good job, sweetie." So—

**02:15**     **D.S.**     **So, they didn't prioritize it because it didn't bring in any money?**

**02:19**     **D.G.**     It didn't bring in any money. And they also, most of the consulting firms are uncomfortable talking to other humans. Especially communities that have been disenfranchised for a long time and they're coming with a lot of trauma, a lot of anger—and there's a lot of liability associated with the work in environmental (justice). So, they get real scared of saying the wrong thing, and you can just see how tense they are at all of these public meetings, because they don't wanna say the wrong thing, they don't wanna do the wrong thing. And they're usually representing somebody else, so, like Union Pacific or the City of Houston or the EPA, and they have to fall in line. And I had a hard time falling in line. And when I was at the Society of American Military Engineers Conference in New Orleans, and my boss who, who's awesome—she's one of the principals of this firm—and we were looking for a woman-owned, or minority-owned business that does work within the Department of Defense contracting, because if you have what's called an 8(a) certification, which is basically the WBE or MBE,<sup>2</sup> but on steroids; if you have that, then you get all of these set-asides, and you can form mentor-protégée relationships with a larger firm. So, those larger firms, when they get these big contracts, if they lose 'em, they need another avenue to get back to 'em. If you think about it, their business model,

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<sup>1</sup> An official city initiative called the Brownfields Redevelopment Program.

<sup>2</sup> Women-owned Business Enterprises; Minority Business Enterprises

with like \$2 billion—if you lose that \$2 billion, you’re kind of screwed.

**04:03 D.S. I see.**

**04:07 D.G.** So, they need other ways to be able to contract and diversify their contracts with the federal government, which in theory, setting up these mentor-protégée relationships allows for smaller firms to play in that space. However, as you can imagine, there's a lot of White men who are taking the lead on these firms but putting a person of color or a woman as the head of that company, so that they can use them... So that just kind of grossed me out. So, one night over a bottle of wine, this woman said to me, she's like, “you could work through all the bullshit that I've had to go through for the past 30 years, and make your way up through this corporate ladder, or you saw the opportunity here, and you’re actually—you can go out and you could get work; You can do your Brownfields thing that we can't really do here, that doesn't really align here, and you go out and do your own thing.” So, the next morning, I called my now kind of business partner and I said, “all right, you wanna start a company?” And then I got a tarot card reading, and the tarot card reading said, “yeah, you needa start a company,” and a whole bunch of other things. And I thought it was just—I really don't believe in tarot card readings until that moment... And the moment where I presented a picture—or she said “tell me something else,” and I said something about my son, and she pulled out the card that had a dragon with this pink ribbon around it, which, his favorite color is pink and he loves dresses. So, she was like “your son.” I was just like, “OK, this went a little too far. Now I'm totally into this.”

**05:55 D.S. Wow. That's cool. I mean, if you're gonna get a legit tarot card reading, it's gonna be in New Orleans.**

**06:01 D.G.** It's gonna be in New Orleans. Did you ever watch *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*?

**06:05 D.S. Oh yeah, of course.**

**06:07 D.G.** OK. So, I call it the Hellmouth. There's a certain energy there... So anyway, the tarot card reading told me to go and—New Orleans told me to start a business. And then I went back to New Orleans for a

ULI<sup>3</sup> workshop on moving into the role of developer. I was thinking more getting into Brownfields development itself. And when I did that, I met this guy that—we started playing with the data and all of the things, and I showed him what we were doing. He was like, “OK, so you guys are in business, right?” I’m like, “No, no, we’re not yet.” And it was just, again, New Orleans told me. So, it was a series of events in New Orleans, and every time there’s an event in New Orleans, I go back to pay homage to the Hellmouth.

**06:57 D.S. Wow, you do. Have you ever seen the tarot card reader again?**

**07:02 D.G.** No, no, I haven’t. [CHATTER BREAK]

**07:42 D.S. And that was—how long ago was that?**

**07:44 D.G.** That was in 2019.

**07:46 D.S. OK. Oh, I didn't realize that—so, I met you in the pretty early stages of your business.**

**07:53 D.G.** 2019, yeah. Right when I started is when everything broke—all the news broke of the cancer cluster (in the Fifth Ward.) And I had been doing work in Fifth Ward for a while, so I kind of knew all of what was happening, and I was not surprised, unfortunately, 'cause of all of the environmental issues throughout Fifth Ward. And I actually told my attorney at that time, I said, “this is why I wanted to start a company—is because if you went to all of those meetings with the community, they didn't have the right support; they didn't have the right experts, they didn't have the right people navigating this. Not many people within the support structure had actually managed and done cleanup of creosote.” And I had managed the North Cavalcade Superfund Site right before leaving EnSafe.<sup>4</sup> So, I felt I could probably show up—but then I was like, I don't wanna show up and be like, “hey everybody, I'm here, I'm a geologist.” So, I came in kind of—I went to a few meetings and got to know the community and whittled my way in.

**09:18 D.S. Yeah. I was gonna ask how you integrated yourself, because you had already been working in the Fifth Ward... Did your**

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<sup>3</sup> Urban Land Institute

<sup>4</sup> This is the consulting firm Danielle worked for

**consulting company allow you to—were there limitations around how you could interact with (the community there)?**

**09:32 D.G.** (Shakes head no). So, I would not have been—afterwards, or during?

**09:36 D.S.** **No, during. So, could you have—Were you able to build any relationships within the community? 'Cause you were working—**

**09:45 D.G.** Only with our clients. No, and the only relationships we had was with the Fifth Ward CRC. And I learned very quickly that the people have different opinions of Fifth Ward CRC throughout the community. We never actually got deep into the community—

**10:04 D.S.** **I think I remember, but what is the CRC again?**

**10:07 D.G.** Community Redevelopment Corporation. [Oh right, OK, yeah, I remember that] And I put together a meeting between Reverend (James) Caldwell. And Reverend Clemons.<sup>5</sup> I'm like, you guys needa talk. 'Cause I hear them saying the same thing, but I don't know the long history of their relationship. And I sat down, and they had this—oh, it was an amazing meeting. It was a meeting of two pastors, really going at each other, like with all Bible verses, and I'm like, “was that a dig?” And then Bible stories, and I'm like, “I have no idea what's going on, can we talk in science talk right now?” [You're like “I'm from New Hampshire”] I am from a (congregation) that we then ditched when our pastor came out as gay and then the congregation said, “no, that's not OK” and then we boycotted it, didn't realize how radical it was at the time—anyway, that's my experience with religion, so at that point I was like... (signals confusion). It was fun, good times. [That was early days then of you—] Not realizing, basically, how complicated the community engagement really is. [Yeah] And I think that there's not really that appreciation—looking back at all of consulting, there is not that appreciation of how just complex the communities are, the relationships are, and you can't just go to one organization, because they represent a subset, and these people represent another subset, and they don't always get along, but they try to get along, but they

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<sup>5</sup> Reverend Harvey Clemons Jr.

don't get along. And sometimes they trick you, where they're all fighting, but then they all come after you, in one united front. A lot of things I've learned.

- 12:13 D.S. **Yeah, it's complex stuff, interpersonal, relationship stuff. It's very political (internal dynamics of communities and subcommunities).**
- 12:21 D.G. It is. I didn't realize how political this was gonna become. But it's kind of—I should write a book on this, just a geologist's perspective of operating within a cancer cluster. [Yeah, that would be interesting] From the trenches, not from the seat at the EPA 'cause—and I see this now, and even last night at the cancer cluster meeting, the consultants were there, they fade into the background and they don't interact (with anyone). [No] And the ones that do, it's not human interaction.
- 13:02 D.S. **Right, no it's not. You're on two different wavelengths, essentially. You can't go into a place without having ever spoken to people, without having any cultural or historical context, and just expect to be able to problem-solve together and find solutions. It doesn't really work that way. It just takes a lot more time. That's something that I—when we were working together, I really respected about you, is your approach was very different than a lot of, even at the county level, right, people that I would work with; You have to be really patient and take your time and listen to people, and that's what goes—people don't consider that very often.**
- 13:50 D.G. They operate so tightly on billable hours and close, tucked into the scope (of work of the client). And if they are not allowed—so, I gave myself the freedom to be able to say, “I don't care how we're making money right now.” And, and I have a certain—don't tell anyone, my wife works for oil. [Yeah, I remember you told me that once, I was like, “wow, interesting”] We say that, yeah, she sold her soul to the evil empire, but it's paying our health insurance, and somebody's gotta do it. And I feel like we offset each other now—job security...

[CHATTER BREAK]

Yeah. But the health insurance is real, especially when you have children, they get hurt a lot. So, I recognize that I had this privilege of having to be able to start a company. We started the company on \$5,000, which is not much, and although we didn't get paid for a year, until we got the data.org funding, we were—we had the freedom to do whatever, and so I could show up at meetings and we wanted to start our company as a social impact organization, a social enterprise, so we were really one giant experiment. What can we do differently? And now it's the experiment of can we get paid, beyond the grant funding? And how do we now not compromise those values of really showing up for community and advocating for the community while we are really obligated to a certain contract with, say, the city, or the county, or the EPA, et cetera. And that's where the struggle is.

**15:53 D.S. Yeah. Is that something that you, when you enter into a contract, you negotiate? Is that something you can—**

**16:07 D.G.** So, the way that we did it was, so we were the community liaison for the Neighborhood Resilience Plan effort in Independence Heights, East Houston, and Edgebrook. And I brought in our nonprofit partners at Black United Fund of Texas, just mostly because I needed more people. And when we first had a meeting—we had very structured, we have this many meetings and we're gonna have a public meeting every, three public meetings, these focus group meetings, and then we're gonna go to the community at these times. It's so prescriptive.

And I said I understand why it has to be prescriptive for basically the federal funding that we're getting for this, but in order for us to do this right, we really need to be more flexible and we're gonna go out and talk to the community. We're gonna have one-on-one conversations with them. We're gonna keep you in the loop, but we're gonna have these conversations, which we gained enough trust with the city to be able to do that, but we definitely went rogue. [OK] Yeah, and there were a couple of times that we got slapped on the wrist for going too rogue, and not including the city in certain conversations, but frankly, if the city shows up, the community's not going to give us what's really going on.

**17:22 D.S. Right, yeah. I wanted to ask too, how do you, since you've been doing this for a few years now and you've... to me it seems you've sort of proven yourself to the community that you're committed. I obviously don't know their—I dunno how they**

**feel—but the trust that you've built, do they... are your interactions with the communities that you've been working with, do you feel like they're a bit more open with you than they would be with someone from the city or EPA, or somebody else?**

**18:10 D.G.**

Oh, absolutely. They'll come to me and—I think that they try, but something gets lost in translation. Like Sandra Edwards<sup>6</sup> called me and, and she said “the EPA keeps calling me asking how this presentation went, and I keep telling them it was bullshit, it was just bullshit, and I don't know what else to say! It was just bullshit. Danielle, could you call them for me?” And I'm like, “Yeah, sure, yeah, I'll call them for you, explain what that means.” And I think that, even working with Tanya Debose<sup>7</sup> in Independence Heights—I don't know if you got the pleasure of working with her—she's gosh, when she calls herself a disruptive historian, the disruptive is with a capital D. She is fierce, and she doesn't take shit. She knows—she can see right through what anybody's trying to do. And she is a serious advocate for the community, and she'll throw down, I don't know how many times she's swore in these meetings. But she's amazing and every community needs a Tanya Debose who gets it and can advocate for the community that hard. But I know that she was able—she wanted, there's certain people at the city that she felt comfortable opening up to that she's built relationships with. But when she was just with me, she could really rip things apart, and give me her honest feedback, in a way that she didn't have to at least try to soften it so that she didn't offend somebody, or so that she could throw something out there and it not be written down, like, “OK she says this,” (and it's more like), “I think this, let's talk through it, let me get to my opinion, but I want a space where we can actually talk through this, without it being taken, and again, recorded or misinterpreted, and then we work through that to get to the right—” This is her feedback, not that first initial one. If you can't have an actual good conversation and dialogue back and forth, and if we can't challenge her, in that kind of, I don't wanna say “safe space,” because I just listened to a Brené Brown podcast that called it “brave space.” [Brave space?] Because there's no way that we can create safe space, that's impossible, but you can create “brave spaces” where you can have those conversations that are real. You can't be vulnerable, but you can come to... you need to have a certain understanding, a baseline understanding of what you're trying to accomplish.

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<sup>6</sup> Fifth Ward resident and activist

<sup>7</sup> Executive Director of Independence Heights Redevelopment Council



- 20:54 D.S. **Yeah. That makes sense, yeah, where you feel brave enough to be able to do that.**
- 20:59 D.G. Yeah, yeah.
- 21:00 D.S. **That's interesting. So, Tanya—you guys have spaces where you just go back and forth, kind of challenge each other and then come to some kind of resolution?**
- 21:13 D.G. Yeah, I mean I think that we're, because I travel—whenever I travel, I end up putting on all the Brené Brown podcasts. And at first, I was like, “I don't really like this one, I don't want somebody talking to me about their feelings and stuff,” but then she came with that shame research, and every other word is a swear word, and I'm... when she goes into feelings, she uses the word ‘heart,’ I'm out, but—
- 21:45 D.S. **The Atlas of the Heart<sup>8</sup> thing—the branding of it was always what I was (not interested), but when you actually listen to what she has to say, it's pretty insightful.**
- 21:56 D.G. Yeah, it really is. So, she had, and I wrote it down somewhere, a quote about empathy. And that's really, I think at the core of everything that we bring and our style is just. And I think that once somebody like Tanya Debose picks up on, we are there in this very empathetic way with the community, that she can say anything and there's no judgment, we are accepting what she says as reality, even if it challenges our beliefs and our lived experience, not—there's no judgment. So, we are then putting that aside and taking, “OK, well she said this, and I know it challenges this, this is gonna be difficult, but we're gonna have to advocate for the community and their lived experience.” And, and it's taken several times of going at risk, having those meetings where we didn't invite the city, and she recognized that we did some things that were a little rogue, on—for her, on behalf of the community. So, when she starts seeing that we're following through on those values, then that starts to build a trust. And I know that that trust can be eroded very, very, very quickly if

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<sup>8</sup> Book by Brené Brown

we don't follow through. So, at the end of it—do you remember Deshara Goss?<sup>9</sup>

**23:22 D.S. Who?**

**23:23 D.G.** Deshara Goss. She was at Fifth Ward CRC, she was a GO Neighborhoods coordinator. But she started working for me, and she came in kind of at the end of this project, she's like, "hey, Danielle, why is this not here? Why is this not here?" And I kept saying, "well, we couldn't, because our hands are tied, because this, because that," and she just looks at me, she's like, "you know you're representing the community and if this goes south, you need to be good with the community." And she was absolutely right, so we basically just doubled down on our commitment to the community, even if it went against the scope of work and what the city necessarily was asking us to do. But I also recognize that the city needs us to do that, and they might not be able to say, "we need you to do that." There's certain people within there that are like (nods, as if in approval). And I've gotten that nod from several higher ups, so Shannon Buggs<sup>10</sup>—I was like, "I don't wanna step on anybody's toes." She goes, "I need you to step." (I'm like), "yes, ma'am." [Yeah, yeah] You know Loren Hopkins<sup>11</sup> at the Health Department [Yeah]... Sometimes they need a fire in order to elevate their response to something.

**24:44 D.S. Yeah that makes sense... [CHATTER BREAK] I guess I'm curious—I already know about sort of hands being tied in the bureaucracy of doing things on behalf of local government. But I never really understood: why are there those limitations to where you can't—you have to get those sort of subtle green lights to be able to do things that seem pretty common sense. I guess it does for us, maybe because we've done the work, but I guess I never really understood the theory behind it. Is it just separation of—**

**25:51 D.G.** OK, so, one, there's a liability factor. They wanna be able to con— because I'm representing the city, [Right] I'm paid by the city, I'm

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<sup>9</sup> Senior Project Manager, Community Lattice

<sup>10</sup> Mayor's Office of Complete Communities (City of Houston)

<sup>11</sup> Chief Environmental Science Officer and Bureau Chief, Data Science Division, Houston Health Department

almost like an agent of the city. So, if I go out there and say something that the city didn't wanna commit to, then they're gonna have to be the bad guy that says, "no, we're not agreeing to that." So, there's been a couple of those instances. When it comes to the environmental, it's highly litigious field, and if you're not factual, if you're not defensible, if you tell somebody else's story, if you say anything that is not—I assume that every single conversation I have, especially with the city, is confidential. I apply that as well to the community. We just have a general rule that I do not tell somebody else's story. As a company, we don't tell somebody else's story, unless we were given permission to, unless they would like us to, unless it is public knowledge, we can't speak to certain things, because there's almost that client attorney privilege type of thing. [OK] But geologist. So, there's that. And then a lot of it comes down to egos. [Yeah] Most of it comes down to egos. And people walking around (thinking) they're in charge, and if you don't disturb somebody's ego—

**27:23 D.S. Yeah. That makes sense. Yeah. Well, I feel—I have a lot more questions to ask you, but I scheduled something at 10:30. This has been great. I've really enjoyed talking to you—we should talk more. I'm gonna come back to Houston—oh, lemme stop recording, we're basically done.**