

Interview with Clarence Edwards

Clarence Edwards, a policy advisor and strategist based in Washington D.C., has spent the last year advising non-profits and social entrepreneurs. Part of this time was spent in Oregon as the coordinator for GlobalPDX. Clarence wanted to see how people on the west coast viewed international development and GlobalPDX gave him the opportunity to learn about the major international development players in Portland and the surrounding areas. His experiences, both in Portland and DC, have given him a unique perspective on global issues and how to plan for the future.

What are you doing now?

“I have focused on helping this think tank called Global Policy Institute. I am in the process of doing some writing on my experience out in Portland and thinking about what comes next in terms of how the US is engaged in the world. I moved into international development in the early 2000’s but now I’m thinking that the world of development is really changing. It’s going to change a lot over the next decade. I’m starting to think about what’s coming next for development”...“I’m working on the bigger picture while also helping to advise organizations whether it’s in development or other areas that are trying to figure out what’s happening in Washington.”

How has COVID-19 changed what you do at work?

“Personally, it hasn’t changed it that much, I’m used to working at a distance. I’ve been working with people who are based over in the UK. This era of working from a distance, working across time zones...I have a remote office so it hasn’t really changed a lot in that regard. The biggest change is that you can’t have meetings with people while you are on a lock down and socially distancing. In Washington D.C. face to face contact is part of the business culture and the international development community is a large community and I know a lot of people in it. We have had to make do with phone calls or Zoom meetings. The biggest change is not being able to see my friends or colleagues in the community on a regular basis unless it’s over Zoom and I do miss that.”

What projects are you working on right now?

“There is a project through Global Policy Institute. We’re looking at how to talk about some of the changes that are happening geopolitically, the changing US role in the world, economic nationalism versus globalization, and also as the world shifts towards Asia how does the US respond. So, we’re doing some deep thinking, big thinking on that. I’m personally interested in thinking more about how I take what I’ve learned professionally, working on international issues

and apply it more to issues here in the US. I'm thinking about maybe coming back to Oregon one day and applying those lessons directly" ... "The world is shifting for all of us and we gotta be thinking about what does this mean?"

What advice do you have for our community during this time of crisis?

"I think that this time of crisis is a real opportunity for the GlobalPDX community. I think that the GlobalPDX community is well placed to be a part of the conversation around what role does development play as the world changes, you know. I think the GlobalPDX community understands the domestic, local, and the global. It would be interesting for the community to really give some thought as to how do we not only help people overseas but help people in our local communities and bring some of those lessons back to US and also share some lessons from here overseas keep sharing those lessons from here overseas. But those same issues that we talked about during the conference last year are still germane and relevant for the GlobalPDX community."

What is your advice for people who want to get involved?

"I think the fact that we are physically distancing gives people even more of an opportunity to get involved ironically because now you don't have to leave your home now to be involved in the GlobalPDX community. And it's still relevant, it's even more relevant, whether you're in Portland or whether you're in Seattle or anywhere else in the region it's a great opportunity to get involved. Some of the issues are really important and I'm going to try to get more involved from here in Washington."

How do you think global change can be amplified through a strong community?

"I think about it in terms of GlobalPDX. One of the things a community can do is each part of the community can leverage the strengths of its individual members or organizations and then that leverage creates a bigger impact and a bigger change. One of the great aspects about a network like, for example, GlobalPDX or any other network that can come together is that you can leverage the individual pieces of that network and create an exponential change. A community is like an organism that can, like a virus, have a particular impact through its component parts. I think that we're going to see more of that in terms of communities instituting an initiating change, you know, the individuals coming together to form a whole. You see examples of that in the International Development community, but you also see it in domestic politics and movements like Black Lives Matter or Occupy Wall Street."

Throughout your career was there a moment that made you the most passionate about collaboration and partnership?

“I had the chance back in 2017 to participate in a group called Opportunity Collaboration which is a group of social impact professionals and impact investors and fundraisers, people who are committed to making social change and there was a lot of dynamism and collaboration in that whole group. I was really excited to see the passion about collaboration and partnership”...“There’s an organization called Moving Worlds Institute. This is actually based in the Pacific Northwest up in Seattle. They have a fellowship that I did when I came out to Portland or finished when I came out to Portland. The fellowship was focused on working collaboratively, human centered design, design thinking, and those sorts of principles.”

Is collaboration impacted by the perspectives of those involved?

“Absolutely because everyone is coming from a different perspective and one of the things you realize particularly as an American working with people overseas regardless of where they're from, is that you do have to step outside your comfort zone a bit. Because you see these different perspectives and ideas coming forth from people coming from a very different place. Whether they're from Kenya, the UK or Indonesia or Australia or Oregon, there’s different facets and different views so it's a challenge but it's also very enriching to encounter all those different viewpoints”...“It’s easy to get used to hearing the same thing and not challenging it, and I think it's healthy to get it challenged every now and then.”

What differences do you see between Portland and DC?

“Here's the thing, the development community in Washington DC is very international. You’ve got all the major institutions here, you’ve got the think tanks, you’ve got the Congress. It’s the capitol, it’s where everything is happening. And it is the home for International Development thinking in the United States, if not globally. A lot of things are centered here and that's good in that you're in the mix all the time, there’s all that intellectual churn. The difference is that you don't get is a real feel for those different viewpoints that we've been talking about. One difference is that the development community here is huge and development community in Portland is not but the thinking and the perspective that Portland offers is really unique and you don't get that here. I think that the development community in Portland has a more innate understanding of the link between development and climate change. It has a better understanding of how local groups and organizations can play important role and the viewpoint point isn't just whatever the USA believes. There's just a different perspective out there that's very valuable because it includes the local mind.”

What would you recommend to young professionals who are seeking a life of travel, exploration, and big impact?

“Join the Peace Corps. Look at federal service with an organization like US Aid because I think the government is going to be increasingly important. Have a reason, be careful of just going on

a foreign adventure. This is not the era for that anymore. For young people going overseas now, I think you have to go with a purpose and also to go with no preconceived notions about what it's going to be like and to go and listen to people. 'Cause it's a time for people in this country in particular to pay attention to people in the places that they're going to see and they're going to work in and they're going to visit"... "People should, especially your generation, should have those experiences but just treat them in a different way than maybe some people have treated them in the past, just be more aware. I don't want to generalize that people treated it this way, but I think this is an even better time to be going overseas, I think, 'cause there's a real dialogue that can start opening up between Americans and people in other countries. And we need it."

COVID-19 has not stopped Clarence from working on his current projects. If you would like to see more information on the Global Policy Institute, click on the link: <http://globalpi.org/>

You can find more information about Clarence here: <https://about.me/cdaryledwards>