

Inspiring Women

Episode 8: Ning Mosburger-Tang

Laurie McGraw:

Welcome to Inspiring Women with Laurie McGraw. I am your host, Laurie McGraw. I have spent the past 30 years in leadership, and over the years, I've come to learn one thing, women need women and not just any women, but inspiring women. Tune in every week to hear from women at the pinnacle of their careers and from others who are just starting out. Episodes can be found at inspiringwomen.show or subscribe on your favorite podcast app. Thanks for listening. And I hope you will be inspired.

Laurie McGraw:

Welcome to another episode of Inspiring Women. And I am very excited to today be talking to this inspiring woman, Ning Mosburger-Tang. Now Ning is somebody who has a background in computer technology and engineering. She has a degree in computer science and engineering from Tsinghua University, and a master's in computer science from the University of Arizona. She started as an engineer back in the Google early days. Back when the motto was, "Do no evil." She was a technical lead there, but then she changed her course.

Laurie McGraw:

In 2006, she really moved her attention to many other interests beyond being interested in things like photography. She is extremely active in conservation, environmental education, climate change, migration, mitigation, community organizing, and policy advocacy. She does her work through a private foundation, a social welfare nonprofit, and she's a private investor in clean-tech startups. She is extremely active in community organizing. We're going to get to hear about some of these initiatives, as well as how organizing in the moment of crisis like a pandemic has led to some really incredible outcomes. So with that, welcome, Ning. I'm really excited to be talking to you today.

Ning Mosburger-Tang:

Thank you so much. I'm really excited to talk about my, I guess, somewhat unusual journey. I have a background in computer science, as you mentioned. I have a bachelor's degree of computer science and engineering from Tsinghua University in Beijing, China. And then, I came to the US when I was 19 to get a master's degree in computer science from the University of Arizona in Tucson. And after that, I have worked in the technology industry in different parts of the country. At the end, I was working for Google for a number of years in the bay area. And after that, around 2006, I was shocked when I read that the global temperature has reached the highest level in nearly a million years. And I also went out to read literature about that and get myself educated.

Ning Mosburger-Tang:

And I saw the [inaudible 00:03:11] graph and about the CO2 level, how it is going up after the industrial revolution. And it's just non-stop and how that relates to temperature rise globally. So I saw that, and I thought, "What can I do? I have to do something about it," because I really enjoy my work in technology, but at the same time, I just feel like I cannot not do anything about it. The climate crisis is coming down on us very quickly. And if we don't take action, then we are going to miss the time window to address the crisis. And so that's when I decided that I'm going to do a real switch of my focus on my career, really, to focus on the environment instead. So that's 2006, and that's when I started the Innovo Foundation to focus on climate change mitigation. And through my work in Innovo Foundation, I was able to work with many environmental nonprofits regarding climate change from Central America to Africa to the United States. So I learned a lot during that period.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, Ning, I really want to talk about that because it's amazing how clearly you made that switch to activism and getting engaged on a much more global scale, as well as at a local level. But let's go back a little bit. At Inspiring Women, I like to really understand women's career trajectories and where they spend their energy and time. And you started off as an engineer. You were at Google. Now Google, everyone knows Google is a premier technology organization that shaped the world. And you were there back in the early days. So I have to imagine that you were feeling like you were making a great impact there. So what was that like back in those early days of Google? Give us some perspective.

Ning Mosburger-Tang:

It was very exciting. When I was at Google, it was a really small company. We are all working on one floor of an office building. We did not even grow to the second floor at the time. So everybody was together, and I get to meet with Larry Page, Sergey Brin. I actually worked with them on some projects. So it's exciting. Interesting, I guess. I'm looking back because right now, they're both pretty high up there, I guess, very well-known and all that. But at that time, it was just like any one of us. And I remember writing code, and I have Sergey Brin, actually standing behind my shoulder and actually looking at my code. It's like, wow, that was... I can't imagine today, of course. But at that time, it was very normal. And it was a very nice working environment. I think it's very encouraging for engineers like us. We feel like we were 100% in control of our destiny and that we can do products that we care about.

Ning Mosburger-Tang:

So at the time, the goal was really to make the world's information accessible by everybody, so that was the shared goal by everybody. At the time, we were not even imagining that Google would turn into the company that it is today. Like we were not thinking about making money, for example. It was really about we did think that information and make it assessable. And also, do not do any evil things. Just be a normal human and do the right thing. And that was a shared goal and a very, very exciting period of time.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, it also sounds like those early days, perhaps, just gave you a point of view of the change and the impact that you could have. I mean, I might be projecting that a bit, but it does seem

when you talk about the 2006 change where you felt this need to do something about climate change, there was something big and brewing that really made you turn your focus to that. So what happened? 2006, all of a sudden, climate change awareness become something really important to you. What triggered that for you?

Ning Mosburger-Tang:

So, 2006, I have been in Google for a while, and even though I really enjoyed the work, I was looking to see if there's a way I can make a more immediate impact in the lives of everybody. I think technology is great. It make things convenient. And I think it's really important, but it's hard to see the direct connection between my work and the welfare of the rest of the world. So I think I read about what's happening with the global temperature that it's the highest in a million years. And it's also going up, and the human directly contributed to that through all our activities. So I was, I just, at that point, I thought, "Why don't I try to help address the issue?" Because it looks like there are not enough people working on that. And it's just very necessary.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, I wish you had many more people at your side in 2006, but my goodness, what an important thing to be working on. Do you think we're doing enough right now? This new administration has really doubled down to make climate change an enormous focus of where they're putting their energy. How are you feeling about that? Do you feel like it's getting the attention that it needs? Do you think it's too late?

Ning Mosburger-Tang:

Oh, I think the Biden administration is great. I think they really are engaged in the issue, and I think they are doing everything they could. That, of course, the Congress will have to legislate, and we have to pass major kind of legislation. So we can make use of the next 10 years to reach the goal that we have to reach, to reduce the emissions as much as possible.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, it also, at the time that you started turning your interests, Ning, to climate change, that wasn't the only thing that you were interested in. You have a long history of service in terms of whether it's helping young women and engineers and making sure that they get careers in STEM through mentorship and other things. In addition to climate change, you've worked on some other things that I want to talk about. Tell me about mentoring women in an engineering or computer science area. Why is that important? Why have you put some energy towards that?

Ning Mosburger-Tang:

Well, I mean, there were not enough women in computer industry. That's for sure. I mean, we have all seen that. And not enough women actually starting in computer science, so we are not doing very well in terms of the building the pipeline for computer engineers or women in a STEM field. So I think that's definitely a problem. And, also in the political space, which is also not enough women running for office or getting elected into office. So I'm also working with an organization called Emerge. Emerge is very helpful in training women and build the pipeline for running as candidates and run successfully for political office.

Ning Mosburger-Tang:

And one reason I think it's really important to have women, both in technology and also in politics, is I think women tend to have different motivations. I think they're more motivated to really serve and address issues and solve problems than gaining power. I mean, that's probably a very general statement. I'm sure there are a lot of men like I will say, like our Congressman Joe Neguse, he's really into solving the issues. It's just my stance that a lot of women will be interested in serving so they can address problems without gaining power.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, one of those areas that you certainly have addressed a large problem was during this time of the pandemic. And last year, 2020, when we were still not really clear on what this new virus was doing or how it worked, we had lots of issues in the United States. And one of those issues was a severe shortage of PPE. And medical is not your background. That's not your field, but that didn't stop you from working on a major campaign called Step Up In Crisis. Tell us a little bit about that. What was it? What did you do? And how did you make it happen?

Ning Mosburger-Tang:

So last March, I realized that we are having really serious issues with pandemic. Also, with the PPE shortage. I have some friends who work in hospitals as nurses, and they were seriously stressed because they had to go to work without the proper equipment, the proper protection. And I thought that was just very... It's very wrong, and also it's very serious issue. So I actually tried to figure out how to address that. And taking my experience in the industry. I figured that if we can raise enough money upfront to procure PPE directly from China and then bring them over here. And then, we can distribute them to healthcare workers who need them as quickly as possible. And also, we were trying to sell some of the PPE at cost, so we can raise some additional revenue to continue on that process.

Ning Mosburger-Tang:

And that's around early April. And when I started that initiative, it got a lot of support, especially from a lot of my former Google colleagues. I think they went through a similar thought process and understand what is at stake. So we raised, quickly raised about \$1.6 million within 10 days, and it was pretty shocking, but finally, we raised that money. And then I actually went ahead and procured a whole bunch of PPE, about I think close to 2.5, two and a half million pieces of face mask and protective suits and whatnot from China and brought it over here in April and May and then June. And then, we were able to distribute all of them to health care and also to frontline workers in the US who were in pretty dire need at that time.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, Ning, I mean, that's amazing. It's just absolutely amazing. And I had the opportunity to read about it in the papers and just your engineering background and taking a really significant issue and a lot of logistics to sort through during a really confusing time that had an impact that got results that actually did something of enormous benefit is it's just tremendous.

Laurie McGraw:

I want to turn the conversation a little bit just to political organization and democracy just in the... You do a lot of writing. You speak out when issues are important to you. I might call you a fierce protector of democracy. And your background, as you said, an immigrant from China, a naturalized US citizen, how does this influence your views and the actions you take as it relates to democracy?

Ning Mosburger-Tang:

So coming from a country that has really has leadership and not much democracy to speak of, I really treasure my experience in the US, where everybody has the chance to speak up and be heard. And can have an influence in the political process and get to elect your own leaders. I think, I'm not sure if people who grew up here, if you realize how precious that is, because I think a large part of the world is it's not democratic. So what we have here is it's really amazing. And I would like to protect that as much as I can when we still have the opportunity to do so.

Laurie McGraw:

Well. And it seems like you're doing a lot to protect democracy. So I've been reading a bit about one of your newest ventures, called the Blue Wave Postcard Movement. And this seems like something that started, as I understand it, just a small group of people that you brought together, and it's turned into quite a movement that's had real results in some of the elections. Can you tell us a bit about the Blue Wave?

Ning Mosburger-Tang:

So Blue Wave Postcard Movement started last year, 2020, right ahead of the really important 2020 election. So I started that with a group of friends in Boulder. Initially, we would just a dozen of us or just a few of us that came together to write postcards every weekend. And then we realized that it was really this momentum for a lot more people. They are willing to do a lot more to help turn out voters in 2020. So we started the Blue Wave Postcard Movement, and I registered as a nonprofit.

Ning Mosburger-Tang:

And, also we were able to design our own postcards and print them and distribute them at really good cost because we do them in bulk. So we grew very quickly. Actually, it's all through the word of mouth that we were able to get several thousand writers involved from all over the country. And they established several hundred postcard groups all over the country, and that we continue to actually be engaged until this moment. But anyway, during the 2020 election, we were able to distribute 2.6 million postcards, targeting eight democratic states in the country. And I'm really excited that we have made some impact. But I believe in the outcome of both the general election and also the Georgia run-off election earlier this year.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, it's just incredible. And it's also really impressive how quickly you're able to get people organized, pull together an organization that actually is having change and impact, and that's just really, really impressive. I really appreciate you sharing that with folks here.

Laurie McGraw:

Ning, part of the reason for me starting this podcast is I really wanted to reach women who are just thinking about their career options and moving along in their career journeys. So with all of the work that you've done, starting out in engineering and computer science, the early days of Google, and then moving on to quite a bit of different activism, whether it's climate or community organizing and the like, what kind of advice might you give to younger women who are just starting out, just from your learned experiences?

Ning Mosburger-Tang:

I think number one is really to believe in yourself. And sometimes, it's hard to believe in yourself unless you have already tried it and done and accomplished something. But the first thing is that you really have to get started and just believe that you can do it and try it, try as hard as you can. And once you gain more experience, slowly building up more confidence in yourself, so that's number one.

Ning Mosburger-Tang:

And number two is really to find your partners. For me, for example, when I started Innovo Foundation, the first thing I did when I moved to Boulder, Colorado is to find a partner to do the climate mitigation work. And we found the Renew Our School. We started Renew Our School program with a local organization called Resource Central. And we have been partnering with them for the past 10 years. And we built up a program for school children to save energy, which has been ranked as the number one program in the nation for a school climate action engagement. So anyway, but without a partner like Resource Central, that would not have been possible.

Ning Mosburger-Tang:

And for the PPE, the procurement of the protective equipment project, I actually talked to the group of funders who might be interested and got their support. And without them, that project would not have even started, so just to be honest. So I found a group partner there.

Ning Mosburger-Tang:

And also, for Blue Wave Postcard Movement, the key was really to find... We have found a group of super-engaged activists, women, a group of women in Boulder. We have about 10 in a group right now, and everybody's working half-time or full-time, so volunteer on the project. And they help design postcards, distribute them, finding writers. Without them, the Blue Wave Postcard will not be where we are right now. So like I said, really find your partner. People you can work with and then set up your strategic plan and try to reach a goal.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, that's unbelievable advice. And it actually is something that you've done again and again and again. This has been an excellent, Inspiring Women conversation with Ning Mosberger-Tang. Ning, where can people follow you if they want to continue to follow your adventures?

Ning Mosburger-Tang:

So Blue Wave Postcard Movement, if you Google for that, you find our website, the bluewavepostcards.org. And right now, we have a campaign going on to support H.R.1, which is

For The People Act, to help it pass the Congress. It's a really important part of legislation actually in Congress right now. And I believe we have to protect the democracy through passing H.R.1 in order to address the climate crisis. So I hope you go find us and join us in a movement.

Laurie McGraw:

Ning, thank you so much. This has been a great conversation.

Ning Mosburger-Tang:

Thank you.

Laurie McGraw:

This has been an episode of Inspiring Women with Laurie McGraw. Please subscribe, rate, and review. We are produced by Kate Kruse at Executive Podcast Solutions. More episodes can be found on inspiringwomen.show. I am Laurie McGraw, and thank you for listening.