

Interview with April Veneracion Ang
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Former Executive Director of the South of Market Community Action Network
(SOMCAN)

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MW: Introduction: This interview is between **Megan Wilson (MW)**, artist and writer, and **April Veneracion Ang (AVA)**, Senior Aide to Supervisor Jane Kim, District 6, San Francisco and former Executive Director of the South of Market Community Action Network (SOMCAN).

MW: Thanks April for meeting with me today, it's been a long time since we've really connected and I'm happy to have this opportunity.

I remember when we were working together at SOMCAN that there was some arts programming that was happening, though I think it was mainly with the youth.

AVA: That's right, at that point it was pretty minimal. However after you left, SOMCAN was selected with Bindlestiff as part of the Shifting Sands Initiative. Have you ever heard of it?

MW: No, haven't.

AVA: It was a Ford Foundation grant program looking at Shifting Sands, which is basically neighborhoods and areas where there have been demographic shifts. And this was coming after the post dotcom boom/bust. So gentrification was still something that was of interest in the funding world.

MW: What year was this?

AVA: It was somewhere between 2005 and 2009, but probably more like 2007. There was a particular program officer who was leading the initiative. He was in the

community development area at the Ford Foundation. He had this idea that arts could be a vehicle for having conversations in areas where there is a shift in demographics or gentrification really, but not really calling it gentrification. And so they funded all kinds of programs throughout the country - Houston, the Mexican Museum in Pilsen, New Orleans, as well as SOMCAN and Bindlestiff, who were selected to be part of The Shifting Sands Initiative.

MW: Wow, that's really great.

AVA: Through the partnership SOMCAN and Bindlestiff were able to lead conversations with the broader community around tough issues, like the new residents coming into the neighborhood. We were able to do some training, which I can't remember what the methodology was called under Bindlestiff, but we also got to hear the history of theater and arts to have these really difficult conversations in anticipation of what was going to happen with Market Street.

At the time the idea for Market Street under Gavin Newsom was to create a theater arts district. So, the idea was how do you set up a conversation with the community prior to that, about how to connect to the larger theater organizations like ACT. It also challenged us at the time to think not only about how to have these conversations, but also about the economic strategies that were relevant to this new kind of movement that was happening to create Market Street as a theater district. So we explored utilizing Bindlestiff as a job-training program for stagehands to support the larger theater district and create those connections. Unfortunately when the program officer who was in charge of the program at the Ford Foundation left, Shifting Sands devolved and shut down. We had been awarded a pretty significant grant that was to be followed up with implementation grants to see the job program through and unfortunately that wasn't able to happen. However, the planning work we were able to accomplish within the community was really amazing. Also It wasn't just Bindlestiff that was part of the project, it also included Senior Action and Oasis for Girls. It was called the NIPA project - Neighborhood Integration Project for the Arts, which also references the Nipa Hut in the Philippines - a very durable structure that could really weather the shifting storms. It was a really great acronym!

MW: That sounds awesome. I'm getting excited just hearing about it. (laughs)

AVA: Yes. And then it was done. I think the NEA subsequently adopted a similar concept, Our Town that was the beginning of the creative placemaking movement, which then ArtPlace became an evolution of that. So I know this is a long back-story, however, these are the projects that you don't really hear about as they relate to the larger initiatives that become the national models.

Everybody around us had really great intentions, because we all want equity and vibrancy. And they want to see these worlds connecting through which everybody is benefiting. That is obviously the ultimate goal. The reality is so much grittier.

MW: Yeah.

AVA: So it's not the shiny market strategy that's put out there. In reality it's very different. So it becomes how do you engage in that process? I still have faith that the community can engage in an authentic way, but it is difficult. The challenge as you know as a fundraiser, is the balance between the need to fundraise in this really challenging fundraising environment and the ability for these organizations to really participate fully.

MW: That's so true, arts organizations and artists are always so desperate for the funding ...for whatever funds we can get so that we're going to rally around whatever's put out there. We'll often shape who we are or what we're doing to fit the model the funders have presented, because we need funds.

AVA: Right.

MW: So it doesn't necessarily mean there is genuine interest and genuine involvement, and often it's because the initiatives aren't genuinely driven by the community. You know, it really ends up driven by the funding and fitting into what's going to make an organization the most fundable. And we will say and do whatever we need to do to make sure we get refunded. Basically because we want to be at the table.

AVA: Yes.

MW: And this is actually one of the things that I found to be missing with the organizations I've spoken with and that I discussed with in my interview with the new director of ArtPlace, Jamie Bennett, which is the need for more funding for capacity within organizations to be a part of the policymaking processes - to really be at the table and really have a voice. Because otherwise we're just going to get moved around in whatever direction that funding takes it.

AVA: Yeah.

MW: Because what's really needed is general operating funds, period. It's not like we, as organizations and artists don't know what to do. We do know what to do. We just don't need these very strict and very narrow definitions of what that is.

AVA: Right. I haven't been in the world of fundraising for a while now, you know, but I do feel like there's been a shift in the funding environment. For community development and for policy and advocacy work, I just don't see that type of funding available.

MW: Agreed. I've also seen that shift as a fundraiser. One example of this, although this could change now with Fred Blackwell coming on as the new director of the San Francisco Foundation, was the elimination of their social justice department, gone. And those funds diverted over to community development.

AVA: Pretty huge.

MW: And community development to some degree I believe is a euphemism for gentrification. You know it sounds really good, but a lot of it does end up supporting those stakeholders that are actually creating a gentrifying environment.

AVA: I feel like that's too much of a blanket statement. I think that community development is very contextual, you know. There are some neighborhoods that

want to see amenities that look like a gentrified neighborhood. And that's why community development is really important. That's why community development corporations have come up and affordable housing, where the market wasn't interested in investing in those places. So the community development work for those groups is super, super important, because that can address the need for a grocery store in a neighborhood, or other amenities that are greatly needed.

MW: Agreed. I totally agree with you on that. I think that those examples are very important for doing that kind of investment. And it's also about defining what gentrification is. You know, like creating those amenities and creating those services is one way of defining gentrification. Another is displacement and higher income communities moving in and displacing lower incomes.

AVA: Right.

MW: But it's also the homogenization of an area.

AVA: In those places where organizations have invested in those neighborhoods, yeah, gentrification is not fair to them because they really built the base and environment for investment to come in. So it's how do you stabilize and create programs and opportunities to protect a lot of people who've really invested in those neighborhoods. That's an area that I'm really interested and invested in.

MW: Yeah. So I'm going to start asking questions related to your position as a senior aide to District 6 Supervisor Jane Kim.

AVA: Yeah.

MW: So you now work with District 6, which is amazing, and that's a shift from being on the ground as a community organizer to now being a part of the policy-making process.

AVA: Yes.

MW: Could you talk about how the District 6 office works with the proposed development projects in the neighborhoods in the district?

AVA: Developers do come and talk to us and say, "This is our project, what do you think of it?" And our first question is "do you have a project that's as a right?" And so, with the passage of Eastern Neighborhoods a lot more projects became as a right, meaning that if it was as a right, there wasn't conformance with the zoning area. So, there are specific affordable housing fees and other impact fees related to building the plan, whether it's transit, streetscape, or pedestrian. And so we don't often see a lot of developers that have projects that are not in conformance with the plan. So, we don't do a lot of engaging with every single development project that happens in our neighborhood.

MW: So how do you initially find out about a development project? Is it part of a long slate of what's in the pipeline, or how does that happen?

AVA: There's notification that happens, but honestly there are so many that it's really difficult to keep track of all of them. I think there are at least 56 active projects that are in our district. So these are active projects meaning they're built at this point, but they were entitled at some other point, probably four or five years ago when Chris (Daly) was in office. These were projects that were in the pipeline, but because of the economic downturn, NEMA, on the corner of Market and 10th Street for example, that new building on Market Street was a project that was approved in 2008, but it didn't move forward because of the economic downturn. And so they just waited and waited and waited until they could get the financing. And so the affordable housing, the BMR (Below Market Rate) is already part of their project approvals.

MW: Is there a database or some way that the information on all of the developments are collected and tracked in a way that's easy to access?

AVA: Some advocates I think do it, like, Fernando Martí. But, you know, there are so many. The advocates that I know pick key ones that they feel are representative of the issues in that neighborhood and try to weigh in on key strategic moments.

MW: Right. It would be awesome though to have that kind of database that could be really accessible.

AVA: I'm sure the planning department has one.

MW: How does your office work with the Planning Department?

AVA: We don't really.

MW: Yeah. And it also ends up coming forward to you.

AVA: Exactly. As an appeal or something like that.

MW: And then how does your office work with the organizations serving the low-income communities that are being affected by the high-end developments in District 6? Like SOMCAN, FADF, Oasis for Girls?

AVA: SOMCAN and FADF we work really closely with. We have worked with them in developing the housing balance with new legislation that we just introduced that's looking at the balance of affordable housing to market rate housing in our district. And so, they were really involved in developing that.

MW: Was that mainly your project?

AVA: Yeah. I was on maternity leave last year, but there was a hotel project that was part of the Youth and Family Zone which we had passed through the Eastern Neighborhood's project that was not conforming to that. I know that FADF and SOMCAN were really involved with that development project. Oasis For Girls, not as much. Jessica (Van Tuyl, Executive Director of Oasis For Girls) has been great, but I don't think she's been that involved in the neighborhood development, as far as the policy side because that's not what they do. Whereas for FADF and SOMCAN neighborhood development is so much at the heart of their work.

MW: Yeah.

AVA: When I was at SOMCAN there was more of a focus on development projects, but that was a different time. Now it's so much more like hyper-development, so it's really hard to keep up with. That coupled with the challenges of funding, the organization is operating at a lower capacity.

MW: Yeah. It also seems that SOMCAN has had to start providing a lot more family resource services.

AVA: Right. It was a conscious shift right before I left. We did a new strategic planning process. The purpose of the organization was always to be an organizing organization, although we also did a lot of advocacy work. Chris was there. I was there. We both had an interest and focus on development. But there was always a tension internally for us that we really needed to do organizing. We need to build a real base and so, that was the choice, you know, whether or not that was the appropriate choice.

MW: That was always my favorite. But I know capacity was always an issue.

AVA: Yeah. But it always means that you have to put something else aside. And the reality of that too is that in that process things have to happen so quickly and other community organizations expected SOMCAN to fulfill that role. So I think there is an effort to return to that role. However, I think from Angelica's perspective, SOMCAN also needs to focus on what the residents' want and need and they may not be interested in development.

MW: Absolutely. It's a really tough thing to balance. I think SOMCAN is a total powerhouse and could be much more powerful if they had the funding resources. The folks there know what to do and if they had the resources they could address the development needs in a very strategic way as well as meeting the family resource needs.

AVA: Yeah.

MW: Does your office work with community organizations and residents to assist with negotiating community benefit agreements?

AVA: We haven't had a lot of opportunities to do that, where community benefit agreements are negotiated. For example with Intercontinental, they wanted a zoning change - the huge zoning change that happened with Eastern Neighborhoods. So, the best that we could do to negotiate benefits was the separation of a youth and family zone in that area. But post that it's not like there are projects that come to the commission or come to the board where we have that sort of leverage.

MW: Right. So what about 5M project?

AVA: Yes. 5M is very unique and it is like an Intercontinental. They have a special zoning district that they are seeking for the Chronicle Site. You should talk to Bernadette (Sy of FADF) if you haven't.

MW: I just talked to her.

AVA: Okay. They have a hot list. So, they have a list that they are tracking. 5M is one of them, as well as Moscone. I can't remember the others. Did she tell you the list?

MW: She didn't give me the full list, but that's mainly because I was focused on 5M since that is the example I'm using in this article as the partner with Intersection for the Arts for the ArtPlace grant. So then how would your office be involved in that development?

AVA: I think we'll definitely get involved in the 5M Project, mainly because the community is going to be involved in the 5M Project. We're not going to impose ourselves in a situation where the community is not prepared to negotiate or we don't have leverage to negotiate. I mean It's not helpful I don't think to do that. But, I think the City has had conversations with the community. The community has been very aware of the project. I'm talking about the greater community, not the arts

community, because I'm not as familiar with that piece, so I can't really speak to that. I am somewhat familiar with the conversations that some community organizations have had with Forest city related to Bessie Carmichael the school and ideas around affordable housing. I think they explored some ideas early on with Forest City about the things that are needs to the community and some ideas around that. Brad (Paul) originally, I think, had some role in helping to convene stakeholders around those conversations.

MW: They had also hired PolicyLink.

AVA: Right.

MW: And unfortunately PolicyLink ended up being let go from the project before they could advance their recommendations.

AVA: Right.

MW: So, over the past five years, what impacts have you seen on the low income communities in District 6 - the economy, the development, the new residents, corporations moving into the neighborhood?

AVA: We're definitely seeing the neighborhood groups challenged by the amount of development that's happening in the community. It's difficult to say exactly the challenges as they relate to other external factors that are challenging and affecting the community. Funding is one of them. The Ellis Act evictions. These are all different additional factors, not related necessarily to development, but gentrification is affecting the community.

MW: The majority of the corporations that have moved into the neighborhood, they don't seem that philanthropic. What are some potential ways that you could see this improving - either through specific legislative measures or community pressure?

AVA: I think community pressure is helpful as far as legislative measures, you know, as it relates to the Mid Market tax rate. There was an idea to create a Community

Benefit Agreement. That was a legislative way to address it. But obviously some groups are not as well intentioned as others and I think that's an internal corporate culture. Like Zendesk, for example, I understand has been really good.

Organizations like Salesforce have been really philanthropic and so I think even with legislation or some legislative leverage, some corporations just don't have a culture of being philanthropic.

MW: How do you see that shifting so that the community is benefiting from the huge amount of money that's coming in from the new culture moving in and that is such the antithesis of the community that has developed here?

AVA: Yeah, I think community pressure is good, but I think there also needs to be some people and some organizations that are willing to work and build relationship with the workers in these organizations. One idea is to do service days where the community is building relationships with the individuals working in the new corporations moving in. The idea is to engage individual workers to understand and know what nonprofit community based organizations are doing, and I think there has been some fits and starts with that, and it has also been super difficult.

MW: Yeah. Chris and I went to that HACKtivation For The Homeless conference. I feel like with so many of these new corporations there are so few individuals within them that really do deeply care. My experience in a general sense is that they really don't. It's just not on their radar and it's not in their interest. Like for the HACKtivation conference so many more nonprofits showed up to pitch their needs than there actually were folks there to help them out.

AVA: I hate to blame it all on funding, but with the declining federal, state, and local funding, even when these foundations have huge endowments too, they haven't been giving. And that's their mission.

MW: I think a lot of that is Citizens United. I think a lot of that money has been diverted into shadow funds.

AVA: That's crazy. That's so upsetting.

MW: It is so upsetting, because the folks who work in those foundations and the program officers and the folks, who, create those different funding opportunities, they're good people obviously, you know. They have the best intentions. But the stock market is doing better than it ever has

AVA: Yeah. Totally.

MW: And, we're not seeing that money being allocated through foundation giving as we've known it.

AVA: Yeah.

MW: So that's my theory as to where that money is going, because we aren't seeing it, yet the stock market is doing better than ever.

AVA: Yeah. So I think there needs to be some political, legislative pressure. You know, if there's something that we can do locally, great, but I think the only reason why banks are philanthropic is because of the Community Reinvestment Act that at the federal level where banks are required to invest in certain communities because that was a legislative initiative that happened in the seventies.

MW: Yeah.

AVA: So, short of that, it really is leadership within these companies.

MW: Well, it's also being lost through taxes. That's why we're losing money in the state, federal, municipal funds is because there isn't enough tax money that's being put into them. We need to make sure that these corporations are paying their fair share to the communities they reside in.

So is 5M the largest development project currently positioning itself in the neighborhood?

AVA: I would say so.

MW: Does Forest City have other projects in the SoMa pipeline?

AVA: Not that I know of. Pier 70 is the other big one in the Dogpatch neighborhood.

MW: What role have you seen the arts having in the context of the new development in the neighborhood - the successes and challenges, failures?

AVA: Definitely arts are an important part of neighborhood and neighborhood development and culture, and bringing people into our neighborhood. Bindlestiff continues to do that, bringing people to 6th Street that typically never would visit there. So, the arts play a really huge role in our neighborhoods.

MW: So what changes do you think need to be made in city governance and policy to address the impact of the development force and increased cost of living especially on the low income communities of color?

AVA: That's a struggle. I have Causa Justa's report in my bag, so I'm looking for ideas too.

MW: Yeah and you are somebody who has a lot of experience with the policy side, the community organizing side, and the City Hall side of it.

AVA: I think that what we're seeing in San Francisco right now is typical, and it's based on market forces, though I can't say exactly how we can impact these macroeconomic forces. There are a lot of different policies that are working to create the gap between the rich and the poor and they are growing as we speak nationally, internationally. And these are global market forces. It overwhelms me for sure. I went to a meeting yesterday and I do honestly believe the best opportunity to address the things that I care about and our office cares about, is a strong market. The question is how do we make those connections between what's happening in the market around this crazy awesome economic recovery with the community?

MW: Do you mean how do we take that money back? (laughs)

AVA: Yeah.

MW: How do you redistribute? And, you know, in ways too where it's like this conundrum of, you know, the 'Google buses' using public resources.

AVA: I totally believe in that idea, to take the work that we have and really utilize it towards poverty alleviation. There's so—now sitting like in a policymaker's office, and I don't want to get bogged down with this because I still want to be helpful, but there are so many more legal constraints and rules than you can imagine in terms of that concept.

MW: Do you think the protests that have been happening, like with the 'Google buses' have been effective?

AVA: I think so.

MW: Do you think they are helping to put the pressure on the corporations and the City legislators?

AVA: I think so. I think it's been helpful. I think what we're doing in terms of tenants' right and advocacy is way beyond what we have done in the last 10 years, including the relocation assistance changing, I think that the in-law legislation was controversial, but it's coming in like at a time in an environment where people are like okay, let's really look at this. So I think that the pressure has been good. Small Sites is getting off the ground finally with projects to do acquisition and rehab in a community land trust model and to maintain units and buildings that are threatened in the market from being taken back for community ownership. So, those are really small things given what I just described as these huge global economic forces, but it's still really important.

MW: Yeah. It is really important.

AVA: And it's empowering.

MW: You know, the small winds certainly do add up and it is figuring out how...how do we, in this environment and culture that isn't philanthropic, take it back?

AVA: Yeah, how do we take it back? We negotiated at SOMCAN the impact things for the Ricon Hill development, the formation of the SoMa Stabilization Fund, you know. And, it's been difficult in terms of implementation. I think the concept was great, but the implementation has been difficult.

MW: Any other thoughts to add before you have to go?

AVA: I think that our office really wants to support the community to address some of their needs and priorities. Development is happening and will continue to happen in this current market. It has been the plan for SoMa since the first wave of redevelopment with Moscone. And, I think the community has been resilient and it has weathered different storms and has been creative and figured out ways to share in that development process, you know. So, we need to get everybody together and think through this next stage.

MW: Yeah. I think a lot of it will be the community organizations working together especially around the Forest City development, being the largest development and being one of the most powerful developers. And this was another thing that the source within Forest City said to me – that the developers work out these agreements with the community and it's like for maybe \$50,000, \$75,000 and the community thinks, Oh that's great. And this source said that the next day they'll be on the golf course and are just laughing at the community. They are just laughing because they're thinking that was nothing. We—we just got that for nothing. And he/she said the community should be asking for millions and then some. However, I do know that it needs to be about much more than just the money – that just seems to be all they (the developers) think in. It really does need to also be about the inclusion of on-site low-income housing, guaranteed jobs for residents, job training, local hire etc.

AVA: Right. The community needs to be technical about their negotiations and they need to be together and strong.

MW: Yeah. It has to be the community coming together as one and making those demands as a collective entity.

AVA: And I feel like TODCO is a really good technical support, I think, for the community to really understand what is an appropriate ask. And I don't really mean "appropriate," but I mean if you do too much or that it doesn't pencil out or that it doesn't make a project that works, then, it's like - oh, they're not serious. How you find out what is within a project's feasibility. Yeah. So it's really understanding what is the land value now, what is this upzoning really going to yield? The developer needs to have a project that pencils. So the community really needs to understand that and to have the technical support to work through these negotiations.

MW: Right. They also need to have more lawyers involved to really work with them and work out the technicalities and ensure that it is a concrete equitable agreement for the community – the community that they've built and that these developers really have no investment in, other than financial.

AVa: Yeah.

MW: Anything else before we wrap up?

AVa: No, I don't think so.

MW: Well, thank you so much April for taking the time to meet with me today.

AVA: Yeah. This was good.

*** (END OF INTERVIEW) ***