

# Water, Engagement, Equity

A conversation with Yordi Solomone,  
Equitable Engagement Manager at Metro Blooms

Conversation with Jen Krava, co-editor

Photos by Aleli Balagtas and Rich Harrison



Yordanose Solomone (Yordi) is a Minneapolis transplant from Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. She is a graduate of the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities with Environmental Science Management and Policy focusing on sustainability and outreach of marginalized populations. She is the Equitable Engagement Manager and works at Metro Blooms on stormwater management and facilitating engagement of underserved populations in water and climate change efforts. While she is from Ethiopia, she grew up in Minneapolis since high school. She is quite familiar with the physical and social landscape of the state. She is currently also serving on the Heart of the Beast’s MayDay Council. She is really passionate about how to meaningfully understand the multiple benefits and opportunities that environmental and art initiatives provide when equity, empowerment and/or social justice lens is used to meaningfully involve vulnerable and underserved populations in our city. Yordi and I caught up about her work at Metro Blooms and equity through community engagement.



Yordi introducing Campfire youth to community planting and the purpose of raingardens.

**Jen Krava [JK]: Tell me about yourself and how you started working at Metro Blooms.**

**Yordi Solomone [YS]:** I’ve been at Metro Blooms for 1.5 years. I started as a Minnesota Green Corps member. Green Corps is an AmeriCorps program that focuses on green projects. Every year they recruit 35-40 members and they are placed in different organizations, at the county, organization or city level, and work on a plan that’s jointly created by that organization and GreenCorps program coordinator. My work ended up being centered around stormwater and urban canopy. I didn’t think that encompassed everything I did or prepared for. The person who was the Equitable Engagement Coordinator when I came into Metro Blooms was working on actualizing equity in underserved stakeholders. Metro Blooms was also working on transitioning into an equitable framework, and cross-pollinating equity and water, and some of these concepts that are usually separated.

Our team in collaboration with other partners tag-teamed and started working on what came to be the equitable engagement framework. It is a framework primarily co-designed to adapt and co-create equitable standards in organizations that are environmentally focused.

I worked on Phase 1 of this project during my time as an AmeriCorps member, then Metro Blooms was able to curate my position into the Equitable Engagement Manager. I work with affordable housing sites on environmental shaping issues. This can look different from property to property but generally, my work is centered in facilitating project steward engagement for these housing and commercial projects. Property managers are usually the ones most engaged. The environmental language or communication that’s done via landscape architects and designers tend to be leave a big community out of the conversation. The residents are usually not engaged. Low income and people of color are usually left out of the conversation. How can we engage in a genuine way but also invest back into the community? The thing that makes our work unique is that we attempt to hire contractors who are local and try to go beyond our mission and show community that we are dedicated to equity work and try to transform dynamic history in these communities, agencies, and nonprofits. This is an actual evaluation of our equity standards being met in the work we are doing.

As I work primarily on affordable housing sites when it comes to equitable engagement, I strive to redesign or co-design the engagement work based around the community. At Metro Blooms, we work with stewards. These are individuals who live in the community and already are connected, tenants of the housing complex. At Metro Blooms, we work with the Cedar-Riverside Plaza Tenant Association(RPTA), and have an incredibly engaged steward task force who has a lot of power and decision making that exists outside of Cedar-Riverside.

I am also working at Autumn Ridge in Brooklyn Park. The community is disconnected with water. It is primarily African Americans and West Africans who have either very little or no relationship with water. How can we reframe and navigate this in a different way? There isn’t a one size fits all engagement frame.

**JK: How did you get into this work?**

**YS:** I grew up in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, one of the poster children of the environmental justice movement. Lots of food insecurity, pollution, superfund sites unregulated in Addis [Ababa]. I saw this growing up but didn’t make the connection about being able to make an impact. Growing up I wanted to be a doctor, I wanted to heal someone or something. At 14, I moved to Minnesota and decided to attend school for pre-med. I actually started going through the pre-

med route and in my second year realized this wasn’t adding up to what I wanted to be doing. I went to an environmental magnet high school. This is where I felt the most in control, even though it feels like doomsday right now with bad news, but I abandoned pre-med. I have always had a very commodified relationship with my environment, so I didn’t change a lot of mindsets until I moved to Minnesota. I am still interested in public health of course, the health aspect of the environment, and how mental health is impacted, I just have a reframed way of looking at this concept. We have this mindset we have to get people to care about the environment in the same way, at the same time and all the time. The reality is that’s not it. You have to meet people where they are, and understand their needs before proposing any solutions.

That’s one of the reasons most of the environmental fields seems too limited. I transitioned to environmental science management and policy. This also felt strict, so I redesigned my major to be environmental science with a focus on marginalized communities and sustainable studies. I got an opportunity to study in Kisumu, Kenya, and saw the trash issues in a slum called Nyenda and knew this was an environmental issue with the trash dumped in the slum coming from the expat and rich places that have made Kenya their home. Lake Victoria was getting trash and was used by the poor local Kenyans who lived in the slums. This transitioned my thinking about environmental justice—as it goes beyond gender, economic class, or racial justice, it is very much intersectional. One of these cannot be solved without addressing the other. It is essential to think about it as a social justice lens. This is not the easiest because climate change tends to take the front seat, but there is a lot of cross pollination. If you can’t solve from a social justice lens, how do you intend to solve the environmental issues?

I couldn’t work for an environmental agency—which are generally great, but not right for me because it was one sector and a linear way



Newly installed raingarden after 2 months at Cedar Riverside Plaza.

of thinking. Metro Blooms was on the surface was a seemingly linear organization, until I got to know the mission and the core values of the organization. I never thought I would be designing an equitable way of doing landscape design with designers. Metro Blooms wholeheartedly believes that the environment can't exist without the people, sustainable development cannot be done without taking in the people who are left out of the conversation.

**JK: Can you tell me more about the framework you referenced?**

**YS:** This direction was very vague at the beginning, I mean when it was on my work plan. Metro Blooms had a plan to implement the framework at the beginning, but weren't sure which direction to go or which partners to reach out to exactly. There isn't a formula/ instruction for every situation. I got into a meeting room and we asked, "what's the best way to go forward without discounting our partners or just adopting equity into the work over the last few years in a way that's valuable?". We needed a way to figure out how to address all of those things and still move forward with the framework. We brought in one of our prominent partners, ACER— African Career, Education and Resource based in Brooklyn Park. They

do a lot of mobilization of tenants and work with people of color, they promote quality affordable housing for African immigrants and other people of color. They have their hand in a lot of equity work that's been developed in the state. They are passionate about the work and had a lot of experience working in the affordable housing sites. They actually were the organization that brought Metro Blooms into the Autumn Ridge co-creation project to strengthen the relationship with the residents and managers via outdoor spaces. The Executive Director, Nelima Sitati of ACER suggested the first step would be is to bring in our network and ask them what is stopping them from incorporating equity into their work. Metro Blooms coordinates Blue Thumb, a public/private partnership promoting native plants, raingardens, shoreline stabilization projects and turf alternatives to reduce runoff and improve water quality. Partners include local governmental units (watershed districts, conservation districts, cities and counties), non-profit organizations, and private companies. So this was the network we reached out to, We brought in Blue thumb to this project and asked them three questions:

What resources do you require to incorporate equity into your work? Is equity already important to your community or organization?

The biggest thing is the environmental work or any advancement in the environment cannot be done without thinking about equity. It will be unsustainable without it.

What obstacles are guarding you from going forward with equitable work?

We cataloged the answers and split them into themes: lack of resources, relationships, and having the tools to start this kind of work (trainings, building professionals).

At the moment we are working toward actualizing some of these themes, so Phase 2 consists of Hennepin County and other partners trying to put the resources out. This happened in three ways.

How do you give people the tools to even start this conversation? We are trying to create an equity hub, a workshop with three modules incorporating the history of environmentalism from an Indigenous perspective.

1. Language and the power it has to keep people out.
2. Storytelling soft session. What is your relationship with water and the environment?

This is an equitable framework, not a toolkit. A toolkit implies that you are certified in something, but this is really about starting conversations without alienating anyone and making sure it is actually helpful to people.

The framework will have case studies of different affordable housing sites or other sorts of participatory landscape models that's ours but also our partners. From our work we will have: Mercado Central, Autumn Ridge, and Cedar-Riverside are all examples. The goal is to put this into perspective and make it digestible for people without so much overwhelm.

**JK: When working with a community that is new to you, where do you start the conversation?**

**YS:** The framework came out of the idea that we have been doing participatory landscape work, and an equitable way of doing design. We meet with community leaders and build that relationship. Then we meet with property managers or whoever owns the place. Then we identify the "climate stewards", or stewards in general. The stewards are dedicated to coming to more meetings than the regular residents. They go through an educational workshop which is tailored to the community. For example, Metro Blooms' Director of landscape Design Rich Harrison who does a lot of these water education workshops is really good at retailoring these presentations according to the community needs. For instance, instead of using "stormwater management", we use "Rainwater 101", as we are trying to modify language based on feedback. Kim Carpenter who was the Director of Equity at Metro Blooms when I was a GreenCorps member was a prominent figure in my understanding of this issue of language being an alienating device in the relationships we form with communities.

After this tailored presentation, there is also an opportunity for residents to become stewards. There is a simple application for stewards that asks questions like: "how many meetings can you come to?". We usually end up recruiting 3-4 people out of 10-15 people who may come to an event or a meeting. They are compensated in some way for their work, typically via gift cards. We are transparent about the project that is happening at that site. Stewards have built relationships with the community and the site pretty well already. They are liaisons between Metro Blooms and the property managers and renters (specifically for affordable housing sites). Not everyone likes to listen to an hour long lecture, so we also strive to do events like interactive picnics or National Night Out to get more people involved in the community.

We go with stewards to distribute flyers and do door knocking, etc.,



Newly community installed raingarden at Riverside Plaza.

but the stewards lead the conversation. We will have an event, a design charrette or something similar and talk about this is what it could look like. What kind of plants do you like, do you like this design? How would you change it? Stewards make the decisions, and the equitable framework came to be out of this.

We do a presentation to property managers—this is the hardest part of selling them on equity. They want to mitigate floods or just try to fix whatever may be ‘damaged’ physically on the site. The way we talk about this is through the success rates we’ve had in other projects. Autumn Ridge had a lot of strained relationships between property managers and residents due to the quality of life inside and outside the property. No sort of conversation was happening between property managers and tenants, because there was a lack of trust between these two entities. ACER did tenant organizing and mediation, and brought in Metro Blooms to co-create a vision a shared vision of a healthier environment at Autumn Ridge. ACER facilitated different kinds of events and meetings. Residents had conversations about issues in their apartments, that’s when the Metro Blooms worked with Sherman Associates and ACER if the project was needed and wanted at Autumn Ridge. There was an element of not only physical improvement of the outdoor space, but also leadership training and co-designing with the residents at Autumn Ridge.

This was a phased project over a couple of years. We incorporated storytelling evaluation as a more equitable way of receiving feedback. Stewards were a divisive part of this relationship turning a new leaf and through the storytelling we did, we were able to see some relationships already being improved. We held a picnic but also asked residents that weren’t able to make it to the meetings for their feedback on the design. Property managers felt more relieved. The owner was so excited they wanted the project to continue and actually bring Metro Blooms into Cedar-Riverside Plaza.

Cedar-Riverside had a different audience than Autumn Ridge, so the conversation had to be modified in a whole new way. When you bring in people that speak the same language as the community, community members feel relieved. Cedar-Riverside is its own city. There are lots of elders and it is community focused. Communicating



Newly community installed raingarden at Riverside Plaza.

in the same language opened things up and community members gave input on their designs. That was enough for the community to keep coming back and feel invested.

**JK: What happens at the end of a project?**

**YS:** We work to build capacity and leave the community better than we found it. When we do environmental education it can be easy to underestimate people. Building communities is more like building capacity. The ties and connections are weak due to whatever reason. Metro Blooms likes to be there in phases in projects like these. Projects can take a long time. Installing a BMP like a rain garden will maybe take a year. If we’re trying to install more than on BMP it takes longer. Autumn Ridge had zero, now they have 10 raingardens, and we also facilitated grant they wanted to apply for a playground, which is one of the things the community asked for. The playground is not Metro Blooms’ expertise, but it helped us build a relationship with the community and find a resource for them. There are a lot of ash trees on the site, so we applied for another grant to remove some of them. We continue to build projects with them and make engagement and on-going ownership a central part of the project.

Commercial projects take about 1-2 years. Like Mercado Central, it’s a big site so you can apply for different grants every year through Hennepin County, MET council and the watershed organization. It deepens on if the owners are committed and if renters come to different events, there’s a lot of buy in, which is incentive enough to keep going.

We don’t bring a lot of stuff into a community, we try to connect people and resources. We create ownership over the BMPs that end up being installed. Stewards are the glue of the projects so when Metro Blooms leaves, the stewards are there to take care of it. It’s theirs. They don’t see this as a burden, most times it is a longtime resident who would like some sort of green, accessible space. We try to meet people where they’re at. We try to build partnerships and leadership development of stewards through other organizations that already do leadership work there, like ACER or the Riverside Plaza Tenant Association(RPTA). Metro Blooms doesn’t have that background, so we foster connections to other orgs doing that work.

We do landcare training and consider it caring for the land. We offer this to stewards and residents so if they want to do any of the upkeep, they know what to look for. Land care gives community members ownership. This is your community not Metro Blooms’. Metro Blooms is simply a facilitator organization. We are not here to say, “we would like to have a relationship with you as long as possible.” Engagement can be independent of design, but people will have a harder time relating if the organization itself is not relating these things together.

We work to keep coming up with different kinds of engagement. We are starting to get more into doing pop up educational activities by the installed gardens or BMPs, trying to give them some sort of exposure. We’ll do weed I.D., activities, music and food. This kind of work will be more and more a common practice in our engagement approach.

We don’t really use the word outreach. We use community organizer or words like engagement manager. That encompasses more than the input. Input is important but it is disingenuous if you say that is engagement. It can tokenize the community itself.

**JK: What does the future look like?**

**YS:** I’m big on amplifying voices that haven’t been in the past. I work with overlooked communities outside my work with Metro Blooms as well, but try not to use those relationships to only better Metro Blooms. I found that for now, I’m going to try my best to use this

platform to make other people who are unheard and overlooked in low-income, communities of color, or people who are inequitable due to gender or sexuality seen and heard. People who are different don’t tend to feel safe in green spaces. How can we make those spaces more inclusive in the way we talk about them? I am not going to change how that will play out—it’s much more systemic—but will continue to work with organizers and change my own approach.

I’m inspired by many local organizers who do this work and have been doing this even before I was born. For instance, Michael Chaney is someone I truly respect. He is a North Minneapolis organizer who started as a food justice activist but really went beyond that, who is creating equitable standards for different environmental work in a much bigger way beyond water. He wants to foster the work of others and contribute to it, and works to amplify other people’s voices rather than thinking about his own leadership role. I think that’s inspiring and as a young organizer, it’s good to have that kind of modeling.

**JK: What are some cues that can be worked into BMPs to show others they are welcome there?**

**YS:** Metro Blooms at the moment is facilitating a work at Riverside Plaza with University of MN, with Mark Pedelty in alternative ways of engaging communities. The University of MN is providing logistical support and funding for a project that will help a community musician and bring another dimension to the community’s raingarden. We did an installation with the Riverside Community which was primarily Somali and Ethiopia in June 2019, and will use the grant to engage people in the community who have no idea what the points of a rain garden is. We worked with the tenant association to recruit members from the community to record their voices and languages to create a rain garden song released on Earth Day. This is a different kind of engagement. We would like the community to co-create a sign that can go in the rain garden, and be designed with the stewards. Perhaps using the language that’s more dominant in the community. How do we simplify languages for people? Pictures can help a lot. And Music too.

**JK: What else are you thinking about?**

**YS:** The biggest thing is the environmental work or any advancement in the environment cannot be done without thinking about equity. It will be unsustainable without it. I keep reminding myself this. The work done for marginalized communities is not placed on the same level as concept plans by designers, and this work is considered an afterthought. Metro Blooms does a great job of connecting these without overshadowing the other. Environmental work and equity are the same weight. This can actually be the way to advance and change the mindset by thinking about people and equity. Without that, it is pointless.

Upper right photo: John Kinara, Housing and Economic Development Specialist at City of Brooklyn Park, participating in community planting with stewards at Autumn Ridge Apartments.



Denise Flood, Sherman Associates Regional Director of Property at Autumn Ridge helping with the community planting for pollinator garden