

**Athletic Arenas for Regeneration:** Alyah Kanso, first Sustainability Manager in the NBA, speaks about working with the community to transform a big corporation to be more environmentally friendly and socially impactful. Interview with Ikechukwu Sharpe.

Regeneration Symposium – Eddy at New Paltz

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### Synopsis

Alyah Kanso, former Sustainability Manager for the Golden State Warriors Basketball team and founder of the Climate Collective, discusses ways they transformed a giant corporation to be more sustainable. In conversation with photographer and MFA candidate Ikechukwu Sharpe, Kanso, first ever full-time Sustainability hire in the National Basketball Association (NBA), describes intentional and experimental steps taken to improve environmental and social impacts in San Francisco by shifting the way the GSW corporation thinks about sustainability action and engaged with activities involving waste reduction, food redistribution, tree-planting, transportation, and climate policy action. Addressing a university audience and regional partners, Kanso speaks to the student experience of creating a meaningful career path in the field sustainability action at the small business and major corporate levels. Kanso describes ways community members can collaborate on projects, even within global institutions where it is much easier to say no than yes to new ideas for greater human and planetary equity and thriving.

**Keywords:** corporate sustainability, career path, sports business, athletic team, NBA, food redistribution, climate action, community organizing

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Ikechukwu Sharpe: Can you walk us through your journey from undergrad at Loyola University Maryland to becoming the first Sustainability Manager for the NBA? What were the pivotal steps that led you to this specific niche?

Alyah Kanso: My route had turns and twists; this was not a linear path for me in any sense of the word. When I started in undergrad, I thought I was going to be a doctor, and I thought I was going to be a doctor for years. The first pivotal step was one that kind of felt like it was forced on me. Many of you can probably relate: sophomore year was the deadline to pick what you wanted to study and make that your major. The sophomore crisis was real for me, and the first pivotal step was just listening to my body screaming at me, being like, you don't want to do this. You know, you thought you did, your whole life up to this point was leading you to study pre-med, biology, chemistry, which in retrospect ended up being still very useful for what I ended up doing, but being a doctor was not it for me. And so, really, the first thing was choosing to ignore what I thought I was supposed to do and experimenting. Ikechukwu, I know you had a similar story during college, too. We went to a liberal arts school, so experimenting with classes was pretty easy. You had access to a bunch of different disciplines at your fingertips, and so I did that, and a class that, like, changed my thinking in so many ways was the Philosophy of Gender and Nature. That class really opened up the floodgates for what I wanted to study, and the intersections between these disciplines: the intersection between environmental and social justice. Really understanding how intertwined all of these issues are, I basically couldn't look away. That was it for me. I was like,

alright, I'm... I'm here, and I... now I just need to figure out how I'm gonna take this further. I graduated and moved back home and started working for a very small company. A very, very small indie skincare company of four people. I joined as their operations person, but during my interview process, I was very, very clear with them how excited I was about bringing my expertise and interest around sustainability and wondering if I could apply any of that to this role. And, you know, they said yes. It was something that they had already been interested in, but didn't really have the time, the knowledge. And so...you will never hear me downplay my experience at a small business. I truly love the experiences that I got there, because when you're one of four people, you are doing so much more, and you have so much more access to the behind the scenes of what it takes to run a business, all of the moving pieces, than if you were to immediately join a larger company. I started doing operations, and I started going to, like, packaging conferences, trying to understand the lingo. What would sustainable packaging look like for us? Having that access was really amazing. But I also still felt like I was hitting a wall with what I knew and how I could implement this, and so I decided to go to grad school. And I went to grad school in Amsterdam, I spent a year there, diving into this knowledge even more, and then I graduated into COVID, and again, not my plan, I was planning on staying there, working there. I had this all worked out in my mind, but obviously, you know, the universe had other reasons for getting me to go back home, and so that's what I did. And I started volunteering my time. I started working on mutual aid projects, with the Los Angeles Community Fridge Network. And I started working with the donut economics coalition in California. I really just tried to take my time and experiment even further. And at the same time, I am applying like crazy to jobs left and right across the country, across the world, across industries. I am putting it all out there. I'm like, I have nothing to lose, this time is crazy, let me just give it a go. And basically,

that is how I found the opening for the sustainability position at the Warriors, and was lucky enough to get an opportunity to interview.

IS: Thank you for sharing that. In this moment, we don't have to get into the specific nitty-gritties of how this interview came about, but I look at this as: you are a pioneer in what you did, working as the first sustainability manager, not only for the Golden State Warriors, but for the NBA.

IS: And, yeah, how did you successfully pitch yourself to be that person? I'm a Lakers fan, so I kind of have, you know, I got a different type of love for the Warriors only because of you, but, how did you successfully pitch yourself in that process knowing, at this time in, how we're moving and living on this earth? We need to be more mindful, especially as big corporations, of what we're doing as it relates to, waste and food recovery.

AK: Hmm. I have to state for the record, I am also a Lakers fan, born and bred. However, they did not pay my check at the time, so... Basically, I think it was a combination of timing, luck, and, my experience. This position was open for a week. I came upon it on one of the last days that it was open. And the interview process was intense. It was a screening call with an HR person, a call with my supervisor, and then a panel of four people back-to-back. It was two hours of talking to four different people for half an hour each. My manager, luckily, was looking for somebody who did not have sports experience. Thank God, because I didn't. I had none of it. Other than being a Lakers fan growing up, it was not a lifelong dream of mine to work in sports. I think it also helped, because I really tried to pitch myself as somebody who could bring sports into the climate space, right? As opposed to being like, here's my experience in sports, and here's how I'm gonna bring climate to it. And I think that was a huge, a huge deal, because now I have this outside of the box, perspective of: how we can really make this work like a business? Sports is different, right? Like, a lot of

teams don't actually own the arena that they play in, or that they practice in. The Warriors was one of them, so I knew it wasn't just walking into a sports team. I'm walking into a massive building with massive resource use.

This is a business, and I need to figure out how to create a sustainability program, and also advocate for sustainability as a practice in this business that hasn't seen it before. It took a lot of work, because not only is this a new role, but this is also a new business, right? The Warriors moved from Oakland, where they were leasing out and had no operational control over their arena, to now owning and operating a huge building, the surrounding campus, an e-sports team, the G League in Santa Cruz. This was a huge undertaking. We went from being something very, very small, not a very good team, to becoming something so big. This was a huge opportunity to take that momentum and figure out how to embed sustainability into its core, not just have it be something that happened on the side, but something that ran through the entire organization.

IK: Yeah, amazing answer. And, as you mentioned, there is luck, but also, you were there at the right time. Everything you worked towards led to this being the perfect moment for them, and for you, too. So, alright, walking us through: you're hired; signed that paper. I'm curious...what were the first 90 days like? You know, coming into an environment, a space, a league, and a corporation, a *global* corporation at that, where they're not necessarily accustomed to a sustainability framework? How did you approach that first 90 days of being that person who's like, *you know what... what y'all doing is not... this isn't it. Or, like, we can do this better...*

AK: Yeah. Well, honestly, before even my first 90 days, I, asked my manager, what do I need to know? Do you have resources, links, articles? Are there people that you want me to know? Are there organizations, other sports teams? Send me everything. And she sent me this huge email of things that I wanted to read

before I even started. I was like, I need to really understand what I'm walking into from an industry level, because obviously the Warriors had some stuff, when they built the arena. They were LEED certified, which is a green building certification, but I was trying to understand not just what the Warriors were trying to do, but also what the entire industry was trying to do. So, prior to even joining, I was like, let me read up, let me see... My manager had been in sports for 20 years at that point, so she was the right person to ask.

As soon as I got into the organization, I had all this information running in the back of my head, and then I went on a listening tour. I wasn't about to tell anybody what to do, I just needed to listen. And it became very clear, *one*, that not enough people knew who I was and what I was trying to do. *Two*, everyone had their own idea of what they thought the Warriors should be doing around sustainability, and when. And... basically, I took all of that information, and because my role was new, but also we were coming out of COVID, there was this immense, yearning for stuff to happen, really, really quickly. But when you're starting a sustainability program from scratch, that's not really how it works. There is a lot of planning and strategy, materiality assessments, a lot of, foundation building that you should be doing before you start jumping into action. I wasn't really afforded that time, and so, I immediately started building the strategy while trying to implement projects at the same time, because I knew if there was already an interest in sustainability when I joined, I wanted to keep that momentum and interest. So I'm literally doing both of the things in parallel. How do I develop a strategy that's long-term, while also creating small wins and programs that are going to be really impactful on top of it, so that people are not just sitting around and waiting for sustainability to happen, but they can see it happening in front of them, and they can be involved in that process?

IS: Nice, yeah. Let's get into the specifics. Would you be able to describe a specific project from conception to inception? I'm thinking about your Zero Waste Initiative, or your very successful - which I personally love - community food redistribution program, and the measurable impact it had on the organization's environmental footprint.

AK: Yeah, let's talk about that. Because I had come from small businesses, the timeline in my mind that it took to take programs from 0 to 1 was not the case when I came to the Warriors. It's a bigger organization: 500 plus people. And there are a lot of other stakeholders at play. I knew I wanted to start a food recovery program before I even joined. I had done it at my last job. I knew there was food waste here. I had contacts already. I already knew how I wanted to do it. I was gung-ho about wanting to start that program and still, it took me about a year and nine months to get off the ground. The Chase Center seats 18,064 people. There's about a million visitors that come through that building every single year. I knew that I had to talk to our food and beverage team, our operations team, the back of house, the loading dock team. I knew that there were a lot of people that I needed to get on board, and I got almost everybody on board very, very quickly.

The biggest player that I needed to get on board that was kind of dragging their feet was the head chef of the food and beverage team. It was pretty clear to me that she was like, *you're stepping into territory that is not yours. This is... this is not your field.* And so, it was a lot of relationship building with that person in particular. A lot of trying to understand what was currently working, how I could embed food recovery into her existing operations, and in that process, there were three big challenges. The first one was budget, the second one was space, and the third one was operations. So, you know, every time an obstacle came up, it was like, *we don't have any money*, and I was like, *alright, I'm gonna go get a grant.* I got a grant from the City of San Francisco to

help us pay for two industrial-sized fridges. And then they were like, *also, our walk-ins, they're not gonna be able to hold all of this stuff*. So I was like, okay, I'll fix it. I turned an old storage closet into the food recovery hub. So now, these two fridges are sitting in this space that is perfectly located right between the kitchens and the loading dock. So access was also going to be really easy. And then, operations. We don't have anyone on our team who's gonna do it. And I was like, got it. I will fix it. And we worked with a company that would do the logistics of picking up food from these fridges and donating it to places really close by. So, I was able to fix the budget, the space, and the operations within that year and nine months. After that, they didn't have any more obstacles, and it was just a matter of starting the program.

We had a lot of this pushback, and eventually, the program ran itself. It's now just become part of somebody's job. After that initial year and nine months of back and forth and being like, *we can't do this, or it's too hard, or who's gonna run the schedule?* Every time something came up, not just with the head chef, but with other people on her team, on my team, we had to clear the pathway and make sure that they knew that we were going to be able to handle it, and that they wouldn't be able to say no. In the first year of this program, we recovered over 24 tons of edible food surplus, which meant that we provided over 40,000 meals and avoided almost 60 tons of CO<sub>2</sub>e emissions that we would have sent to the landfill. All of these meals were immediately donated to people to be fed within five miles of the building. And it's not going to food banks, it was literally going to places like navigation centers that served seniors, or the unhoused community, or folks in low-income brackets. This food was going to people who needed a warm meal, tonight.

I was really proud of the fact that a lot of sustainability programs happen in the background. They're very operational. Nobody knows about them, nobody ever hears about them. Because this program was so successful, we got

DoorDash to be a corporate partner and help us pay for this. We got basketball players to help us make this program what it was. Andre Iguodala, Corey Joseph, Lindy Waters, all participated in the food recovery program. They learned about it. They even joined one of the runners on a distribution. BBC featured this program. We were able to take something that could have just stayed in the background, and we brought it to people. Once you have a player involved, once fans can see it, once it's in your building, it's really hard to chop. I have been gone from this organization for over a year. That program is still running, doing what it needs to do: it's still feeding people, it's still recovering all this food that otherwise would have been in the garbage, and yeah, it's one of the programs that I am most proud of. And it was one of the hardest things that I had to do.

IS: Everything you just mentioned can be expanded on in so many different ways, and just one thing I wanted to highlight for everyone here is, *obstacles*. When someone, whether it's the head chef or someone who's like, *we don't do things like that, or we don't work in this way, or this will never work*, you know, our day-to-day is about finding new alternatives to exist, and not just with other humans, but with our non-human living beings. And finding different ways will be difficult at first, or it might take some time, but once you find that readjustment and make those changes, as you just did, something that continues to run, other teams in the league will eventually follow what you brought to the Golden State Warriors, just like a pioneer in space. [The Artemis II space mission would land the following day.]

You mentioned Andre Goodallah, and a lot of those participating on this call are from the athletic teams here on campus. I'm curious to ask, how does the star power of an athlete or the global brand of the NBA, accelerate the sustainability goals that you have? And did you find it easier for doors to open

with that influence of athletes who, are really devoted to their craft and their sport?

AK: 100%. Athletes are powerful cultural influencers. I'm sure we could all name an athlete who has helped change culture in some way. There was even a study that showed that 61% of people trust information about social issues like climate change, when it comes from someone that they consider an authority, like an athlete. Athletes have power; their words have power; their influence has power. So, having athletes, behind this program was huge, right? Especially when you're in a high reputation organization and everyone is competing to get their program, their department, their whatever included in that spotlight. I just knew that once we were able to get this to be front-facing, fan-facing, once we were able to put kind of that star power behind it, people were gonna listen and pay attention, and that was going to carry through, any other program that we would try and run. We already knew we have the attention of these people and if we could just continue utilizing that, it would help push all of our sustainability programs forward. But it started with one program, and that, again, took a year and nine months, and so we did the hard part; now we just needed to figure out how to keep doing this and reiterating and embedding sustainability into the things that are already running. We already have a marketing team, a social media team. How do we start embedding this language, these projects into the campaigns that they're already running? And, it is hard, but it's worth it, because there's almost a sense of security to the programs when you know that you have the backing of this global organization and of the athletes, who are, obviously people, right? They have things that they're interested in, too. A lot of them have their own foundations, so it was also about, like, matching the person to their interest in the program at hand, and it was just so cool to see all of these players light up at just learning about what we're doing in the building that they basically live in. You know, they're in there all the time. The business of

basketball and the business of running the arena were always very, very separate, and so anytime you could, bridge that gap was huge, because now these athletes are talking about what's happening in the building with the people doing the work and the intermingling that can happen there was really pivotal, and I saw it increase as I was there. We asked, how do we start to include them in some of the projects that we're doing? We know that they care, so, why not bring them in?

IS: Yeah, perfect answer. Just reflecting back what you said: an athlete has so much power. Athletes are multidimensional, as we all are multidimensional, and like you said, finding what aligns with them, and amplifying that -- that's really special.

Let's pivot to the aspiring professionals here with us, because working with such a high-profile team and league, how did you align the grassroots sustainability initiatives that you set out to accomplish with a global corporation? There are either high-stakes financial or business goals. So, working with an organization like the Warriors that affects our Earth and our carbon footprint in major ways. What was that like in terms of finding that fit where, you're able to successfully achieve these initiatives you set out to accomplish?

AK: Hmm, yeah. When you study sustainability, climate change, you get really good at understanding how these problems are connected. What I had to learn very quickly was how to translate the goals that I was trying to push into their language and into their priorities. So, I'm speaking differently to the CFO than I am to the COO, than I am to the marketing folks, right? The message, the goal, is the same, but the way that we get there was different, and that changed. A lot of my job was showing folks how their job, their role, their department was connected to broader sustainability goals. It was a lot of meeting one-on-one

with these departments and showing, here's how we can help each other. And the question, the thing that you mentioned about grassroots sustainability initiatives and global corporations, how do you blend these two? Point blank: businesses are not the expert on what people need; communities are, you know? And there's a saying in Spanish, *solo el pueblo, salva el pueblo*, which roughly translates, "only the community saves the community," and I think, in particular with sports teams, they're *local*. That's a local team. You're embedded in the community. You have to rely on the experts in that community to tell you what needs to happen.

Most sports teams, the Warriors included, have a community foundation, and in that community foundation, the goal is to put money in the hands of organizations, grassroots initiatives that are directly embedded in the community. The only issue for me was that our community foundation had nothing to do with sustainability and climate. I knew that I could use the same model of trusting and listening to find the grassroots initiatives, the experts in our community, and partner with them. Because as soon as you attach a name like the Warriors to a community project, now that community project gets more eyes. It does help when you have @warriors.com at the end of your email. People will answer. I used that to my advantage, and I was like, *I would love to learn about what you're doing. I'd love to partner with you.* I did so many of those meetings, talking to folks within the San Francisco and broader Bay Area. I'd walk around the city and ask, what organizations do I see? What am I looking at here? One popped up quickly called the Friends of the Urban Forest, and that was an organization that plants trees in areas that have low tree cover. And when you understand that tree cover is directly correlated to, improved mental health, and perceived safety, and, overall, a better way of life.... it was, really clear. I thought, this is a really interesting organization; I want to partner with them; I want to help uplift what they're doing. And we did. We turned one

of our games into a night where fans could vote on where we could plant trees, and then got, sixty of our employees to come out and plant trees in these neighborhoods, in areas with low tree cover. That is just one of the ways that we tried to embed ourselves in our community that was different from what the Community Foundation was doing, because I didn't have access to those folks, and their focus was different but I knew I could learn a lot from them, and I tried to implement that in a similar way.

IS: Yeah, it's amazing. Community is always, you know, the answer. Again, being candid with you, what difficulties did you come across, in terms of working within a corporate institution? I feel like with everything that we do in regeneration and sustainability is, we're pushing up against a system that does not want anything that we're talking about. In a lot of ways, the system is designed to do exactly what it is doing. So, when it came to, the difficulties you experienced approaching solutions, is there a takeaway about the difficult matter of resistance?

AK: The pushback was crazy. The pushback was constant. And it was unexpected, because I'm like, y'all hired me for this, right? You wanted me to do this, right? And at times, it felt like they didn't. At times it was like, *no, you're just here to sit at the desk and just make people laugh*, and that was it. And a lot of the pushback was around timeline, or budget, or bandwidth. There was a time where I was unable to talk about the work that we were doing, and the opportunities that I was given, and I thought, I'm so confused at what's happening right now. Because you're right: I am trying to do sustainability in an organization that has never had it before. There's a lot of organizing that you have to do internally, and there's a lot of change management that takes a really long time, and I don't think I recognized that until I was already in it. The

time scale for how things were gonna change and the pace that they were gonna move...was so different than I expected when I joined. When I talk about the food recovery program taking a very long time, it wasn't a year and nine months of me, every single day, pushing on this. There was a period of time where I was like, *I need to take a step back. It is actually at the point where I don't know if this is gonna work, and I just need to take a step back.* And that was important, in that time, and any time that I was running up against the system in a way that felt Sisyphean. I'm almost there; I'm rolling up this boulder, and then immediately I get pushed back down.

IS: Yeah.

AK: Finding climate community is huge, right? It's kind of lonely sometimes when you're the only sustainability person. You don't have a lot of people to talk to, especially who understand what you're trying to do at the same level, and so I spent a lot of time building climate community. And as these roles started to pop up more, I also started to connect with other folks trying to do sports and sustainability work, and sometimes we would literally just have meetings, and it was a safe place for everyone to talk about the things that they were running into. To nobody's surprise, they were very, very similar. This person has pushback; this corporate sponsor isn't aligned. Having that space to share and to be honest and to hold each other's worries was so, so helpful. And then, something that really helped was starting the Climate Collective, which was an internal community of practice where the goal was to get employees to understand what we were trying to do. When I joined the Warriors, nobody knew who I was or what I was trying to do. I'd walk into the kitchen and introduce myself and tell them I did sustainability, and they were like, *okay, what the hell does that mean? Like, what are you actually doing here?* So, starting the Climate Collective was really important, because now all the employees who care about sustainability, but see no relation to the work that

they do, can come together. In the first year of the Climate Collective, we got 15% of the employee base to join this group, and we held 13 different events based on a survey that we asked them to do about: what they were trying to learn; what they were interested in; how we could bring these folks into our world. We did tours of the building, we did volunteer opportunities, we had folks come speak, we did lunch-and-learns. We were trying to get folks on the same page. That was so pivotal, because I went from being the lonely little soldier, trying to do this stuff by myself, to now: there are 60, 70, 80 plus people who care about this work, but they need help understanding how to get involved. And so, alright, I have to get this program running. This group had people, from assistants to vice presidents, across the entire...organization. The general manager of the basketball team is in my DMs asking for recycling bins for the players' campus. People that I never thought would be in this group are in this group, and all it took was saying, *we want to create a space for y'all to come in, to bring your ideas, to bring your interests. We are going to meet you there. We're going to include you in this process.* Instead of asking somebody five steps down the line, hey, we want to do this program, and we need your department's help, we would bring them in at ground zero, saying, *here are the key elements that I think are important around sustainability, stuff that you're telling me you care about. Let's work together to make it happen.* And that healed a lot of the pushback that I was feeling, that sometimes always almost felt personal, but, I really realized we're all going through it.

IS: Community is everything, you know? You've since transitioned from the NBA, from the Golden State Warriors, to founding your own company, Carry On Consulting. What inspired that leap into entrepreneurship? Working for the Warriors, you might have thought, this is the peak, I'm done, this is my final job, I'm good in life. So what led you to create your own company? Tell us more

about it, your core mission, your values, and what you hope to continue to achieve in your career and in your life.

AK: I'm gonna be so honest with y'all. I left for a number of reasons, but something so core and central was, I didn't want to feel like I was being censored anymore, in the work that I had poured my heart and my soul, every part of me into. This work is personal, full stop. Nobody enters this work because it means nothing to them, right? Like you said, Ikechukwu, for a lot of people, this is the peak. And for me, this job was the first step into what I foresee being a very fruitful and exciting career. I also want to help more than one organization. I don't want my knowledge, my expertise to be tied to a single organization. I wanted more autonomy in the types of projects I could do, the organizations I could work with. As an employee, you're beholden to one company, and the choices that company makes that are out of your control. You have to sit with that. There were decisions they made that I could not get behind, that I just did not feel right about, and, at the same time, I'm really inspired by the work that we were able to do. But I have to weigh what that means for me. And truly, I wanted to bet on myself. I have worked in a bunch of different industries, with sustainability being the through line. What does it look like for me to take everything I've learned and help companies who have said they want to start working on sustainability, but either don't really know how, or have shiny object syndrome, where they see something pretty over here, and they turn their attention, or they see something on the news over here, and they think that's what they need to put their energy into. And really, I want to be the internal sustainability compass that says: here's what's actually going to be beneficial to your business, to your industry, and here's how you create a sustainable program that's actually going to work within your business, in your operations, in your budget, in your community, and run itself. That's really the goal of Carry On Consulting, is to help organizations find that: push everything

else aside that isn't relevant to you, focus really hard on this, and transform your business. That's what I'm trying to do now.

IK: Amazing, yeah, I'm excited. I feel like it's an honor to witness and experience this journey of yours up close, and I'm happy to welcome you to our SUNY New Paltz community. I have three more rapid questions, and we can open up for Q&A if anyone has questions in the audience. First one is: whether in arenas or buildings, or a university campus setting, there's a lot that comes in and out. Are there any practical ways we can be sustainably proactive? Before or after an event, such as the one we have today

AK: Hmm, yeah. The first thing I'd say is lobby for climate policies. I think universities and sports teams, in particular, have a lot of influence in local politics, and climate policies affect everybody. A lot of sports teams have lobbyists, and none of them are lobbying for climate policies. I could see one big, impactful change, it would be sports teams, and universities. lobbying for more climate policies. Transportation is a huge one, especially for sports teams. The people you're asking to travel to your game, your event - - are there ways for them to do that in a less individualistic or extractive manner? If all you have is opportunities for people to drive, what would it look like to offer bus routes or other public transportation at a discount? And then waste is the last one, right? You're trying to feed people; a lot of times you're giving people stuff. Giveaways are a huge part of events. It's a culture that I honestly think we need to change. I don't think anyone should now go into an event expecting to get something beyond the thing that they're trying to watch or experience, but we've made that part of the culture. And so how do we start to think about waste, and not just what's coming in, but also what we're sending out and giving away to people? How do we start to be more responsible and think about that from the entire material life cycle?

IS: Thank you for that second one. For those in the audience looking to reduce their carbon footprint, what are some of the most effective ways to become aware of those options in our day-to-day lives?

AK: You won't be surprised by my answer, but my first one is to get involved in your community. Doing something, anything, imperfectly, is gonna make a huge difference. I know people who are like, ***I can't be vegan, I love cheese. Be vegan plus cheese.*** I think we're slowly moving past this idea of perfection: *I can only do something if I can do it perfectly*, and that's gonna stop people from even wanting to take the first step. And I also think that when you get involved in your community, you realize that this is happening, not on an individual basis, but at a local level. ***We're not gonna bamboo toothbrush our way out of the climate crisis.*** We are going to mutually aid, support each other and fix the food crisis by working together, helping support community gardens, helping create, localized, community-owned energy systems. Getting out in your community - - that's not talked about enough when people talk about personal carbon stuff. I have veered away from *you just need to buy an electric vehicle*. No, you need to get involved in your community. The more you get involved in your community, the less likely you're going to want to be doing what the capitalist machine wants you to do, which is to think that this is only your responsibility, and that you can buy your way out of it, because you can't.

IS: Community, that's the thing. Last question: what is your advice for graduating seniors who are looking to pursue unconventional dreams or create roles that don't exist? Your life and career path is so special, and the ways that you have been able to pivot from work at small businesses to large scale corporations, now founding and owning and operating your own. Do you have any advice for seniors who are at this juncture in their life where they're thinking about what's my dream job or what's my next step in life?

AK: Yeah. Oh, God. I wish someone, or many people, had told me that it was okay to not know exactly what that path was gonna look like, and that it is okay to try things. I left senior year of college, not having anything lined up. On the outside, I was trying to portray this very strong exterior, and to be completely honest, I was scared. I had no idea what I was going to do. I could not find any traditional, entry-level sustainability jobs. This was a long time ago, and things have changed, luckily. But at the same time, I still wish somebody had said, it's okay to experiment, it's okay to go volunteer at a state park, a national park, and try that out. It's okay to just do things that are maybe not things that you might consider long-term, because figuring out what you don't like is sometimes more important than just rushing toward the thing that you think you do like. You might be surprised. A lot of my career has been me just jumping around, trying to see, do I like this industry? Do I like these projects? Do I like this size of organization? Just trying to experiment. I wish I had done more of it, if I'm gonna be totally honest with you. And I feel like I'm at that point now in my life and in my career where I have less to lose, and I'm willing to experiment and try things, even within my business, within myself, to figure out how do I get closer and closer to the thing that I'm meant to do? And the only way that you can do that is by trying things. And I really wish somebody had told me that before I graduated.

#### Q & A

Josephine: My husband Shabazz and I have an environmental company. He founded it in the 90s and I joined it in 1999, and we have been doing, zero waste in institutions since that time. Everything you said really resonated because we are an independent company, and we're consultants. We are also working around other people's budgets and excuses, and I feel fortunate in comparison, because you were getting through this alone for a long time. I'm much more like, *oh my god, I can't get these people*, and Shabazz never has a bad way of

looking at stuff. He always says, *I'll just give them time, or they'll come around.* Quick story: when we rolled out our first kitchen with about five chefs, they all sat with their arms folded and their heads down. They would not look at me. They said, *you're giving us more work*, and that's back in 99. They didn't really get it, you know, and I said, *Well, I promise you one thing: it's going to keep your kitchen so much cleaner.* When I walked in in a few days later, they were like, oh my gosh, you're right. I appreciated all the things you said about community, and getting people to work with you. We do tree plantings, community gardens, free fresh food giveaways. You have to lead by example. I am grateful that you're doing that, and if you want to come to New York, the Knicks could really use some help.

AK: Thank you. I will share something more about the chef who was the biggest pushback, the biggest obstacle to us doing our food recovery program... I had a colleague tell me that in her own company meeting, running our food and beverage program, this chef was boasting about the food recovery program after it got started. Ironically, the person who was the biggest obstacle to this program is now yelling it from the rooftops and claiming this program as her own. For me, that was a big win, although, it came with the mixed feelings of knowing you didn't want this to happen, but I'm so glad that now you're standing behind this program, ten toes down, you are so excited, you're willing to talk about it in your own internal meetings. For me, that was huge.

Josephine: Absolutely, you are, and I know we are too, Agents for Change. And, you know, that's a culture shift. When you have people who said, *you're ridiculous, this will never work*, now actually boasting, you know, that's pretty good. Congratulations.

Shabazz: I had a question, about your experience with the Golden State stadium. You had obstacles, but they weren't structural. In our experience with stadiums, there are structural obstacles that we haven't found a way to overcome. The event we did in the Barclays Stadium on a carting contract. When we think about food waste, we think about the not recoverable franchised food waste. There was no recoverable food waste, because everything is packaged. And, so, what do you find as you go around in your private business? Are you able to overcome these obstacles?

AK: Yeah, thank you for this important question. The location of the Chase Center in San Francisco, you're absolutely right, has completely different structural elements than, let's say, someone in Kansas City. What I have found is that you have to be really creative and create business streams where there weren't any before, and work with what you've got. It doesn't have to be perfect, and it doesn't have to cover the entire arena, or the stadium, right? And I think that's been the biggest change: people are like, *well, I don't want to do it if we can't do it 100%*. A lot of times, it's better to just start small, especially if you have to get creative. So, like. Some teams work with local farms if they can't fit all of these bins that have a compost compactor on site. They've been able to take some of their food waste to farms to feed pigs and chickens. Not a typical compost cycle for a business of that size, but it's worked for them, and it's helped reduce their cost of hauling. And that's been helpful when you're talking about structural changes. What can we actually save by not hauling this or putting this in our regular bin, but by creating another stream, and what does that also look like from a social standpoint? Can we start supporting a small business? Can we start marketing this to our fans? People are gonna start caring. Start small. That would be my suggestion. That's what I've seen work at places that have completely different structural advantages or disadvantages.

Shabazz: It's what we call top-down, bottom-up. Working for a carting company, it's like we're at the bottom. We've been working here with this college since, 2009. They've been our customer. And we were brought in by the administration. So, we started at the top. And then, as we made recommendations, we were able to implement changes. They were able to bring it down to the chefs, bring it all the way through the whole process. We have a compost facility that is about two, maybe three miles from here. And we developed a system that we call the Clean Can One Touch System. And, you know, the system goes right into the workstation. And then, from there, it's picked up and brought to us. And it's picked up six days a week because there's no storage capacity. So, that came from the top down to the bottom. When you get hired as a consultant, you start out at the top. And I think that has led you to the success that you have. When you go in with a carting company, you start out at the bottom, and you can't bring it to the top. The route is not the same, going up as it is coming down.

Audience member Lucas: How do you negotiate your identity as an advocate with the conflict between the moral basis of sustainability and the profit-seeking function of the corporate business structure? Did it feel like the Warriors, as an organization, cared about sustainability in the same way you do? And if the answer to that question is no, what other motivators would they have to pursue sustainability practices?

AK: You must be a writer, because that's a beautiful question.

Lucas: I am, yes.

AK: How did I negotiate my identity? It was constant. I worked for very small companies. The stakes were completely different than at the Warriors. Part of the reason I left were these moral decisions, internal conflicts that I had with

myself. There are corporate partners that I have no interest in supporting, that the Warriors did. Once I realized how big a business, a marketing tool, the Warriors were for huge very, very harmful organizations.... I did not clock that until I got into the organization. That was not clear to me until I was in it already. The marketing budget that the Warriors get from Chevron, from Salesforce, from Accenture, from these major, major companies that are doing real harm. I did what I could in saying, *I don't think we should partner with Chevron; I don't think that aligns, and it's gonna undermine and devalue the work that I'm trying to do, to position us as leaders in sustainability. I don't really see how the scales are going to balance on that.* At first, they said no. They put it off for a little; eventually Chevron came back with a bigger number, a bigger check; they couldn't say no to. This was at the tail end of my time there, but it was a real challenge for me to sit back and let that happen. If I am the only person who says something about it and nothing happens... I gotta rally the folks; we have to say something about this together, but it's not enough. And it was really, really hard for me. I had to wrestle with that all the time. I'd come home and be like, I was not okay with this conversation. I was not okay with the fact that they partnered with these people, and I have to figure out what to do for myself to be okay, or to move on.

The second part of your question was, do you feel like the Warriors as an organization cared about sustainability in the same way that you do? The answer to that was no. And the motivators that they did have to pursue sustainability practices were my invention, basically. I had to motivate them to care about sustainability. I had to make the business case for sustainability, too. When you learn about sustainability, you're not learning how to make the business case, unless you're maybe going to business school and there's a sustainability aspect. But I had to learn how to make the business case. I had to learn how to say, if you invest in this thing, there will be a return on your

investment in a year. Or, if you help me do this program, we will create a new revenue stream. Or if you do this, the reputation that you will have of being a more sustainable sports team will be X, which can be hard to quantify. So, no, they did not care about sustainability in the way that I expected them to when they hired me. However, I knew that there were a lot of other people who did. When Shabazz was talking about bottom-up, I knew there were a lot of people at the bottom who did care about this stuff in very different parts of this business. I thought, together we can probably motivate the organization at every level of these departments to care about this, and to be motivated by it, and to embed it into their existing job functions, but, yeah, it was hard, and it takes time. That change management and that advocacy, and that internal organizing, and having to wrestle with the function and the actions of this business, it's a lot. If you really believe in the change that you can make in this organization, it can be really worthwhile for a lot of people.

IS: Thank you, again, for your time, your wisdom, your care, your passion, and really appreciate you.

AK: Thank you so much. This was a pleasure. I said this to you yesterday, but most moderators don't get to know their panelists for 10 plus years, so I feel really lucky to do this with you. Thank you so much, and I really hope, everybody, you enjoy the rest of the symposium and the amazing meal. I'm kind of jealous I don't get to share in it, but you know, break some bread, I am really happy I got a chance to talk with you all.