



# On Honeybees, Diversity and Al Gore's Climate Reality Leadership Corps Training

by Penelope Boyer

On Monday March 2nd I attended a screening of *The Vanishing of the Bees* sponsored by Green Spaces Alliance of South Texas. Although my dad tried beekeeping for a bit when I was a kid, I was astonished at how little I knew about bees. Two mysteries stung me: 1) Colony Collapse Disorder to which colossal numbers of honeybees have been lost in recent years and no one knows why but climate change is blamed; and 2) life in the honeybee colony itself which I learned to my awe and astonishment is not filled with male drones but with a majority female population serving the lone queen bee (male drones are few in the hive and exist only to mate). Honeybee society is a matriarchal, largely female, homosocial domain where girl bees grow into adults and at each stage of her life she performs different roles—from preener to pollinator, scourer to scout. Life in a hive is a female-managed, highly complex democracy with equitable decision-making policies, careful communication conveyed through descriptive dancing and intricate housekeeping/honey-producing rules.

Between seeing *The Vanishing of the Bees* on March 2<sup>nd</sup> and packing for Cedar Rapids on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, I have apprenticed myself to local apiarist, Liz Rendon, who has several hives scattered throughout the Southside, read six books on bees including Bill McKibbin's *Honey and Oil* chronicling his founding of the environmental activist movement, 350.org, peppered with visits to a Vermont beekeeper friend's farm, and gotten Rick Fink, owner of Bandera Bees and president of Alamo Area Beekeepers, to install ten hives at Land Heritage Institute, the 1200 acre Southside property I have worked with for 10+ years that is under development as a land museum. That film motivated me into that much action—who knew!

Packing for Cedar Rapids? Yes, I traveled to Cedar Rapids, Iowa this first week of May to participate in Al Gore's 28th Climate Reality Leadership Corps training! I had never heard of it myself until the end of April—I applied immediately. The application asked for a picture of yourself doing something you love—I sent a shot of me in one of Liz's bee suits, a new vocation though I may love more the honeybee's homosocial democracy than actual apiary activities. The application also asked me to commit to ten climate actions to be conducted

within the next twelve months. This story is one; stay tuned for more. The deal is that the training is free and they give you lunches, breakfasts and break snacks, but you have to get yourself there and lodge yourself. I found a Couchsurfing host, slept on an inflatable mattress in her sewing room and walked nearly three miles each way/day to the DoubleTree Hotel where the training was held.

The first day of training was Cinco de Mayo—what would have been my Dad's 90th birthday, a nice commemoration to a would-have-been beekeeper, I thought. I was assigned to Table 39 located at the very back of this huge hotel ballroom. Great: Gore would be miles away. If he's there at all. At this point, I really didn't really know what I was in for. Online information about the 3-day training was sketchy, especially Gore's part in it. It was clear he would introduce the Mayor of Cedar Rapids, and thrilling when he appeared, but he read the intro (kinda clumsily) and then he was off. Was that all for Al?

Mayor Ron Corbett rattled off famous facts about the city, some funny, then spoke feverishly of the 2008 flood—the destruction, devastation, aftermath, relief and recovery—that tragic cycle we've all become too familiar with in recent decades. We began to understand we were brought to Iowa not only because the 2016 Presidential Primaries loomed: We were brought here by the flood.

Two panels followed but what struck me and others was that all panelists were white. I commented on this on the summit's private Facebook page. (Social media activity was encouraged, even rewarded with t-shirts and caps.) Worse was the hue around the huge ballroom was pale. This was Iowa, but it was also 2015. There were 329 participants from 14 countries and about 2/3 of the states represented. At Table 39 we were four women, five men. A young gal from a Cedar Rapids youth group, flitted frequently from our table to find her swarm; she eventually left our disproportioned hive. That left Mamalynn, Geert and me as the female worker bees of Table 39.

Mamalynn is a community activist from Des Moines.



“The first climate,” she says, “is the climate between people.” She describes what she is trying to do as “mobile sustainable education.” She works across issues, but as an African-American her interest is in getting more people involved—and by people she means people of color or “ordinary people” as she calls them. Toward that end, she brought with her Evelyn who was assigned to another table but kept checking in on Table 39—especially on days 2 and 3 when, in an act of divine intervention the powers that be switched everything around and Table 39 got re-positioned at the very front of the ballroom giving us the

best seats in the house for what turned into the best days of the training. Evelyn is a deep green devil’s advocate, asking whether the push for solar and wind energy by the training’s presenters might be motivated by their own investments in those fields. This is a woman who says she’s been waiting since September for a “Farm Number” for her urban farm at which she’s hosted twenty refugee families from Nepal. She claims she’s

asked the gal at the USDA, “What needs to be done to get my Farm Number?”

And the gal has answered, “Oh, it just takes a few moments.”

“Then why can’t I get my Farm Number, I’ve been waiting since September?” She believes

the delay is because once she has her Farm Number she is eligible for grants and by not giving her a Farm Number they are de facto excluding her from the grants process. She’s right, of course.

Geert lives in Fairfield, Iowa but only recently moved there having lived fourteen years in California with her husband. They are both from New Delhi, India. She’s a software technologist who works remotely from her virtual home office with colleagues in China, France, Poland, Canada and the U.S. Her husband has installed solar panels on over 500 homes representing over 3.6 megawatts of solar energy (that’s a lot, she points out). In California, he converted a Hummer to run on used restaurant vegetable oil and tried to convert another car to electric. She’s the one with the stable job to support

his experiments. They moved to Iowa to try to live a more sustainable life and grow an organic garden. Two weeks ago she watched *An Inconvenient Truth* and Googled Al Gore; he had an invitation to apply to the Cedar Rapids training on his website, and here she is—without her husband.

So from our front row seats, Table 39 got to take in the extraordinary Day 2 of the Climate Reality training: A 9-5 analysis by Al Gore of his ever-continuously-updated slide-deck presentation on climate crises and the science of climate change reality. This former United States Vice President is personally training a volunteer corps of Climate Leaders, people to present highly-personalized (because they’ve learned and value the power of storytelling) versions his very own slide shows—mini-versions of the Keynote (Apple’s version of Power Point; Gore proudly sits on Apple’s board and was sporting his brand new Apple Watch) presentation documented in the multiple Academy Award winning documentary and Grammy Award winning audio book of his book of the same name, *An Inconvenient Truth*. The “inconvenient truth” is “the truth about the climate crisis...[it] means we are going to have to change the way we live our lives.”

Each of us had a binder containing the slide deck images and all of us post-training will have access to the spanking-new Reality Hub, a centralized online network for alumni of the 28 Climate Reality Leadership Corps trainings, now nearly 7000 strong. The Reality Hub has ready-to-download slide sets straight from Al Gore’s laptop, and Gore pledged—with apologies to his staff—to upload weekly 20-minute slide sets with the most current climate images available. The man deserves that Nobel Prize.

Gore’s daylong dissection of his slide presentation was divided into three sections; Table 39 crafted questions at each interval as instructed. Table questions were curated by Climate Reality staff for Gore’s consideration. The final question Table 39 submitted was not selected; it read: “You mentioned the Civil Rights, LGBT and Feminist Movements as examples of positive social change. How can we better include these groups to form a more diverse and inclusive Climate Reality Project?”

In my mind, main criticisms one could have of the training (they served the healthiest vegetarian-only food, everything else was recycled/recyclable and green, no complaints there) are 1) the Climate Reality Project is truly a top-down autocracy leaving little room for any voice other than Al Gore’s—though his is mighty and fine and his images constitute a global cry; and 2) when there is trickle down and others are given voice—at least in Cedar Rapids—people of color were not among the presenters. Much pride was given to youth among the participants and the event closed with a little girl named Rehia from Lahore, Pakistan, reciting endearingly in her lilting English Sarah Weeks’ poem, *Let it Spin*, about the humble bumblebee before Gore left us with our last challenge to go out and do our (his) work.

The next Climate Reality Leadership Corps training [[www.climate reality training.org/florida/](http://www.climate reality training.org/florida/)] takes place in Miami, Sept. 28-30. I’m pretty confident it will be more culturally diverse than the Cedar Rapids session was. Go if you can. Swarm!

*Bio: Penny Boyer has been an author, activist and actor. She has queerated a number of exhibitions for the Esperanza and is Special Projects Coordinator for Land Heritage Institute. [penelope@penelopeboyer.com](mailto:penelope@penelopeboyer.com)*

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Top Left: Penny; Right: Geert & Mamalynn; Bottom Left: Penny & Al Gore