We Have Our 1st Sustainability Director! Meet Eera Babtiwale Episode 124

00:00:00 **Eera**

What I really gained insight about is the fact that sustainability isn't about buildings, it's really about people. It's about being able to inform and educate and empower people to help change their mindset if it needs to be changed, so that it is more informed by sustainability. It's to help change behaviors and change old habits so that we can actually have a culture that is sustainable.

00:00:26 **Christina**

Hi, I'm Christina Barsi.

00:00:31 **Sun**

And I'm Sun Ezzell. And you're listening to the Magic Mountie Podcast.

00:00:35 **Christina**

Our mission is to find ways to keep your ear to the ground, so to speak - by bringing to you the activities and events you may not have time to attend, the resources on campus you might want to know more about, the interesting things your colleagues are creating, and the many ways we can continue to better help and guide our students.

00:00:52 **Sun**

We bring to you the voices of Mt. SAC, from the classroom to completion.

00:00:55 **Speaker 1**

And I know I'm going to achieve my goals, and I know people here are going to help me to do it.

00:00:59 **Speaker 2**

She is a sociology major, and she's transferring to Cal Poly, Pamona! Psychology major, English major ...

00:01:07 **Sun**

From transforming part-time into full-time.

00:01:08 **Speaker 1**

I really liked the time that we spent with Julie about how to write a CV and a cover letter.

00:01:15 **Christina**

Or just finding time to soak in the campus.

00:01:19 **Speaker 1**

To think of the natural environment around us as a library.

00:01:22 **Christina**

We want to keep you informed and connected to all things Mt. SAC. But most importantly, we want to keep you connected with each other. I'm Christina Barsi, Mt. SAC alumni, and producer of this podcast.

00:01:33 **Sun**

And I'm Sun Ezzell, Learning Assistance Faculty and Professional Learning Academy Coordinator.

00:01:38 **Christina**

And this is the Magic Mountie Podcast.

00:01:39 **Christina**

We are happy to announce that Mt. SAC has a brand new Sustainability Director, and we are so excited to share this conversation with you. Her name is Eara Baptivale . And one of the goals of the Climate Action Plan, which was approved back in 2018 was for the campus to create a position for, and hire a Sustainability Director.

00:02:02 **Christina**

And though it has taken until now to accomplish this goal, we are so excited the moment has finally come. Tania Anders sits down with Eara to talk about her background, her goals, and so much more. Enjoy.

00:02:17 **Tania**

Welcome today's Magic Mountie Podcast. I am so very excited and honored to be able to introduce to you today, our campus's first Sustainability Director, Eera Baptivale. My name is Tania Anders, your host of this mini-series and our campus's sustainability coordinator.

00:02:34 **Tania**

For a very dedicated and committed group on our campus who has been supporting and pushing sustainability issues at Mt. SAC, this is indeed a big moment. Eara, we are delighted that you are joining the Mt. SAC family in the role of our first Sustainability Director.

00:02:52 **Eera**

So excited to be here. Thank you so much, Tania. I'm really looking forward to our conversation.

00:02:58 **Tania**

Thank you for being here and making some time. If you could please be so kind and share a little bit about yourself with our listeners, including your professional background.

00:03:08 **Eera**

Yeah, absolutely. Thank you for that question. So, I've been in the design profession for the last 18 years, specifically in the architectural industry. And my focus has always been sustainable design. I have my bachelor's from the College of Environmental Design at Berkeley, and my master's in architecture from UCLA, and my thesis was in sustainability.

00:03:33 **Eera**

Right after that, I started working as a designer, a sustainable designer. And for the last 18 years, I've been doing that with a focus in higher education. So, I've been working with Mt. SAC as a matter of fact, for a number of years, over a decade, working on different sustainable design projects and with facilities, and also on the Climate Action Plan, working directly with the CCIC as it was then called, to help craft a path towards carbon neutrality.

00:04:06 **Eera**

So, I've been able to over the last 18 years, really see so many different facets when it comes to sustainability, whether it's in terms of a design of a building and making it the most sustainable building it could possibly be, different constituent groups, different organizations on campuses, such as Mt. SAC's campus to craft plans that will help the organization or the community college in this case, see a path towards a more sustainable future.

00:04:36 **Eera**

So, it's been a really a wonderful career thus far, and I'm really excited to see how I can hopefully bring that expertise to some use here at Mt. SAC.

00:04:49 **Tania**

Thank you so much. So, I'm curious, what got you interested in sustainability? What started your journey?

00:04:57 **Eera**

Well, I mean, it's such a personal question too, because for me, and I think it's so individual for everybody; for me, it's quite personal because I would say it's really been part of my DNA ever since I can remember, really. My own parents came here in 1968, first-gen, with $50 to their name and sort of just made their way and raised my brother and I.

00:05:26 **Eera**

Like so many first-gen immigrants do, were working multiple jobs and working so hard and using resources that they had to their maximum, and really optimizing whatever they had; whether that meant using all the food that we had available to us in the refrigerator, or whether that meant making sure that we turned off all the lights, whether that meant reusing whatever packaging we had - it was all sort of just really ingrained in me from the get-go in my upbringing.

00:05:57 **Eera**

I was really fortunate too, to be able to travel back to India quite often throughout my childhood. And that I think really informed me as well more to the fact that sustainability isn't just about energy efficiency and water efficiency, and waste prevention. It's really about ensuring that everyone has access to a sustainable future.

00:06:19 **Eera**

And I think that it's really evident that as it stands now, it just isn't. Like the dichotomy that you see, for example, in countries all around the globe, but certainly in places like India, the dichotomy that you see between the haves and have nots is so profound and so blatant.

00:06:37 **Eera**

Throughout my visits there, that never sat well with me. I always felt like it just wasn't okay that families that had money basically, or had the means to a better life, also had clean water, clean air, and access to food while families in the masses simply did not have the same "luxuries." And so, that really informed me.

00:07:03 **Eera**

And that I think has been a perspective that has been very valuable to me, not just as a designer, but also just as a human being. And that's something that I hope again, to, you know share in everything that I do at Mt. SAC.

00:07:18 **Tania**

You know, it's interesting that you say that with your travels because I'm from Germany originally. And so, I also go back regularly and take my children. And in Germany, because everybody lives much closer together than in many regions of the United States, I would say overall, they are definitely also much more conscious about producing waste for example.

00:07:40 **Tania**

And I grew up also with my dad always saying, "Turn the lights off." He was born 1943, or two years before World War II. And then he was born of eight children. So, he grew up stealing potatoes off the fields after the war. And so, that generation in Europe really had it in them, also, everything needs to be used. And so, that's how he certainly raised me also.

00:08:06 **Tania**

So, it's interesting to just hear that over and over again, how we are informed by our parents really, and who we become, and seeing different countries definitely also always helps. I tell my students all the time, please travel as much as you can. As you get to know more about the world, you understand different cultures better, and you become much more understanding of other people and accepting of other people.

00:08:30 **Tania**

So, I'm so excited that you're bringing that to our campus also, your personal background. So, as far as Mt. SAC goes, how do you see your role as Sustainability Director then at Mt. SAC and what are you most excited about to bring to our campus?

00:08:48 **Eera**

Oh my gosh, I am so excited in general, just to be a part of such a vibrant community that gets sustainability, I think at its core. And I hope to really empower anybody who is interested in being part of a sustainable solution. And what that means to me, is beyond building design. Certainly looking at our facilities and our campus as a whole is important, ensuring that we're using less fossil fuels or depending less on fossil fuels, is certainly important.

00:09:18 **Eera**

I think what's also really important and really exciting is being able to empower students, faculty, administrators, and the community at large, to become environmental stewards and giving them the skills and the tools and the knowledge, the education, the resources that they need in order to really take on that role with some fortitude. I think that that is perhaps the most exciting piece.

00:09:44 **Eera**

You know, as I mentioned, I've been in the design profession in the architectural industry for 18 years, and it's been very rewarding, designing beautiful sustainable buildings.

00:09:55 **Eera**

What I have also learned is that sustainable design isn't limited to buildings. I think sustainable design is something that could be part of lifestyle. And I think using that design thinking can really help us get to a more sustainable future because it means you have to be able to understand multiple perspectives, multiple concerns, and then design and craft a plan that helps address all of those concerns so that you can get to a more sustainable future.

00:10:28 **Eera**

So, to that end, I hope to look at working with faculty, and look at curriculum, working with you, for example, to see how we can help again, empower students and faculty in terms of the curriculum; working with the administration to understand what we're doing on our campuses and within our facilities and what types of resources we're using.

00:10:49 **Eera**

Working with the Energy Manager to help understand where we stand today in terms of fossil fuel consumption and how we can ramp down over the next 20 years so that we can reach carbon neutrality. Working with students to help them understand what the campus is doing and allowing them to become the voices to the community so that they can share all of the good work that's being done.

00:11:15 **Eera**

I think all of these things are so crucial. And I think what's, I guess, again, the most exciting is the people aspect of this. I have really been very fortunate to meet so many different people over the last couple of decades and helping them bring their ideas to fruition into a physical building. You know, their ideas sort of manifest into this tangible thing.

00:11:39 **Eera**

But what I really, I guess, gained insight about is the fact that sustainability isn't about buildings. It's really about people. It's about being able to inform and educate and empower people to help change their mindset if it needs to be changed, so that it is more informed by sustainability. It's to help change behaviors and change old habits so that we can actually have a culture that is sustainable, not simply just a built environment that is sustainable. It's really all about the people and it's the people that excite me.

00:12:16 **Tania**

We're really excited that you're going to bring all that energy to our campus. And I really also appreciate you sharing. And I think it's come out in a couple of our episodes of this mini-series on sustainability. Initially, people, when they hear the word "sustainability" often just think about the environment and climate change, and greenhouse gases. And maybe they'll go as far as thinking about the LEED-certified buildings.

00:12:39 **Tania**

But you're absolutely right, it's a lifestyle, right? And so, there's so much that we can do and that will certainly be accelerated now that you're also going to join our team. You mentioned earlier the Climate Action Plan, which we also have an episode of the Magic Mountie Podcast on the two of the authors of the Climate Action Plan. And so, I refer our listeners to that one as well.

00:13:07 **Tania**

The Climate Action Plan includes a description of the position that you're embarking on here for us. The goal was to get a Sustainability Director already, I think two years ago. So, it's been a long time in the making. And so, part of the job description includes that you're going to be revising the Climate Action Plan every five years, that you're going to take charge of the greenhouse gas inventory and supervise some student internships, which we just gotten some off the ground.

00:13:38 **Tania**

And so, hopefully, we can hand over the torch, a well-oiled machine here to you already. Also, in general, just to help increase the visibility of sustainability on our campus. And I'm excited about that. It needs to be something visible, right? Like a sustainability center or something like that.

00:13:57 **Tania**

So, I'm curious, how are you planning on addressing some of these topics, and which groups on campus ... you kind of already mentioned a few that you're planning on working with. So, maybe you can share a little bit on your ideas there.

00:14:10 **Eera**

Absolutely. Yeah, I mean, the Climate Action Plan is such a wonderful document and the people behind it are even more wonderful, I would say, because they are so passionate and so skilled. And so, having all of their insight has been so wonderful.

00:14:25 **Eera**

I think as all of them have also shared the plan was the first step - implementation is like, is the real test. And so, getting down into all the details of the Climate Action Plan and then begin to prioritize what items have to be addressed first is going to be absolutely key.

00:14:45 **Eera**

Over the last two years, so many things have changed including an entirely new administration with a very strong focus in environmentalism. So, I think a lot of funding sources are also going to become available. And so, aligning the Climate Action Plan, perhaps, and maybe shifting and reprioritizing some of the focus is going to be key in order to make sure that we can optimize some of that funding.

00:15:09 **Eera**

For example, whether it's infrastructure projects, or whether that's education or what have you, I think there's going to be a sort of a little bit of adjustment required there.

00:15:20 **Eera**

As far as what I aspire to do in the first let's say, year, is really to figure out again, what those priorities are. In order to do that, I think within the first 60 days, I think what we'll will need to happen is sort of a visioning exercise where we backcast, find out where we want to be by year one.

00:15:42 **Eera**

And then identify what milestones we have to hit working backwards in order to get there. And using the Climate Action Plan as a backwards roadmap, if you will, to help guide that discussion is going to be important. And who I'd like to bring to the table is really so many different stakeholders.

00:15:59 **Eera**

Students from the Eagle Club, for example, representatives from Student Senate and Academic Senate, certainly members from the Climate Action Implementation and Environmental Justice Committee is going to be really key.

00:16:14 **Eera**

And I'd like to note that I'm so honored to be even part of a campus that understands that climate action is integrally tied to environmental justice. And I really applaud Mt. SAC for making that momentous move, because it speaks volumes about your commitment to climate action, and to understanding that at the intersection of the pandemic, of the climate change crisis, of really any crisis - is always sort of the same populations of people; the disadvantaged, the disenfranchised, and they're the people that we really need to empower. And I think, again, that at Mt. SAC, we have this wonderful opportunity.

00:16:57 **Eera**

So, I think bringing them, representatives from those groups is going to be crucial because we need to make sure that their voices are heard.

00:17:08 **Tania**

Yeah, I completely agree. And you know, it's interesting how COVID has brought so much sadness and devastation, but I always try to be an optimist, and see also the positive or the opportunities to think about certain things.

00:17:26 **Tania**

For example, understanding the connection between environment and health and social status and who is impacted the most, COVID has made that so clear and so easy to understand. I think that people are hopefully understanding much better now that sustainability goes way beyond just the environmental aspect. It's really been eye-opening for a lot of people.

00:17:53 **Eera**

It really is. I mean, I completely agree. I think that this pandemic in a lot of ways has been a moment of pause and introspection, where you really have, like you said, an opportunity to question what are we doing professionally or academically, or personally? And what can we do to enhance a positive impact that we're having in the world, in our society, in our local communities, in our families?

00:18:22 **Eera**

I think it's been in a lot of ways, like you said, a silver lining would be, that we've had this time to sort of, to think over these things. And I know that's certainly what I've done. It's made it very clear to me what I wanted to be able to contribute. And it's really about, again, cultivating this culture around sustainability with sustainability at its core, and helping not just our generation make it through, but the generation of students that is currently at Mt. SAC, for example.

00:18:57 **Eera**

I hear so often that we have to leave a legacy that we can be proud of for the next generation. The thing is that that next generation, it's not my 10-year-old or 13-year-old, or even my two-year-old - that next generation is the generation right now in schools at community colleges. They're the ones that are going to feel that initial brent. They're the ones that are feeling it right now.

00:19:24 **Eera**

And they're also the ones that we have to empower because they are going to be the change-makers, the solution makers. And I think that again is another opportunity. And I would say that this pandemic in a lot of ways is really indicative of what could happen if we don't respond with more strength, with more fortitude, when it comes to climate change. Climate change is a much slower-moving animal.

00:19:51 **Eera**

It's not as I guess, abrupt in a lot of ways. As the pandemic, it hasn't made us do a full stop, but if we don't set up ourselves so that we can be proactive and have a set of solutions ready so that when the next climate change event occurs, whether that's a weather-related event or whether that's a food shortage or what have you, we'll be better prepared.

00:20:15 **Eera**

I think that we have the resources and the skillsets, and we have the critical mass to make those changes, but we have to have everything set in place now in order to prevent catastrophic changes from happening.

00:20:34 **Tania**

And I like what you brought up about the current student generation, because I completely agree with you. They're the ones who are feeling the impact right now, and they're going to be the change-makers. And I've been an educator for over 20 years now also, and I've definitely noticed that shift in students.

00:20:56 **Tania**

They're actually, often now, they're starting to get angry, almost. Like they're realizing, man, this is what has happened to our planet now and we're paying the price for it. And it's hopefully a healthy kind of anger, right? Like we really want to make some changes now. We really want to make this a better place again. And so, it makes me very, very hopeful.

00:21:22 **Tania**

When I first started teaching, and I teach geosciences, so, I teach about oil and gas and all of those things too. And climate change, of course, a big topic in my courses. And 20 years ago, students were definitely not as aware of the changes. They are so much more visible now. I mean, every year, new records and more storms, and here in California, more wildfires. So, the momentum is definitely there, for sure.

00:21:52 **Eera**

And that's like, I would almost say, as you mentioned, it's almost nice to hear in some ways, because you're right, I think we can actually harness that energy and maybe use it for a positive impact, empower them to use that so that they can make a positive change.

00:22:10 **Eera**

The last thing that any of us want is an apathetic culture where we just sit back and watch this happen. So, I think we owe it to them to empower them with the resources that they need so that they can succeed. And I think helping all of us understand really that from whatever position we're in, whatever we're doing in life, we all have the ability to become stewards of the environment.

00:22:39 **Eera**

To the degree at which that happens might vary, but all of us have a role. And I think that's an amazing thing. If we can take the masses and sort of make that part of everyone's ethos, we have the ability to make that positive change.

00:22:55 **Tania**

You know, you said it so, so nicely. I almost feel like that's like a beautiful closing remark already. But I wanted to ask you one more question. You mentioned earlier that you've been working with us here at Mt. SAC for a while now. So, of course, it's wonderful that you're coming in really, hitting the ground running.

00:23:17 **Tania**

And you mentioned also that you want to use your first probably two months or so here to just kind of get an overview and identify some areas. But I'm just wondering if you already have something in mind, like some areas where you're like, "Yeah, this is an opportunity, I want to grow this already. This is what I really want to focus on in the beginning."

00:23:40 **Eera**

Yeah, Yeah. I mean, so many ideas come to mind. I certainly don't want to be a silo because I want to make sure that these ideas are sort of shared and embedded and maybe even are able to be better informed by all the groups on campus that we have the opportunity to speak to.

00:23:56 **Eera**

But you know, some ideas that come to mind right away are looking at where we stand today. So, we're doing the greenhouse gas inventory right now, and we'll get a better sense of how we're doing. I think it would be interesting to look at how we can plan to become a net-neutral campus. And looking at electricity use is one thing, looking at our natural gas is another.

00:24:18 **Eera**

And maybe even crafting a vision toward becoming a campus that doesn't use any on-site gas combustion. I know that's a really tall order, but I think having a vision in place would be amazing. Again, setting the foundation for that to become a reality at some point in the future.

00:24:37 **Eera**

So, many cities are beginning to do this. California has a carbon-neutral plan that begins to set this into motion and perhaps, will make this a lot more viable for so many community colleges up and down the State. So, I think that's something that we can begin to discuss.

00:24:53 **Eera**

I think that there's also, again, to the point that we were talking about before, about empowering students - I think that green tech is going to become such an important piece of so many futures when we're talking about careers.

00:25:07 **Eera**

And so, looking at how we can partner with different nonprofits, looking how we can partner across industries, with tech, for example, to see how we can become incubators or different startups, or different ideas to begin to bloom here on campus, I think will be a wonderful resource for not just our students, not just the community, but really globally. If Mt. SAC could become sort of that go-to for sustainable innovation, I think that would be an amazing feat.

00:25:33 **Eera**

And I think that as well, working with the local community to make sure that we are the best partners that we can possibly be. So, that regionally, we are all on the same page about what sustainability means to us here in the city of Walnut. And then also, to the different populations that we serve beyond Walnut, right? Looking at all the different reaches that Mt. SAC has.

00:26:00 **Eera**

I think that really having a big focus on environmental justice is going to be so, so important as well. And I think looking at how Mt. SAC can become a resource again, for all those populations that are most impacted by climate change is going to be just a big piece of what I do.

00:26:21 **Tania**

Well, I can just say it again, we are so, so excited, thrilled that you are joining our team. And I thank you for taking the time to do this interview with me. Do you have anything else that you would still like to share with us before we close our conversation?

00:26:43 **Eera**

I mean, only that I as well, I'm so excited to become a part of the Mt. SAC community and in a more integral way, I have been for so many years. But now, I think just to be able to step into a community that that gets it, that has so much momentum and so much, so much wonderful groups, so many wonderful groups on campus. I think it's going to be just inspiring and I think it'll be just enlightening as well for me. So, I'm just really excited and I look forward to starting this journey together.

00:27:16 **Tania**

Thank you so much for your time, Eera, and we will be looking forward to seeing you around our campus.

00:27:22 **Eera**

Thank you, Tania. It's been really fun. Thanks.

00:27:27 **Christina**

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00:27:42 **Christina**

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