CHEMICAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION

POUNÉ SABERI

Imagining Philadelphia's Energy Futures

Transcript of a Research Interview
Conducted by

Roger Eardley-Pryor

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

on

14 July 2017

(With Subsequent Corrections and Additions)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This oral history is one in a series initiated by the Chemical Heritage Foundation in partnership with PennFuture, PennEnvironment, the Energy Coordinating Agency, Citizens Climate Lobby, and Planet Philadelphia on G-Town Radio. The series, titled "Imagining Philadelphia's Energy Futures," documents the personal perspectives of Philadelphia citizens interested in impacts on their city from energy use and climate change. The series records individual histories and then asks participants to imagine the future of Philadelphia, particularly with regard to energy production and use.

The "Imagining Philadelphia's Energy Futures" project is made possible, in part, through funding from Philadelphia's Climate and Urban Systems Partnership.

http://www.cuspproject.org/

Climate & Urban Systems Partnership

THE CHEMICAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION
Center for Oral History
Release Form for Research Interview

Title of the Research Study: "Imagining Philadelphia's Energy Futures"
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INTERVIEWEE

Pouné Saberi was born in Tehran, Iran, and experienced the 1979 Iranian Revolution as a child. Her family left Iran in the mid-1980s during its war with Iraq and settled briefly in Boston. Pouné's parents and younger sister returned to Iran in 1989, but Pouné stayed to graduate from Commonwealth High School and attend the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. In 1999, she earned her Medical Doctorate and a Master's degree in Public Health from Tufts University School of Medicine, where she helped found Sharewood, a free medical clinic. Pouné then moved to Philadelphia where, in 2002, she completed her residency in Family Medicine and Community Health at the Hospital of University of Pennsylvania. Pouné later became the primary care provider at a federally qualified healthcare facility at Sayer High School in West Philadelphia. In 2012, after increased concern about environmental toxins, she completed a second residency in Occupational and Environmental Medicine. Pouné now works in Philadelphia as an occupational medicine doctor and serves on the national and Philadelphia board of Physicians for Social Responsibility, with whom she works on projects related to health and natural gas development in the Marcellus Shale regions of Pennsylvania.

INTERVIEWER

Roger Eardley-Pryor is a historian of contemporary science, technology, and the environment. His work explores ways that twentieth and twenty-first-century scientists and engineers, culture-makers, and political actors have imagined, confronted, or cohered with nature at various scales, from the atomic to the planetary. Before earning his Ph.D. in 2014 from the University of California Santa Barbara (UCSB), Roger was a National Science Foundation graduate fellow at UCSB's Center for Nanotechnology in Society. After earning his Ph.D., Roger taught courses at Portland State University, at Linfield College in Oregon, and at Washington State University in Vancouver, Washington. In Philadelphia, Roger accepted a postdoctoral research fellowship in the Center for Oral History at the Chemical Heritage Foundation (CHF). Roger co-designed, earned funding for, and managed this place-based oral history project titled "Imagining Philadelphia's Energy Futures."

PROJECT

"Imagining Philadelphia's Energy Futures" is an oral history and public education project about energy, climate change, and the future of Philadelphia. The project uses a narrative approach that encourages deliberation, storytelling, and creativity. It asks the following questions: As climate change reconditions our lives, city, and planet, how do Philadelphia citizens imagine using and producing energy in the year 2067, or 2140, or 2312? And how might the personal histories of these citizens shape the ways they imagine Philadelphia's energy futures?

The project consists of oral history interviews with a small but diverse set of Philadelphia citizens. The oral history interviewees were selected in collaboration with the project's partners: the Chemical Heritage Foundation, PennFuture, PennEnvironment, Energy Coordinating Agency, Citizens Climate Lobby, and Planet Philadelphia on G-Town Radio. The majority of each oral history interview records a participant's personal history. Next, interviewees share their visions of energy use and production in Philadelphia by imagining three time periods in the future. The future time periods are the year 2067, fifty years from the present; the year 2140, nearly one hundred twenty five years from the present; and the year 2312, nearly three hundred years from the present.[1] Content from the oral history interviews then serve as the basis for further storytelling, future visioning, and deliberation in a public educational workshop held at the Chemical Heritage Foundation in October 2017.

"Imagining Philadelphia's Energy Futures" is based on the idea that discussing visions of the future can help individuals and groups construct and articulate meaningful stories about the current challenges they confront, identify potential solutions to those challenges, and reflect on how these might influence themselves and their community as a whole. Research on ways to enhance societal capacity for governing complex energy transitions reveals that narrative and storytelling helps facilitate improved engagement and decision-making among mixed groups. Stories and narratives enable the incorporation of contributions from different groups of people to build collective frames of reference. In light of our need to transition to renewable energy sources, narratives offer communication strategies and practices that can help promote broader engagement and participation in energy choices, more diverse kinds of policy information and input, and greater capacity to imagine and invent new energy futures.[2]

Imagining and discussing Philadelphia's energy futures allows city residents to imagine—and inhabit, in their minds—multiple, alternative visions of the future that may result from choices made today. Energy plays a powerful role in any city's techno-economic systems, yet energy use and production is also inseparable from a city's social systems and environmental relationships. When Philadelphians imagine renewable and distributed ways of using and producing sustainable energy in the future, they are not just imagining new techno-economic systems. They are also re-imagining the ways social relations and political power works in their lives. And they are re-imagining interrelationships to our local, regional, and global environments.

"Imagining Philadelphia's Energy Futures" was funded, in part, by Philadelphia's Climate and Urban Systems Partnership (CUSP). The CUSP approach to climate change education emphasizes local, relevant, and solutions-focused methodologies. The oral history interviews and public education workshop for "Imagining Philadelphia's Energy Futures" takes place in Philadelphia with local Philadelphians. The project is relevant in wake of the recent failures by Philadelphia's energy industry and the city's environmental activists to find any

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[1] The years 2140 and 2312 were selected to complement Kim Stanley Robinson's science fiction novels. See Kim Stanley Robinson, *New York 2140* (New York: Orbit, 2017); and Kim Stanley Robinson, *2312* (New York: Orbit, 2013).

[2] Clark A. Miller, Jason O'Leary, Elizabeth Graffy, Ellen B. Stechel, Gary Dirks, "Narrative Futures and the Governance of Energy Transitions," *Futures* 70 (2015): 65-74; Rob VanWynsberghe, Janet Moore, James Tansey, and Jeff Carmichael "Towards Community Engagement*:* Six Steps to Expert Learning for Future Scenario Development," *Futures* 35 (2003): 203-219; Jana-Axinja Paschen and Ray Ison, "Narrative Research in Climate Change Adaptation: Exploring a Complementary Paradigm for Research and Governance," *Research Policy* 43:6 (2014): 1083-1092.

compromise on a vision and framework for Philadelphia's energy future.[3] Collaboration to achieve Philadelphia's systemic energy transition to renewable sources must be broad-based and inclusive. This project seeks to produce and re-produce, on a small and manageable scale, efforts to build a shared vision of that renewable energy future, from the bottom up, with local Philadelphians. "Imagining Philadelphia's Energy Futures" is solutions-focused in that formulating and sharing visions of the future can help individuals and groups make meaning of contemporary challenges they confront; it can help determine possible solutions to those challenges; and it can help individuals and groups consider ways that certain solutions might impact their lives and their community as a whole.

[3] Katie Colaneri, "Philadelphia Fails to Find Common Ground on 'Energy Hub,'" *StateImpact Pennsylvania*, March 11, 2016: https://stateimpact.npr.org/pennsylvania/2016/03/11/philadelphia-fails-to-find-common-ground-on-energy-hub/. See also the minutes of the meeting of the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission Board Committee from January 28, 2016, http://www.dvrpc.org/Committees/Board/2016-01.pdf, accessed February 25, 2017; "Philadelphia Energy Vision Working Group," *Raab Associates, Ltd.*, last updated January 13, 2016, http://www.raabassociates.org/main/projects.asp?proj=134&state=Services (accessed February 25, 2017).

INTERVIEWEE: **Pouné Saberi**

INTERVIEWER: **Roger Eardley-Pryor**

LOCATION: **Philadelphia, Pennsylvania**

DATE: **14 July 2017**

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Okay. This is Roger Eardley-Pryor at the Chemical Heritage Foundation. Today is July 14. It's a Friday in 2017 and we are conducting an oral history/oral future interview with Pouné Saberi—Dr. Pouné Saberi. So, to get started, would you mind spelling your name for us?

SABERI: I spell it P-O-U-N-É and then there's an accent that goes on the E, so that's Pouné. And then, my last name, S-A-B-E-R-I.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Great. And where were you born?

SABERI: I was born in Tehran, Iran.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Fantastic. When were you born?

SABERI: When? I have to tell you the year?

EARDLEY-PRYOR: You don't have to! You can decide what you want to say and what you don't.

SABERI: So, I was born during the time of the Shah and my childhood was during the [Iranian] Revolution.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Wow. So, can you tell me about what your family and mother and father, what were they doing in Iran around then?

SABERI: My mother was a teacher. She taught Persian literature. My father worked for the Central Bank of Iran.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: What were their names?

SABERI: Shireen is my mother's name and my dad's name was Massoud.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Beautiful. What kind of work were they doing there when you arrived, again? Your mother was teaching literature?

SABERI: Yeah, that was her job.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: And your father, again?

SABERI: He was an accountant. He worked for the Central Bank.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Oh, right on. Very cool. Do you have siblings?

SABERI: I do. I have a younger sister. She does research on HIV, and she lives in San Francisco right now.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Wow. She's also a doctor?

SABERI: She actually trained in pharmacy. She trained as a pharmacist, but then really her career took on a different path and started doing research on HIV medications.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: What were some of your early childhood memories?

SABERI: So, yes, as I said, a big part of my childhood is very much intertwined with this kind of political upheaval and the revolution of 1979. So, a lot of my memories are around that.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Would you mind sharing some?

SABERI: Yeah. So, let's see. I had—so what happened was the year that I started first grade was the year that the revolution happened. And so then, starting second grade, we had to go to school—like in first grade, we don't have to cover our hair. But then second grade, we had to cover our hair, because by then was the Islamic Republic.

And then, there were a lot of kind of demonstrations and a lot of chanting and gathering at nights. You know, with grown-ups and guns and --

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Do you remember seeing those things?

SABERI: Seeing what?

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Seeing these kind of rallies and these sort of movies at night?

SABERI: Oh, yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Oh, I mean there was—my parents participated. They were pretty active. I mean, speaking about things that change your future, this whole idea of this egalitarian type of—in the sense of we're all equal, and there's no difference in classes, and that type of thing. So, yeah. They would go off, and I'd stay back with my grandmother. She wasn't like a very daring person, so she'd stay back and she'd be praying on her rosary beads. And I was little, and I'd stay back.

But then, yeah. So it was a very—I mean there [were] a lot of active discussions and arguments and political kind of debates and——but also, it was also kind of people who I knew who disappeared.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Really?

SABERI: People who were political and they were no longer—because they were jailed and hung and—

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Are these kind of things you heard your parents talk about?

SABERI: So, yeah. So then, I would wonder, "Well, where are they?" But then, you kind of **<T: 05 min>** would listen in on the grown-up conversations. They may think you're not listening, but you're listening. And then, you'd know what happened. And you'd be like,

"Yeah." And so, it would be—I mean, thinking back as a kid, you don't question things. But thinking back, I'm like, "God, that was traumatic." [laughter]

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Did you have ideas about if that would happen to you or any of your family members?

SABERI: Yes, definitely. There's a memory I have where—so, my parents listened to a lot of the poets and the writers who were politically active. They had their cassettes, because that's what we had back then. We had cassettes. That's how old I am. And in school, somebody mentions one of the poets. Then I say, "Oh, we have that." And then, I came home and I was like, "Mom, in school they said—" And they start giving me this whole lesson about some kid who—essentially, what the kid ended up saying was ratting the parents out, and then they hauled the parents away. And I was like, "Oh, my God! I'm going to be the cause of my parents disappearing!" So it was very frightening. You grew afraid of what you said very fast. You just knew you had to keep your mouth shut and not say anything.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Did the revolution impact your parents' lives and their careers?

SABERI: Yeah.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: In what ways?

SABERI: They quickly, after the Islamic Republic became the law of the land, they realized that this is not what they fought for. And they were super disillusioned. They were really upset and angry about it. So my dad quit his job. He started his own carpentry shop. He just didn't want to work for the government. My mom kept teaching as well, but they kind of had like a sense of—I don't know. I guess a significant amount of dismay. It's like, "This is not what we lost our people that—our friends and families for."

And then, it was also a very restrictive time. You couldn't—like, let's say we'd go to a dinner gathering, and they'd take me with them. On the way back, the guard would stop the car and search you. You know, like if you'd been drinking alcohol or something. So it was also very frightening to move around. There was also a—what is it? Curfew, a military curfew. And so you'd be kind of the sleepy kid in the back, and then you hear the—you see the flashlights.

My mom's best friend, her mother was traveling, coming back. I guess she had used a newspaper, she'd stuffed it in her shoe. And while she was away, that newspaper had become outlawed. So when she came back, this was stuffed in her shoe. She was jailed two years for that.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Wow. This was your grand—

SABERI: This was my mother's friend's mother.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Oh, wow.

SABERI: So my best friend's grandmother.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: That's a scary time to be a little girl.

SABERI: Yeah, right. So, again, at the time, you just kind of go through life, right? What else—what other option do you have as a seven-year-old? But then, in retrospect, I'm like, "Wow. They really need to pay attention to children during the times of war and that kind of thing." Because, of course, it didn't let up, right?

Then it was the Iran and Iraq war. And that's when all the air raids, and the bombing, and getting woken up at night, and windows shaking, and running down into cellars—that's when it started. After that, my mom was like, "We're done. We're leaving." Her sisters had lived in the United States prior to that. But my mom loves her country, and my grandparents love their country, and my uncles. So, they never wanted to leave. But then after, she was like, "All right. We're done."

EARDLEY-PRYOR: So, what happened?

SABERI: So, we—my father—so we essentially got visas and then, we came here. My parents—and then we **<T: 10 min>** got green cards. And then—

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Where did you come in, when you came to the U.S.?

SABERI: Boston. That's where my family lived. Yeah, they all lived there. I had a couple of aunts and uncles who'd lived there for a long time, twenty years. I guess—yeah, at that time, it might have been like ten, fifteen years? I mean, they've lived there for—I don't—actually, you know what? I don't know how long. Whatever. There was a long time.

And then we got a green card. But my parents didn't like it here. They went back.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Oh, they did? When? When'd they leave?

SABERI: They went back in 1989.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Wow. So, only a few years, I mean—

SABERI: Yeah. They came here for a few years. They came here for five years, and they went back.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: What about you and your sister?

SABERI: So, my sister, because she was younger, she had to go back with them. She went back with them. I was in the last year of high school, entering college. And I had already gotten accepted. So I just went to college and then stayed with my aunts.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Oh, wow. What did you think about, when you were a little girl, moving to the US? What was life like in Boston for you?

SABERI: So, I was kind of like a tween then. Hmmm, I don't know. I wouldn't say I loved it. I would say that the thing that struck with me was the kind of in—so, I have a language for it now. I didn't have language for it back then. So there's kind of this depth of human interaction that I had experienced with my friends, this kind of deep friendship and—

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Your friends back in Iran?

SABERI: My friends back in Iran. And also between just humans in general—like my cousins in Iran, and my parents and their friends, and their neighbors and their communities. And then to come to the United States, I found everything was watered down. It was like a watered-down quality to that. It's kind of really superficial.

And I think part of that—it's interesting, because during the [election of current US President Donald] Trump thing, this whole collective trauma [laughter]—at least the blue states, maybe in parts of the red states—that people went through. It's really bad, but I think it really

connects people in such a deep way. I'm not saying we need trauma for a deep connection, but I do think it has something to do with that. Yeah, so I didn't love it. I didn't love it.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: But you decided to stay.

SABERI: I decided to stay because I hated the country it had become, Iran. I hate—I didn't hate the country. I just hated the political climate that it had become. I didn't want to cover my hair. I felt like it was a total infringement on my personal rights.

And I was also kind of like a—I don't know. In general, I'm—I would say, well, a little quirky. Like not really—well, I don't win popularity contests. Let's just say it like that. And so, I don't really—I like environments where I'm allowed to just kind of do my own thing, like be my own person. I just felt like it was a lot more of a restricted, scripted, strict—the strictness of it makes it more scripted. I mean—I'm actually wrong about that. I do think that in the United States, there's also a lot of scripted lifestyles.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: What do you mean when you say scripted? What does that mean?

SABERI: It means like, I guess the thing that most—the schema that most people associate—the script that most people associate with is, like a house in the suburbs and two and a half kids, like that type. That's kind of the closest thing I can come up with.

But you know, I'm wrong about Iran. It's not true that that script is imposed as strictly as I had envisioned. Because there's plenty of people who are doing their own thing there now. Part of my friends from there, they're movie directors, and they're play writers and actors, and that type of thing.

Like my best friend, she was accepted as a chemical engineer in **<T: 15 min>** college in the university. She went for one year and was like, "This isn't for me." So she enrolled in School of Drama, didn't tell her mom. And for the rest of her college career, every day she'd get up and go as if she's going—but she wasn't going to School of Engineering. She was going to School of Drama.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: That's great.

SABERI: So, I mean, she like, you know. So, I'm—

EARDLEY-PRYOR: And this was back in Iran.

SABERI: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. So, I'm—

EARDLEY-PRYOR: So, you maintained friendships with people there, too?

SABERI: Yes.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Was that something that you did—you carried with you when you came and just stayed in contact? Or did those develop later?

SABERI: No, I stayed in contact. I also, I had a lot of cousins. I have kind of a big family. And some of that is from there, and then some of it is kind of like—again, my family is like my mother, my mother and father, their children, who I might have maintained relationships and friendships with. But also, my own school friends. I was in touch with them a lot more back then than I am now. But still, I'm still in touch with them, see them when I go back. And—

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Was there a strong sense of community in Boston because of the family, for you?

SABERI: Well, you know, mainly for my mom. She's really close to her sisters. And two of her sisters live there. So if you let them, they'd be hanging out together all the time. Like, "What did you guys do today?" My mom's visiting and she's like in her sister's house right now in Boston. It's like, "What'd you guys do today?" They can't even tell me one thing that—and yet, they spend their whole day together. So there's that sense.

But then, again, like I said, I don't spend my time like that. I just find I spend my time—like there has to be a purpose to my day, and something like a list of things that I have to achieve, and I have my own list.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Where do you think that comes from for you?

SABERI: I think that part of it is that—I don't know. Maybe… There's kind of a saying that translates to something like "Time is gold," that time has more value than money. Also this kind of sense of like—I grapple with the question of how do we leave our mark on the world in general? And it's interesting, because my sister also, that's her existential question, too. So I feel like it must have something to do with it—but I don't know how.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Do you remember feeling that certain way maybe in junior high or high school, like "I really need to get out and do some things?" Or did it emerge at a certain time?

SABERI: I have to—I can't answer that right now. I'd have to—yeah.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: When your parents were in Boston, what kind of work did they find themselves doing here?

SABERI: Yeah, that was part of it. Their work wasn't really gratifying for them. My mother opened up her own daycare, but she's—she loves the children, but [before] she was doing a lot more high-level type of—and then, my dad was working with my uncle for a while. He was doing kind of like woodworking for a while. And he just didn't find that gratifying either. That was part of the reason why they went back.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: When they went back, did your father start working with the banks again?

SABERI: No. My—no, no. [laughter] My father—it's not funny. I'm just laughing, because it's uncomfortable to talk about. My father had a severe stroke, ended up becoming disabled, and then died. Yeah. It didn't end that well for him.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: And your mother chose to stay, despite her sisters being in Boston?

SABERI: Yeah, her parents were there, and she's very close to her parents. And the rest of her family was also there. She's also really close to her brother, and he was also there. And, again, she has—it's so—it's an interesting thing. **<T: 20 min>**

So I was listening to this interview, just happened to be listening to this interview on NPR about this other Iranian woman who's an author. And it really was like, when she was talking, it was like, "I could have said every single one of those sentences." And she wrote about her village that she grew up in Tehran—not in Tehran, in Iran—and her dad. It's a novel, I think she wrote. I forget the name.

What was interesting was that, number one, she used the word "a chameleon." She feels like a chameleon. And I was like, "That's exactly what I've called myself for the last, I don't know whatever, twenty-five years." And then she said somebody told her you either have roots

or wings, and you never can have both. And so, she felt like her father had the roots, and she had the—and it was like, "That's exactly right."

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Which do you feel like you have?

SABERI: The wings, definitely. I feel like, again, it becomes a little bit of a point of contention. It's like the world's my home. However this cookie crumbled, this is how it crumbled. I don't have that same sense of fierce loyalty to the land. I have fierce loyalty to Earth, but that is not defined for me by geopolitical boundaries. So—

EARDLEY-PRYOR: So when you were in high school, what were the kinds of classes and things that you were into? What were the things you enjoyed doing then?

SABERI: I would say, I was really good at math. That kind of came really easily to me. So they moved me up, and I ended up in this class with all these people who became physicists—I wasn't that good. So, I don't—it was like all of these theoretical, mathematical, hypothesis, theory-proving stuff.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: That seems like a pretty high-end high school.

SABERI: Yeah, it was a private high school. Yes. It was, it was. I went to really good school.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: What was the name of the school?

SABERI: Commonwealth.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: In Boston?

SABERI: In Boston, yeah. I also was really good at languages. So I took a lot of French and Italian. And I was really—that was cool. I enjoyed that a lot.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Did you grow up speaking Farsi at home?

SABERI: [Yes].

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Did you keep doing that in Boston?

SABERI: [Yes].

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Yeah? Yeah. I could see the languages, you having a space in your brain for that.

SABERI: Yeah. And I think that—maybe that's part of my kind of skill, like math and languages kind of go together. Those two things I'm good at. Let's see. What else?

Oh, it was kind of an interesting high school, because the thing that they taught you regardless was comparative literature. So, I also kind of became—it was good to really learn the *English* literature.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Do you remember some of the stories that you gravitated toward, that you really liked?

SABERI: In high school?

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Sure.

SABERI: Let me think. It was a lot of poetry. So, they did a lot of kind of like you need to do a lot of kind of poetry, like dissecting on that type of stuff. There was also Bible studies class, but it wasn't like a religious class. It was Bible as a work of—

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Literature.

SABERI: —literature. And that was really interesting, because we had to—I mean, I read the Bible, and I know passages from the Bible. But that was just as a piece of literature.

And let me think. I don't know. I have to think about that…

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Was religion something that was a part of your life growing up?

SABERI: [Laugher.] Yeah, my grandparents were very religious. They both were descendants of theologians, so yeah. So, they—like I had to learn how to pray. And then, of course, in school you had to read the Koran, and you had to take Arabic.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: After first grade, at least.

SABERI: After first grade, exactly. So, I'm agnostic-slash-atheist.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: I was going to say, when did—if that was part of early life and coming to the United States, different kind of context but still have the Iranian family there—when did you make a transition for the role of religion in your life?

SABERI: **<T: 25 min>** I don't know. I never thought about it. I always thought religion holds people back. I feel like it's like a brain—that it makes brains more dense. I have since come to not have that strong a view as I used to. I recognize that the—it's the health benefits of religions. Actually, they're fascinating to me. And also, like—

EARDLEY-PRYOR: What do you mean by that?

SABERI: Well, you know, like how people who belong to a larger community, a larger religious community, have less bad health outcomes. They have lower rates of certain things. And part of that has to do with the impact of community on a person, and the religion is providing a reason to be part of it. So it's not the religion, it's being part of a community. But that, in itself, is really interesting.

And then, there's also the adding a layer of spirituality that also has health benefits. I think maybe this has come as a result of [me] working with faith-based organizations that also work on climate. It's kind of like seeing maybe where religion can take you that's good. I don't know. Because, anyway, my experience was that anything that has to do with religion can be—can't be anything good. It's all bad. [laughter] It could lead to destruction. But I've maybe come to revise that a little bit.

My aunts write—one of my aunts, she's writing a book on the role of prayer in middle class communities in women in Iran. Like about how this combination of culture and literature and poetry and prayer is all part of this—just their kind of normal life. In a way, that's none of—they're not actively seeking to be literary people or religious people. It's just kind of part of

what they're comfortable with and they like. And it's a common language that they speak. Anyway, so that's—I don't know, I'm just using this as kind of examples of how I'm seeing it differently a little bit now.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Yeah. When you made the transition from high school to college, where did you go and why did you go there?

SABERI: I went there because—I went to U Mass Amherst [University of Massachusetts-Amherst]. And I went there because I was in a Massachusetts residence and that would be the cheapest college. I was accepted at Bryn Mawr, as well, but that was going to be a lot of money to take out and I—so, I went to U Mass Amherst. Yeah.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: What did you study there? What were you drawn to?

SABERI: Yeah. So, I start—I had these notions that I could become something, that I'm going to kind of sculpt myself out of. But I soon realized I didn't have the discipline for it. And also, there is kind of like this family, not lore, but this kind of family request that my grandmother always wanted a doctor in her family. So my aunt didn't—one of my aunts as supposed to do that, and she got her PhD, but it was in Anthropology. So I just was—I just realized that I didn't have kind of like the emotional energy to really do this thing that I wanted to do, which was kind of sculpt myself to become this thing that I wanted to be. So—

EARDLEY-PRYOR: What are—take me back. What does that mean?

SABERI: Yeah, I know, I know. What do I mean?

EARDLEY-PRYOR: When you were talking about sculpting yourself in college?

SABERI: So for example, <**T: 30 min**> you know how kids these days, they do these interdisciplinary things, and then they take gap years, and then they do projects. And what they are is not—you know, in the way, maybe, our job titles and occupations were very well-defined, like you're an engineer, or you're a lawyer, or you're a doctor. But now, it's like, "Yeah, you're an environmental historian." [laughter] It's like, "Wow. Okay. You have to explain that to me." So that's what I mean. I mean I wanted—

EARDLEY-PRYOR: So you had a sense that you wanted that?

SABERI: Right. So I had a sense that I kind of wanted—like I wanted to be maybe somebody who did some sort of international work, who traveled, and did whatever, I don't know. So I started studying political science. But then, I just realized that that wasn't going to work.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Why?

SABERI: Because I think that—just because I feel like people who do that are people who might—this is maybe an unfair thing—but it's people who don't have maybe other things to worry about.

They don't have parents who've now gone back to a politically charged country with this loaded history, and there's financial issues, and they're not taking the Greyhound bus to and forth to their aunt's house, and loading their stuff into a Hefty plastic bag. You know what I mean? It's like they don't have those things. When you do, you just feel like, "I can't."

So then, you just have to do something, not easy, but more discipline and kind of with tracks already in place on this end. You can't be like, "Oh, let me go and explore myself, take a—be on, like do volunteer work on this ship around the world." I don't know. So those—that's what I would have liked to have done, but I didn't. So, I was like, "Fine, I'll just do medicine."

EARDLEY-PRYOR: What were the tracks that you went on?

SABERI: Well, I just did it, because that's—because then, everybody was like, "Listen. You owe us." And this is the whole immigrant mentality, right? You always have a job. You need to always have a job wherever you go. They were right. They were—it's not that they were wrong. They were correct. When everybody else—gradually they lose it. You have a job as a doctor. They were correct about that.

And then, this whole thing about the immigrant parents. They kind of sacrificed themselves so their kids can do better. And then, what's the definition of better, right? It's being a doctor. That's the ultimate doing better.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Was some of this—the choice to be a doctor—in some ways to please these parents that had then left and returned to Iran? Kind of justifying why you were staying or what their time of investment was for you being here?

SABERI: I think it was—part of it was—I just felt like… my grandmother. She was like, if we're talking about roots to wings, I mean she was like roots personified. She'd be kind of like a big tree with a huge roots and trunk and stuff like that. And I just felt like the whole—the way the political events had turned out was like, again, that wasn't in her script of life, right? She would have thought all her kids would be around her and they wouldn't be dispersed like diaspora throughout the world. And I don't know. Maybe I just did it because I wanted to make her happy. I don't know. I mean I'm not saying that was the only reason, right? I'm saying it was easier for me, and it was like it was kind of—yeah, it had all of those qualities.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: I love—I love the idea that becoming a doctor was the easier choice. [laughter]

SABERI: Yeah, yeah.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: So, what were your interests in that? You ended up taking biology classes and taking chemistry classes and all of these sort of things in college, right?

SABERI: Yeah, right.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: With the goal of, "This is for me to get into med school."

SABERI: Yeah. I mean, right. So, this whole quote—this thing that you raised: "Is that easier?" I paid for that in medical school. Because I hated medical school.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Really?

SABERI: Hated it.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: But you were on the path.

SABERI: I mean, I just felt like I can't turn back now.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Why? What was it about medical school?

SABERI: Because I had taken all these loans, and it was like, "I can't do it. I just—whatever. I have to. Come hell or high water, I just have to do this."

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Get done with it. So, after U Mass Amherst, where did you go?

SABERI: Tufts. [Tufts University School of Medicine]

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Oh, so back in Boston. Awesome. And family is still there, so you have a sense of community. <**T: 35 min**> Tell me more about med school experiences. What was it like being back in Boston after going to college.

SABERI: I love Boston. Boston's beautiful. You can't complain about being in Boston. It was fine. It was—sometimes it's kind of tough to live with your family when you're in medical school, because essentially in medical school—I don't think people who are not in medical ever had a sense of what it's like in medical school. You understand when I tell you, "Don't talk to me. Don't call me. I can't do anything." It's like, "Nothing." I don't think people get that.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Because the work is so hard.

SABERI: Because the work is so hard and so time consuming and just—yeah, exactly. So part of that was a little hard. Overall, it was good.

I did a Master's in Public Health, which was part of my degree. So that was kind of—to do the public health part felt more gratifying to me just in terms of the work that I was doing.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Is that why you did it?

SABERI: Yeah, because even back then, I knew that it's—I guess like—what's the word? Just like you work for improvement of the world around you. And that's what public health does. You work to help people around you. And as a doctor, maybe you're helping one person. And as public health, it's populations. That's why I did it, yeah. Yeah.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: What kind of medicine were you drawn to in school?

SABERI: Yeah, so I did this, as part of my public health experience, I went around with someone who did home visits to—he would go and visit the homes of families with kids with asthma. And then what we were doing is we would check to make sure that their carbon monoxide monitor's working and their alarm smoke detectors are working. And just to look to see if there are things in the home of this person [that] would contribute to asthma, and that type of thing. And I totally loved that. We would go to warehouses. It was like, "I want to do this." And he said, "You know, you can be an occupational medicine doctor." And I was like, "What is that?" But I couldn't figure out how to do it. There was not a set path and—again, this whole thing about just the inertia of these paths that are not well defined. And I also explored some other things like the Epidemiology Intelligence Service with CDC US.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: The what now?

SABERI: Epidemiology Intelligence Service. But then I --

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Did you do some work with them?

SABERI: With the CDC? I did it with the Philadelphia Department of Public Health, yeah. We did like—it was cool. It was like outbreaks of varicella and that type of thing. And then, I ended up—but so, I couldn't figure that out. Or just, again, just didn't have the emotional energy.

So I ended up doing family medicine, here at Penn. And I was a second-year residency that they had the program.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Oh, I see. So after Tufts, when you were looking for the residency, that's when you came to Penn? That's when you moved to Pennsylvania?

SABERI: [Yes].

EARDLEY-PRYOR: When was that?

SABERI: It was 2000.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Oh, okay. What was life like in Philly, then? It's different from Boston.

SABERI: Yeah, I always think of—I don't know if I came up with this, or somebody else came up with it and I just kind of took the metaphor on, I'm not sure. But I always feel like Philly and Boston, Philly is like—Boston is like Philly's sister, but it's a sister who married well. [laughter] They're very similar. There's a lot of history. They're both very kind of interesting architecture. But Boston's got a lot of old money. And Philly's rate of poverty is super high.

So in some sense it was good. In some ways, I liked being here because it made it a lot more accessible. If you're on a resident's salary, you can still live somewhere nice and your rent isn't sky high, like the way it would be in Boston.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: So coming to Penn and then doing family medicine. <**T: 40 min**> What kind of stuff were you involved in then? I mean was it—was it what you wanted, I guess, is kind of what I'm asking.

SABERI: So, right. So then what happened—again, it was kind of like, "Oh, God. It was the same thing back in medical school. I'm doing what I don't want to do."

But then, I was so just surprised at how much I liked it. I liked family medicine. I liked that kind of personal relationship. But it was also like a sense of, like—I know I'm saying too many likes. I don't know, the individual outreach meant a lot. I also really kind of bought into the whole idea of each person's not an island. They're part of—so, then you can see the kids, and the siblings, and the parents, and that was cool. I really liked that.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: But when you talk about outreach, what do you mean?

SABERI: So West Philly is a very low-income neighborhood. And this kind of providing what I would—because there's kind of this sense in medicine that somehow money should be able to buy you superior healthcare. That sits so wrong with me. And I feel like, "No. You should have quality healthcare practitioners available to anyone of any income." And so, to me, I loved the fact that I was doing that. And it was like, "Okay."

So, Penn is—it's funny because it goes back to this kind of idea, this mentality—this project that we started at Tufts. Oddly enough, Sonya just interviewed me about that project, too. But this idea that these hospitals think of themselves as these ivory towers, when they're located in these low-income neighborhoods. And people train and just learn their whole medical education by being in these communities. And they go on to become these highly paid doctors. And yet, they learned it from these low-income communities. And so that's not okay.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: What was the program at Tufts doing around that?

SABERI: Yeah, so the program at Tufts we created was a free clinic in this very, in the Chinese-speaking area—the New England Medical Center was smack-dab in the middle of Chinatown in Boston. And so a lot of the Chinese, they were immigrants. And there were undocumented immigrants, and they didn't have health insurance. You have top of the line, you know—the New England Medical Center. And then there's these people who can't even access a regular doctor. So we created a free clinic.

I wanted to call it Sherwood, like the Sherwood Forest, like you take from quote-unquote "rich" and give to quote-unquote "poor"—even though I'm not really saying that in any kind of connotation, I'm just giving the idea that was. And then my cohort, they were like, "No, no, no, no. That's too polarizing and charged and stuff." And so it was called Sharewood.

So anyway, twenty years later or whatever—I mean, I can't believe it's been that long. But whatever, almost twenty years later, it's still in existence. It kind of developed legs of its own and kind of walked on its own, and it became a big thing. Now it's a big experience for the med students there. They did a piece on it, and they called me to interview me about that. So it was just kind of—that's why it's fresh on my mind. Anyway, so back to this. That's what I mean.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Was that part of the first times you had done that sort of service outreach—the politically-oriented thinking about systems and community work? Was that one of your early stages of involvement? <**T: 45 min**> Or had you done that kind of stuff before?

SABERI: Let me think. You mean in residency?

EARDLEY-PRYOR: I mean, I'm thinking more just—

SABERI: Not in residence. In medical school, I had done it. I did a—so my capstone for my public health was, how would an undocumented immigrant navigate the healthcare system? How would you be able to help them navigate this really complicated system that even we can't figure out? How would you expect them to figure this out? So, that was one of my projects that I had done there. So, yeah. I mean maybe it was the first time that I had done one-on-one outreach. But that *type* of work, I had done some of that before.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: The service-oriented work, the part that is thinking about social responsibility and engaging in giving back and fighting for equity—where do you think that comes from for you?

SABERI: I don't know. But I would say if there's one kind of fundamental ethos that just drives me, it's a sense of justice. There must be fairness. And of course, given that almost nothing is fair, [laughter] you can tell how indignant I am at any point of the day.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Were you like that as a little girl? Was it like the sense of justice that your little sister got the teddy bear? Was it like—were those the kind of things you were doing?

SABERI: Yeah, yeah, yeah—maybe I wasn't so much like *that* towards my little sister. I was like, "I have all my chocolate, *and* I will have her chocolate." [laughter] Yeah.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Was it maybe more seeing—

SABERI: No, I was. I mean, yeah, I was. I don't know. I think I was.

It was kind of like, you have people work in your homes when you're in Iran. They're not servants, just folks who maybe even live with—live with my grandparents and then they worked and they helped making lunch and that type of thing. Because food is a big thing there, so preparing it is like a full-time job. So I would wash dishes with them. It's like, "Oh, no. Why wouldn't I?" You know? Like, "If they wash dishes, I wash dishes." You know? It's like that kind of thing. Yeah.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Definitely. So, after the residency in Penn—how long did that last?

SABERI: It's three years.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Three-year residency. And then, did you say in Philly or did you go elsewhere?

SABERI: I went to Chestnut Hill, and I worked there. And then, I came back to work in a school-based health clinic in West Philly. It was also a federally qualified healthcare center. They had just done the architectural plans for it inside a high school, Sayer High School, and they needed a doctor. So they asked me if I wanted to come back and be the primary care provider there and start it going.

And at first, we were in a mobile clinic. We were in a van, where on days like this, your nurse is like, "I don't even know if I'm having hot flashes or—" [laughter]. It's so hot because

there's no AC or anything like that. People kind of amble down the street, and they come up the steps in the mobile van. It was cool. I liked it. It was very basic healthcare stuff, but it was nice. And then, finally moved into the space and—

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Within Sayer High School.

SABERI: It's within Sayer High School. They took two of the classrooms, like math and something else. Because the enrollment had dropped down from like twelve hundred to like seven hundred, so that there was—not all the rooms were being used. So they—and there was a garden. We had a garden.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Like a food garden?

SABERI: Yeah, like an urban garden inside the high school where the kids could work on it. And the idea was that they could also maybe volunteer to work at the health center, so then when they graduate, they have some skills. But we were also the main primary care facility that surrounded that, like the two zip codes surrounding that. And the reason why it could be qualified as a federally qualified healthcare center is because they look at their ratio of healthcare providers to the residents of those neighborhoods. And so, this qualified. There's not a lot of doctors that are that far up in West Philly. Yeah. And that was great too. I loved doing that too.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: The move from Chestnut Hill right out of residency to then this mobile clinic, <**T: 50 min**> and then eventually into this newly formed health center in this high school—what instigated that move? Why did you leave the position at Chestnut Hill?

SABERI: Part of it was that, at some point, Chestnut Hill was bought by a for-profit company. And I just didn't want to work there.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Was the vibe different?

SABERI: It was kind of like, when I was there, we had a free clinic for pap smears and mammogram screening. We did a lot of community outreach programs. And looked at—we were part of this whole multi-center initiative looking at pre-term labor. And then, a lot of that, I just didn't think that I—yeah, I felt like—yes. So maybe that's another way of saying it. Fine, the vibe was different.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Did you like the vibe down in the West Philly healthcare clinic?

SABERI: Yeah, yeah, that's—yeah, totally. But there's also something else. Also at that time, I was like, "Wait. I love primary care. I'm totally bought into the whole idea. But there's something else I wanted to do." I felt like I could then start to do this whole sculpting my own, you know, persona, career, skills. I just felt like I was really missing that. And I had maybe had enough time to get past the trauma of medical school and residency. [laughter]

And then think about—it's just like "Wait, no, there was something else I really liked." I also felt that a lot of the—the thing that I love is the environment. And I just don't have time to do that on the side. So I have to make it part of my regular work.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: When did the environment become something that was of interest to you?

SABERI: That's a good question. I can't really tell. I stopped eating meat when I was in college. I think maybe it was just kind of . . . I don't know. I don't know. There was—

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Did you take like an environmental studies class? Or was it like you went on a hike somewhere and something triggered?

SABERI: No. No. I mean looking back, being in the Berkshires, of course, it was such a great place. I'm like, "God, why didn't I appreciate this place more?" In the summers you'd go to the reservoirs and you swim and you just ride your bike everywhere. And all the while, you're complaining "There's no clubs around," and "This place, it's so backward." And then now, I'm like, "Ah, I wish I could go back there!"

But no. I don't know. I stopped eating meat. I just felt like, whatever. I didn't necessarily say meat is murder, but it was almost like that. I don't know.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: When you think about the environment, what does that mean for you?

SABERI: Nature, animals, ocean, mountains, desert, kind of open skies. And then—so, yeah, maybe if you think of claustrophobia, this is the opposite of claustrophobia. Like I think of nature—like for me, nature is like—not the antithesis [but] the antidote to claustrophobia.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: How does that fit in with your work? You're living in Philly, and it's a very urban city.

SABERI: I know, I know. And I've lived in Tehran, I've lived in like all—I just feel like I'm just used to, I guess, living in cities and—

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Do you see the city as a space of the environment, as an environmental place?

SABERI: Umm . . . No. Well . . . So, it depends. I hate the city in the summer.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Why?

SABERI: Again, because I feel like it just—it escalates my sense of claustrophobia. I feel like the buildings are coming—kind of like, crashing down on me. But I think part of it just has to do with this urban heat island effect. That really bothers me. I feel like it doesn't have to be like that, you know?

Yeah. We could—like, for example, I love having the pools. But why are they only open for six weeks? They should be open as long as it's warm out, you know? Like May through September. And I know it's all about funding. But then that also bothers me, because I feel like those are displaced priorities. **<T: 55 min>** And not just because I'm saying, "Oh, why aren't we spending tax dollars, so that I can go to a pool?" I'm not saying that. I'm just saying that I think that the city doesn't have to be this oven in the summer. It doesn't have to be that way.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: This might be a good point to transition into things that *could* be. Right? What things could be. So, maybe we make a transition to thinking about envisioning the future?

SABERI: Sure.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Do you want to bring me up to speed with any other career work? Maybe even more of your environmental work? Before we make that leap to the future stuff, you could talk about the work you've done from when you were in that—the center in West Philly, to the work you do now.

SABERI: Sure. So I would say that's about where it all started, like in terms of the official transition to—

EARDLEY-PRYOR: To what?

SABERI: To integrating the environmental work into my regular work.

So I took a class in "Lead in Our Environment." Because that was one of the reasons why I liked—because then I felt like I could take classes, you know, back at Penn, like maybe audit them. And then I met one of the professors there who taught a class about environmental health. And then he asked me to co-teach it. So I started co-teaching that.

And at the same time, I was thinking about how I love primary care, but I have to do something different. That's not really what I set out to do. So then I, while kind of taking classes—Oh, and then, also around that same time is when I . . . How did I meet her?

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Who?

SABERI: Iris. Iris Murray Bloom. You don't know her. [laughter] No, you wouldn't. You'd know who she was, if you knew her. I read this whole thing by Theo Colborn—who is like the, you know, you know who she is—about—

EARDLEY-PRYOR: She was working on the endocrine disruptors out in Colorado.

SABERI: Yes. Yes, exactly. About the whole idea of endocrine disruptors. And about how, if we're trying to get them out, there's this whole process called hydraulic fracturing that's causing these endocrine disruptors to end up in water. And I was like, "Wait. What?" And that was, I don't know, 2009? That's right when, I think, *Gasland* came out.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: *Gasland*! Yeah.

SABERI: The first one. And so I started kind of—not like in a very—it's not like I was like, "Oh, I'm going to volunteer." I just started doing a lot more work with this organization Protecting Our Waters, which is a very—it's like the definition of a grassroots organization. Whatever time people spend, it's just their own volunteer time.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: With the Protecting Our Waters group?

SABERI: [Yes]. I started working with them. And then what happened was that one of the NPR writers, Susan Phillips, was writing these pieces on StateImpact. [https://stateimpact.npr.org/] And she went out to interview someone who thought that her water had gone bad, and all her problems were because of her water having gone bad. So when they went out there, they were like, "Well, we know this doctor, who can kind of—." And then that's where all this environmental exposures—and how do you evaluate people for environmental exposures—that really kind of started for me. So I was doing courses, teaching them, and then doing these things on the side.

And then I thought, "I really need kind of a very. . ." Just being a doctor, you feel like everything has to have a certificate, you know? [laughter] You can't just say you can do it. You have to actually torture yourself to get some sort of degree. So I did that. I went back to residency.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Doing what? To study—

SABERI: Occupational and Environmental Medicine, which is what I do now. So that all kind of happened together, and it just combined itself to be the work that I do now. Which is, I work—so I do—my regular job is an occupational medicine doctor.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Where at?

SABERI: I can't tell you. [laughter] I'm not allowed! They've specifically told me that I can't do that.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Okay. But here in Philadelphia.

SABERI: You can look me up. Yeah. But then, also, I'm the board president for Physicians for Social Responsibility, **<T: 60 min>** both the Philadelphia and then the next year for the national. And so a lot of the work that I do has to do with one of these two things, either my regular work or my affiliation with this organization, PSR.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Is the Physicians for Social Responsibility work, are they looking mostly at environmental contexts?

SABERI: Mm-hmm. PSR Philadelphia has two topics: environmental health, mainly—like fossil fuel extraction, transportation, energy, climate change, those types of things—as well as prevention of youth violence.

And PSR national started with banning the nuclear weapons globally, and then they added environmental health, maybe back 20 years ago, to the cadre of things that they look at. They also do a lot of work on climate change now, and on toxics in our environment. You know how everything in our environment effectively is kind of—in the chemicals that are used in our environment, and that type of thing. Yeah, so it's --

EARDLEY-PRYOR: It sounds like pretty amazing work.

SABERI: Yeah, it's really very—it's gratifying and it's intellectually challenging. Yeah, it's fascinating work.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: How has that work changed your relationship with the city, with being in Philadelphia?

SABERI: That's a really good question. I almost feel like—like, do you have another hour? [laughter] So it's kind of like this. Okay. So you're an environmental historian, right?

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Yeah.

SABERI: And then, Chris Jones is an environmental historian, right? And he writes about energy, and you write about what?

EARDLEY-PRYOR: All sorts of different things. [laughter]

SABERI: All sorts of different things.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Global environmentalism, in particular.

SABERI: Do you guys feel that you have a voice in the way policies are made in cities that you live in?

EARDLEY-PRYOR: No.

SABERI: Exactly. And yet, the information that you have is pretty key. It's pretty fundamental, right?

EARDLEY-PRYOR: It could be.

SABERI: It could be, right?

EARDLEY-PRYOR: It certainly could be.

SABERI: Why is that? Why is it that you have this really rich vessel of information, and yet no one who's in a decision-making power has bothered to hear it, reached out to you to hear it, and vice versa. Like, you haven't reached out to tell them how you think what you do can impact policy, right? So, that's how I feel also about my work.

I feel that my work, as well as any other professional who in any way is involved in public health, I feel that there's this super important message that has to be communicated. I mean, it's kind of this bridge that has to be crossed, where we have to get this message out to how these policies impact us. Like let's say if you want to get 100 percent of your message out there. Maybe less than .01 percent is getting out there. Right? I really believe that events like Flint [the crisis of lead in the public water supply of Flint, Michigan] happen because of that. **<T: 65 min>**

And so then, back to how does this—I feel like Philadelphia could be—like, could Philadelphia become a demonstration project for how you would make that [communication] work? Not necessarily a role model, but you try out—like, what if you could remove these kinds of barriers? What if you could empower public health professionals to voice their opinions or to demand a place at the table with policymakers? But to do that, they would have to really feel like they have the skills, they have something to say, and that what they're saying is really important. Right? I think what they have to say is really important. I think what *we* have to say is really important.

And I feel that, "Hmm. Well, that's kind of funny. All these kind of, let's say, 'industry voices' have this big, fat cushion at the table." I don't think what they have to say is as important as what we have to say. And yet we're shut out, and they're there. And why is that? And not necessarily "Why is that?"—because I know exactly why that is—but "How do we

change it?" And I—anyway, so that's kind of, I would say in terms of the abstract, how I feel [about] my work in Philadelphia. So, yeah.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Well, we've got about fifteen-or-so minutes before I think we need to tie things up. So let's get into the visioning part here.

And maybe we could start with—I mean, the future is how *you* want to imagine it. We can go with the "business-as-usual and things will continue as they have," or [with] a utopian sort of vision—of all the dreams that we think could happen for renewable energy and greenhouse-gas reductions. Could happen either way.

So if we're going to picture, let's say, fifty years in the future—so from now, that would be the year 2067. What do you think that future for Philadelphia is like? What kind of city is that? How is energy being used here?

SABERI: Yeah, I saw that question. And I—I don't know. I feel like—I don't think you want to hear my answer.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: I would love to hear your answer!

SABERI: I don't know if you would *love* to hear it! [laughter] I have a pretty apocalyptic view of what will happen.

I think that the speed at which people think we can move at is like, "Oh, I want to just live my own really privileged world, where I can order from Caviar, and take Uber and end up at this place, and do this and that. I want to have that." Right? "Oh, and yeah, by the way, it would be nice if we could knock off of two degrees." But those two things are not compatible.

And we have people like Tom Wolf as a governor [of Pennsylvania], who can't seem to be connecting the dots between—like you can't write a letter to [President Donald] Trump asking him to stay in the Paris Climate [Agreement], when the day before you approved pipelines. Do you realize that those two are absolutely not compatible? So I feel like if we have policy makers like that, it's—this world view is, my world view is pretty grim.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: So what is the city like, then? I mean, if that's what you think the future will be in fifty years—will be more of that pathway—how will Philly be different in fifty years?

SABERI: I think that—you know, it doesn't feel good to say it. And I guess I would say that maybe I don't even think about it, because it's just not really pleasant to think about.

I think that if we don't fundamentally change our transition, and if we don't do it soon, in a way that we—a lot faster than we seem to be doing it now, it's going to be a really hot place. <**T: 70 min**> Like, talk about urban heat island effect now? Oh my God, it's going to be unbearable! It'll be filled with mosquitos. Because heat holds onto moisture, it'll be this breeding ground for mosquitos. It'll be hotter, it'll be wetter. And it'll be a lot more—there'll be a lot more poverty.

Because the thing that a lot of our policy makers don't seem to get is that if you have the choice between jobs that make money, are sustainable, have a future, and don't put the health of the workers at risk versus jobs that are not sustainable, don't have a future, are really unhealthy—why wouldn't you choose option A, right? I think that investing in industries that don't really have a future—like, the world's going to change whether we want it or not. There'll be a lot more investment in these things.

I think that there'll be a lot more poverty. The people who are currently in areas with the highest air pollution—like where there's significantly higher rates of asthma, let's say, in children than the rest of the United States or even the state of Pennsylvania—will be at much higher risk for environmental exposures and pollution. The people whose homes are areas where there's sea level rise will be a lot more at risk for flooding.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Where are you thinking?

SABERI: I mean typically we think of Eastwick as the area where there's a lot more. And then, in terms of air pollution, think of, again, West Philly, Southwest Philly, around the airport, that area around the refinery, let's say, or part of North Philly and those areas.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Will those areas be—in fifty years, will they, any of those places be dealing with flooding or dealing with these deeper pollutions?

SABERI: Yes, I think so. I think that if we don't change fundamentally what we do now—because there's a principle in environmental health that's called cumulative impact. I think of it as, for example, let's say—and it has ties into resiliency. So the more you're exposed to something, it predisposes you to be impacted by something else.

So, let's say if you're—and what the example sometimes I use is, if you've been sleeping well, eating well, exercising, not stressed out, maybe you can fight off the flu during the flu season. But then, if you haven't been sleeping well, if you've had to grab whatever else you can find on the go, and you're stressed out, you might be a lot more likely to catch it. So your body's resiliency goes down as you're cumulatively impacted by environmental exposures.

I think that we've entered the age of Anthropocene. We're at this stage where there's so much pollution in our environment that you can't just negate it by eating organic or whatever. It's in the water. It's in the air. If you don't do anything to reduce the sources of those pushes, that's just going to cumulatively build up over the next fifty years and just make it all a lot worse.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: So let's think then even beyond that to—let's [go] almost one hundred twenty-five years in the future. I like the idea of 2140 as an idea to think about, because Kim Stanley Robinson is a science fiction writer, and he just wrote a book that's imagined this time period.

So one hundred twenty-three years from now, the year 2140, what do you think life will be like in Philadelphia? Will we have started making the changes to resist those cumulative impacts and to build our resiliency? And, if so—

SABERI: What's the name of this book?

EARDLEY-PRYOR: The Kim Stanley Robinson book? It's set in New York. It's called *New York 2140.*

SABERI: Oh, I see. Okay.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: But just as a time period for us to think about Philadelphia.

SABERI: Sure. I don't think we'll exist then.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: You don't think the city will be here?

SABERI: I don't think so. I also read a lot of Cli-Fi, like climate fiction. And I actually think that, frighteningly enough, there's many things in Margaret Atwood's trilogy—

EARDLEY-PRYOR: *Oyrx and Crake*, from that *MaddAddam* trilogy?

SABERI: *Oyrx and Crake*, right. The *MaddAddam* trilogy, where essentially, there's going to be a kind of massive wiping out of humans. And I don't see us really being able to thrive.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Us as a species?

SABERI: As a species, right, but also as an area where there's a lot of humans living in concentrated quarters. <**T: 75 min**>

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Here in Philly?

SABERI: Here in Philadelphia. So, I don't know if you want to put that in your [project].

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Yeah, no, these are *your* visions of the future, and they're fascinating. So Philadelphia will have been abandoned or have crumbled by 2140?

SABERI: Yeah, it's almost it's like an agar plate with bacteria. If the bacteria just kind of reproduce, then they double their population, double their population, double their population—and then, they run out of all the resources that are on the agar plate. Then it all dries up, and they all die off. It's kind of like that.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: So Philly won't be able to pull in resources from the outside to help keep it sustained?

SABERI: I don't think there will be resources from the outside. What I don't think people are realizing is that we are tapping out our resources. The moment where we double our numbers to go beyond a number that we no longer can sustain is like minute fifty-nine before the hour's up. Right? Where it's too late to pull in.

And besides, where would we pull the resources? If we didn't put in the infrastructure to pull in the resource that we should have—like the sun, like the wind. If we didn't do that, there would be nowhere to pull in resources from.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: What would things look like if we *did* pull in those resources, sun and wind and more organic farming? Even if it wouldn't solve problems, but it might help alleviate some. Is that a possible future for Philly?

SABERI: Yeah, I mean, look at this way. They're building this—they excavated this—they tore down Penn Tower, which was kind of like an old hotel on the Penn campus. You know, that hospital campus, right across from the hospital? They tore it down. And they're building a whole big massive other building there. To me—but I'm not an engineer, I'm not an architect either—however, if I were to imagine a future where we would have a snowball's chance in hell of actually making it, that type of construction would really need to have these really rigorous standards that they would have to meet in terms of energy efficiency. Right?

So for example, let's say they would need to have explored whether geothermal energy would be something that they'd have. And they're digging in so deep now. That's when they would be doing it, right? And that, then, is now. They're doing this. If there was any type of foresight on the part of the city, they would be mandating that every building that is getting constructed would have to explore these options. I don't see that happening. So I don't really have faith in the fact that we're going to be saved.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: So, if we're dreaming for a possible, hopeful future, is there a potential vision of a future of Philadelphia—fifty [years], one hundred twenty-five [years], even beyond—where perhaps those buildings are being built? And any time they are digging in, they are tapping into geothermal? I mean, is that even—is there a potential for that?

SABERI: What I'm saying is that in order for us to have that future, *that* thing has to happen now.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: And it's not.

SABERI: And it's not, so it's unrealistic. It's not as if we can be like, "Oh—" It's not like we don't have the technology. We have the technology. It might be that the investments might be higher up front, but the payoff is definitely there on the back end. But that would mean you'd have to switch your kind of mentality about profiting. We're not doing that. We can't do that. And so that's why I have no faith in this.

So what I'm saying is that—I went to the Paris Climate Conference. And then to come back and then just really realize that this is just kind of an abstract thing for people. <**T: 80 min**> As much as it bothers me that Trump wants to pull out [of the Paris Climate Agreement] or whatever. But I feel like we weren't doing anything before then anyway. So it's all kind of on paper.

So I don't really—I think that that's just kind of lulling ourselves to sleep, to think that somehow, "Oh, if we stay in the Paris Agreement," but *then* still approve the Mariner East Pipeline and the Atlantic Sunrise Pipeline and the Constitutional Pipeline and all these things that have been shown, by measurements, to be worsening, disrupting the climate . . . You know?

So in some ways, I almost feel like, what then? Then I'll just go ahead and get an Uber and eat out all I want. [laughter] Because maybe it's just not going to be here in my future.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Do we even—is it even worth trying to imagine what Philadelphia is like three hundred years from now? If there are no people, have people resettled it? Or has wildlife taken over?

SABERI: Well, it is a little bit like the Margaret Atwood thing. It's like where all the spliced genetically engineered animals start to have their own kind of ecosystem and habitat. And then, you know, these really intelligent pigs and stuff like that.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: What do you think? So, let's say almost three hundred years. Let's just pick the year 2312 as our standpoint. What's Philly like?

SABERI: I think—I mean, I don't know. I don't know what Philly's—but I feel sometimes a little bit hesitant to talk about my visions of future. Because I feel that I want Earth to be there, even if we're not. And I think that, especially as a doctor, that's hard for people to hear.

So I can tell you what I wish. I just don't know if it'll—I wish that nature will still be there, animals and the ocean, trees and all the things that we think are beautiful now.

EARDLEY-PRYOR: Will those have taken over the city?

SABERI: Yeah. [laughter]

EARDLEY-PRYOR: I like it. That seems to be a point where we are—[it's] about time for us to settle up. So, Pouné, thank you so much for taking your time today.

SABERI: You're welcome.

[END OF INTERVIEW]