

Genise M. Choy
Mashapaug Pond Oral History Interview

Date: April 9th, 2013

Place: Vartan Gregorian Quad, Brown University, Providence, RI 02912

Interviewee: Genise M. Choy

Interviewer: Cynthia Fong

Cynthia Fong: [00:00] My name is Cynthia and I am recording an interview for Annie Valk and Holly Ewald's class on Mashapaug Pond. Today is April 9th and it is 7am in the morning.

Genise M. Choy: Hi, I'm Genise, um, I've been involved with the Urban Pond Procession since winter of '09/'10. Um, I've worked really closely with Holly over the last few years, um, doing communications and, um, graphic design work and other, um, grant writing and, um, basically the sort of behind the scenes stuff. Um, when I first moved to Providence – I'm from San Francisco originally – when I came to Providence, um, after I graduated from college, I was living, um, the Elmwood area in South Providence and I really, I really loved it. Um, but I think I was looking for some place that, um, it wasn't meaningful to me yet. Um, and I think when I found Mashapaug, um, I felt like, like I could stay here for a while. Um, and I always feel a little weird advocating, spending so much time advocating for this pond when I'm not actually from here. It's not necessarily mine to advocate for. Um, but I think that it's such a hidden gem, and once people realize that it's there, that it becomes, um, something of importance to them as well. It's just a matter of letting people know that it exists. Um, most of the time that I've spent there has been for meetings, actually. So I think my experience with the pond is a little different from, um, what it maybe should be? Um, it's definitely a wonderful resource for the people in the area who, you know, practically have it in their backyard. Um, it's such a wonderful potential recreational space, and, um, and just aesthetically really beautiful. Um, and I think that, I actually had that much, uh, time to really enjoy it in that way. I'm usually doing something, actively doing something while I'm there, like figuring out, you know, who we should hire for our consultant to help, um, lead urban pond procession in, you know, a stronger direction, or, um, doing a clean-up, or organizing an event. Um, so I think, like I said, my experience with the pond is a little different from other peoples'. But, but I definitely, it's unmistakable that it's such a treasure.

Fong: Yeah, thank you for sharing that. So when you say that, like, um, your experience isn't what it should be? Like, I don't know, can you expand a little bit about what you mean?

Choy: Um, I think any open space like that, um, that really is so versatile in that, you know, you have the parks, J. T. Owens and, um, oh what's the name of the other park, um, Murphy Trainer on the western end of the pond, and then you have the beautiful boat house on the sort of southern tip, and then, um, you know, what will be a park, um, around Alvarez. I mean, and then you have the water itself that's just, um, has so much potential, um, for so many uses if it weren't for the blue green algae and all that jazz. Um, I mean, that's really what the pond should be used for, it should be for people to relax by, to, um, to play baseball by, to explore, to, you know, just really enjoy like, like an open space should be. Um, whereas, for me, it's really been more of a

task, I think. Um, and everything I do there is more or less, uh, not part of work, I wouldn't say that, but it's, I'm always fulfilling some sort-of job while I'm there. Um, yeah, I'm not sure if it makes it any clearer. [4:52]

Fong: Can you tell me about a time when that hasn't been the case?

Choy: Hmm, I remember once, I was there for a meeting, but we had a little time before and after, um, when we were just sort of hanging out. It was Holly, um, Kathleen Scharf and myself, and it was raining, it was pouring rain and we were sitting at the boat house, um underneath the overhang, and, um, I got to take a few minutes just to sit there and, and watch the rain, enjoy the space, smell the air, and it was just heaven.

Fong: That's awesome. Um, can you tell me a little bit more about your work with the pond? So you mentioned, like the Urban Pond Procession, as a graphic designer, and..?

Choy: Yeah, so, um, I would say probably in November or December of 2009, um, I was working at Providence City Arts for Youth down on Broad Street. Um, I was in Americorps VISTA there, um, doing development work, and Holly came to, uh, give a talk to the teaching artists there about the work that she had been doing, around Mashapaug and other, other projects that she had done in the past, and, uh, I remember her talking about Mashapaug specifically, and I really thought it was an excellent way to use the arts, um, to engage people around, um, you know, not typical art topics, like, um, environmentalism and science and, um, and she saw it in my eyes I think. I don't realize all the time what my face looks like, um, and what sort of emotions it's expressing, um, but I think my eyes probably got big and she knew that I was ripe for the picking to recruit to be a part of the effort. Um, so, so she sort of, you know, contacted me a little while later, um, and told me that she was holding a meeting for people who was interested in getting involved, um, and it was on the pond. It was, um, at a, a teacher's house, um, and you look out her back window and you could see, you could see the pond, and it was just beautiful. And I had done a little dabbling in graphic design prior to that, and, um, and I offered to try to design a logo for the, this organization which didn't have a name yet; we weren't called Urban Pond Procession at the time, um, and, and from there I just sort-of got caught up in everything that Holly and the group was trying to do, um, it was really, it was a wonderful group effort, very collaborative. Everyone had wonderful ideas, and were coming from different places, and were appreciating the pond in different ways, um, and wanted to see different things happen with, um, with the area. Um, and I think I just sort-of got swept up, and from there, I, um, I continued to do graphic design work for the organization, um, you know, designing fliers, posters for various events, um, and, and I started doing a lot more grant writing, um, pretty much everything, uh, that Urban Pond Procession runs on, in terms of funding, is, are, come from grants. Um, we do get, you know, some level of individual donations, but by and large, we get most of our funds from grants. Um, beyond that, I, I started doing more strategic planning. Um, Holly and I worked very closely, uh, working to develop a, a strategy to move Urban Pond forward, in the sense of, you know, we want to reach more people; we want to get the neighborhood more involved; we want to make sure that, if, one or both of us, you know, decides that we can't do this anymore that Urban Pond Procession will continue, um, and ideally, that would be in the hands of the neighborhood and the community members. Um, I mean, both Holly and I are very invested in this, but neither of us are from the area immediately around Mashapaug. Holly's from Detroit,

I'm from San Francisco, um, and so really, we feel like there's a lot of importance, um, in having the immediate neighborhood take agency over this. [10:04]

Fong: Have you worked closely with the, like, people surrounding the pond? And to what extent or in what context?

Choy: Amelia Rose from the Environmental Justice League has been doing such amazing work getting the neighborhood involved. Um, earlier on, it was really, she was really working with community members around advocating for the former Gorham site and getting that cleaned up and making sure that Textron was, was really following through with what they said that they would do in terms of remediation efforts. Um, and, and I think since the EJ League and Urban Pond Procession's relationship has gotten stronger, and we've been working, um, more in concert. Um, Amelia's efforts with the community have been getting that much stronger. I mean, I think we all realize that, that we did have a handful, maybe, of people from around the pond who were going to meetings that Textron was holding to let people know what the updates were, um, in regards to the Gorham site, but we didn't have that sort-of support at the Urban Pond meetings. Um, sort of the more day to day advocacy work, um, and so this past year, Amelia was able to get, um, a grant from the EPA, an urban waters small grant, um, that funds us for two years, um, to do more outreach in the community, to work with more schools in the community, um, or at least, work with schools more in-depth. Um, and, and the focus has really shifted to storm water, um, and how to mitigate the effects of that, and how to reduce storm water in general. Um, and I think that that shift from, from just concentrating on Gorham to, to, you know, broadening it to more everyday stuff, I think, was really a good step forward. Um, in a sense that it's something that the community can really, um, can really take into their own hands forever, really. At some point, hopefully, the Gorham site will be cleaned up, um, and that will be that, but, um, but storm water will always be an issue. Um, and it's, you know, in their daily lives. So I think it makes it, the site more, um, I don't know, I think it makes their involvement more consistent, more constant, more, uh, everyday sort of real.

Fong: Are you really passionate about the environment? Or what is the most passionate part for you about the Mashapaug Pond dream?

Choy: You know, to be honest, it's, in some ways, it has very little to do with the environment. Um, I think what I love most about being involved in Urban Pond is the people that I get to meet along the way. Um, and that's the community members, that's Holly, that's other artists, that's, um, people who just have, um, a **head** for this sort-of collaborative work, who are really interested in sharing ideas and, and working amicably together, which sometimes is hard to find, um, and it's rare in some cases. So, it's been a really wonderful experience, um, working with these people, who are really just in it for the greater good and are certainly not in it for themselves, um, and, are just incredibly great people to work with,. Um... yeah.

Fong: What kind of people have you met along the way? So you mention, like Holly, and also, like...?

Choy: One of the best things about Urban Pond is that it does draw the attention and efforts from people from so many different, um, so many different walks of life, and fields of work. So

there's Elizabeth Scott from DEM. [14:55] There's Bob Vanderslice from the Department of Health whose daughter, I actually, am very friendly with, because she, uh, works for the Providence After School Alliance, which Urban Pond has been, um, has found a great partner in. Um, we've been able to offer, um, a few different workshop opportunities through them. Um, and then, of course, there's the EJ League and everyone who works, sort of, directly or tangentially with them, which includes a lot of the community members. Um, there's all the artists who have contributed so much creativity and imagination and enthusiasm, um, for, for what we do. A number of them have, uh, worked or currently work at City Arts, so it's nice to have, um, a connection to them in these multiple ways. Um, and then there, of course, the performing artists who really just making the procession what it is, and you know, Big Nazo, the Extraordinary Rendition Band, What Cheer? I mean they, they've been there. They've been so solid, and they, without them, the procession would just be, sort of, it would be a much more solemn event. Um, and then all the educators that we work with, the principles, the teachers, from Reservoir Elementary, from Alvarez, from Nathan Bishop, I mean, there's so many schools that we've worked with that the fact that we were able to get into the school means that the people there are just incredible, um, you know, almost visionary, um, educators, and that's really exciting to be around. Um, yeah.

Fong: Can you tell me about a Pond Procession? Or how many have you been involved with?

Choy: I have helped organize... let's see, helped organize the 2010 procession, 2011 and 2012, so it's been three years. Um, and this one upcoming, so it will be four. Um, the first one, I was actually, I helped plan but I didn't go to because I got sick that day and I stayed home. The second year, I, um, I was late getting to because the bus schedule didn't pan out the way I had hoped. Um, but I did catch most of that one, and I walked with it, um, through the neighborhood the whole way, and that was, um, you know, I had heard so many stories about what it was like, how much fun it was, and I had seen so many photos, and, um, and it was pretty much exactly what I had imagined it to be. It was very lively, lots of, um, wonderful, colorful, signs, costumes, everything. Um, but then the third year, this past year, um, I, I helped set up the food table and display area at the end of the procession, so I spent, um, the entire time there. Not in the actual parade. Um, and that was also, actually, really enjoyable, because it was, um, we had a lot of other similar, similarly minded groups who were there, who were setting up at the end to sort of support the procession and also get the word out about their own organizations, um, including, uh, Save the Lakes, and the Narragansett Bay Estuary Program, and, and just like these really, really wonderful organizations, and I, it was nice to be able to, sort of, in a relaxed environment, because I wasn't, you know, busy running around, trying to fix costumes as they were falling apart during the procession, to just, you know, be able to, to, sort of, hang out and chat and, um, it was especially exciting to see the procession come over the hill towards the Temple, the music and this big colorful wave. It was very cool.

Fong: Can you maybe like paint the picture for me? I've never been to a pond procession.

Choy: The last few years, we've started at, um, at the boat house at Mashapaug Pond. We usually start with, uh, a few presentations, speeches, um, students sharing some of the work that they had done over the course of the year to prepare for this event. Um, usually that entailed the production of some sort of fairly large work of art. [20:18] Um, last year, the, the girls at Sophia

Academy designed a, a floating sculpture at the pond, and that got unveiled at the beginning of the procession last year. Um, from there, one of the bands, either ERB or, um, or What Cheer? Brigade would start playing and, and lead the, the crowd out into the job lot parking lot. From there they would weave through the streets, um, on a planned path. We always had it planned so that people could, um, find us if they, if they weren't able to join us at the very beginning, um, and Phil Edmonds, I don't know if you're familiar with him, but he's an incredible community activist/musician, just, he's really something else. Um, and he would always lead the procession with a big flag and a big smile on his face. Um, and from there, we would usually make a stop at Liberty Elm Diner, which, unfortunately, doesn't exist anymore. They recently closed about a month or two ago. We would stop behind there, and have a little, um, exchange of, of bands. Um, I think last year, it was the Extraordinary Rendition Band that started the procession, and then switched off to the What Cheer? Brigade. Um, and, it's at this point usually that Big Nazo joins, um, and then, and then it's a real, it's a real procession with much to do. Um, typically, from there, we end up going, um, down Elmwood, under a bridge towards the Roger Williams Park ponds, um, and last couple years, there was always a moment of reflection where we, everyone just sort-of paused by the water in Roger Williams Park and, um, Rick Benjamin, who is now the Rhode Island poet laureate, um, would say a few words or have, um, some his students he's worked with earlier in the year to say a few words, and, um, it's always a beautiful moment to just stop and think and appreciate with all these other people around you who are there for the same reason. Um, and then after a moment, then the whole crowd goes, continues through the park and ends up at the Temple of Music, um, and like I said earlier, there's a great moment where, where all these people, um, with colorful flags and props and costumes just come over the hill, um, so the people who are already at the Temple are sort of awash in this sea of color. Um, and then there, we usually try to have a few performances and presentations, and, you know, um, words from local politicians about why it's important to, to serve as stewards to the environment, um, and then there's always food. Food is always really important to us; every meeting, every event, we always make sure to have lots of delicious food because we know that that's key to a successful event. Um, and then people go their ways, and they come back the following year.

Fong: Who is, or what is Big Nazo, you keep mentioning?

Choy: Oh, Big Nazo, Big Nazo puppets, they're based downtown in Providence. Um, I believe it was started by **Remitio Pinkway**, um, and they're, they're these puppets, um, in the sense of, you know, they're not like marionettes. They're people dressed up in these large foam, sort of monster costumes. And they are pretty grotesque sometimes, um, but they're just, they're very fun. They are real performers, I mean, they know how to interact with kids and they're audience, and really, um, a lot of kids are scared of them, frankly. [25:05] But, but they also kind of love them. It's this funny relationship they have with, with young people. Um, but, these, these puppets, they're, they have this sort of rotating group of people who design them, make them, wear them, perform in them. A lot of RISD students have gone through their doors and learned how to, how to do this sort of work, make these types of, um, costumes. Um, and it's really, it's really a Providence, a Rhode Island staple, um, for events and the performing arts in general. They have really, they're really kind of one of a kind.

Fong: Um, have you, you mentioned also earlier that you, um, worked a lot with schools and students? Can you tell me a little bit more about that?

Choy: Yeah, I personally actually didn't work that much in the schools. Um, but a large part of Urban Pond's work is, um, facilitating workshops in schools and after school. Um, Sophia Academy has been one of our, our, sort of, um, strongest partner schools for several years now. Alyssa Wood is the science teacher there, and she's known Holly for a very long time and has been very supportive of this project. Um, and she really has made sure that, that the folks at Sophia recognize the worth of, of incorporating Urban Pond topics, um, and events into the curriculum. Um, in the past few years, we have worked with various middle schools through PASA, the Providence After School Alliance, um, including Nathan Bishop, Gilbert Stuart, um, I think we might have even done one or two workshops at Roger Williams, I can't completely remember. Um, but, but I'm more familiar with the sort of behind the scenes administrators there, and less with the, um, less with the teachers. Um, but having said that, I've heard so many wonderful stories and conversations, um, about what it's like to work with the teachers there. Um, I mean, Holly is really sort of the front person for building those partnerships with the schools, uh, and she, she always fills me in on what happened on any given day in any given classroom and so I feel like I know the teachers even though I might not have actually spoken to them in person. Um, and definitely Alvarez, that's a school we're really trying to, to become more a part of because of their site and also because of the potential there, and there are so many teachers that have expressed interest in working with UPP, um, and we think it's so exciting that the new principle, Jessie Rivers, has expressed, um, has recognized that, you know, the curriculum shouldn't really be about teaching to the test, and that there are other things, like the Socratic method, like getting involved with the community, things like that, um, where we think we could really serve as an asset to enhancing the curriculum there.

Fong: Do you mind if we move over there? The vacuum, sorry, is a little bit... you know.

Choy: Oh, sure.

Fong: That's awesome, some of the students also, um, for part of the class, are working with Sophia Academy.

Choy: Oh yeah?

Fong: Yeah! They're actually going there on a weekly basis to, well, weekly on a four week thing, and they're like teaching about the pond and oral history, which is primarily what this class is about, like collecting oral histories.

Choy: Oh that's great.

Fong: Yeah, so it's awesome that you talk about your work there. Um...

Choy: Actually, the funny thing is that I haven't actually been to the school, um, but I am friends with two of the people who are teachers there, so, and I've met Gigi, the principle, and, but I've

never actually been to the physical location, um, so it's another case of, I feel like I know it but I don't actually know it, but I do. [30:10]

Fong: Um, what, um, you mentioned that you have done a lot of flier work and also designing a lot of things, what is the most difficult thing about representing or presenting Mashapaug graphically?

Choy: I actually haven't found it that difficult because it's so, there are so many elements to it that are, uh, conducive to being used, um, as a branding mechanism or, um, or simply as an aesthetically attractive element to add to a flier or poster. And I think that because it is a pond, it is an open space, it's a public space, I mean, the idea of it is, I think, very universal. I mean, if someone sees, um, a blue shape that is irregular, let's say, I mean, I think one of the first things that comes to mind is a body of water. Um, and that's a very simple thing to, um, to interpret and to use as, um, as something that's recognizable, um, and that people will immediately, uh, have, be able to make some connection to. Um, and then of course, the landscape around the pond, like all the trees that turn beautiful colors in different seasons, I mean, that too is, makes it easy to, to create a flier or poster around, if I want to convey a sense of, um, like this is a winter activity, then, you know, everything will look more like it does in the winter when it's kind of white and it'll look cold, and, um, whereas, you know, the procession is always in the summer, or at least late spring, late spring, early summer, um, and the colors in those posters will always be brighter, um, and more vibrant like it looks at the pond. Um, you know, leaves are always much greener, the water itself is, um, you know the color might not necessarily change but the, um, the feel of it is certainly different, and I think those are all things that people can recognize very quickly, um, even if they don't think about it.

Fong: Have you, um, made, so you sort of mentioned how all ponds sort of, you know, irregular bodies, I think you're totally right. Um, so how have you made Mashapaug stand out in that way?

Choy: The funny thing about Mashapaug is that the shape of it is very, um, it's unique. I think it's easy to recognize once you know what it is. Um, when I was designing the logo for Urban Pond Procession, I was looking at a Google map, I mean it's sort of where everyone starts, I think, when they're trying to reproduce a, you know, a body of water. Um, and, and the two ponds, um, leading to it in the watershed, Tongue and Spectacle, um, they, the two of them together, sort of look like a U, um, or actually, the three of them, it's Tongue, Spectacle and Mashapaug together look like a U. And then, all of the ponds in Roger Williams Park, um, which are downstream of Mashapaug look like a P. This is very fortunate, given that we had just decided that we were going to call ourselves the Urban Pond Procession. Um, and that, the U and the P in Urban Pond are found in the shapes of the ponds themselves. Um, so, it's, the Mashapaug shape is, is a funny one, because you have the cove that comes down from the north and it's sort of, um, the shape sort of widens towards the bottom, and, um, it's sort of like a, um, whenever I look at it now, I sort of think of, a sort of, hunched over, kind of, funny figure of a person wearing a skirt. Um, and, and I think that's because when I first designed the logo, it was designed so that not only look like a U and a P, but also, it was meant to look like, like the shapes of the ponds were dancing and processing through the streets. [35:12] Um, so in my mind, I always think of it like the shape of Mashapaug as a person, walking or dancing, moving,

um, but I recognize that telling people that might not be the case. Um... I don't actually remember what the question was, sorry.

Fong: No, I think, yeah, that was, totally, I asked, um, how do you make Mashapaug Pond stand out in your graphic representation...?

Choy: Yeah, another way to make the shape of Mashapaug much more recognizable is just to put it everywhere. Lots of repetition, um, and I think once it's been labeled once or twice, that people start to, to immediately recognize what it is. And it is a very unique shape, certainly, very, very unique.

Fong: How, what sort of outlets have you used for publicity or how have you really invited people around the pond to be, to get engaged with this project?

Choy: Recently, um, now that we've garnered consistent support, um, from a few of the, the community members right around the pond, um, we've been trying to, to hand out, um, fliers and notices and things like that to every house around the pond. Um, especially on the eastern side, just because we've had better luck on that side. The folks on the western end have been more difficult to reach, um, but the two community members that, um, we've partnered with, um, and have developed really strong ties with, um, Diane Librandi, who lives, um, right by Alvarez, and then, uh, Dave Talon, who helps run the Elmwood Little League, and has been in the area forever. The two of them have been really helpful and willing to, to engage in the, um, sort of, one-on-one, uh, face-to-face, um, outreach to the community members. Diane goes to every door and knocks on it and says, "Hey, how's it going? My name is Diane and, um, you know, I want to tell you about this group, this Urban Pond Procession, and what events are happening, and you should really get involved...", um, and that has been really, I mean, absolutely priceless, I mean, invaluable in all senses. Um, because it's really that person to person interaction that gets people hooked, like it did me. So, um, so yeah, we're really trying to do that more, um, being able to talk to people, um, instead of just, you know, leaving a flier in their mailbox or whatever. Um, we really want to develop more meaningful relationships, um, and we're so glad we have Diane and Dave to help with that.

Fong: Um, what are you, what are some of, so like, in, has it been difficult, I guess like, has it been difficult for you, like, not being, like, being from San Francisco and sort of not living around the pond? I think that's something that, like, we as a class have found difficult, like we sort of this imposing, you know thing, how have you felt about that?

Choy: Yeah, Providence is really cool in that it is so easy to network and feel like, um, you're a part of something that, that is real. So, when I first moved here, um, I was doing obviously a lot of work with, um, Providence City Arts, because that's where I worked. Um, and through that, I made a lot of connections, um, in the art world and, um, with organizations, um, that the, that City Arts worked with like RISCA, um, the Rhode Island foundation, things like that. Um, but then I also found that, through working with Urban Pond, I was getting to know a lot of, um, folks in the environmental world, including Amelia and, um, Will York, who has been a really wonderful, um, resource for the Urban Pond. He's, uh, the founder of Small Feet, which works with schools to, to decrease their carbon footprint. [40:10] Um, but it's, I mean, just getting

involved with, you know, things that are happening, including, um, the Urban Pond Procession, actually let me start over. Um, so it was really easy to get involved in things in general in Providence and, and it was really easy from there to make connections with people who then lead to further connections with other people and just my network was growing so rapidly and, with such ease. I mean, it really was easy for me to feel like I had been here for a really long time and was part of a community, even though I wasn't, really. Um, and I think even though I don't live by the pond currently, um, it's, I mean, Providence, in some ways, feels like just a large neighborhood. And I'm from San Francisco, which is also very small, it's only 7 by 7 miles, but, um, but I think Providence has a special, um, feel to it that makes it seem like, while there are distinct neighborhoods, it's so easy to get from place to place that it all sort of meshes into one. Um, yeah.

Fong: Yeah, um, what are some of your dreams for Mashapaug? So if Mashapaug could be your ideal Mashapaug, um, what do you, how would you describe that?

Choy: In my ideal world, Mashapaug would definitely be used more. And I wish people, more people knew it was there. Um, and there are parts of it that are totally available, currently, for safe recreation. I mean, there's the boat house, there's J. T. Owens, um, and thank goodness there's the Little League that uses J. T. Owens all the time, otherwise it would just be a desert, I feel. Just absolutely underutilized space. Um, but, but in my ideal world, you know, people wouldn't have to ask, "Oh, Mashapaug, I've never heard of that, where is it?" Um, people would just know, and they would know that they could go there and enjoy it, and you know, take your family there, have a picnic, whatever. And of course, that, my ultimate wish would be for the water to be able to use as a recreational asset as well. Right now, it's unsafe for people to go in, get skin rashes. Um, I remember when I first got involved, I remember that dogs could get really, really sick, and, um, which was a, kind of a funny thing. I mean, it's important for people with pets to know but it's also like a little bit of a funny aside when we're trying to make this, um, you know, very family-people centric. But, um, but I really, I'd really love for people to be able to enjoy the water itself and be in the water, and, or fish and be able to eat the fish. That might not ever happen, but, um... yeah.

Fong: Okay, um, is there anything else you want to add?

Choy: Um, I don't think so.

Fong: Okay, so, cool, with that, I'm just going to grab this form... [44:20]

[End of interview]