

1st Interviewee: Michele Sharkey

Occupation: Executive Director of San Francisco 49er's Academy in East Palo Alto

Interview Date: 3/13/19

Location: San Francisco 49er's Academy in East Palo Alto

1:10

Hannah- Please state your name and occupation.

Michele- My name is Michele Sharkey and I am the Executive Director of the San Francisco 49ers Academy in East Palo Alto.

1:21

Hannah- How and when Did you become a part of the public school system In East Palo Alto

Michele - I've been working in the public school district which is the Ravenswood school district for gosh, 23 years since 1995.

1:37

Hannah- Why did you choose to become involved in the school district?

Michele- I chose to get involved with the Ravenswood School District in East Palo Alto because I grew up in Palo Alto right across the freeway and it was really eye-opening to me to see the different opportunities kids were afforded just based on their address.

2:03

Hannah- How would you describe your school's community?

Michele - Here at the 49ers Academy are school community is wonderful, it's really family-like, it's an amazing and supportive environment and we love our kids.

2:26

Hannah- What is your job description here?

Michele- My job here at the 49ers academy is executive director so I oversee all programming, all fundraising, our community partnerships with the school district and with the San Francisco 49ers, with the police and with everyone that's involved with our program and managing all of our staff as well.

2:47

Hannah- In your own words, what is gentrification?

Gentrification, to me is when more affluent, when the community is starting to be infiltrated by more affluent people with money moving in and slowly taking over community and pushing the local and more low-income people out.

3:16

Hannah- In what ways have you noticed gentrification in the community?

Michele- Gentrification is a huge issue here in East Palo Alto and really over the last 5 years you're really seeing the negative effects, it's a double whammy for the public schools, your kids are being pushed out, so our community, our low-income families can no longer afford to live here so we're losing enrollment which means losing dollars for the public school but then you're also seeing on the

flip side, the students that stay in the community are becoming increasingly stressed in terms of housing and security trauma, so the schools are faced with declining enrollment which means declining funding and then higher needs with their student population.

4:05

Hannah- How does gentrification affect students differently than other age groups?

Michele- So yeah, I think gentrification can really affect students and their schools because they're being forced to move which is, as a young child, having to have a break in your education system is traumatic, to have to leave your friends and your community and go to whole new school because you can't afford to live in your home community any more, that's huge, and being at school if you're hungry or homeless or facing all of that outside, it's really hard to focus and be present in your academics as well.

4.52

Hannah- How would you say gentrification impacts your students life socially, I know you mentioned it a little bit with like....?

Michele- Gentrification impacts our students socially by really creating an unstable environment in their community, so their friends are leaving, they may have to move out of their home, they may have to be sleeping on someone's couch, or in a garage, or in a car just to stay at their home schools. So that really affects your ability to be involved in social activities, you can't be on a soccer team after school, or in a club, or do all the things that build community and the social aspects of school, your just not able to do it.

5.36

Hannah- when did we start to notice these major changes, like was there a set time or...?

Michele- I personally started to really see the effects of gentrification in East Palo Alto about 10 years ago, where we were seeing a significant decline in enrolment. Since 1995 our district was 4500 and today its almost 2200 so that's half of our community and our kids have left the area

6.04

Hannah- Do you have any specific stories that stick out to you?

Michele- around gentrification?

Hannah- yea

Michele- Yea I think, for me where i've really seen gentrification affecting the public schools in the last 4 years, especially the last 2 years, is the number of kids that are "quote on quote" homeless. So housing insecurity, our population of insecure housing has almost doubled, we've always been about 25% we are up to 50% now in just a few years.

6.45

Hannah- How would you say your daughter's experience differs to the students at your school?

Michele- so my daughter's experiences are much different from the kids here in East Palo Alto, we live in Los Altos which is a very affluent, stable community. My Daughter has access to everything she wants, she has home security, she is fed, she has access to all the support she would need with it being tutoring or club soccer, or all the things that make being a young person a well **boom in audio** rounded adult, well, yea, my students here, we just took a group up to see a theater up in San

Francisco and just picking them up I have one student that is living in a house with about 20 other people, she doesn't have her own room, she has to do everything on her own. Where my kids have all the space and all the support, there's no stress in their lives compared to the trauma the kids out here are facing. But they all end up at school together, so really the challenge is that students from East Palo Alto will end up at Menlo Atherton High School with kids from Menlo Park and Atherton and their social and home lives are very very different but they are expected to have the same level of performance when they get to high school.

8.07

Hannah- what would you say happens after high school in this area, compared to what we know?

Michele- Well I think a big difference in just a low income communities with students of color and students of low income backgrounds, college and that culture of going to college isn't prevalent where your parents may not be college or even high school graduates where in a more affluent community its just expected. Everyone you know is going to... its not when you go, its where, it's not even an option **oops it sounds like a camera went off** but students here in East Palo Alto, thats a big challenge they dont have a parent thats leading the way or really modeling that kind of expectation for them

8.58

Hannah- So we noticed a gate around your school, is there a story behind that, like have there been incidents in the community?

Michele- no the schools really in East Palo Alto are safe haven, we've never had an issue, i've been on this campus for 20 years, we've never had an issue. There are plenty of violent issues right outside of our gates have happened, but here on our school sites, I think the one thing Ravenswood school district has a really safe and awesome school environment for our students.

9.30

Hannah- so from our research we've noticed that there's like a difference with charter schools so when affluent people move in then there's an increase in charter schools, do you notice that effect?

Michele- yea so in my opinion, charter schools are detrimental to low income, small communities because they have the power of a corporate for profit brand behind them so they are doing huge campaigns to recruit kids that then pull kids out of public schools and with them goes their funding, so the end product is that our public schools will close and really the charter schools might not necessarily be any better as a school but they have more money behind them in private dollars to do the big PR campaigns and all that. So we've seen charters come and go a lot in East Palo Alto , they're always great at pulling kids out but not necessarily great at serving that population.

10:29

Hannah- You mentioned earlier about financing and how that is altered in affluent areas, Can you elaborate on that

Michele- right so low income school districts get their funding based on funding from attendance and enrollment whereas schools in like Menlo Atherton and Los Altos get their funding from tax base. So if you have a rich and stable tax base with people owning their homes then you have more wealthy funded schools. So when you have a low income area and you rely on state funding based on your enrollment that's a big difference. And if you have a district like this one that shrunk by half

in a 20 year period then you are losing half of your operating budget with the same amount of school so how do you maintain all of that without closing the school when you are losing your funding.

11:30

Hannah- So are schools closing? Like is that a problem that you see in this district or is it more of a threat?

Michele- Umm its a threat, there is a big threat of schools closing. There is a new Charter school that is coming to the community and has pulled out a large number of kids in addition to the gentrification that is happening. So yes i do believe that is is a huge threat that one of the public school in East Palo Alto will be closing in the near future.

11:58

Hannah- is there anything else you would like to add?

12:35

Michele- Some of the things that stick to my mind that still surprise me daily here is how different the experience of growing up in a low income community like East Palo Alto is compared to my own children's experience in Los Altos. Just last weekend I took one of my student up to San Francisco to see a play and she mentioned that this is one of the most exciting experiences of her life because she never gets to do anything like this. And I said well what do you mean. And she said well I never get to leave my house because there is just no where to go and no one to take me anywhere. And it just hit even me as someone who works in this area everyday, just how different growing up so close to each other i mean we live within miles of each other but the academic, the enrichment, the opportunities that kids are afforded based on how much money they have or where they live is completely different. And it's shocking that its so close to home. Its crazy, I mean I see that a lot. It blows my mind, especially with my kids being the same age as the kids that i work with that every day I think about the opportunities that my own children have compared to the kids here. But the kids here are brilliant and talented and amazing, they just need that equal opportunity and equal access.