A Call for Change: Minnesota Environmental Justice Heroes in Action

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Macalester College

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Introduction

Minnesota has long had a reputation for being a great place to live: a strong economy, great schools, good healthcare infrastructure, and (if you don't mind cold winters) 10,000 lakes and beautiful nature for all to enjoy. What USNews and other "best state" analyses do not talk about, however, are the deep racial disparities of life in this midwestern state. Minnesota has some of the widest racial gaps in the country with respect to educational attainment, employment, poverty, homeownership, health, and incarceration rates (Gordon, 2019).

Racialized injustices in Minnesota extend to the natural environment as well. As in the rest of the United States, people of color in Minnesota are significantly more likely to live, work, and play near toxic facilities, to have lower access to parks and greenspace, to suffer from health conditions linked to environmental toxic exposures (e.g., lead poisoning, asthma, certain types of cancer), to breath air higher in pollutants such as particulate matter, or to be exposed to environmental hazards at their workplace.

Though the roots of these injustices are deeply embedded in the economic, political, and cultural life of our state, many people are taking a stand for justice and transformation. This book is the story of Minnesotans engaged in the work of Environmental Justice, the "fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, culture, education,

or income…" (US Department of Energy). Environmental Justice demands social justice, equal access to a clean and healthy environment, and an end to institutional discrimination.

Minnesota is home to a network of individuals and organizations creating and modeling more equitable relationships within society, and between human society and the more-than-human world that sustains all life. Thanks to these individuals confronting systemic racism woven into the fabric of our culture, Minnesota can become a birthplace of change, setting an example for other states to follow.

The following chapters are brief introductions to the lives and work of some of these Minnesota residents who advocate for Environmental Justice. Their stories were captured in interviews conducted by Macalester College students in Spring 2018, 2019 and 2020. Because the scope of Environmental Justice is large, the work of these individuals is widely varied. Each person featured in this volume takes their own unique approach to re-imagining justice. For some it is through a traditional job in a non-profit, government, or a private company. For others, the work of environmental justice involves organizing people, planning protests, and challenging unjust laws. Still others focus on inspiring the rest of us, and strengthening the movement as a whole, through their music, art, writing or performance. The work featured in this volume covers a broad span, showcasing the depth and breadth of Environmental Justice. More importantly, this book celebrates the extraordinary everyday people who choose to take action in the face of injustice. While their

approaches to Environmental Justice work are diverse, they are united in their persistence and their creativity.

In addition to elevating the voices and work of those described in these pages, we hope this book can be a resource for those seeking their own starting point in the EJ movement.

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2018

Lupita Herrera: Working to Mainstream Environmental Justice Curriculum

Madeline Cook

Lupita Herrera

Lupita and I are finally able to talk over phone on a windy Sunday afternoon, right as our long Winter of 2018 was finally transitioning into a beautiful Spring.

After trying to connect for over two weeks, I was more relieved than anything to be doing the interview. From a full-time job in the education department at the Science Museum, to pursuing an undergraduate degree at Hamline University in St. Paul where she studies Anthropology, Lupita juggles a lot. As we began our conversation, however, I quickly became amazed and genuinely delighted to be engaging with such an impressive and articulate young woman.

Lupita came to the Twin Cities from rural Minnesota to study at Hamline University in St. Paul. Upon enrolling in an Environmental Studies class, Lupita became enamored with theories of Environmental Justice (EJ). As a young Mexican American, the themes of systemic racism and oppression through environmental hazards that are so

prevalent in EJ resonated with Lupita. Through a discussion after class with one of their guest speakers, Lupita was able to secure a job at the Minnesota Neighborhoods Organizing for Change (NOC), a local EJ group. Additionally, she began going to community meetings and protests about EJ issues, like the Northern Metals lawsuit.

Lupita had been exposed to ideas of EJ before. She watched a video one day in high school about why people should be vegetarian, and decided to pursue a meatless diet. By becoming more conscious of what she was eating, she started learning about sustainability. From there, she learned about the benefits of growing one's own fruits and vegetables, and became interested in community gardens. However, she also learned about the downsides of community gardens—their ability to raise property values and make a neighborhood more susceptible to gentrification. She found this compelling, and knew she wanted to engage more with EJ work in the Twin Cities. Therefore, when this opportunity arose to work at NOC, she was thrilled.

Despite her passion for EJ, Lupita quickly grew disenchanted with NOC. Frustrated with how the organization was being run and irritated that her voice wasn't being heard, she decided to take a break from Environmental Justice work. Lupita's prose was full of words of wisdom and insight beyond her years as she explained her decision. She consulted with Janiece Watts, her sort-of mentor who works at Eureka Recycling in North Minneapolis. In a moment that shows us that sometimes things do happen for a reason, Lupita was able to secure a job at the Science Museum, where she fell in love with

working with youth. What's more, Lupita was able to still engage with EJ issues by bringing her knowledge of environmental racism into the classrooms at the Science Museum. It was then that she truly realized the importance of her work, in educating young minds about the EJ issues in their community.

Lupita's effort to bring issues of environmental racism into the classroom stems from her belief that it is a privilege to know about Environmental Justice. In her eyes, Environmental Justice is rooted in higher education. Most people who know about EJ were exposed to it in school.

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They understand the academic and scientific jargon associated with it. They had the time to engage with EJ issues. Lupita's high school EJ class was only taught once a month in the early morning, but she was at least still able to engage with it. Furthermore, Lupita remarks that in all the EJ meetings and conferences she's been to, never once have there been a discussion or flyer in a language other than English. It reminds her of issues she has learned about in her Anthropology classrooms, when anthropologists do field research about non-western

cultures. They come up with an ethnography, a statement, or an article, but they don't share it with community they studied and they write it academically. She feels that both the EJ movement and her field of study are only doing work for those who have access to higher education.

Despite her cynical view on Environmental Justice's accessibility, she refuses to sit idly by, opting instead to make EJ curriculum more mainstream. She does this primarily through her work with the education department of the Science Museum. Lupita started at the Science Museum in 2016 as a summer camp counselor, teaching science to middle schoolers. Once school started, she became part of design team, an afterschool program that travels to different St. Paul schools to teach STEM. Last summer, she was promoted to full-time STEM teacher with her own class. She is now in the role of assessment coordinator. Not only does she help write curriculum for the education department, but she is also in charge of assessing its effectiveness.

Though she no longer works directly with youth she has taken full advantage of her ability to influence their learning, working hard to ensure that the strong link between STEM and social justice is conveyed in the program's curriculum. In fact, one of the STEM program's four tracks is on Environmental Justice and sustainability. Informing the students of EJ and its importance is central to her personal mission: "Since we are science and social justice I wrote a curriculum on…water, but instead of just talking about clean water we talked about the pipeline [Line 3 in Minnesota] and Flint. When we talked about garbage we talked about the incinerator [which is] flowing dirty air into North Minneapolis."

By discussing local EJ issues, Lupita's role transitions from educator to motivator. She makes sure they know the scientific terms, but also the simple terms so they can explain it to their families. Her curriculum also encourages changes in their daily habits, like recycling and water conservation, so that they feel empowered to be invested in EJ in all aspects of their lives. In doing this, she feels that she can encourage them to be more involved in the EJ work going on their communities.

Lupita hopes her approach to youth education can help solve another issue—the lack of diverse voices in the Twin Cities Environmental Justice movement. It seems as though nothing has caused Lupita more distress than the feeling of pervading whiteness in EJ spaces across Minneapolis and St. Paul. It has led to her to feel disconnected from active EJ work, and to her eventual (and current) break at the advice of her mentor, Janiece Watts. Her disillusionment with Twin Cities EJ work was also caused by feelings that her voice was being ignored and shut down: "I would cry because I would go to a meeting and I felt like I wasn't being listened to." Lupita knows that as a young, woman of color, it will be more difficult to get her community members to listen to her. She says she has to be more confident, more factual, and more correct in everything she says. That is why she views her current respite as a form of self-care and a response to burnout.

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It is clear that at this moment, Lupita's priority is education. Looking forward, she is certain that will continue to be the case: "Even if I don't become someone whose working at Eureka, in my education life I still want to bring that up and make it part of education." Eventually, she would like to return to EJ work, but is enjoying her break from the intensity of it all. Lupita's perspective is an interesting one—she is poised to be a vocal and effective leader of local environmental justice issues, but as a Junior at Hamline University she is still trying to figure out her calling, find her voice, and understand her place in all of it.

Anita Urvina Davis: Making Connections Between Health and the Environment in Northern Minneapolis

Molly Adams

Anita Urvina Davis Photo Courtesy of AFSCME Council 5

On a cold Tuesday morning, I sat at French Meadow Cafe awaiting the arrival of my interviewee, Anita Urvina Davis. Ten minutes past eleven, she bustled through the doors and apologized for being late. She went on to explain how the hood of the car in front of her on the freeway had flung open while driving and how she put on her hazards to help escort the car safely to the breakdown lane. Although this anecdote seemed inconsequential at the time, after I spent an hour talking with Davis, it became a part of her personal story. Stopping for a complete stranger despite the fact that it was going to make her late for her previous commitment explains so much about this incredible woman. Davis is selfless, compassionate, hard-working and determined to make the lives of those around her better.

Davis's empathic nature drives her work in local public

health and environmental justice issues. In 2016, a survey sent out to North Minneapolis residents reported that 99% of the respondents knew or had known someone with asthma (Tigue, 2016). Davis's daughter is one of these asthma-stricken individuals, and it is no coincidence the majority of her neighbors share her illness. Since then, Davis has engaged in a plethora of work including public health service, civil rights policy work, environmental justice activism, community outreach, and both corporate and federal advisement. At the intersection of public health and environmental justice, Davis's work sparked my interest in selecting her as my interviewee.

From the moment I met her, Davis's warm, loving, personable energy was palpable. Our conversation explored the scientific, political and social aspects of her work while delving deep into the very personal stake Davis has in the environmental justice movement. After an hour of engaging with Davis' professional and personal journey, I began to understand what drives her to do amazing EJ work regarding toxicity reduction and community outreach, which she continues to pioneer today.

Davis is a Latina American woman who grew up in North Minneapolis. Her parents immigrated from Mexico and raised their family in the states. In 1972, Davis graduated from Minneapolis North High School and went on to study dance at the University of Minnesota- Twin Cities. She had intended to graduate from the University of Minnesota and become a dance teacher; however, she was sidelined with a career ending injury. For the rest of her adult life, Davis continued to reside in North Minneapolis. She eventually married and had children of her own.

Four days after her second daughter was born, Davis

rushed her baby to the hospital as she was having trouble breathing, turning blue in the face. At the hospital, her baby was diagnosed with asthma. Upset and confused, Davis initially struggled with this diagnosis. She understood asthma to be a result of interacting with the environment. How could her newborn already contract such a disease? Davis' doctor explained to her that there must have been something in the air which Davis ingested during her pregnancy. The toxins traveled to the fetus and infected her in utero. Davis's doctor encouraged her to investigate her home environment.

At this pivotal moment in Davis' personal life, her professional career also ignited. She embarked on her first environmental justice action. Davis engaged with members from her neighborhood and the surrounding communities. Curious to see if her daughter's case was abnormal, she talked to other parents, specifically mothers, to understand their experiences with newborns and family medical history. The responses were overwhelming. Not only did she find solidarity while confiding in her neighbors but Davis was struck with a much larger realization. The correlation between high

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Engaging with her community sparked Davis' interest in community outreach and education. Davis became deeply involved in Hennepin County environmental services. Her positions included Spanish Speaking Community Liaison, Multicultural Outreach Coordinator, Volunteer Coordinator, and Planning Analyst. Davis conducted surveys and compiled information from the public to create behavior change programs. A few of the topics of interest were recycling and toxicity reduction behaviors. With the toxicity reduction project, Davis focused on encouraging members of the community to become educated on toxic exposures in their households and environments. In addition to this work, she gained significant policy experience as the Chair of the Minneapolis Commission for Civil Rights. For twelve years, Davis fought to implement the city's Civil Rights policies. Through this work, Davis gained valuable knowledge and insight into the work of environmental activism, research, policy, and community outreach.

At Hennepin, Davis centered her community outreach work around immigrant and BIPOC communities because the land in North Minneapolis is home to a BIPOC, lower income community with little political and social power. Davis saw North Minneapolis as a complex environment where community members were left in the dark about the health concerns they were confronted with by living in their neighborhood. She expressed a duty to work with these communities because "no one is telling [them] what they are being exposed to." In working with the Somali,

Vietnamese, and Hmong communities through community outreach, Davis was able to educate those who otherwise would not have been included in educational programs.

Davis's innate need to help those who are not being considered in conventional educational initiatives stemmed from her childhood. Watching her father learn English while she was growing up, Davis felt she had the background to help English language learners. She has a understanding of the struggle of feeling smart and accomplished in one sense, but also being unable to express her thoughts due to language barriers. She watched her father adopt other communication strategies while he was still learning English: when he went to the grocery, he would memorize the package label. Having a visual image of the red Campbell's Soup can and a picture of a tomato helped her father accomplish everyday tasks. Davis incorporated this strategy into her community outreach presentations. Using visuals to show toxic household products, Davis connected to people without language. She further educated them on behavior change activities and adverse environmental risks which the community members face because of their socioeconomic status.

Once her career in the environmental justice field began to accelerate, Davis was again sidelined due to health complications. She was diagnosed with breast cancer. More specifically, a cancer associated with high exposure to toxins: carcinoma. After seeing her test results, Davis's doctor asked, "what do you do for work?" He had assumed she worked in the chemical production industry because workers in those fields tend to be exposed to high levels of toxins. This profession could have accounted for the high level of toxins in her blood. Davis had never worked for a

chemical company, nor had she knowingly been exposed to toxic chemicals in high doses.

After more research, Davis learned that her cancer was extremely rare: 1/45,000 will be diagnosed in their lifetime. Not only was this number shocking, but what made this statistic even more jarring was that Davis knew of two other people from her neighborhood who suffered from the same type of cancer. In 2010, the U.S. Census Bureau reported the population of North Minneapolis was 5,968 people. According to the numbers, there was something odd about the national statistics and the rate in Davis's small neighborhood of North Minneapolis.

Davis decided to fight the cancer. Not only did she sign up for a treacherous road of chemotherapy but she simultaneously began a lifelong battle against the large corporations that poisoned her and her community. Davis pledged to diligently continue working at Hennepin, but her focus now turned to investigating HERC and Northern Metals, two main sources of toxic waste and pollution in North Minneapolis. Davis's work at Hennepin was vital to her career and through her difficult fight with cancer, her work became increasingly more personal.

However, this job posed several challenges. Davis experienced outward discrimination in the workplace. Because she was ill, a person of color, and a female, Davis's boss used every opportunity to discourage her from continuing to work. At this point in her fight against cancer, Davis would have chemotherapy and radiation on Thursday after work, recover Friday through Monday, and then return to work Tuesday through Thursday. Regardless of her hectic schedule, if a report was late because she was too sick from the chemo or if she missed an unexpected

day of work, Davis was reprimanded. She believes her positionality as a woman of color in this work force contributed to the animosity she faced. Davis faced compounding advisory due to the intersection of her identities, another central theme in her environmental justice story.

Despite these enormous obstacles, Davis did not lose sight of the problem she vowed to undertake, fighting for those who face environmental racism and injustice. Fifty-seven percent of North Minneapolis residents are black and fifty-nine percent live in households earning less than $35,000 a year (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). Davis began to learn that the placement of health compromising and toxin polluting plants (HERC and Northern Metals) is strategically intentional. She researched landmark environmental justice cases such as Love Canal and discovered the parallels between these historic scenarios and her own. Davis saw a demand for education and action. Her mission was to educate people in her community and to speak out against chemical plants. As with many landmark cases in the past, Davis hoped the environmental justice movement and action would influence policy makers to realize that the ethical and just verdict in this case is that HERC and Northern Metals must be removed from North Minneapolis. Anything less would not only be an injustice but also a further perpetration of racial inequity by the city and state government.

Politically, Davis felt confident that her background would give her enough power to get politicians to listen. Through her work as the Chair of the Minneapolis Commission on Civil Rights, Davis made numerous connections with politicians in the Twin Cities. Additionally, through her

work in the PCA, she engaged with numerous politicians who did not believe her story. Many of them were skeptical of the evidence that HERC is emitting these chemicals and that people's health are being compromised as a result. In response to this type of adversity, Davis made the politics personal. She told them that she was the evidence. Telling her story and getting the politicians to empathize with her was the first step Davis took in attempting to reason with politicians. Additionally, she tried to find commonalities between herself and politicians. She found it universal to start on the grounds that everyone wants the best for their children. Once politicians started understanding Davis' tough, tireless work, she gained credibility among this tier of politicians.

Davis made the politics personal. She told them that she was the evidence.

Davis' political reputation was vital to achieving change in the North Minneapolis environmental justice fight. Because of the demographic of the population, the people have little political or social power. The large industries and politicians will not listen to them as they have no established authority. Davis expressed that she feels extremely "privileged to know what to say, how to say it, and who to say it to." As a pioneer for her community, Davis sees the vital need to engage at the social, political, and environmental level to instill change in North Minneapolis and enhance the wellbeing of the residents.

Davis provides a voice for so many who are oppressed by their socio economic status, education level, or race.

Through community outreach, Davis has learned about the population for whom she is fighting. Putting in this "background work" has propelled her to be an even more successful advocate for the North Minneapolis community. By giving people the power of information, Davis helps build a collective voice with which the community can now speak out against environmental injustices.

Having the chance to speak with Davis was truly an honor. The selflessness with which she approaches life is quite inspiring. Whether it is a small act such as pulling over on the freeway to ensure the safety of another driver or pioneering a fight against large corporations that are poisoning communities, Davis is always working to support others. The local level environmental justice work which she has been committed to for over twenty years is crucial to the current moment and the larger fight for equality. Davis should be recognized as an environmental justice heroine of North Minneapolis; her immense compassion for others coupled with the extreme drive to enhance the well-being of those around her is remarkable.

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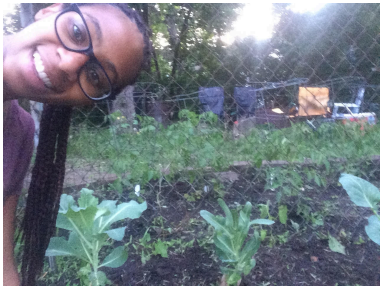
Janiece Watts: Waste, Climate Justice, and Environmental Justice

Mara Short



Janiece Watts

Minneapolis alone produced about 140,000 tons of waste in 2017. According to Eureka employees, 50 percent of items thrown in the trash in Minnesota are recyclable, and 30 percent is compostable. In 2017, the Twin Cities burned 58% of their trash, sent 4% to landfills, recycled 21%, and composted 15% (City of Minneapolis 2018). Eureka employees say that Saint Paul has a rate of 40% recycling and 10% composting. Regardless of the particular numbers, half of what is going into landfills or incinerators is recyclable material.

Waste is a huge part of our lives, and despite the upward trend in recycling, there is still far too much going into the trash. I had a conversation with Janiece Watts about the relationship between waste and environmental justice, and how her work with Eureka Recycling relates to this. I learned that garbage is intimately connected to racial and economic justice, and that if we really want to stop climate change, we need to pay more attention to what we're buying, and what we're throwing away.

Americans produce about 4.4 pounds of trash per person per day; without disposal systems, cities would be nothing but huge piles of garbage. Traditionally there were two main methods to get rid of this waste; what Janiece Watts calls "burn and bury." These disposal methods, rather than being "solutions," are sites of huge environmental injustices. Landfills and incinerators are mostly placed in low-income communities of color, bringing their pollution, emissions, disease, and smell into already vulnerable areas. Janiece Watts sees recycling and composting as a solution to this problem. Recycling reduces the need for these methods of disposal. Rather than only spewing pollution, it brings long-term jobs and reduces pollution and waste that would otherwise be shunted into other minority neighborhoods.

Americans produce about 4.4 pounds of trash per person per day; without disposal systems, cities would be nothing but huge piles of garbage.

The majority of the Twin Cities' waste is incinerated to produce energy. However, incinerators are a real environmental justice problem. They are framed as positive contributors of energy, but in fact are almost exclusively placed in low-income communities of color, and produce massive emissions by burning trash (Peeples 2003). One example is the Hennepin Energy Recovery Center, or HERC, managed by Covanta Energy. This facility is placed in North Minneapolis, a largely minority area that has historically lacked the financial and political resources to

prevent the industrial activity. Janiece Watts has fought HERC with several groups, helping in a community struggle she says began with the facility's proposal 30 years ago.

Since it was built in 1989, HERC has been cited several times for toxic emissions over standard levels (Wright et al). A 2015 Minnesota Pollution Control Agency study in Minneapolis showed that air pollution in North Minneapolis is still above recommended levels, and that heavy metals are in the air breathed by residents (McMahon 2016). Janiece Watts stated that incinerators are one of the largest sources of air pollution and carbon emissions, and indeed HERC is one of the most serious point-source polluters in the state (Wright et al). However, this plant is not regulated as closely as it should be, and a lot of emissions are self-reported, raising community suspicions of the plant. Few studies have been done on the environmental and health effects of garbage incineration, but the high rates of asthma in the community have caused community members to be deeply concerned about HERC (Benson 2014). Asthma is a major concern for North Minneapolis residents, who are mainly low-income and people of color (Tigue 2016). Eureka employee Janiece Watts agrees that "race is the highest predictor of living near these sites" emitting toxic pollution. These factors show that the presence of a garbage incinerator in North Minneapolis demonstrates the environmental injustice of burning trash.

Workers' rights around waste also tie into environmental justice. Watts explains that in landfills and incinerators, workers are usually temporary, and safety and rights standards are lax. Even in many recycling plants, injuries

are frequent and dangerous with a for-profit view, and these workers are often people of color who are more vulnerable and have less of a political voice (Mock 2015). There are serious labor concerns tied into waste disposal that can be solved by more strict standards for labor and for trash.

Eureka recycling is a not-for-profit recycling company that collects the recycling from all of the residents of Saint Paul, as well as some other areas (CSP). They serve 282,000 residents, and provide justice-oriented recycling and outreach services for all. The company is committed to advocating for Zero Waste, and focusing on upstream reduction, as well as reducing the percentage of waste that ends up in landfills and incinerators (Eureka website). The company is profitable, but also committed to making the world more sustainable and just, as Watts explained in our interview together. Her work over the past year has helped the company become more introspective and justice-oriented.

Janiece Watts: Career and current work

A lifelong Minnesotan, Janiece Watts came to Eureka from a background of environmental and social justice organizing. She sees her current EJ work as a way of uniting all of her justice interests under one umbrella. Even just a sampling of her previous jobs can demonstrate just how hard she works, and how broad her justice organizing background is. Watts spent some time with Working America campaigning for economic justice, working to raise wages and get people enrolled in MNsure, Minnesota's state insurance. Following this interest in economic justice, Watts also spent some time at a co-op working for food justice: expanding local food systems, building the local economy through food, and getting

justice for workers. Watts has also been involved in a number of electoral campaigns and voter registration initiatives to increase minority communities' voting access and political voices. The last stop on this chain of activism was at Neighborhoods Organizing for Change (NOC), a grassroots racial justice organization with a variety of initiatives. Watts found Eureka through her work with NOC and a coalition of community groups that came together to fight HERC. Janiece Watts was working at Eureka for less than a year as the Community Engagement Manager in 2018. Her role was to work on outreach and education, help Eureka reach the community, and look at Eureka's relationship to environmental justice. From her lens of racial justice developed from her many years of activism, Watts has a great understanding of the intersection of racial, economic, and environmental concerns that are involved in environmental justice organizing.

In reflecting on this career path, Watts discussed the difference between grassroots and "grasstops" work. She calls government work "grasstops" because it's the opposite of community organizing, as the few privileged people at the top making rules and policies rarely see the larger ground-level impact of their policies. Having worked in both, Watts criticizes the misunderstanding of justice found in "mainstream nonprofits" and government. One of her state-level jobs was an environmental organization, which bought land and set it aside as preserves and natural spaces. Watts called this "place-centered conservation," a way of seeing the environment that relies on the separation of humans and nature. The disconnect between humans and nature in this kind of conservation got her to wondering: what about the people

involved in the environment? Where did they fit into this kind of conservation? These questions and their answers led her away from “grasstops” work to a community-oriented path of environmental justice.

So how has Watts used this lens to view recycling as environmental justice? She explained how waste can be toxic and hazardous, and its health effects are usually pushed onto communities that are already vulnerable to health issues: low-income, underserved, and minority communities. Race is the highest predictor of living near waste disposal sites, and the dangers of living in these areas is known by those in power, and ignored. Watts is adamant that “no one should have to live like that,” and speaks to the power dynamics involved. Her background in economic justice and workers’ rights has also helped her focus on the economic injustices of “burn and bury.” Most of the people employed at waste facilities are immigrants and people of color in temporary positions. These temporary positions mean that landfills and incinerators pay lower wages and have more lax safety standards. This is something Watts and Eureka have been attempting to subvert with their own standards at Eureka.

Waste can be toxic and hazardous, and its health effects are usually pushed onto communities that are already vulnerable to health issues.

Labor and economic standards at Eureka are very different than at most conventional waste facilities. The employees

at the MRF, the truck drivers, and other employees all receive living wages, access to healthcare, paid time off, and insurance. Watts has recently been involved in forming a People of Color and Indigenous workers' caucus at the plant, to ensure that the racial and economic divides between the mainly white office and the mainly minority MRF workers are being discussed. The company wants the MRF employees to be able to speak to management, since at most similar facilities workers rarely have a voice. Labor justice remains a concern of Watts, and Eureka is seeking to set themselves apart from other waste-management facilities. With their not-for-profit model, Watts says that Eureka has the freedom not to think of people as disposable. "We put our values in the way we operate," and justice has to start within the organization if they hope to advocate for justice elsewhere.

In fact, the not-for-profit model does allow the company to put a lot of resources and energy into advocacy. A lot of Watts's work with Eureka has to do with policy. Eureka isn't just trying to reduce waste by physically recycling it; the center has an advocacy arm that focuses on policy. Currently, Watts is seeking to ban plastic bags in Minnesota. Plastic bags are one of the most problematic products made, clogging Eureka's MRF, appearing all over the environment, and, worst of all, they are not feasibly recyclable. In battles such as this, Watts emphasizes a need for relationship building with the community, gaining their understanding, and garnering support. Also necessary is a knowledge of politics. She says plenty of policies seem good on the surface but are actually harmful, and advocates need to know how to tease out the harm from the good. She wants to craft policy that works for everyone and involves everyone, from "tree roots to grasstops," from the

communities impacted, to the policy writers who don't see their policies' impacts in marginalized communities. It's also tough to try and make policy in partnership with other environmental groups, because in mainstream climate activism, waste is often treated as an afterthought.

Policymaking does get difficult when navigating waste advocates' relationship with the climate movement. Watts explains how waste is often left out of the climate change discussion and the mainstream environmental movement. It is brought in as an "afterthought," when it is actually intimately connected to greenhouse gas emissions, land use, and climate change. Recycling reduces the energy costs and emissions from extraction, incineration, and landfilling, and is also more cost-efficient and cleaner. Waste should not be separated from climate change, and bringing the two into conversation, especially with a lens of environmental justice, is vital to the success of the climate movement.

Conclusion: Waste, EJ, and Intersectional Issues

Recycling represents an intersection of issues that places it within environmental justice, and Janiece Watts' work demonstrates this clearly. The interplay between internal and external environmental justice is at the crux of her work; how are workers treated in the environment of the workplace, and how is the work of the Eureka MRF affecting its own surrounding environment?

Recycling causes a ripple effect, with multi varied impacts on the environment and the people in it. Upstream, recycling reduces the need for raw resources, lessening the energy costs of extraction. Downstream, it keeps waste from going into landfills and incinerators, keeping those emissions and toxic wastes from impacting communities

of color. Eureka's dedication to policy and Zero Waste contributes to the wellbeing of the community, and its commitment to its employees' wellbeing is also part of environmental justice.

Eureka is working diligently in the community to spread the word about reducing waste and recycling more. Education is a big part of Watts's job, and she tries to clear up the common confusion around recycling. People often have trouble understanding both the details and the large-scale impacts of recycling. Watts likes to show people that it's "not as complicated as it seems." With community outreach, recycling can become accessible and not confusing. Watts says that knowledge is important; just telling the public about Eureka, what it is and what it does can raise awareness in important ways. Tours give people a view into the workings of a recycling plant, showing them that it's not an opaque and scary process. More understanding of the process and more accessibility can help people recycle more accurately, and can help waste become a bigger player in climate conversations.

Although policy can seem hopeless to many environmental justice advocates, it is not hopeless to Watts. She and other Eureka employees work very hard advocating for policy changes in Minnesota. Eureka's focus on policy shows how the organization is different from other waste management facilities, and provides a model for a better future in waste management.

But most of all, the most refreshing thing about Watts is that she understands what it is to live in this world. She's realistic about where people are at in the process of recycling. She knows that "we all have to live in this system," and thinks it's important to be sympathetic to how

difficult recycling can seem to people, and to help it look fun, important, and easy.

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Alisa Hoven: Using Food and Culture to Promote Environmental Justice

Sabine Peterka

Alisa Hoven

Alisa Hoven can spot a good path. She completed a 2,300 mile bike ride, has lead dog-sled trips near the Boundary Waters and enjoys exploring trails along the Mississippi. Each of these activities takes an eye for pathways, and when it comes to advocating for topics she cares about, Hoven can also identify paths for activism to take.

Hoven, who was working for a non-profit in Minneapolis at the time, took a break from grant writing to speak with me about her work in environmental justice. She told me that she often sees two possible paths for environmental justice activism to take. The first is working toward policy changes within the systems already in place. This work is crucial to making communities livable and alleviating pain in people's day-to-day lives. However, Hoven has found herself beginning to tread more on the second path of activism: creating

alternative spaces outside the oppressive systems that dominate society.

“In every moment, in every community, the largest assault to the environment is from white supremacy and capitalism,” Hoven said. “It’s much bigger than a single issue or one fight for one pipeline; it’s such an oppressive system … So I want each community to be building with people who see that whole system and want to dismantle it. Working from one lens of one issue, I think we’re missing our mark.”

Hoven’s past involvement with environmental justice work has been on a larger scale; she has fought for water and against pipelines, even visiting Standing Rock two years ago. In our conversation, she often referred to her role as supporting the environmental justice movement, rather than leading it. But her efforts have certainly inspired action. Recently, Hoven’s values of education and trust-building have led her to become more involved in local environmental justice work. When I asked about her background in environmental justice, she said that the past six months have been a new stage of her journey as she has applied broad values at a more local level. “I’ve always been interested in how humans interact with the Earth and I feel like we make … a lot of poor choices that impact a lot of people unfairly,” she said.

In 2013, Hoven was a member of the Minnesota GreenCorps through the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency. This program places AmeriCorps members with organizations to promote future protection of the environment. Hoven was then placed at Hope Community in the Phillips neighborhood in 2018, where she worked as a program coordinator for the Healthy Food Strong

Community Program which engages neighbors in urban gardening.

Through neighborhood involvement, Hope Community provided valuable learning opportunities. Hope Community is a nonprofit which started as a homeless shelter in the 1980s. Today, in addition to housing, it provides community gardens and a variety of learning and leadership opportunities. Hope Community is based on a model of engagement, asking the community what changes they want to see and working with them to take those actions. In alignment with this mission, the organization holds regular community listening sessions to provide space for dialog and trust-building. Hope Community also works to involve youth, who survey residents and gather information about the area.

The Phillips neighborhood where Hope Community is located faces a variety of environmental justice concerns, including air pollution, soil contamination and highway construction. Hoven highlighted the irony of sickness and high asthma rates from the air pollution: “The largest polluter in the neighborhood is the hospital,” she told me. Although there are multiple medical buildings in the area, the large facilities worsen the air quality, making people sick. Furthermore, soil was contaminated with arsenic from the CMC Heartland Partners Lite Yard site, a pesticide plant. According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) website, it is likely that arsenic spread from the site into residential yards. The plant was in operation from 1938 to 1963 and clean-up was conducted by the EPA from 2004 to 2008. However, some residents did not respond to requests by the EPA to excavate contaminated soil from their property. In addition to soil contamination and air

pollution, the Phillips neighborhood is intersected by two interstate highways: 94 in the north and 35 in the west. Hoven noted that the construction of these highways displaced residents.

Phillips is a diverse area, which Hope Community embraces. According to 2012 to 2016 census data, Midtown Phillips is 34% black, 31% hispanic and 25% white. The median household income in 2016 was $45,289 but almost 40% of residents made less than $35,000. To compare, the median household income in the U.S. in 2016 was $57,617. When I spoke with Hoven, she emphasized that this diversity enriches conversations about environmental justice topics.

At Hope Community, Hoven dedicated herself to “Ground Work” in the three community gardens which are active April through October. In total, 7,500 square feet of growing space are used and managed by Hope Community and surrounding neighbors. There are also two community kitchens and year-round skill-sharing opportunities such as open garden nights and cooking groups. Hoven told me that many neighbors are eager to share their skills. With a diverse population, everyone has something to teach and something to learn.

“[Ground Work is] focused and centered on food and reclaiming our connection with the land and with each other,” she said. “It’s a super diverse block where there’s lots of different cultures and identities and experiences that get to be in space together and can provide very fruitful, honest conversations and also moments of humility.”

In Ground Work, community members are encouraged to explore their cultural relationship with the Earth, learning

about plants their ancestors grew and sharing family recipes. This work centers on the question "What are our stories of food and culture and where do we come from?" In fact, Hoven uses food as an entry point into deeper conversations on environmental justice topics. Growing, cooking and eating can help people to express and share ideas about home, famine, war, corruption and capitalism. When I asked Hoven about using food as an access point, she noted that identifying or discovering one's relationship with the land is an important step.

Growing, cooking and eating can help people to express and share ideas about home, famine, war, corruption and capitalism.

"Learning and continuing to connect to your own personal story of where your people come from and what relationship they had with the land, what harm and healing has happened – that's important I think with any work," Hoven said.

In fact, Hoven has enjoyed diving into her own ancestral histories of hurting and healing. To reflect on the harm and healing related to one's heritage without bringing guilt is extremely valuable, she said. She told me that coming from a healthy identity and a place of trust and loving allows for more open communication with coworkers. An awareness of her own identity has helped her find her role in her work.

"I am a European identified cis female who comes from more of a middle-class background, and that's not a

common demographic in the community," Hoven said. "I definitely am in community with an awareness of that privilege that I bring."

Being conscious of her identity allows Hoven to build trust through commitment and open communication. She said that through her work, she rejects charity models and mindsets, seeking to work with — rather than for — the community. Joining a project because it is well-funded does not earn trust, Hoven told me. Having devoted herself to work in the Phillips community for almost five years, Hoven has proven persistent dedication.

"[To build trust,] come in with humility and really wanting to work with the community to create change," Hoven said. "I do not believe that [a charity mindset] is how transformational change happens. So I'm just generally in the midst of people sharing about my lived experience and hearing theirs."

Hoven is also conscious of when to step in or step back. With a laugh, she mentioned that as a quiet Midwesterner, outspokenness does not come naturally. While she challenges herself to use her voice to push where and when she sees a need, she also recognizes that she is not equipped for every job. A new Wellness Garden project meant to provide for people of color, for example, is something she strongly supports but will not lead. Rather, Hoven said her role is to listen.

"[I am] definitely working to listen and understand people's experiences," she said. "And I think the main pillar of my work or sort of my goal is to listen and help make the connections that people want to make the changes

they want to see. I am definitely more of a leader on the side."

Hoven left her work at Hope Community in the summer of 2018. In the past six months, she has delved into more local environmental justice work by starting her own LLC, named Wild Heart. Wild Heart is centered on garden services + education. She hopes to bring that into community work, with the overarching goals of "…nourishing food for humans while creating spaces for pollinators". Hoven has been able to provide gardening services amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, but has had to pause her educational efforts due to social distancing and the ways of coming together in person are made more difficult by the pandemic. She hopes to offer more education and workshops once we come back together.

"Part of the reason why I started the LLC…was because I wanted to keep my hands in the dirt and work directly with the communities. I also have more autonomy working for myself, allowing me to focus on whichever projects I think I could help most with."

Hoven is spending part of her summer at Buttermilk Falls CSA & Folk School Retreat, a farm in Osceola, Wisconsin.

Buttermilk Falls is a nonprofit farm that "…creates direct connections between the people who eat the food, the land, and the people who grow the food." They plant, grow and harvest their produce without using any harmful herbicides, pesticides or insecticides, aiming to maintain a healthy relationship with the land they are on. There is also a focus on understanding the history of the land that is being farmed, where individuals who visit or work at the farm are given the room to reflect on this history and are encouraged to reflect on their own histories and lineages in the process.

Individuals who visit or work at the farm are given the room to reflect on this history and are encouraged to reflect on their own histories and lineages in the process.

During her time at this farm, Hoven develops a curriculum and manages day camps for children, educating them on gardening and the importance of having a relationship with their food and where it comes from. She is currently exploring the ways she can decolonize her teaching practices and show up fully and honestly to the hard life-long work of coming back to each other and the land.

"Teaching these children and working with these communities, I am often asking myself 'How can we honorably harvest something from the land (a concept she learned from Robin Wall Kimmerer)? What has enabled us to be around gardens?' I think these food stories and really

questioning the ethics behind our work is key to bringing us closer to the land and each other."

She sees value in celebrating small moments, even if complete healing is still a long way off. Maybe her goal of food, water, medicine and liberation for everyone will not come to fruition in her lifetime, but she believes that the people she impacts in her life can carry that work to the next generation and beyond. For now, victories like a good growing season are well worth recognizing.

"There's a lot of healing work to do," she said.

While this may be true, Hoven seems to be on a path toward the creation of new, liberating systems of environmental justice. In our conversation, Hoven painted a hopeful and idyllic image of "small, integrated communities who work to grow and share food together" with an emphasis on mutual aid autonomy. Hoven's healing work promotes healthy relationships among neighbors, with the planet and with the past. And it all starts with food.

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Heidi Affi: Channeling Passions, Art, and Hope into the Environmental Justice Movement

Quinn Rafferty

The environmental justice movement in Minnesota needs more wickedly bold, unforgivingly honest, and open-minded people; cue in Heidi Affi (she/her/hers).

Heidi Affi

On a brisk and sunny day, Affi and I sat in Dunn Brothers surrounded by the strong aroma of roasting beans and constant bustle of cafe-goers to discuss Affi's journey within the environmental justice movement. Racial justice, food insecurity and indigenous peoples' rights are Affi's passions, but her drive to be an environmental justice activist stems from a fundamental moral belief that complacency and passivity are unacceptable. Her candid responses and willingness to invite me in to explore her struggles with the movement provoked me to think about the gap between social justice theory and the reality of what truly happens on the ground.

Affi's academic journey took a roundabout approach before she found herself pursuing environmental justice. Affi graduated from Macalester as a double major in

Religious Studies and Political Science with a minor in Environmental Studies. Through her time at Macalester, Affi became acutely aware of the constant increase in injustices throughout the Twin Cities. By the end of her Macalester career, her studies mainly focused on environmental justice and modern US policies and politics.

During her college years, Affi capitalized on Macalester's unique location and allowed herself to get involved off-campus and begin specializing her career path before entering the professional post-graduate world. Affi had the opportunity to work with several non-profits in the Twin Cities and intern with the Pollution Control Agency. The path was winding and long. Affi's first experience working with nonprofits in the Twin Cities was with Food and Water Watch. From February 2014 to May 2014, Affi worked as a Campaign Intern; in this role, her responsibilities included petitioning and phone banking in the St. Paul community in the fight against the use of antibiotics in livestock. After her four months working with Food and Water Watch, Affi was an Elementary School Intern for the Schlitz Audubon Nature Center. Soon after, she found herself working with the non-profit Clean Water Action. During her time with Clean Water Action, she was a Legislative Program Intern and Field Canvasser. Through this position she fostered her communication and fundraising skills through the community engagement portion her job entailed. Then from September 2015 to December 2015, Affi was a research intern for the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA). Her major task for PCA included researching and drafting the preliminary Clean Water Act 404 State Assumption Study. During her senior year, Heidi worked at the Science Museum of Minnesota in the Kitty Andersen Youth Science Center, providing support to high

schoolers in an STEM Justice focused after school program.

After graduating from Macalester, Affi continued to develop her professional skills through community engagement and outreach positions. For nine months, Affi worked for Honor the Earth, a nonprofit aimed at raising awareness and financial support for Indigenous environmental justice[1], as a community organizer. Her responsibilities included campaigning and protesting against pipeline construction in Minnesota's Great North, planning community building events, and advocating for the recognition of treaty rights and tribal sovereignty in Minnesota's state government.

While she gained consequential skills and worked with some fantastic people throughout all her volunteer positions and internships, there was a significant obstacle Affi did not expect to encounter: Affi became a victim and observer of the nonprofit industrial complex (NPIC). The NPIC is a system of relationships between the State (or local and federal governments), the owning classes, foundations, and non-profit/NGO social service social justice organizations that results in the surveillance, control, derailment, and everyday management of political movements.[2] With these partnerships, the state manipulates nonprofits to pursue and spend their energy on actions that ultimately end up proliferating injustices even further. For example, state power structures often co-opt nonprofits and activists' energies away from mass-based organizing because these strategies would in reality create legitimate change. Another prominent and common issue within the NPIC is that corporations mask their exploitative and colonial practices by using nonprofits or

grants in their “philanthropic” work. Consequently, social movements are encouraged to follow capitalist structures rather than challenge them. All the while, employees and interns working at these organizations are made to believe that they can only make a significant difference within the field only through expending all their energy in nonprofits, often creating overexertion and exhaustion. This is quite problematic not only because it further perpetuates the harms of the NPIC, but is also a recipe for high rates of burnout; Affi shares that her energy and efforts were exploited from within the organizations she worked for.
Nonprofits are not as pure as they are romanticized to be. Affi describes these pre-disposed idealistic assumptions about working with non-profits as one of the factors that pushed her towards burnout. Her acute sense of awareness of NPIC problems combined with the ever-growing sense of urgency to push for change caused the pressure to accumulate into a monstrous personal obstacle. “How do we get urgency out to the community but maintain our sense of wellness?” asked Affi. The demand for better work standards, self-care and reflection are under-appreciated and underlying facets of the world of environmental justice. Affi discovered these aspects through her journey to find her place in the movement, where she believed she could make the greatest change without compromising her morals.

Another frustration Affi faced in the nonprofit system was a lack of recognition for serious social justice issues within the organizations. Affi sees this issue largely as a product of environmental justice being a blanket term often encompassing non justice related work in combination with an overall lack of understanding of the intersectionality between different social injustices. Affi

found that within one organization in particular, there was a narrow vision of what issues the non-profit should and should not consider to tackle. It was a shock that nonprofits did not seek a vision of complete equity but rather, strides in their personal agendas. That organization in particular was rife with sexual transgressions and racism amongst and towards employees. As Affi saw it, the passivity towards these problems violated not only the overall goal of environmental justice but also her personal morals. The non-profit organizations that Affi worked for often ignored issues outside their "domain of interest," which ultimately was a manifested version of racist passivity and gender violence through institutional practices. Affi saw these harmful flaws within the system and decided that she did not want to be a part of an organization that pursued this model. "The beautiful thing about environmental justice for me is that it really puts in perspective how everyone is connected," said Affi. The scope of importance and chosen fights should not be limited but rather embraced and encompassed in their entirety. But with this multitude of intersectionalities between social, economic, cultural, racial, and political spheres, the problem that arises is: Where do we start?

"The beautiful thing about environmental justice for me is that it really puts in perspective how everyone is connected."

This is a question Affi finds herself constantly pondering. A question that seems simple, but when we dive deeper into its hidden implications, the answer becomes incredibly

complicated. Then to make matters more difficult, Affi expressed the difficulty in finding her place in the movement and what she could do best to contribute. Affi found herself trapped in an environmental justice inception. The movement as a whole is trying to fight for justice, recognition, and change for marginalized communities yet, as an active participant inside, Affi found herself fighting for validity and recognition of pertinent issues to be included.

Affi also recognizes that many mechanisms of environmental injustice stem from our Western dominant ways of thinking, which are being exported around the world at an exponential rate. There is an ugly and damaging drive that manifests itself into an attitude of claiming superiority over the earth, resources, labor, so called 'races', law and order, and religion. We are all engulfed in this system and as a consequence, it consumes all of us. "I have felt very small and overwhelmed by facing the power and embedded strength of this worldview. This country was founded on that field of thought," expressed Affi. The repercussions of this particular field of thought is dangerous, harmful and parasitic.

This harm is amplified at an even larger scale due to the intense corporate control in Minnesota. Within the Twin Cities, there is a corporate presence of companies such as 3M and Target which act within the non-profit complex as large stakeholders. With these corporate ties, the motivation and the fight for justice becomes blurred. From Affi's experience, she expressed that there appears to be a strong symbiotic relationship between the corporations in Minnesota and the non-profit organization system. To fight corporate power and their grasp on the environmental

justice movement is an enormous undertaking. Additionally, many of these environmental justice organizations, in addition to being up against very powerful social structures, are also very implicated in white supremacy, colonization, and the nonprofit industrial complex. The lines of what is the right work and what is the wrong work become even more blurred and we are once again faced with the question: Where do we start?

A good place to start with this question is through self-reflection. Some advice Affi gave me during our interview was that no one individual is going to fix all the injustices completely and to be in this line of work, one needs to make sure they evaluate what they can do realistically to optimize the change they can create. The projects she is now pursuing are examples of her own advice. For Affi's professional career, she is working with the Kitty Andersen Youth Science Center (KAYSC) in the Science Museum of Minnesota as a crew member. KAYSC is an out of school program that provides programing for underserved youth with the goals of building leadership skills, career readiness, and fostering confidence and appreciation of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM)[3]. As a crew member, Affi has had the opportunity to work with about 70 high schoolers consistently and directly manage a smaller subset group of 11. While Affi helps and manages

One needs to make sure they evaluate what they can do realistically to optimize the change they can create.

the group, the high schoolers are the ones who spearhead projects that have a larger emphasis on environmental racism and social justice. The types of projects they pursue range from making videos and zines – noncommercial publications devoted to specialized and often unconventional subject matter[4]– about food insecurity, segregation, and pollution in the Twin Cities.

Personally, Affi is undertaking a project where she will create art narrating and explaining her Syrian, Arab-American identity. This personal endeavor will depict the relationship between Syrians and their environments as they exist in a war, as refugees, and/or as settlers in a new land. It will also depict the civil war and other conflicts as results of the same worldview that feed the fossil fuel industry, globalization, and the domination of race and religion. For the past 60 years, the Middle East has experienced severe environmental injustices such as being dominated by white superpowers, the ever-growing presence of the fossil fuel industry, and land exploitation. Affi hopes that with her project, she can bring to light this topic to the Twin Cities.

Affi's persistence, passion and veracity are unquenchable. While her journey through environmental justice has been a rough road, she still has retained a pocket of optimism for the future. "There are some really smart youth out there and the work that they are doing inspires me too," said Affi. As tensions in the Twin Cities continually increase, the need to fight the good fight becomes even more demanding. A couple of issues Affi has her eyes on for the future of Minnesota are gentrification, elimination of food deserts, disrupting the fossil fuel industry and pushing for the establishment of renewable initiatives. The trials and

tribulations through the NPIC in the Twin Cities are indicators of problems larger than any one person and the fact that Affi has come out of the system with the urge to continue to fight for what she believes in, is admirable beyond words. Our national stage is ready for social justice warriors like Heidi Affi.

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Chanelle Crosby: Zero Waste as a Solution to Environmental Injustices

Lianna Goldstein

Chanelle Crosby

How does our consumption drive our trash production? Why is it that the communities who may produce the least amount of the trash are stuck with the burden of living near incinerators? Minority communities breathe compromised air each day, while those who have higher trash production aren't being affected. How come minority communities are the ones located in food deserts? Who is fighting for their right to access safe and clean food? While many have yet to draw the connection between Zero Waste and Environmental Justice, Chanelle Crosby has found that the disconnect between the two may be preventing both movements from reaching their full potential. Chanelle has tied the two together, stating that, "Zero Waste is a solution to environmental injustices." Through utilizing the mindset and framework of Zero Waste, Chanelle is hopeful that environmental justice violations can be minimized.

On April 13th, 2018 I had the fortunate opportunity to interview Chanelle at Empire Coffee in Minneapolis. The main goal of the interview was to have a conversation with someone who is currently working in the environmental

field in order to gain a stronger understanding of how young activists, like myself can tie together the knowledge we have of environmental justice and apply it to our communities to make a difference. I am hopeful that Chanelle's experience and knowledge can be learned by others who have an interest in similar future work. It is valuable to hear the story of someone whose work has influenced both the Zero Waste and environmental justice movement. Chanelle's framework of environmental justice and Zero Waste gives a critical, yet needed perspective on how we can put an end to environmental injustices by approaching our lifestyle in a new way.

Her Story

Chanelle Crosby's work focuses mainly on educating and advocating Zero Waste throughout the Twin Cities communities. She was the Zero Waste Programs Manager at Eureka Recycling, a non-profit recycling program in Minneapolis that focuses on reuse, recycling, composting, waste reduction, and producer responsibility. Its mission is to demonstrate that waste is preventable, not inevitable (Eureka Recycling: Mission, n.d.). As the Zero Waste Programs Manager, she organized events all across the metro area relating to Zero Waste. At these events, there are volunteers who learn and demonstrate Zero Waste living. Afterwards, the volunteers have an increased competence on the subject and are more likely to conduct the sustainable actions in their personal life. Through hearing other Zero Waste stories and experiences, these volunteers feel empowered and take the knowledge they gained back home or to the workplace and in doing so, they spread awareness and encourage others to join in.

In addition to working at Eureka, Chanelle was a board

member for the organization Be Zero. Be Zero, now disbanded, was a grassroots non-profit with ambassadors all over the world doing local advocacy work regarding Zero Waste. It was based out of Boulder, Colorado and is where Chanelle had her first exposure to the concept of Zero Waste. Be Zero's work included teaching accessible methods for reducing trash, sharing resources and tools for reducing overconsumption, and inspiring individuals to adapt low-waste friendly lifestyles. Being a part of this organization has taught Chanelle how to live in a simple, supportive, sustainable way both as person and consumer.

As of July 2020, Chanelle is working as a Botanic Specialist with the Portland Community Gardens program in Portland, Oregon. She continues to use an intersectional framework to advocate for and embody regenerative practices for positive impacts on our lives, and ecosystems. Her work is still rooted in food security, the environment, health, and liberation.

Prior to moving to Minnesota to work at Eureka Recycling, Chanelle lived in Colorado and did freelance work. During this transition from Colorado to Minnesota, Chanelle's interest in Zero Waste grew exponentially. As she moved halfway across the country, she realized she was trying to move too many possessions and instead should reevaluate the amount of things she owned. As she pulled things out, categorized, and downsized her belongings, she thought about how she was consuming. She had a realization that not only was she over consuming, but she was participating in "fast fashion." Fast fashion is when people buy more clothes than they need in order to keep up with the "trends" as they go in and out of style. Because of fast fashion, the life of textiles has been cut drastically short. This causes

many negative environmental impacts such as water pollution, the use of toxic chemicals, and increasing levels of textile waste (Perry, 2018). Overall she found herself conducting unsustainable purchasing habits and knew something had to change, and that change was to focus on Zero Waste.

Zero Waste is a philosophy that encourages the redesign of resource life cycles so that all products are reused. It is more than just eliminating waste through recycling and reuse, rather it focuses on restructuring production in order to reduce waste (Platt, 2018). A major component of the Zero Waste model is the cradle to cradle approach. This tactic re-defines problems by focusing on design (The National Recycling Coalition, 2016). For example, we must design products in a way so that materials flow in closed loop cycles and waste is minimized. Recycling is only the first step towards a Zero Waste future; to further the movement we must also build awareness and education. In addition, Zero Waste can be used in many different contexts as demonstrated by Bea Johnson in her book Zero Waste Home which applies Zero Waste to the individual and their lifestyle. After reading this book, Chanelle realized that she was already modeling her lifestyle off of Johnson's tactics. The book reminds us that the Zero Waste lifestyle can be unique and individualized for each person. It is not about producing solely "no waste" but instead how each person can implement more sustainable practices into their lifestyle.

According to Chanelle, environmental justice quite literally means justice for our environment, but she also has an innovative vision for the movement.During our conversation she recalls a memoir from the book Braiding

Sweetgrass by Robin Wall Kimmerer where the author, who is a teacher, asked her students "do you love and care about the environment?" and all of the students immediately raised their hands. But when asked "do you think the environment loves you back?" nobody raised their hands. This prompted a conversation where the students questioned why would Earth love us after everything we have put it through like pollution, deforestation, and more? It is important to recognize that even after all of the damage we have caused, Earth keeps on providing for us, showing that if Earth did not love us back, it would not keep on giving. The link between us and the Earth shows the mutual relationship between giving and receiving. We need to give to Earth in order for Earth to continue giving to us. We must make a change in how we treat Earth, starting with minimizing environmental justice violations.

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Environmental Justice Issues

According to the Environmental Protection Agency, environmental justice is defined as "the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income, with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of

environmental laws, regulations, and policies." Environmental justice violations have been and continue to be an issue, but it was not until the early 1980's when people finally realized it. It all began in 1982 in Warren County, North Carolina when the State of North Carolina deemed its location a safe place to build a landfill and deposit contaminated soil. The community in Warren County is 75% African American and considered low income. Not surprisingly, residents feared their water would be contaminated by PCB, a hazardous chemical, and conducted a sit-in in hopes to stop the construction of the landfill. Although the protest was unsuccessful, this event is understood to be the catalyst for the environmental justice movement that would change the future of environmental injustices (Environmental Justice, 2018).

Historically, it is clear that environmental justice has not been held, and as a result, many minority and indigenous populations have taken a brutal beating due to the lack of equality regarding environmental issues. Even today, pipelines, incinerators, and landfills tend to be located in minority communities, adversely affecting black communities and indigenous populations. Here in Minnesota, the Hennepin Energy Recovery Center, hereinafter referred to as HERC, is a facility that burns garbage to create energy, resulting in pollution and poor air quality in the surrounding neighborhoods. Let us take a moment to think where HERC is located. It is not located in upper class white neighborhoods, but instead in downtown Minneapolis which inhabits many minority communities. According to a justice map, the neighborhoods just north of HERC, Near North, Hawthorne, and Jordan, household income is between $20-30k per year and over 80% are non-white residents (Justice Map – Visualize race and income

data for your community, n.d.). One of the worst aspects of HERC is that the energy does not even power the communities who have to endure the pollution; instead most of the energy is used to power Target Field. This trend is seen not only in our community, but all over the world and we must stop these environmental injustices from happening in the first place by examining our own lifestyle.

Our waste production ultimately contributes to these environmental justice violations. Chanelle sees three main environmental justice issues that we can combat by promoting a Zero Waste mindset. The first issue examines the link between pipelines, incinerators and trash production and how our consumption drives our trash production. As stated earlier, many pipelines and incinerators are located in minority communities. In order to combat these injustices, we must recognize how our goods are wrapped. Our trash production may eventually go to an incinerator and if we do not want to support incinerators, we must use our voice to make a difference. Chanelle recommends we go to the manufacturer and tell them “We don’t want to support pipelines and incinerators, so you have to stop making this product wrapped in this material, otherwise you will lose my purchase.” Instead of adding to the trash production, we are encouraging the producer to think in a Zero Waste mindset so that their products flow in a closed loop. We are using the power of the consumer and human voice to make a difference.

Chanelle also points out that there is a lack of representation for people of color in the Zero Waste

movement. She says there are and always have been people of color doing this work, but for some reason they have not had the opportunity to be heard. It is important that all stories and voices are shared and heard. She explains that although the Zero Waste movement can come across as extreme, elitist, and superficial, people of color can change the representation of Zero Waste by sharing their stories and experiences. Chanelle is a prime example of someone who is using her stories as anecdotal evidence as a woman of color to change the representation of Zero Waste. She is involved in many different Zero Waste organizations and proves to be making a difference with her work.

Although the Zero Waste movement can come across as extreme, elitist, and superficial, people of color can change the representation of Zero Waste by sharing their stories and experiences.

Lastly, food deserts are a major concern within the Twin Cities area. Within the metro area, there are areas where there are no grocery stores within two miles; these places are often called food deserts or food apartheids. A food desert is a part of the country lacking fresh fruit, vegetables, and other healthful whole foods, usually found in impoverished areas… which is largely due to a lack of grocery stores, farmers' markets, and healthy food providers" (USDA Defines Food Deserts, n.d.). Minnesota is ranked as the 7th worst state in the nation with no

groceries close to their homes and “more than 1.6 million Minnesotans — 30 percent of the state’s population — lack easy access to healthy food” (Kamal 2017; Reinan, 2017). Fortunately, many have realized this concern and are fighting for food justice, the connection between what people eat, what kind of food is produced, and how it is accessed (Gottlieb, 2009).

Chanelle was a volunteer at Open Arms of Minnesota, a nonprofit that grows, cooks, and delivers nutritious meals to people in the Twin Cities area. Specifically, it has created a support network for people in the community who live with life-threatening illnesses. Doing so ensures that even if people do not have access or the opportunity to go to a grocery store, they are still provided with food. Open Arms believes that food is medicine and provides over 600,000 meals each year to people living with cancer, HIV/AIDS, multiple sclerosis and ALS, as well as their caretakers and dependents (Open Arms of Minnesota, n.d.). Through support and joining organizations like Open Arms, we can help better understand the connection between environmental justice and food justice and the necessary actions that need to be taken in order to stop these health disparities.

Conclusion

My interview with Chanelle reminds us that in the fight for environmental justice, it can be beneficial to focus with a Zero Waste mindset. Zero Waste has proven to be a strong tactic both in environmental justice and the environmentalist movement as a whole. Zero Waste is a solution to environmental injustices. It is important to recognize that Zero Waste is more than a white environmentalist movement. It may appear that you have

to have certain resources to be Zero Waste, but this is not necessarily true. Zero Waste is a mindset that is individualized and unique to each person. Chanelle's work is the beginning of a powerful movement that connects Zero Waste and environmental justice.

Chanelle's main motivation comes from Braiding Sweetgrass which states, "In gathering roots, just plunging in will get you nothing but a hole. We have to unlearn hurrying. This is about slowness. First we give. Then we take." This quote reminds us that the fight for environmental justice can be a long slow marathon process. Although it can be overwhelming, according to Chanelle, we must be patient and think about how we can transform pain and emerge into something new. We must be inclusive and put in the work in order to come out with something greater. This philosophy was inspired by the quote "Nobody is free until everybody is free" by Fannie Lou Hamer.

The question now becomes, what work needs to be done to achieve this justice? Chanelle has several recommendations to those who want to get involved in the movement. One of the biggest struggles toward progress is the lack of intergenerational conversations within the community. We must start communicating with people who are not our peers in order to grow as people in all generations. As stated earlier, if we want to change the representation of the Zero Waste movement, everyone must have the opportunity to share their experiences; the power of stories is much stronger than many people think. Personal narratives and anecdotal evidences have proven to be most relevant and effective. Lastly, there are many

people doing amazing work in the environmental justice movement and we must recognize, support, and join them.

Chanelle's optimistic and insightful outlook on environmental justice is just the beginning. In her concluding statement she said "What changes do you want to see in the world? We can't do anything without the support of each other. We must see the value in ourselves as much as we see the value in Earth. Earth needs us and we need Earth."

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Elise Roberts: Witness for Peace Solidarity Collective

Elise Roberts(left) and Francia Marquez(right). Francia is a colleague of Roberts from Colombia who won the Goldman Prize in April, 2018

Traveling to sixty countries in ten years? Working for the United Nations? Elise Roberts has done it all.

Roberts is a Macalester graduate who is currently a core member of the Witness for Peace Solidarity Collective, a workers collective continuing the work of an organization called Witness for Peace. The Solidarity Collective works towards supporting peace, justice and sustainable economies in the Americas. They do so by conducting educational delegations in Latin America and by influencing policy change in the United States. With popular education programming at the core of their work, the Solidarity Collective aims to influence policy change in the United States' systems that often tend to have an impact on governments across the world.

I got the opportunity to interview Roberts for an assignment that was part of my Environmental Justice class at Macalester. The interview was conducted on the 17th of

April, at the Dunn Bros on Grand in order to learn about her involvement in Environmental Justice work. Roberts explained how a large part of the work she does involves supporting Environmental Justice movements in Latin America. Further, she spoke about the interdependent nature of human rights and environmental justice and how both are equally crucial to the establishment of sustainable governments and economies. This report covers my interview with Elise Roberts, on her journey to Witness for Peace and her work within the organization.

Her Journey

Roberts graduated from Macalester in 2003 with a double major in Sociology and Literature. Post graduation, she took a gap year and backpacked over Latin America by beginning her trip to Mexico. She then went on to conduct programs for gap year students that mainly focused on analyzing power and privilege in society. Following this, she worked for several international justice organizations including the United Nations. Through this journey, she began to realize how the broader power structure in place still continued to privilege certain systems, mainly systems in the US. She called this a “giant mis-serving charity model” that actually did not achieve any justice. Reflecting on her position in these various systems, she began looking for ways in which she could influence change in the US. Roberts explained how a part of this process was recognizing how she as a white woman from Minnesota needed to be cognizant of the space she took up while trying to create this positive change.

She began seeking work that would allow her to make a change in US systems connected to broader systems all over the world. She got her masters in international justice

and non-profit management at Columbia University after which she began working for Witness for Peace. Witness for Peace was founded in Nicaragua during the Contra War. And ever since, the organization has established themselves in countries where they see the most drastic impact of US intervention. Roberts, who worked as the national coordinator and was a founder of the Solidarity Collective, described that Witness for Peace was different from most international justice organizations that work around building institutions in different countries to create change. The Witness for Peace organizations, on the other hand, works more on self-reflection on the broader systems the US supports and further works toward understanding the responsibility that they have related to that support.

Witness for Peace achieves this in three ways: conducting education programs, influencing policy change and building transnational solidarity. The education programs take delegations to countries in Latin America to participate in an immersive learning experience connected to grassroots social movements. The most recent delegations have travelled to Cuba, Colombia, Nicaragua, Mexico and Honduras. When these delegations return to the US, they are encouraged to use their experience to create policy change. This could be through a presentation to a local congressperson or even a media story by American journalists who continues the movement of their counterparts in Latin America.

At their core, Witness for Peace is a popular education organization that focuses on making connections to support people’s advocacy. Roberts herself has conducted several of these educational trips. She spoke of one in particular that she deemed very successful, where she took Ilhan Omar on a delegation to Honduras. On returning from the

trip, Omar introduced a resolution in the state legislature to support the Berta Cáceres Act. Hence, through Witness for Peace, Elise ensures that the delegations from these trips create ripples of change in US policy which is connected to larger systems across the world.

Through the work she has accomplished as well as her goals for the future, it is evident that Roberts is a woman who has a passion for social change. It is noticeable that while carrying out this work, she is aware of the place she occupies and the privilege she carries. Roberts mentioned multiple times during the course of our meeting that there is a need to undo certain colonial structures that work in and around our lives. She then pointed out how this is related to "how we are distributing wealth, access to media and access to the opportunity to travel internationally."

Environmental Justice Work

Elise Robert's work as mentioned above largely focuses on maintaining human rights, nonviolence, social and economic justice, and sustainable development in countries in Latin America. A huge part of this work is supporting closely related environmental justice movements and activities. Environmental justice is integral to the preservation of peace and justice in these communities.

The environmental injustices faced by the communities stems from US government and/or US business interest for a hydroelectric dam, solar panels, mines or free trade zones etc. In uncovering and resisting these injustices, Roberts places a large focus on supporting the local indigenous and religious leaders and their movements.

Environmental justice is integral to the preservation of peace and justice in these communities.

One particular activist that Roberts was especially passionate about supporting was Berta Cáceres, a Honduran environmental activist. Witness for Peace is largely located in countries in Latin America as this is where they see the most drastic impact of US intervention. Honduras saw a rise in the number of mining projects in the past thirty years, which resulted in an increase in the demand for energy. For this reason, the government sanctioned off large areas of land and rivers to private companies for dam projects. Several of these private companies were US-based and were hence backed by US taxpayer money. This large-scale privatization resulted in the uprooting of indigenous communities.

One such community was the Lenca people who had to face the consequences of the Agua Zarca Dam. The construction of this dam would occur on the Gualcarque River which would cut off their access to water, food and medicine. This violated international treaties governing indigenous peoples' rights, and additionally also violated the right of the Lenca to sustainably manage and live off

of their land. Berta Cáceres, a Lenca woman, was at the forefront of the resistance against the construction of the dam on the river which was of spiritual importance to the Lenca people.

One of Witness for Peace's largest campaigns had been on their interaction with Berta Cáceres and the construction. They had worked with Cáceres and her family for several years and had provided human rights accompaniers for them up until her death. Ultimately, the people who carried out her assassination were not only connected to the corporation that has ties to the United States but also the military which is trained and funded by the US. Hence, Witness for Peace took up the responsibility to influence the way US taxpayer money was being used by US businesses and the military. Within three and a half months of Cáceres' death, Elise became the organizing coordinator of legislation into the Congress to cut funding to military aid. This is one of the ways that Roberts, as the national coordinator, guides Witness for Peace to identify links between US policy and injustices across to world and then induce change through those links.

On speaking about her involvement with Witness for Peace, Roberts explained how she is largely working for what is essentially a policy organization. She said, "we

“How do we undo existing colonial structures as they do their work – ie. how are we distributing wealth, access to media, access to the opportunity to travel internationally?”

believe that we need to change policy to change the world; but we don’t think the representatives are going to be the ones doing it.” So some the overarching questions that guide their work are: “How do we undo existing colonial structures as they do their work – ie. how are we distributing wealth, access to media, access to the opportunity to travel internationally?”

Additionally, Roberts is cognizant of the space taken up within the organization as well. Initially, most of the delegations comprised of older, white men. But over time Witness for Peace has increasingly worked towards creating delegations that have young, queer, people of color. Currently seven of the delegations are all people of color, and one is an all black women delegation. Roberts says that this change within the organization has allowed to place those at the heart of building intersectional movements at the forefront of the work done at Witness for Peace.

Roberts also made sure to clarify that the educational trips by the delegations were serious work. They aren’t only educational, in the sense that the individuals who return from the trip have a weighty responsibility of using their experiences to create impactful change while continuing to support the grassroots movements. In supporting these

movements, Roberts clarified how important it was to understand that the activists in these countries are the bosses, and that their agendas were amplified by Witness for Peace and its delegations. This reflective of Roberts' efforts to support local movements in a way that is not intrusive and overbearing.

In conclusion, Roberts spoke about what success means to her. Owing to the arduous nature of her work, she mentioned how it's often difficult to remain optimistic when death threats and the murder of close colleagues are rampant. However, amidst the often harrowing work, Roberts looks for small successes. She believes that any impact, regardless of the size, has the ability to create meaningful change. And therefore, by reflecting on her personal experiences, Roberts advised that appreciating all the small successes helps power through larger failures.

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Jason Rodney: Climate Youth and Activism

Sophie Mark-Ng

Jason Rodney

Jason Rodney is Program Coordinator for YEA! MN (Youth Environmental Activists Minnesota) – a core program of Climate Generation, a Will Steger Legacy.

I met Jason Rodney on a Wednesday afternoon in a coffee shop in St. Paul. He had managed to find time in his busy day to talk to me about his climate justice work. He arrived right on time with his bike helmet in hand having biked to meet me despite the near freezing temperatures. The area was familiar to him as it was right near Macalester College, where he graduated from in 2010.

Jason Rodney grew up outside of Cleveland, Ohio before moving to St, Paul, Minnesota in 2006 to attend Macalester College. Prior to college, Rodney had never been involved in environmental activism. However, something about Macalester's culture often sparks activism in the students here. Many of us are privileged in that we do not have to think about climate change in our everyday lives. Rodney's realization that climate change was an urgent issue that demanded immediate action came from viewing the film

"An Inconvenient Truth," which features Al Gore speaking on increasing awareness surrounding global warming and climate change. This inspired him to join MacCARES, a student-run organization at Macalester focused on environmental sustainability. This organization addresses the broad issue of climate change, but classes such as Environmental Justice deepened his knowledge on the ways in which climate affects people. It taught him the inequality of climate change: it most strongly affects those that are most marginalized and have the fewest resources to deal with the effects of climate change.

Becoming involved with MacCARES alongside other community led organizations inspired Rodney to attempt to create his own major, one relating to community organizing surrounding environmental justice work. However, when proposing this major, Rodney was pointed in the direction of American Studies which looks at the influence of race and ethnicity in the United States. This department is very interdisciplinary, looking at the influence of racism and ethnicity across time in education, art, and, of course, the environment. Rodney graduated with an American Studies degree in 2010, but with a strong connection to the Environmental Studies department.

Looking at Environmental Studies through a lens which closely examines the importance of race and ethnicity lends itself to environmental justice work. Under the category of environmental justice is climate justice, the crossing between climate change activism and environmental justice work. Although the majority of climate change causing greenhouse gas emissions are emitted by wealthier countries typically categorized as "developed countries," climate change will disproportionately affect less wealthy

countries often referred to as “developing countries.” On a smaller scale, more wealthy communities will have a larger environmental impact, while less wealthy communities will have to bear the brunt of those impacts. In addition, countries and communities that are less wealthy have fewer resources to adjust to the effects climate change will bring including rising sea levels, warmer and more humid climates (in some locations), and an increase in extreme weather events. As a whole, climate change will more directly and more strongly affect BIPOC communities in the US and internationally.

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Locally, the proposed Line 3 pipeline is an example of a climate injustice. Enbridge seeks to build a new pipeline to replace an aging one which brings oil from Canada to the US. However, the new route for the proposed pipeline will cut across indigenous land through sacred sites and across wild rice lakes. This not only would destroy areas of cultural importance to Indigenous people, but it would put an important food source for them at risk from inevitable oil spills. The new pipeline would harm Indigenous populations to serve wealthier communities, continuing with the historic pattern of the health of Indigenous communities being placed below the luxuries for others.

Beyond race and class, there is the issue of age. Previous

generations have created our current reliance on fossil fuels and caused much of our environmental harms, but it is today's youth that must deal with the consequences and clean up the mess that has been made. In a way, this is an environmental justice issue because one group must live with the environmental harms caused by another.

Rodney binds both of these injustices in his work by uplifting the voices of youth through his work for Climate Generation as the coordinator of the YEA! MN program. This program supports youth activism by giving high schoolers the tools necessary to become involved in climate justice activism. Students often become involved in local environmental justice campaigns including Line 3, one of the most pressing environmental justice issues facing Minnesota today. In addition, they are taught skills on how to create clubs and projects that put forward their own ideas on how to effectively address the issue of climate justice.

Beyond workshops on effective organizing within their communities, Rodney teaches climate justice workshops to students who may be unaware about how it differentiates from broader sustainability work. Workshops often cover the growing clean energy business sector. Energy industries like oil, coal, and natural gas have historically profited a very small group of people, and a very limited demographic. The demographic primarily reaping the benefits of our energy dependence is white men and today's energy industries continue to benefit them. When looking at a renewable energy future, it is important that these industries do not follow the same pattern.

Many organizations in Minnesota are working to address this and Rodney mentioned them in our conversation as

organizations that are currently doing good environmental justice work. Groups such as tribal nations, the Just Solar Coalition, Power Shift Network, Cooperative Energy Futures, and Minneapolis Energy Options work to grow Minnesota's clean energy in an equitable way, expanding renewable energy to be accessible and beneficial to people of color. Power Shift Network in particular links youth activism with a vision for a clean energy future. Connecting students with these organizations is an essential part of the work of YEA! MN. Rodney emphasized the importance of building connections: between different organizations working towards a shared vision for the future, between people with different views on climate change and environmental racism, and between high schoolers coming from different backgrounds.

Building connections allows Rodney to remain optimistic about the environmental movement despite how politicized the concept of climate change has become. Building connections bridges the gap between people with different views and can convince them that climate change is a real and must be addressed. Rodney stressed the importance of building on shared values and making sure to not exaggerate to gain the support of someone to your cause. He spoke of farmers that may be hesitant to support government spending on renewable energy. However, agreeing on something like soil health as an important issue builds a foundation of shared values. Soil health is put at risk by pipelines and in the future will be even more at risk because of climate change; so the consensus that this is an important issue opens people's minds to need for a stronger push towards sustainability.

Although most of the high schoolers that Rodney works

with can agree that climate change demands immediate action, connections that are built bridge the gaps that exist as a result of the different backgrounds the youth come from. The leadership core, a group of eight students in 2018, is the central section of YEA! MN and meets weekly to plan and lead workshops and events for other youth. The leadership core is a diverse group, reflecting the diversity within the Twin Cities. This program, along with several other programs, attempts to break the mold of Climate Generation being a predominantly white organization serving white people. Seeing these high schoolers forming connections is one thing that gives Jason hope about the future of climate justice. When they come together and innovate and lift their voices together they can be heard by many more people.

One of the main issues with Climate Generation is that despite its vision of an equitable clean energy future, the organization has a background as a primarily white organization teaching workshops to a primarily white audience. In our conversation, Rodney was very candid about the flaws of Climate Generation and YEA! MN, partially because of his background in American Studies and environmental justice work. Despite the organization's mission to reach high schoolers all across Minnesota and teach them on how to become involved in climate justice activism, aside from the leadership core, the youth that he works with are predominantly white. This is one of the challenges facing the organization in the coming years, branching out to reach a more diverse group of youth.

This may be one of the reasons why Rodney hesitated from calling his work explicitly environmental justice work. Although he was recommended by an environmental

justice activist as someone else doing good environmental justice work in the Twin Cities area, he said his work was more climate change than environmental justice focused. However, the YEA! MN program has a strong focus on climate justice. This raises the question: what differentiates climate change work from climate justice work, and that from environmental justice work? Climate justice work has a stronger tilt towards ensuring that increasing renewable energy is equitable than climate change work. Whereas work surrounding climate change may be purely focused on stopping the use of fossil fuels and increasing use of renewable energy sources, climate justice looks to create a system of energy, land use, and more that redistributes wealth and decision-making power to be shared equitably. Educating people on this issue is an essential part of Climate Generation's climate justice work.

Climate justice looks to create a system of energy, land use, and more that redistributes wealth and decision-making power to be shared equitably.

If climate change and climate justice work can be so easily differentiated, what is the relationship between climate justice and environmental justice? Environmental justice is defined as equality between races, classes, genders, and ethnicity with regard to the environment. This includes a diverse range of issues: from the location of hazardous waste sites in proximity to communities of color to gentrification in neighborhoods improving their

environmental condition, from lack of food sovereignty in food deserts to poor working conditions and exposure to dangerous chemicals in factories and on farms. Under this broad definition, climate justice would fit within the category of environmental justice, but Rodney does not identify his work as completely environmental justice. Maybe identifying with climate justice is more specific to the work that he is doing, or it is not Climate Generation's space to claim itself as an environmental justice group. However, the impression I got from our conversation was that Rodney prefers to amplify the voices of the youth he works with rather than claim the role of environmental justice activist himself.

Although he may be hesitant to identify as an environmental justice activist, there is no doubt that he is supporting the work of many youth environmental justice activists. The students he works with become involved in important resistance campaigns like Line 3 and run workshops and lead conferences such as the Youth Climate Justice Summit; they meet with local legislators about laws regarding climate justice and form partnerships with other organizations doing environmental justice work. Rodney's role teaching skills to students and helping them build connections, putting their ideas into action, and making their voices heard is a huge support to the environmental justice work the youth activists are doing.

Rodney feeds off the energy and the optimism of the youth he works with. It is what gives him hope about the future of climate justice. Seeing high schoolers connecting over a shared agreement that climate change demands action, actively creating change within their communities, and raising their voices to be heard at a higher level gives

him confidence that real progress will be made for sustainability and environmental justice issues in Minnesota. This is what motivates Rodney to continue his work creating the space for the voices of many more youth activists to be heard.

Tyler Sit: Fighting for a New City Using Spirituality and Environmental Justice

Eliza Macy

Tyler Sit

In November of 2017, a revolutionary church met for the first time on a quiet residential street in Minneapolis. The Bible was not the only topic of discussion, as among religious texts and teachings, attendees found a strong focus on gentrification and housing justice. Members not only congregated to worship, but to support each other in their struggle for justice that is integral to the church's mission.

On this day, Rev. Tyler Sit preached his first sermon as the pastor and founder of the New City Church. After years of planning and community engagement, his vision of a church approaches environmental justice from a Christian lens. As someone who understands the environment, religion, and justice as inherently connected, his team hoped to create a place where people would experience the "inward transformation and reflection about the outward transformation they are seeking to enact". New City Church, which is a United Methodist church, focuses on combating gentrification in the Powderhorn, Phillips, and

Central neighborhoods of Minneapolis. Sit's emphasis is on building community strength on a grassroots level in order to reverse gentrification trends, as well as advocate for necessary policy change on a governmental level. New City Church expands the definition of environmentalism and environmental justice to include urban areas and housing justice. In doing so, the church advocates for affordable housing as a way of engaging local communities in the environmental justice movement.

Sit's life work is both religious and environmental. He has identified as Christian his entire life, and has been passionate about the environment since he was a child. His interest in the environment began as a kid in the Boys Scouts, where he spent extensive time outside. As a flamboyant, Chinese-American boy, he often felt ostracized by other Scouts, but found that nature taught him his place in the world. He was struck by both the strangeness and unity of ecosystems, feeling that he too fit into its remarkable abnormalities. Sit felt a strong responsibility to protect the environment because it had defended him, beginning his lifelong devotion to environmental work.

For much of his life, Sit has been motivated to do work surrounding climate change. Prior to creating the New City Church, he worked with community organizers for years. His experience in social justice, however, shed light on a severe lack of, and need for, self reflection and

“Worship without justice is self serving and justice without worship is self destructive”.

preservation. Again and again, he noticed an unsustainable trend in which people who were energized and eager to do justice work were overworked, burning out within a few years as they were unable to continue the work they set out to do. Sit noticed an intense need for self preservation and rejuvenation to enable people to show up most effectively to their work. As someone whose spirituality is integrally connected to his passion for environmental work, Sit saw a solution through religion. He realized the importance of merging his values to create New City Church, believing that “worship without justice is self serving and justice without worship is self destructive”.

Sit’s vision was not always one of a church combating gentrification. Raised in Eden Prairie, Minnesota, Sit entered the three neighborhoods he now works in with the idea of creating a church focused on climate change. As an outsider, Sit spent eight months communicating and building connections with residents in the Powderhorn, Phillips, and Central neighborhoods. He proposed the idea of a climate focused church, but found that while people cared about climate change, they were uninterested in becoming involved in a climate justice church when they were dealing with pressing issues of gentrification. When people are unsure of whether or not they will be able to keep their house the next month, climate change is a disconnect.

Rather than creating a climate church, Sit proposed the idea of an “Eco Church”, which he thought sounded sexy and appealing. However, community members quickly gave the feedback that it sounded expensive, “like a bougie ‘eco-toilet bowl cleaner’ that you pay more for but that cleans worse”. Sit has approached his work knowing that “if we don’t create an environmentalism that poor folks and people of color can participate in then all of us lose”, so he decided not to frame the church as an establishment focused on climate change or labeled as “eco”, because that wording felt distant to the community. After listening to community members, Sit decided on the name “New City”, which aims to embrace the idea of a ‘new city’ (an allusion to Revelation 21 in the Bible) in which people of all racial and economic backgrounds are able to live in healthy neighborhoods. Rather than focusing on broad issues and ideas that are disconnected from many people’s lives, this name emphasizes the church’s direct relationship to the people of these neighborhoods.

The New City Church arrived at gentrification because it is the issue that community members continuously came back to. The dominant story among residents was one of predominantly African American and Latino communities that, amidst the crime and violence Minneapolis experienced in the 80s and 90s, started organizing. People who did not feel comfortable letting their children walk around alone started putting in bike lanes, planting community gardens, and closing brothels. Residents were successful in shutting down one of the three factories giving children asthma, and even started the Midtown Global Market, a popular community hub. As they cleaned their neighborhood, however, housing prices began to increase, pushing out the very people who had worked

tirelessly to make these communities their own. Sit continuously heard residents saying, “well I guess I’m too poor to live in a safe and green neighborhood”. He realized the need for a church that regarded gentrification both as an environmental and religious issue, expressing that “as a Christian, I categorically refuse that that’s the reality we have to live in”.

Gentrification is an issue plaguing cities across the country, and in recent years has begun to strike Minneapolis. Generally, gentrification occurs when rent prices increase as more affluent, often white people move into lower income neighborhoods, where residents tend to be people of color. As a result, original residents are pushed out of their home communities. Although there has been some debate about how severe gentrification actually is in the Twin Cities, a recent study conducted by the University of Minnesota (UMN) that interviewed 58 Twin Cities residents found that two thirds of participants fear “physical displacement”. The Center for Urban and Regional Affairs, another department at the UMN, reports that home values, median household incomes, and percentage of residents with college degrees are spiking in the Phillips and Central neighborhoods, places in which New City Church works. As neighborhoods with large communities of color and low

New City Church works towards a city where underrepresented people are able to stay in their clean and safe neighborhoods, avoiding fear of displacement.

income residents, a lack of affordable housing provokes fear and a sense of instability in these areas. As gentrification becomes increasingly threatening to long-term Minneapolis community residents, New City Church works towards a city where underrepresented people are able to stay in their clean and safe neighborhoods, avoiding fear of displacement.

Gentrification is an issue of both housing and environmental justice. The people who are removed from their communities are the same people who bear the brunt of environmental hazards. Not only are factories and toxic sites disproportionately built in low income neighborhoods and communities of color, but these disadvantaged people are forced out of healthy neighborhoods. When the very people who clean up their neighborhoods to improve health and foster community are unable to stay, cities essentially label these communities as unworthy and expendable for the sake of wealthier residents. Gentrification exacerbates environmental justice issues, as it pushes out lower income people who live in safe places, forcing people to move to neighborhoods that are more affordable, and often less healthy.

Including gentrification in the definition of environmental justice expands the definition of environment, and brings people who have been historically left out of environmental movements into the discussion. New City Church includes urban neighborhoods into the definition of environment, making housing an environmental justice issue. Sit realized that by working with communities to address the direct injustices threatening their livelihoods, he could make impactful change that is part of larger environmental issues. He explains, for instance, that New City Church still

focuses on climate change, but does so by “transforming one neighborhood at a time” as it is “the most immediate, visible, tangible thing we can do”. While there are numerous organizations in Minneapolis that focus on affordable housing, few approach it as an environmental justice issue. However, in targeting gentrification and affordable housing as environmental justice, New City Church works to ensure that people have rights to live in environmentally safe places.

New City Church aims to hold the Minneapolis government accountable for its urban planning and treatment of residents, and advocates for policies that ensure housing security for low income communities and people of color. With the new Minneapolis mayor and city council, New City Church recently announced that they will be signing on to the “Homes for All” Initiative, in which numerous affordable housing groups in Minneapolis are banding together to ask for significant government money to invest in affordable housing. Sit himself is part of the “Green Zone Task Force”, that works to incentivize green development in disadvantaged communities without sparking displacement. As the minister of New City Church, Sit brings personal stories and experiences from members of his church into city planning spaces to represent people who are uncomfortable sharing themselves. The church also has a designated minister of public witness, whose job is to track affordable housing news and developments in Minneapolis, so that members can meaningfully step into policy and advocacy work.

To bring this work to a human level, New City Church builds community connections through urban agriculture. One of their established methods of combating

gentrification on a grassroots level is through a permaculture program where neighbors grow self sustaining, edible plant gardens for each other. This project aims to relieve families of some of their grocery costs in hopes that an edible garden might allow residents to save money, helping them stay in the neighborhood. Creating relationships between community members through gardening humanizes issues of affordable housing, and helps residents combat gentrification. Sit explains that gentrification research has shown that when communities have these soft connections, they are better able to combat displacement, as they can make collective decisions.

To offer opportunities for inner reflection, grounding, and connection, New City Church invites community members to join “life together” groups. These meetings consist of six to eight people, which are intentionally diverse, and provide a space for people to share their life stories. Rather than focusing on policy, these groups intend to build relationships across difference and create a community of spiritual wholeness. Sit emphasizes the importance of these groups in grounding and holding people accountable to their values, so that they can “find a deep sense of inner resilience” to continue doing justice work.

While churches that emphasize environmental justice and action are not uncommon, New City Church is groundbreaking in its focus on gentrification as an environmental issue. Sit encourages people to focus on the positive changes they do want to see in their communities, rather than solely rejecting injustices. New City Church combats inequity through embracing and working towards a vision of a just city, believing in hope. As Sit shifted his dream of a church from one focused on climate change to

one centered around gentrification, he embraced people's lived experiences, creating a church that meets community needs and includes underrepresented people in vital conversations. Movements are built when people are energized about and connected to the change they want to see. New City Church finds power in connecting large issues of climate change and environmental justice to real lives, proving that environmentalism can both be rejuvenating and intersectional. This young, small church is changing lives and proving the unstoppable resilience of historically underrepresented Minneapolis communities.

Abé Levine: Placekeeping as a Strategy for Environmental Justice

Adele Welch

Abé Levine in the garden. Photo courtesy of Hope Community.

"We are, in a sense, seeing each other as separate which is not entirely healthy," community organizer Abé Levine told me over Google Hangout. He paused thoughtfully before continuing, his microphone picking up his gentle and clear voice. "People need to understand we're all part of one community."

Levine's environmental justice activism brings people together in social contexts such as the garden, kitchen, and meeting room. He works as a Program Assistant at Hope Community in South Minneapolis on youth programming and policy initiatives. The organization started in the 1970s as a shelter and hospitality house, but currently operates as a community center whose goal is to "present an alternative to gentrification."

Levine and Hope Community take a collective approach to activism because both are aware that not one individual or

institution holds the answers to community problems. As a transplant to the Twin Cities himself, Levine is keenly aware of his positionality. Throughout this profile piece, I focus on how Levine and Hope Community effectively engage with environmental justice organizing through the process of "placekeeping," which preserves cultural resources and knowledge by exposing and supporting what demands already exist within a community. Levine is able to leverage his multiple identities by acting as a facilitator instead of a producer of solutions.

Placekeeping: an introduction

The term "placekeeping" is a relatively new response to the concept of "placemaking," which has roots in the 1960s. Placemaking refers to the process of improving a neighborhood or larger city through investment in public spaces such as parks, plazas, and streets. According to the Project For Public Spaces, placemaking refers to, "a collaborative process by which we can shape our public realm in order to maximize shared value."

However, placemaking as it was historically practiced wasn't enough for many low-income communities and communities of color because of the threat of gentrification. As the quality of public spaces improved, property values rose, and many local residents were forced to leave the spaces they had physically and symbolically constructed. While PPS currently emphasizes the role of local community involvement in placemaking, a new expression, "placekeeping" more directly underlines the need to preserve a place's existing community and cultural assets while working to improve its condition.

While both words are sometimes used interchangeably,

“placekeeping” gained popularity in the late 2000s. “Placekeeping has been described as the active care and maintenance of a place and its social fabric by the people who live and work there. It is not just preserving buildings but keeping the cultural memories associated with a locale alive,” U.S. Department of Arts and Culture representative Jess Solomon explained. Cultural activist Roberto Bedoya is known for offering the example of “Rasquachification” as placekeeping, which refers to an aesthetic expression of intense colors and decorations in Mexican-American neighborhoods. Maintaining the cultural memories of a place reclaims the artistic processes of low-income communities and communities of color while working against gentrification and displacement.

Levine defines placemaking and placekeeping in a similar manner. “Placemaking is the idea of generating a culture where maybe it’s lacking or needs revitalization, and placekeeping is unearthing the stories and assets that

"Placemaking is the idea of generating a culture where maybe it's lacking or needs revitalization, and placekeeping is unearthing the stories and assets that already exist here."

already exist here," he explained to me. Hope Community puts placekeeping into practice by holding listening sessions to connect and equip community leaders. While the organization and Levine works to improve the economic and environmental conditions of the Phillips and Cedar-Riverside neighborhood, they recognize that they are not and should not be alone in brainstorming solutions. Levine is reflective on how his identity shows up in practice and how his background led him to environmental justice organizing, which ultimately leads to more effective strategies for change.

Levine's background

Levine cites his cultural context, family, and education as major influences on his interest in environmental justice. He grew up outside of Boston near nature reserves, including one of Harvard's Arboretums. "I grew up in the city but was surrounded by nature and opportunities to run around … I feel like that was super critical in my development," he said. "It's something I wish every community had." He described his childhood neighborhood as working class, queer, Puerto Rican and

Asian, but dealing with gentrification. Despite this, Levine had a positive relationship with public natural spaces from a young age.

Levine also told me about how his family impacts his current work in food justice. “I had access to cultural foods that were important to me and that was an important form of community building,” he said, citing his grandmother as the organizer of the family. Every Sunday, Levine remembered affectionately, she would gather the family around traditional Chinese dishes. Bringing people together around cultural foods continues to be an important aspect of Levine’s work, especially with youth, and he upholds that food is “a big vehicle for [placekeeping].” On the younger end of the family, Levine’s adopted sister influenced his interest in youth work. While helping raise her, he said, he was, “thinking about how you educate, how you have conversations, how you have learning activities around these bigger, heavier things, that are hands-on and enriching.”

These “bigger, heavier things” Levine mentioned could be a reference to the broader, often times oppressive systems that shape society he learned more deeply about at Macalester College. Through studying the education system, farming system, and the environment in particular, Levine graduated with a greater understanding of environmental justice that he puts to use as an organizer.

How Levine placekeeps: youth work and policy

Levine works for Hope Community’s Food, Land, and Community initiative. He employs environmental justice placekeeping in two main areas: youth programming and

policy. The youngest person he works alongside is four years old, and the oldest are over 65.

"A youth culture of food"

As a community center, the Hope Community building includes a kitchen, garden, and technology space for children and young people to spend time in after school and during the summer. Youth work was the first topic Levine brought up in our interview. "We're doing just basic learning about food, the harvest, the ecosystem, and trying to get youth into more positions of leadership," he described. Most of the youth that Levine works with are between five and thirteen years old.

Levine's specific programs include a weekly dinner night for young people and their families and a Food & Photo Project aimed at teenagers. Just like he was able to connect with his cultural heritage and environment through food as a child, Levine is interested in cultivating a "youth culture of food, food activism, or food engagement" in South Minneapolis. According to Levine, food is a powerful part of environmental justice because it has to do with, "people feeling like their own culture is represented … as well as looking into how we can grow more on public land." Opportunities to garden and cook can help, "people [feel] ownership and autonomy in their neighborhoods," he continued. Through the Food & Photo project, Levine hopes to engage youth with food through art. "There's just room for … people being able to express their full selves and identities in work," Levine said, particularly through creative projects. Placekeeping emphasizes both community autonomy and artistic expression, which Levine cultivates among young persons.

Looking into the future, Levine is interested in involving more young people in policy and research. He cited the organizing around Minneapolis public parks as a site for youth engagement. “It’s the place that they are; it’s their space,” Levine stated. Young people should be involved in the policy conversation about, “how that land is owned and benefits community,” he continued, cycling back to the concept of placekeeping as benefiting all community members. Additionally, Levine mentioned Youth Participatory Action Research as a framework he is interested in exploring for a summer program. Ideally, he would interview young people for a 13-week, paid summer research cohort about social justice in South Minneapolis.

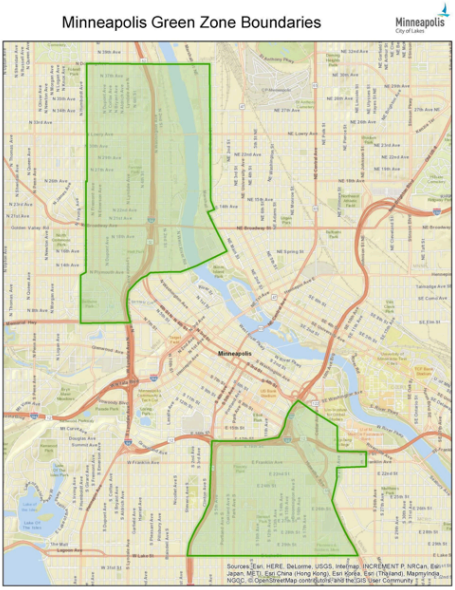
While retaining youth is difficult in the out-of-school time field, Levine strives to operate from a youth-centric perspective to sustain and improve Hope Community’s programming. He prioritizes listening to young people, following through on what interests them, and sometimes just giving them space. “I might just leave for a while and let young people do their thing,” he laughed. He also speaks with parents, guardians, and elders to leverage the assets of students’ families. In addition, Levine asserted that increased partnerships would strengthen Hope Community’s youth work, such as partnerships with different daycares, youth organizations, and activists, especially those working in rural settings. As a leader, Levine employs placekeeping by facilitating intra-group and extra-group dialogue in the community to connect people, utilize existing resources, and cultivate change.

Policy: “a constant negotiation”

Levine balances youth programming at Hope Community

with city-level policy work. Currently, the organization is involved in Minneapolis' Green Zones Initiative.

"Green Zones is a model that started in Los Angeles amongst, I would say predominantly black and brown, disenfranchised communities that have experienced a lot of environmental racism," Levine told me. "[They] came together to proactively develop policies that would protect their communities and move their communities forward." Thanks to the Minneapolis Climate Action Plan Environmental Justice Working Group, Minneapolis has designated two areas in South and North Minneapolis as Green Zones. The City of Minneapolis describes Green Zones as, "a place-based policy initiative aimed at improving health and supporting economic development using environmentally conscious efforts."



A map of Minneapolis' designated Green Zones. Photo courtesy of the City of Minneapolis.

Levine organizes and attends meetings teaching community members what Green Zones are and how they can provide input on specific policy. He is interested in making sure the zoning process is conducted in a holistic manner that takes into account green jobs, air, soil, and water quality, equity and anti-displacement, food access, and energy and homes. While he said he is excited to come back to Hope Community's principles of anti-displacement, Levine also expressed frustration about policy's bureaucratic nature and time-consuming complexity.

"[Policy] is a constant negotiation. It should be very simple to say like, hey rent's increasing at a rapid rate, and people's incomes, particularly Black and Latino families,

are decreasing. There should be a way to control the rent so that it's affordable to people. But it's a process to do that," Levine explained. While policy may be uninviting for the average person, Levine breaks down the process for community members so they have the tools to influence decisions. Placekeeping emphasizes the empowerment of local persons to create positive change, and policy is an influential sphere that Levine attempts to bring more community members to.

Placekeeping as a framework

Placekeeping is not only a strategy, but a framework as well. While Levine's work is across the board, he organizes with a few of his own best practices in mind that tie his approach together. He analyzes and utilizes his own identity, is cognizant of cultural boundaries of the community, stresses his role as a facilitator, and develops trust over time. These methods strengthen the placekeeping process. The following tools can function as recommendations for all community organizers.

Reflect on and leverage identity

Levine describes himself as a mix of identities, some of which are privileged and some are not. He is able to bring all of the intersections of his identity in his work. Levine specifically talked about his self-assessed educational privilege, housing privilege, and job privilege. While bringing comprehensive knowledge from his educational background can help put Hope Community's work into context, Levine stated he often, "[thinks] about if I should be the main voice in a space." Levine also celebrates the assets that come from his marginalized identities. "I try to share … the stories of my family, I try to share Chinese

cultural foods or traditions," he told me. By presenting his identity with pride and honesty, Levine is able to communicate on shared levels with the community members he works with. However, he is careful not to assume homogeneity with his own background. This aids in the placekeeping process by building a respectful environment.

Learn cultural boundaries

"This is a large Somali community, so [I try] to learn a little bit of the language and also what cultural boundaries exist," Levine told me. By paying attention to specific cultural customs, Levine shows community members that he values their safety and background. He demonstrates that he cares about the cultural assets that community members bring to a space, which is necessary if placekeeping attempts to preserve them.

Facilitate instead of create

"I'm not here to create solutions for people's lives, but if anything, to listen, to facilitate programs, [and] to hold space," Levine said. Uncovering what needs already exist within a community is an integral part of placekeeping. Instead of coming in with solutions, Levine emphasizes that the kitchen and garden is "always a space to [listen]." Levine's work is not passive, but focuses on creating structures for people to

"I'm not here to create solutions for people's lives, but if anything, to listen, to facilitate programs, [and] to hold space."

take their stories and curiosities and, “move to a place of leadership or changemaking.”

Practice patience

Levine understands that placekeeping is built from authentic relationships, which take time to cultivate. He said he, “[moves] at the speed of trust” to “[develop] relationships over the long haul.” By allowing community members, especially youth, time to grow into their identities, Levine creates a comfortable atmosphere at Hope Community. Placekeeping is not a quick fix, and Levine is concerned with sticking around and getting to know the community, which builds trust and helpful vulnerability.

Conclusion

Levine and Hope Community’s framework of “placekeeping” demonstrates a sustainable and useful approach to community organizing. He works for environmental justice through youth work and policy by tapping into existing community knowledge and resources to support effective solutions. For example, he aims to create local research-based organizing opportunities for young people, and trains community leaders to influence city-wide policy that affects their neighborhood.

Levine sustains his placekeeping approach by grounding himself in his own identity and background, such as his family’s Chinese heritage and food customs as well as his experience playing outdoors as a child. Regardless of whether or not his identities match the communities he is working with, he employs placekeeping strategies to cultivate an environment of respect, safety, and trust at

Hope Community. Levine is a placekeeping facilitator, and all organizers can learn from this approach.

Levine and I ended our Google Hangout talking about the future of environmental, economic, and social justice activism in Minneapolis. “I’m really excited to see that, there is an upswing of activism and taking issues into our own hands,” he said, his voice lively. “Young people as well, are out there.”

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Bahieh Hartshorn: Creating Meaningful Connections Between Community and the Environment

Maya Swope

Bahieh Hartshorn

In her own words, Bahieh Hartshorn knows that "we can't talk about racial justice without talking about health and environmental justice." Although this fact is now ever so clear to her, this wasn't always something so readily apparent to Hartshorn. As the Community Organizer for St, Paul's West Side Community Organization, much of her work happens at the intersections of health, racial justice, land use, and community-building– some of the main pillars of environmental justice work. Now she works as the Movement Politics Manager at TakeAction Minnesota where she works to invest, train, develop, and place leaders into decision making roles – whether elected, appointed, or hired.

I met Bahieh at Fresh Grounds coffee shop on Saint Paul's West 7th Street, on exactly the type of cold and rainy April morning that makes you want to stay inside this warm and friendly shop. I inquired about her work and her motivations, and her thoughts on working for a more just environment. Hartshorn was open, honest, and interested in hearing about my questions and helping me answer them– a series of traits that make her such a good community organizer.

Our conversation lasted nearly forty minutes, and the topics we covered wound from gentrification, to identity in activism, to colonialism, to city politics. Through it all, Hartshorn showed her prowess in navigating political structures that were not built for young women of color like her. I was especially impressed by her ability to think about big ideas like structural racism and historical trauma and effectively combine that with local community-based change. That is part of what makes her a great advocate and change-maker.

Journey to Environmental Justice

Hartshorn was born in Guayaquil, Ecuador and moved with her family to Luverne, Minnesota at just 2 years old. She attended college at Hamline University in St. Paul, where she graduated in 2016 with a double major in both legal studies and women's studies. She planned to head to law school, but a job as a paralegal at an immigration law firm showed her that this was not the way she wanted to approach justice work. "I hated working within the system," she told me, especially when that meant doing paperwork for an attorney who didn't even respect his clients.

She quickly began looking for other ways to make a positive impact on the Twin Cities communities that were important to her, and found her way to TakeAction Minnesota, an organization working to promote a variety of justice-based platforms. Door knocking, phone-banking, and attending meetings there gave her an opportunity to work for change, outside of the political system. Around that same time, she attended marches and rallies in the aftermath of Philando Castile's murder, and worked with the Black Lives Matter movement to further an issue she had long been passionate about– racial justice.

However, it was not until someone told her about the position at the West Side Community Organization (WSCO), that she first started thinking about being a community organizer. When she accepted the job there, Hartshorn noted that environmental justice "was not something that was in my forefront; I felt like I was too busy thinking about racial justice that I wasn't thinking about how they intersect." She quickly discovered that

pollution, land use, green space, and other environmental factors play an important role in the experiences of westsiders. In this part of town with relatively high levels of poverty and a large immigrant population, these environmental experiences are not separate from race and class.

She made the connection between racial and environmental justice, and also connected her own self-interest to the cause. “I’ve experienced continuously through my life choices being made for me, my identity being erased.” Environmental injustice happens when “there are so many choices being made by people who don’t live in these areas.” In her activism, Hartshorn understands the importance of grounding what she does in her own experiences and identities. She talks about her commitment to understand her own stake in the work, and to recognize the interlinking systems of oppression that influence her own lived experiences.

“I’ve experienced continuously through my life choices being made for me, my identity being erased.” Environmental injustice happens when “there are so many choices being made by people who don’t live in these areas.”

For Hartshorn, working for environmental justice on the West Side means building a system in which community members are able to “lead, and have a voice, and make change to the lived reality” of being in an industrial area.

Through her work, she hopes to lift up the voices of people within the community, to heal previous traumas and to ensure better futures. Although environmental justice is not her only focus, the concept is intertwined with all of her other work.

Development and Wellbeing

Currently, much of Hartshorn's work focuses on the creation of an equitable development scorecard, a document created by community members and WSCO to evaluate potential new developments in the neighborhood. This is a tangible way for the people of the West Side to show the city and developers what they want out of new investments, and to prove that decisions regarding land use have real impacts on the lives of nearby residents. There already exists a base economic development scorecard, assembled by a variety of organizations in the metro area, to better evaluate how future developments will impact residents. Proposals can be rated on a variety of variables that are deemed most important. On the West Side, WSCO is creating their own version– one centered around westsiders themselves. Bahieh tells me: "We want to make sure that we have this document that can live in the hands of community, that has different pillars that we say are essential in creating a healthy and vibrant community, and one of those pillars is environmental justice."

For Hartshorn and others in the community, the conversation about development, land use, and environmental justice is not only about the city's current policies on the West Side. Just as she told city officials in a recent meeting, she explained to me that "past practices and policies influence the ways that communities are set up, and the landscapes of that community… It matters that

we talk about how we got here, [ ] that we talk about colonization, slavery, and imperialism." As in many other places across the country and across the world, these are all factors that have shaped the physical, social, and political environments of the West Side. They have helped to create a place where residential neighborhoods are located right up against industry, where schoolchildren get sick because of the particles in the air near their schools, and where Our Lady of Guadalupe– the primary Latinx church in the area– abuts heavy industry. It is no coincidence that this is a particularly poor part of the city, with a high proportion of immigrants and people of color.

These forms of structural oppression, however, are made possible in the real-life laws and policies of cities like Saint Paul. So, for Hartshorn and WSCO, the development scorecard is an avenue to create positive change that is grounded in the local community. "It needs to be a holistic document that ensures that every community member's voice is in it," she tells me. It needs to include people's lived experiences, and the systems of oppression that have shaped life in this community– and all of these things are connected to environmental justice. Through a series of community meetings, surveys, and individual conversations, WSCO has worked to incorporate all of this into their draft scorecard, published this spring.

One of the players in the creation of this equitable development scorecard is WSCO's Health and Environmental Justice Committee, a group that Hartshorn helps to organize. Before her arrival, this group– formerly known as solely the Environmental Justice Committee– focused on projects around gardening and bees. She notes that while that type of environmentalism has its place,

this should not be the organization's main focus. People in this community "are dealing with the fact that they can't even get food on their table, dealing with the fact that they have to breathe in [harmful] air particles," and dealing with a host of other real-life problems that make pollinator gardens seem trivial. Adding a health focus to the committee helps people see the connections between the environment and their daily lives, and helps them to see that "actually environmental justice is [their] lived experience here and now." Community leaders from the committee bring this lens to looking over drafts of the scorecard, so as to ensure that future development will protect the health and safety of residents.

All in all, Hartshorn has a positive outlook on the predicted ways that the city and developers will respond. As a district council (a unit of city government), WSCO has a certain amount of credibility with city planners, and a relationship with their city counselor. Recent meetings have shown city officials to be receptive to this type of score card. Some developers also seem to be on board. Instead of being surprised with a potentially angry community, the document can help them know ahead of time what they need to do to stay in good faith of west side residents.

Still, Hartshorn worries that backdoor deals between the city and developers could continue to jeopardize the wellbeing of westsiders. She points to an "arbitrary" scoring process for development that leads to high end condos encroaching on a neighborhood where people can't afford that type of luxury living, and to an industrial corridor that cuts people off from the Mississippi River and pollutes their neighborhoods.

Thus, Hartshorn sees one of the roles of WSCO as helping

to keep the city accountable on major projects. Her message to city decision-makers is that they have told the community that equitable development is something they want to take into account, so they need to do something– "if not, we are going to vote you out." Although they get city funding, Hartshorn makes clear that WSCO is "first and foremost a community organization, before we are a district council… we are ensuring that the community is the one pushing the work, and that we are accountable to the community, not to the city."

In the future

Looking ahead, Hartshorn knows that there is a lot of work yet to be done, but she is hopeful about the future. She tells me that the mark of a good organizer is that you can step back and move on to a new position, and the people you have been working with can step into the role because you have invested in their leadership. The people who actually live in the community, who know these experiences so well, can lead the organizing work. Someday, she does hope to move on. One day, "in the far future," she tells me "I hope to run for office as a city councilor."

Until then, Hartshorn has plenty on her plate. In addition to her work on the scorecard, meeting with residents, and helping to keep the district council running, she is working to create a community of indigenous women and women of color who are investing in their leadership and organizing around identity. Eventually, this is something that she hopes to expand beyond the community of the West Side.

As we close our conversation, she notes that a lot of environmental organizations focus on big, broad ideas like

A lot of environmental organizations focus on big, broad ideas like climate change, "but the lived experiences and the direct organizing that needs to happen locally seems to be forgotten."

climate change, "but the lived experiences and the direct organizing that needs to happen locally seems to be forgotten." That is exactly where Hartshorn's power lies. Her ability to use the past to understand the present, to connect people and government, and to build relationships, make her job especially important. The work that she does is varied, timely, and– most importantly– grounded in her understanding of community as a force for change.

Natalie Cook: Organizing and Title-Claiming within the Sierra Club

Anna Rynearson

Natalie Cook

While I sat down with my coffee in the café where I was meeting Natalie Cook, an organizing representative for the Sierra Club, I noticed an email notification from none other than the interviewee herself. In the message, Natalie noted that our interview might have to be cut slightly short because she was headed to the state Capitol to do the very organizing work that I was so curious about in the first place. Throughout our conversation, I was struck by Natalie's carefulness and candor when discussing the intricacies of her work, regardless of if the topics were easy to swallow. Even in the short amount of time I had the privilege of speaking to Natalie about her past and previous work in environmental activism, I came away from our conversation asking even bigger questions about the environmental justice movement as a whole; how one's positionality matters when working within with organizing and activism; and the efficacy and limitations of large

organizations like the Sierra Club. Ultimately, I learned that it behooves us to be careful around the labels that we claim, that we must acknowledge the broken system we are in yet still work within it unrelentingly, and that we need unimaginably big goals when we are dreaming about the future of environmental justice.

Work Before and At the Sierra Club

While Natalie now works at the Sierra Club with their North Star Chapter, the organizer has a varied history for someone still early in their career. Over coffee, Natalie discussed her evolution in organizing, stating that she first became interested in environmental work and organizing when she was just seventeen and still in high school, though much of the work she was involved in did not fall under environmental justice. Instead, much of her work was "comfortable" and mainstream environmental work that did not address the unequal distribution of environmental harms against marginalized communities. Nonetheless, it served as a jumping off point for Natalie's work with the environmental movement before heading to school for her undergraduate degree at Hamline University. Pursuing her Bachelor's degree, Natalie majored in Environmental Studies and Legal Studies, and was also involved with the Minnesota Public Interest Research Group, a student-directed organization that trains students to take collective action regarding public interest causes in the state of Minnesota. After graduating from Hamline, Natalie used the skills she gained with MPIRG to start a career around political organizing, and her work was not limited to environmental issues. She worked on organizing for LGBTQ+ issues such as the fight for marriage equality in Minnesota with the "Vote NO" campaign through the

organization Minnesotans United for All Families. Prior to the Sierra Club, Natalie worked most recently with the organization Climate Generation within their YEA! MN (Youth Environmental Activists Minnesota) program. There, she taught high school students how to organize to fight for climate justice through leading programming for those involved. From there, Natalie started working at the Sierra Club and has worked there for almost three years now in a variety of capacities.

At the Sierra Club, Natalie works for the North Star Chapter in a couple of different capacities alongside supporting leadership building and working as a registered lobbyist. One specific project Natalie works on is as an organizer on the Tar Sands campaign which is directly related to Line 3 resistance, as the tar sands movement advocates "for clean energy future that is free of oil pipelines, trains and fossil fuel transportation through the state of Minnesota." Tar sands, also known as oil sands, are a mix of clay, sand, and water where a very low-grade petroleum deposit is found. In order to extract the oil, companies completely clear up forests under which rests the deposits and bulldoze through the area with widespread environmental and environmental justice consequences. First, extracting tar sands emits immense levels of greenhouse gases from the extraction process alone, not considering the burning of the fuel extracted. In fact, "A single open pit mine and its associated upgrading facility release as much carbon pollution each day as 1.35 million cars." As we know, climate change caused by excessive greenhouse gas emissions is an environmental justice issue, so tackling tar sands could be considered an implicit fight for environmental justice. However, the Sierra Club's— and Natalie Cook's— fight against tar sand extraction does

have an explicitly environmental justice focus to a certain degree. Sierra Club's North Star Chapter, where Natalie works, notes in a report that the extraction of oil from tar sands violates treaty rights of many indigenous communities. In the report, for example, the chapter notes that indigenous governments such as "Beaver Lake Cree have documented 20,000 treaty rights violations from the tar sands expansion" and that "eighty percent of the traditional territories of the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation and the Mikisew Cree First Nation in Canada are rendered inaccessible for periods of the year due to tar sands development." Part of the North Star Chapter of the Sierra Club's fight against tar sands is motivated by environmental inequity and the fight for justice, albeit to a smaller extent than many movements.

Natalie also works on the Beyond Coal Campaign that the North Star chapter heads up, which deals with the need to reduce the state's dependency on coal energy. This is an issue that the Sierra Club does not approach with an explicitly environmental justice lens, similar to other issues that they approach with a rather mainstream focus. In a document Natalie is cited on for the Beyond Coal Campaign, it notes that we have a long way to go in terms of the state's coal use, stating that "Nearly half of

Minnesota's electricity, and 75% of MN Power's production, still comes from burning coal; which pollutes our air and water and is the largest source of harmful carbon pollution. Energy companies like MN Power must outline transition plans that continue down the path of replacing our old, coal-burning power plants with clean energy; especially, wind, solar and energy efficiency." One of the issues with the simple call to end dependence on coal power is that the integration of renewable energy must be done with a certain level of care and planning, in order to ensure that the economic benefits do not go to a select few privileged communities as is true with non-renewable energy industry. The document that the North Star Chapter produced, which cites Natalie's contact information, mentions how the benefits of renewable energy should be distributed equally if they are to be pursued. The report notes that we must make sure that "community solar benefits everyone who wants to take part;" and while this sentiment is a step in the right direction in terms of acknowledging that solar and other renewables should benefit more than a select few, it might fall short of how we need to be thinking about the future of energy. It is this very contradiction between the often watered-down politics of large organizations like the Sierra Club and more radical and inclusive forms of activism that we largely need. Now that it is clear some of the work that Natalie is concerned

"Nearly half of Minnesota's electricity, and 75% of MN Power's production, still comes from burning coal."

with is environmental justice, I attempt to unpack this dichotomy in terms of the discussion I had with her.

‘Big Environment’ vs. the Grassroots

One of the reasons that I was so interested in interviewing Natalie Cook was because she worked for the Sierra Club, a prolific, powerful, yet often problematic organization, and I was interested in further understanding these seemingly contradictory characteristics. When I asked Natalie about how more radical and inclusive goals can often be muddled in the large bureaucracy of national organizations, yet often succeed due to their unmatched resources in the field, she agreed that such a contradiction existed. However, Natalie also noted that there are a variety of reasons that one might be drawn to working for the Sierra Club while also influencing how the organizer interacts with the label of ‘environmental activist.’

In our interview, Natalie begins to unpack one reason why she took a job with the Sierra Club. She, like many young professionals in today’s economy stated that, at the time, she just “needed a job and they were hiring” and the Sierra Club’s North Star Chapter was a way to fulfill such a need. In other words, it’s easy to see why taking a job is a lot more ‘practical’ than working in other grassroots positions. Taking one look at the Sierra Club’s careers page makes clear all of the comforts that come with working for the Sierra Club over grassroots, low-salary jobs: “The Sierra Club offers a full array of benefits to our employees. Our health and welfare plans include medical, dental, vision, life insurance options, flexible spending accounts, an employee assistance program, free Sierra Club membership, discounts on Sierra Club outings and books and long-term disability insurance.” It sheds light on the

issue of burnout within grassroots organizing, where hours are long, pay is low, and moral can be easily squashed by the power of corporations and government officials. Luckily, Natalie noted that even though she works for a large organization, she works to make equity and equality the center of her work, often working with community members directly. I find the balance that Natalie has struck with her work admirable, and certainly a lesson to take away as someone concerned about a forthcoming career.

However, the nature of the work Natalie does— work for a large, mainstream environmental organization— is one reason why Natalie doesn't consider herself an 'environmental justice activist,' and is careful around the labels that she chooses to claim or not claim. Natalie said that she is "careful around claiming things that aren't [hers] to claim" because of how different her work is from those down in the 'nitty-gritty' of it all. I found this an interesting and unexpected response from Natalie. It seems that surely working against Line 3 and tar sand extraction (which displaces native populations, for example) is environmental justice work, but perhaps it would benefit all of us to reassess where we lie in certain movements, and start to be as careful around the titles we claim as Natalie is.

Interview Reflections and Takeaways

One takeaway from my conversation with Natalie regards the manner in which we can all continue to learn and call people into the conversation about environmental justice— even if that means taking a passive, listening stance rather than a leadership role. Natalie's evolution from a young person with little knowledge about environmental justice issues can serve as a lesson in the necessity of how much

we should all continue to question and learn about injustices around us, even if we start from different places of learning. We should not condemn and fault (completely) and 'cancel out' those with limited understanding of environmental justice issues, but instead call people into the conversation. Natalie noted that even she has so much to learn, and that she continues to learn every day. It would behoove everyone to take a similar stance, especially those in privileged positions, and acknowledge that it takes an enormous amount of work to understand how deep and embedded many injustices are. Natalie's work with YEA! MN is also indicative of this value, as the work that Climate Generation does with young people helps get students involved, regardless of their starting point of knowledge about environmental justice or even mainstream environmentalism.

Even though Natalie described herself as a "pessimist" at one point in our conversation, her words about the need for "unimaginably" big goals stuck with me as a call for optimism and dedication rather than cynicism. First, Natalie talked about how broken the system we work within really is— so much so that it may be hard for us to comprehend. When asked to elaborate, the organizer said that "the system is designed to divide and conquer us," that it is bureaucratic, oppressive, and slow-moving. She mentioned the 'guilt by association' bill surrounding Enbridge's fight to install Line 3, which would incriminate anyone who "'aids, advises, hires, counsels, or conspires' with someone who damaged — or trespassed with the goal of damaging — a pipeline, facility or utility may be held criminally liable" as an example of truly how broken our legal and legislative systems are. Our systems are so deeply flawed and plagued not only by slow-moving bureaucracy,

but by the remnants of centuries of white supremacy, colonialism, capitalism, and the valuing of profit over people. But just as the goal of women gaining the right to vote in the United States was once 'unimaginably big,' we need to shoot high when it comes to goals of environmental justice. One sign of hope is that the Sierra Club and large organizations that have historically overlooked marginalized communities are growing and changing their missions to become more environmentally justice oriented. Margaret Levin, the State Director of the North Star Chapter of the Sierra Club and Scott Cooper, the Chair of the Executive Committee published a recognition of the Sierra Club's troubled past and dedication to equity moving forward:

"Throughout our 122-year history, the Sierra Club has played an important leadership role in our nation's environmental movement, and the North Star Chapter has mirrored this leadership since our founding over 45 years ago. However, despite our many accomplishments, we have so far failed to build a diverse, multicultural movement that is inclusive of people from all backgrounds. There is growing clarity within the Sierra Club that we must make significant improvements in this area if we are to achieve our ambitious environmental goals. Further, we know that we must address this challenge not just to be more effective, but because it is the right thing to do. In recognition of this, the North Star Chapter has committed to transforming ourselves into a multicultural, anti-racist organization that is working to eradicate all forms of oppression."

The two go on to discuss the concrete ways in which the organization will approach a goal of eradicating 'all

forms of oppression,' including "continually evaluating the Chapter's issue priorities and campaign plans through the lenses of equity and Environmental Justice." At one point, the notion that the Sierra Club might publicly publish goals related to anti-racist ends was unimaginable, especially at the organization's inception. Of course, this should not and cannot be where our so-called 'big' goal ends. The point is that it may not be tomorrow, or the next day, or even next year that we reach this goal. We must try our hardest to imagine a world where there is environmental justice and equity, no matter how unrealistic it seems today. We must not take the privilege of looking away or settling for a lesser goal.

A final take away from my conversation with Natalie regards the piece of advice she gave anyone who is looking to work within organizing or activism. She told me that if you "do good work, you'll meet good people," and then find good work from them; it's a cycle. I like the idea of a cycle of this kind, as it implies that ultimately circles of 'good' work (although we must be careful around deeming things simply 'good' or 'bad' as they are more than likely more nuanced than that) can grow to include more and more people. There are good-hearted people in the world looking to make a positive change, and Natalie's words make me reflect on how a few good people can become a movement by means of inclusion, education, and hard work. Even if

A few good people can become a movement by means of inclusion, education, and hard work.

Natalie calls herself a pessimist, her words invoke a much more positive outlook on the state of environmental justice.

Conclusion

My interview with Natalie Cook was a highlight of my semester for a variety of reasons. Although brief, it was wonderful to get to speak with someone who approaches their work with unyielding care, candor, and nuanced understanding of the field they work in. Natalie was anything but brash, always taking the utmost attention, respect, and forethought before answering a question, providing an example of how I would like to approach my future work. I truly appreciated all of the small lessons I was able to take away from our conversation, including how pertinent it is to deeply consider what titles one claims in activism work, the need for 'unimaginably' big goals in relation to environmentalism and environmental justice, and the nuance and contradiction that comes with working at a national organization like the Sierra Club. We could all benefit from taking the same level of care as Natalie in our work, wherever that takes us in the future. I believe we would have a much more kind, compassionate, and equitable world if we did.

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2019

Margaret Breen: Defunding Big Oil

Alia Benedict

Margaret Breen (4th from right) and the Youth Climate Intervenors

If America's reliance on fossil fuels was a story, then it would have been written a long time ago. It might begin by saying that we rely on gas and oil, and that gas and oil are good. It might say that although the construction of oil and gas pipelines sometimes hurts the land and those that live on it, these pipelines must be built, because fuel is good and so is money. Such a story might end by saying that we will continue to drill, because there is still oil in the ground and money to be made.

This story has, in fact, been written. It is a classic story, and it is very well known, because it is read to us every night by the people who wrote it. The story has become so ingrained in our minds that its plot line has become our reality.

Last week I sat down with Margaret Breen, Macalester student, Youth Climate Intervenor, and environmental justice advocate, to speak about a new narrative that she's helping write. Margaret shared her experience about what it's like to compete against the fossil fuel industry, both as an individual actor and also within a larger collective

of activists. In speaking about her experiences on the front lines, Margaret shared insight on the current challenges and successes of the pipeline resistance movement. She also spoke about her hope for the future.

The story of Margaret, and of the work that she does to rip old narratives off of the shelves, is invaluable. By sharing her voice, Margaret shows us how a group of activists can make history, and chip away at the oppressive and unjust tales that have been read to us for decades. It is important to listen to Margaret's story, and the stories of others like Margaret. She is a very important author– she's writing us a new future.

Margaret is, like many students at Macalester, particularly busy. She may be a full time student, but she's also a full time activist. In her three years at Macalester, Margaret has taken classes across a variety of disciplines in order to complete her studies in sociology and environmental studies. She has taken an active role in the Lives of Commitment program on campus, interned for Bernie Sanders, and has even served as a delegate to the 2016 Democratic National Convention. Margaret has since committed herself as a policy and justice issue area coordinator within the Civic Engagement Center at Macalester. In doing so, she's able to pursue her intersectional passions for seeking justice; in the summer of 2018, Margaret received a competitive Chuck Green fellowship in which she partnered with the Restorative Justice Community Action (RJCA), a community based non-profit that provides opportunities for people cited with misdemeanors or minor felonies.

Margaret's activist work both on and off Macalester's campus has launched her into the public sphere. Now, she

is one of 13 Youth Climate Intervenors (YCI), a group of young people who have been granted full legal status as an intervening party in the case against Line 3. Along with the legal and procedural work she does as a YCI, she's also an active member of the MN350 Pipeline Resistance team, which works to unite Minnesotans against the fossil fuel industry across the state.

Margaret hasn't necessarily been always at the front lines, however. It was in her first semester at Macalester that she became involved in the fight against the fossil fuel industry on a national level. "When I was a first year at Macalester, the Standing Rock occupation was really at its peak," she said. So she traveled to Standing Rock Indian Reservation in North Dakota to stand in solidarity with those fighting the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline, a 1,172 mile long underground pipe that, if built, would cut through Sioux land (Levin 2016). But it was in an Environmental Justice class at Macalester where Margaret first learned about Line 3, an active Minnesota pipeline that has been operational for more than five decades. For Minneapolis born Margaret, that news hit closer to home. "I was seeing a lot of parallels between [Line 3 and] the Dakota Access Pipeline and was horrified to think that this was something that was occurring all over again," she said. "I was not aware that we had so many pipelines running under our feet."

Much like DAPL, the Line 3 pipeline is an issue of national concern. The pipeline is a 1,097 mile crude oil network that has carried hundreds of thousands of gallons of crude oil from Canada throughout Minnesota and into Wisconsin since its build date in 1962 (Nelson 2018). The pipeline crosses the headwaters of the Mississippi, cuts through

tribal lands, and threatens wild rice beds that are sacred to the Anishinaabe tribes who live in reservations located across northern Minnesota. Despite the importance of the natural resources and the health of the native communities through which the pipeline runs, Line 3 is the only fully approved, fully funded tar sands infrastructure in North America (Honor the Earth).

But the pipeline is old, corroding, and only carries a fraction of the oil that it used to. And in order to export more oil, Enbridge has to replace the line. In 2014, the oil transport company announced a proposal to replace the old line and expand the capacity of the existing one (Enbridge), which would allow the pipeline transportation network a pipe along 337 miles of northern Minnesota that would increase tar sands oil traveling out of Minnesota by 370,000 gallons a day (Sanders-Reed 2017). Margaret was one of many climate activists that knew that the new Line 3 was not a replacement of an old pipeline, but rather a major move to sustain the fossil fuel industry in her home state. It was at this pivotal moment in which Margaret knew she had to fight against the replacement of Line 3 and the environmental injustices that it would perpetuate. "I wanted to be more engaged on the front end of the fight, and become more involved throughout the duration of the process," she said.

And involved she became. Following her introduction to Line 3, Margaret reached out to Akilah Sanders-Reed, a 2016 Macalester alum and a member of the Powershift Network, an environmental justice based organization based on empowering youth to get involved working in environmental justice policies. Sanders-Reed encouraged her to explore the MN350 Pipeline Resistance Team by

attending their meetings, which Margaret now does on a bi-weekly basis. Sanders-Reed also asked Margaret what she thought about potentially participating in another, newer project: “It was hypothetical at this point,” laughed Margaret, “but [Akilah said that] she was kind of thinking about getting this group of youth together.”

This group of youth, who would become nationally recognized as the Youth Climate Intervenors, would be instrumental in the fight against Enbridge and the placement of Line 3 in northern Minnesota. In the group’s earlier months, they “were a group of 13, who did not have a lawyer, who were arguing for legal standing,” Margaret said. When the group testified for the legal ability to intervene in the pipeline permitting process in July 2017, Margaret wasn’t sure how their case would be viewed. “While of course we saw our case as very valid and legitimate, we very much expected the judge to say, ‘Nah, I don’t think so.”

But the judge didn’t dismiss them. In fact, in a historical move that inspired generations of youth activists across the nation, the YCI were granted legal standing in the case against Enbridge’s proposed pipeline, not only enabling them to work as stakeholders the legal process, but allowing them to represent millions of young citizens who would be ultimately affected by the effects of pipeline building, like Enbridge’s Line 3. “It was really shocking,” Margaret said. “But in the best way possible.”

Since then, the work Margaret has done with the YCI has largely been procedural and legal. She pours over evidence, files legal briefs, and continues to represent the YCI as battles over Line 3 continue. It was by suggestion of Sanders-Reed that Margaret began to put her

organizational efforts towards the MN350 Pipeline Resistance team as well, which focuses their efforts on grassroots organizing.

In our conversation it was clear to see that Margaret's passion for justice is what enables her to continue doing tiring legal work. But isn't always easy, she says, to work inside the system. "It's kind of a catch-22. The issues that are causing projects like Line 3 in the first place are also what's stopping us from being able to use the legal process, from fully protecting us from those [issues] as well, because they're so intertwined," she said. Margaret pointed out that the construction of the pipeline would not only endanger Minnesota's natural resources, but also the health of its citizens. The current Line 3 already runs through northern Minnesota, traveling 300 miles under federally protected reservations (McKenna 2018). While Enbridge wants to build its new Line 3 off reservation land, the proposed route would cut through areas where local tribes grow wild rice. Wild rice is not only economically valuable to the state, but sacred to the tribes that grow it. And while the US Constitution defines

"It's kind of a catch-22. The issues that are causing projects like Line 3 in the first place are also what's stopping us from being able to use the legal process, from fully protecting us from those [issues] as well, because they're so intertwined."

reservation treaties as the supreme law of the land— something that federal representatives are sworn to uphold— the voices of native tribes aren't being taken to consideration by elected officials. Instead, they're listening to Enbridge. The oil transport company has poured over 16 million dollars into lobbying state officials for Line 3– that's a record amount as reported by the MN Public Utilities Commission (Sanders). And it's working.

"When seeing the numbers of the millions and millions of dollars that Enbridge has spent exclusively lobbying the state of Minnesota, it feels impossible to compete with that because YCI did not have any funds," Margaret said. But YCI, along with other intervening parties, didn't let lack of funding stop them from fighting Line 3 construction. "We followed every rule, got every expert witness that we needed, we did everything," Margaret said. And their work paid off– in April 2018, the Administrative Law Judge appointed to the case recommended that the Public Utilities Commission (PUC), a group of five board members appointed by the Minnesota governor, deny the certificate of need for Enbridge's preferred route. Margaret said she would have been blindsided if the PUC didn't side with the judge; the YCI had administrative law, the Department of Commerce, and the Department of Human Rights on their side, as well as five indigenous tribes, the Sierra Club, and various other intervening parties. In Margaret's eyes, it was a slam dunk. That's why, when the PUC pulled a 180 and unanimously granted Enbridge the certificate of need two months later, Margaret was shocked. "I think a lot of people were surprised," she said. "I was surprised to an extent where I knew I shouldn't have been." It wasn't until later in the year that she found out that Enbridge had spent 11 million dollars lobbying in the state of Minnesota.

Then, “it all started to make sense. [I began to understand] that these legal systems, while it’s necessary to interact with them, can also fail us in many ways.”

Margaret is not unfamiliar with working within a state that fails her. In the courtroom, for example, she and other pipeline resistance activists are often disregarded because of their age. “I think that people not fully taking us seriously unless you’re wearing a suit and have a law degree is really disappointing,” Margaret said. “It’s really indicative of the value system that is placed on our legislative bodies– not only in the state, but also in the country.” Margaret is hopeful that the work of the YCI and the work of other groups will continue to challenge that narrative and show that a diverse collective of voices such as the YCI can indeed be valuable, well informed, and educated. “We maybe don’t have a law degree, but we’re still equally valuable in those cases,” she says. “Hopefully that will be shifting.”

But it’s not just a matter of age that limits pipeline resistance activists from being taken seriously. The amount of racist discrimination that surfaces in the pipeline resistance movement is striking, Margaret said. In her mind, it is embedded racism that deepens injustices in cases such as these. “The Stop Line 3 Movement is indigenous led and that is a very defining feature of the work we have been doing,” she stated. “But some voices are seen as more credible than others. Throughout the entire process it was very clear that there is a great deal of systematic racism that was delegitimizing the work that indigenous people were doing.” Margaret noticed that she would be treated differently than indigenous activists. She would see consistent targeting of indigenous people in the

courtroom for rule enforcement, for example, and noticed a difference in how police interacted with indigenous people within the legal processes at the PUC.“That goes to show that in every aspect of this fight, racism is hugely significant and controls a lot of why the projects exist in the first place,” she said. “But it also controls how the fight against it has been defined.”

Because of this, Margaret said that in this line of work, it is necessary to not only work within the legal system but also outside of it. “I think that working outside of the system is not only beneficial, but necessary in projects like this,” she said. “A lot of these problems are so deeply embedded and ingrained into the legal system and that in many ways makes it challenging– if not impossible– to overcome these types of injustices by using those tools.” While Margaret is trained to attack the development of Line 3 from a legal standpoint, she emphasized that it is necessary to approach the issue from many different angles until these legal processes are fixed in order to prioritize justice in a larger realm. “Especially environmental justice,” she added.

This doesn’t mean that YCI and MN350 have to change their attack plan. In fact, they’re making significant progress just playing by the rules: “The fact that [water protectors], with no money, have been able to hold off someone who is throwing millions of dollars at the state…is an important reminder,” she said. While she may feel frustrated that pipeline resistance activist groups haven’t fully been able to overcome Enbridge, she acknowledges that they are making a significant impact in the process. “The work that we’re doing is worth 11 million dollars in the last year, and 5 million dollars the

year before," Margaret said, in reference to the ways in which pipeline resistance legal efforts have been able to combat Enbridge's lobbying. "While of course we are lacking that huge resource, I think we make up for it in a lot of other ways."

It's exactly through those "other ways" that keeps Margaret going, especially when experiencing setbacks, such as PUC's decision to grant Enbridge the certificate of need. "I felt so exhausted in that moment," Margaret said. "I felt like that all of this work building up to it was nothing, because so much of it was ignored by these five rich, white commissioners who were sitting up on a board." Sometimes, she says, it's easy to feel discouraged. But Margaret doesn't give up— she knows she has to keep fighting. "If there is one thing, when I am feeling helpless, hopeless, and sad about the state of affairs, the only way that I can lift myself out of that is by talking to people who are doing something about it," she said. " While we might not have the elected officials on our side, and while we might not have the money on our side, we have the power of the people on our side." Margaret said that there are few things more inspiring than knowing that there are masses of people that support her in this fight, who also see Line 3 as a horrible injustice for the state of Minnesota. "[We try] to remind ourselves that [our

"While we might not have the elected officials on our side, and while we might not have the money on our side, we have the power of the people on our side."

power] in many ways is more powerful than the systems that we're fighting against."

On December 13, the Minnesota Public Utilities Commission rejected petitions filed by environmental and tribal groups asking the commission to reconsider its approval of Enbridge's proposed Line 3 pipeline route. Although recent green light given by the Public Utilities Commission okayed a new route in October 2018, the line isn't necessarily a done deal. Margaret and other pipeline resistance activists are now making their case in the court of appeals, along with the Department of Commerce, which claims that Enbridge failed to prove the need for actually replacing the line (Wagness).

In more good news, the resistance is growing. Margaret urges people to do what they can to continue to delay Enbridge and other oil companies from building not only the Line 3 pipeline, but also by preventing injustices on a larger scale. "In a sentiment from a book that I read by Angela Davis, there is this idea that everybody has a responsibility to be involved in the fight for justice, but not everybody needs to be involved in the same way." Sometimes people are immobilized by a fear of thinking they don't belong in the fight, Margaret said. But she challenges this. "I would push people to just show up and see what options are for them. I think there is a place for everybody in this movement. The only way to find out what your place is, is by showing up and introducing yourself to people and becoming a part of that community."

What Margaret says is true. Five years ago, she chose to show up and introduce herself in the fight against Line 3. Now she is, at 21, changing the course of history. This is not metaphorically said, but meant in the most literal way.

The world has a lot to learn from Margaret and the people with whom she stands. The fossil fuel industry doesn't have a place in the future of this country, but Margaret does. And I do, too. There is no use in listening to stories written by those invested in the past. There is great promise, however, in spreading the voice of the future. Thanks to Margaret, this story, I believe, is different.

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Nazir Khan: Reclaiming Narratives Through the BIPOC Environmental and Climate Justice Table

Anna Lewis-Workman

Nazir Khan

Nazir Khan sat down with me on the 4th floor of the Minneapolis Institute of Art and chatted with me for almost an hour about everything from anarchism to the 40+ plants he has in his apartment. But our conversation centered around his inspiring environmental justice work. He has been organizing with People's Climate Movement and Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), as well as in the labor movement, but his most pertinent project right now is starting a Black, Indigenous, Person of Color (BIPOC) Environmental & Climate Justice Table with others from the movement, including from Black Visions Collective, the Center for Earth, Energy and Democracy, and others. The other main organizer involved is Sophia Benrud, another amazing environmental justice activist. They are currently figuring out what this table is going to look like, but they are envisioning a space for

people of color who are either already in the climate and environmental justice movements or want to get involved.

Nazir's goal and the goal of the BIPOC table is to create space for BIPOC, especially those who are in the middle of environmental justice campaigns or who want to get involved. Nazir wants to accomplish this with a base-building orientation, he believes in organizing lots of people to create something more powerful than any individual could. Often when something happens in a neighborhood, people get up and start fighting without building that base, or getting connected with other organizations. Their efforts will be more successful if they organize and empower others to act collectively with them, and connect to the other fights around the state with similar goals. There is a recurring problem within the environmental justice movement where POC are often the single POC within their white organizations. They often end up getting ignored and left out of the conversation. In his organizing experience and as a POC himself, Nazir recognizes the need to organize, build power, and go in together to take up space.

"There needs to be organizing but at the end of the day you aren't going to move people that are ideologically and politically opposed to you by asking them to be nice and to respect your historic or current injustices. You have to come in with power, so let's build power together first and come to a shared analysis about things, because often people of color are pitted against each other."

For Nazir, this is necessary in order for POC to be less isolated within the movement. Although the BIPOC table is his main focus right now, Nazir does a lot of activism and organizing with Democratic Socialists of America (DSA).

DSA is a big tent organization that involves everyone from communists, anarchists, to social democrats. This creates a nice organizing environment because there is a lot of tolerance of other ideological understandings. According to Nazir, DSA is one of the most anti-racist and internationalist spaces in the U.S. leftist politics arena.

Next, we talked a bit about how he views the environmental justice movement. According to Nazir, environmental justice has historically been a space for frontline impacted communities. Big greens (large environmental organizations) and the climate movement at large have allowed these frontline environmental justice fights to have relative autonomy, but they have also taken most of the funding for themselves. This is frustrating for Nazir as he feels we are at a point in the movement where the most transformative legislation and campaigns are coming from those frontline movements. An example of this type of transformative campaign is a POC environmental justice campaign in Illinois called Lvejo (little village) that has been fighting emissions and pollutants coming from warehouses outside Chicago. They championed the Future Energy Jobs Act, a statewide comprehensive legislation that addresses job creation and climate change through allocating $750 million dollars to energy efficiency and renewable energy programs in low-income communities. The legislation includes a new Illinois Solar for All policy, a low-income solar energy program targeting environmental justice communities and including a job training program that will recruit from these same communities. This is a prime example of how a strong organized base can make lasting change, hold the larger organization accountable, and keep a movement grounded and grassroots-oriented. Lvejo has maintained

momentum because they have a base that keeps them militant. Nazir added that many big greens don't have the political skill to push for transformative legislation; their eagerness to compromise leads to them being eviscerated by big oil.

In contrast, communities directly impacted by environmental injustices have had to fight for their survival, learning compromise is not an option when people's lives are on the line.

One of the questions I asked Nazir was "what does it mean to be an organizer?" I wanted to know what that title meant in more general terms, but also why it is significant for him personally. Nazir responded by bringing up how in our current society, the dominant approach to change is very individualistic and sees power as a one to one dynamic. This results in people asking for things from those in power and expecting the wisdom and persuasiveness of their arguments to convince them to change. Organizers like Nazir approach power as a collective process, people need to be organized into groups or collectives to pressure those in power because, fundamentally, the system is not just or equal. It is a system built on slavery, indigenous land theft, and genocide that continues to perpetuate inequality. Nazir asserts that "you're not going to change things by asking someone in power nicely and individually, it's going to take collective power." This becomes especially true when you realize that

"You're not going to change things by asking someone in power nicely and individually, it's going to take collective power."

on the other side are monied interests and capital. Industries don't want change; they want to worsen the divide because they make money off of inequality. A good example of this is the mining of rare metals in the Congo, if conditions improve there and people are paid better wages the industry will lose profit, they are actively invested in keeping things the way they are. You might be able to get your councilperson to listen to you to get some space to park your car but besides that, you won't get very far within a broken and unequal system. The concept of organizing attempts to combat this by building collective power and gathering people along a shared goal of transforming the world into a more just world.

Our conversation then took an interesting turn when I asked Nazir how he got involved with environmental justice work and where this whole journey started. Nazir graduated from Harvard in 2006 and started doing a lot of international public health work, specifically around the HIV/AIDS crisis in Sub-Saharan Africa. He became disenchanted with how that world operates, it is extremely neoliberal and often just a cover for a lot of foreign aid and U.S. diplomacy that does more harm than good. For example, according to Nazir, PEPFAR (President's Emergency Plan For Aids Relief under President Bush) was essentially funding abstinence education as a solution to the HIV/AIDS crisis which sometimes took money away from people who actually had HIV and needed medication and treatment. He was also involved in international development and was disillusioned seeing how destructive much of that work is and the negative impacts development projects have on communities. People aren't being asked what they actually want, but instead are being kicked off their land and further disenfranchised.

Seeing all of this playing out around him, Nazir quickly fell out of love with the work he was doing. But there were community organizing aspects of this work, which was the part he actually enjoyed. He decided to focus in on that and ended up quitting his job and moving to India. There, he got involved in a political campaign and worked at an urban institute that was using technology to solve social problems: Mapunity. In India, there are very strong leftist traditions, and he was more deeply exposed to those traditions during his time there. He eventually went back to the U.S. and got a job as a labor organizer, mainly organizing adjunct faculty at universities. He was organizing professors who were teaching hundreds of students, but barely making enough money to survive. Many of these professors were teaching 5 classes, spending all their time traveling around, and didn't even have health insurance or time to grade papers. He was organizing them to bargain with their administrators, noting how the managerial class was extracting all the value of labor and not paying the workers what they deserved. In doing this work, he was made further aware of the power divides that exist in our society and really started to politicize.

Nazir eventually ended up doing labor organizing at the University of Minnesota, where David Pellow was supposed to be heavily involved before he left and moved back to California. Dr. Pellow is the author of the book *Critical Environmental Justice* which provided the framework used in our Environmental Justice class. Nazir works closely with one of Dr. Pellow's graduate students. Pellow's environmental justice framework aligns with both DSA and Nazir's personal politics very nicely because of its overarching critique of the state and big money and the general anti-capitalist and socialist ideological framework.

All these factors led him very organically to the environmental justice movement.

Coming into the environmental movement gave Nazir an even clearer analysis of where power sits. Big greens are often in a much more comfortable relationship with business, capital, and industry and therefore try to shift things by being nice, not realizing what it is going to take to get a large corporation to stop funding fossil fuels, for example. Things are not just given to you; you have to build the power necessary to take it and force the hand of your opposition. This analysis is something that the environmental justice movement seems to have, which is part of why Nazir saw his role in the movement so clearly. Frontline environmental justice activists are fighting for their lives everyday against entities that are profiting off their suffering. Those in power don't care, that's the way things are done so it takes actual power building to change it.

Next, I asked what Nazir thought the most important environmental justice issues facing Minnesota are. Line 3 is one of the most significant, and most of the work he does with DSA revolves around getting more movement, organization, and coalition surrounding line 3. If it gets built it will supply tar sands oil which is the most harmful, carbon intensive, and all-around dirtiest oil in the world. Line 3 goes through Minnesota, but if it gets built it is going to supply the globe. There is a lot on the line, but if this pipeline gets stopped it would further damage an already suffering industry. Stocks are going down and new infrastructure development is declining, stopping line 3 could potentially kill the tar sands industry which would be

a major hit of fossil fuels as a whole. Furthermore, it would incentivize investors to shift towards renewables.

But for Nazir, this issue is pretty short term and although the two are interrelated, the most important long-term fight is inequality. Minnesota has some of the worst inequalities between people of color and white people that Nazir has ever seen. Everything, from education, health, environmental injustice outcomes, and exposure to toxins shows extreme inequalities. This can be seen clearly in the Frogtown neighborhood. Frogtown is a lower income neighborhood in St. Paul with a majority POC population, the deeply embedded system of racism that exists in our society has resulted in this area being exposed to toxic soil, poor air quality, and dangerous infrastructure that has and will result in negative health impacts and a larger vulnerability to climate change. This is exactly what Nazir was referring to when he spoke about severe inequalities, he has lived all over the world and Minnesota is home to some of the worst inequalities he has ever seen. You can feel it, in ways that he hasn't seen in other places, if you go to Frogtown, East Phillips, or North Minneapolis and then go to places where more white people live, the difference is astronomical. "That's the power of environmental injustice: it's so observable and smell-able, you can literally feel and see it." Nazir believes this has to do fundamentally with how POC are not organized to fight back, despite all the non-profits that are

"That's the power of environmental injustice: it's so observable and smell-able, you can literally feel and see it."

serving them that talk about racial justice, they haven't been able to create any lasting change because people aren't empowered on their own to take charge of their wellbeing and betterment.

This connects back to the mission of the BIPOC table, power needs to be in the hands of those who are bearing these impacts. They need to be building their power and developing as political beings, not handing power to some representative who isn't going to do anything. Nazir used the fight against the Amazon headquarters in New York City as an example of this. After intense pushback from the community, Amazon ended up canceling their plans to build a new headquarters in Queens. This was successful because of the huge base of mobilized people; it has taken generations to organize and build that base, but they are there, and they are instigating change. That's the environmental justice fight, it's not any campaign specifically, it is organizing the people who are impacted to have collective power.

We are witnessing a dramatic generational shift in how we understand what is happening in the world and Nazir and many college students such as myself are examples of that shift. The longstanding faith in post WWII wealth and shared prosperity came to an end in the 80s with Reagan and Clinton practicing neoliberalism. They wanted to free the market and globalize, thinking that everyone would benefit. But this is misguided, that's not where the prosperity came from. The grand failure of this mentality was felt first by all of the developing countries that were subject to the World Bank, the IMF, and other structural adjustment programs that pushed for divesting from public health and education. These programs were riddled with

corruption which resulted in destabilization. But that destabilization made it more profitable for capital, if those in power invest in education and health, incomes will rise, and global corporations will have to pay more for labor. Now we are looking at an ecological crisis as a result of this worldview, the analysis that we need high GDP growth to get human development just hasn't worked. And many in our generation are realizing this system is broken.

Nazir spoke candidly about the many fights he has gotten into with friends who went to work for development banks or U.S. foreign aid bodies and thought they were helping people, when in fact this is a form of neocolonialism. His friendships with these people became an ideological battleground. But now there is a shift happening as people see the consequences of that worldview play out. This is part of the current influx to groups like DSA that provide an alternative. It's not just Bernie Sanders or Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez causing this shift and the growing interest in groups like DSA, what is behind it is a large scale failure of a worldview and the realization that we need a different way of doing things if we are going to address these huge problems that could result in literal genocide on parts of the planet. We need systemic, structural change.

When I asked Nazir about what keeps him going when there is so much cynicism and bad news all around us, he struggled. But after some thought, he said that seeing his role as straddling two worlds, as a "fugitive" with a mission here in the U.S., keeps him motivated. He was born in the U.S., but his parents immigrated to Brooklyn in 1980. He has done a lot of reflecting on his place in this country and as someone of Indian origin, exclaiming "what is my relationship to my home country and this country?" He has

realized that he needs to maintain a real and meaningful connection to India that is not just about holding onto some traditions, but about acting together in struggle with those there who, for example, are on the frontlines of the worst impacts of climate change. The world is changing all around us, but he isn't going to come here and just forget his family and people in India. He stands in solidarity and is fighting from the inside — especially as the response to climate change within the Global North is increasingly to shut down borders and push immigrants out. For Nazir, seeing his role and mission in this fight in a clear way and taking the time and care to build those connections is life giving and nourishing. So in conclusion, maintaining an internationalist solidarity and community keeps him going. And plants.

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Michael Chaney: Using Project Sweetie Pie to Address Food Deserts

Tulsi Patel

Michael Chaney

The process of setting up a meeting with Michael Chaney is emblematic of the polychronic ecosystem he operates in. After a week of struggling to communicate over email and phone calls due to myself getting sick and our schedules not aligning, I called him on a Wednesday afternoon during my lunch break hoping for a free 20-30 minutes to have a phone conversation. He insisted on talking in person, and he was free… at that moment! So I dropped the lunch, hopped in my car, and found my way to South Minneapolis to meet Michael in a co-working space on East Franklin Ave. Through my years of working with food justice activists, I have found that the ability to operate in polychronic rhythms–free-flowing and adaptable with time, emphasizing connections to people and building relationships–is extremely important, so when Michael called me over I knew that the best way I could respect his time and energy was to shift my day and take a trip across the Mississippi.

As a brief overview, Michael has been involved in environmental justice, specifically social and food justice,

in the Twin Cities for quite a while. In 1984 he was one of the co-founders of the Minneapolis Juneteenth Celebration. In the 90's he was one of the co-founders of the Wendell Phillips Credit Union. In 2010, he started an organization, Project Sweetie Pie, that uses urban agriculture to revitalize the North Minneapolis foodscape, and has spent the last decade working on accessibility in higher education and food sovereignty. As a current member of the Northside Green Zone Task Force he has continued to plant the "seeds of change" and implement evolving strategies and priorities. He also has become an avid critic and advocate for equitable food and public land development and community ownership in the current conflict over the development of the Upper Harbor Terminal in North Minneapolis. Recently Michael helped co-create The Family Of Trees.org and was awarded the 2020 courageous collaborator award from the Environmental Initiative. Other community projects he has birthed and is implementing to advance environmental justice, equity and inclusion for all are The Northside Safety N.E.T (Neighborhoods Empowering Teens), and J.U.I.C.E. (Juneteenth Urban Initiative Creating Economic Empowerment).

For the first twenty minutes, we flipped the interview and talked about myself and my background in food justice. We traced my youth from growing up in a South Los Angeles food desert, to attending a social and environmental justice-based high school, to Macalester & the plethora of avenues in which I've deepened my experience in the food justice movement. We noted how much of my experience has been based in theory and higher education. Through my studies in my classes at Macalester I participate in discourse on systems, frameworks, and theories

surrounding food, agriculture, politics, and economics. Last summer I was a research assistant on a University of Minnesota urban agriculture project. The following fall, I studied food systems in three different countries over four months through an immersive abroad program. I've met amazing people along the whole journey who continue to inspire me to get through college, and later immerse myself in on-the-ground justice work. I've been building and building for many years, and I think my conversation with Michael gave me such an insight as to what my future will look like putting this knowledge into practice.

A consistent thread in our conversation was the desire to encourage self determination in marginalized communities, specifically low income communities of color. One such community, North Minneapolis, has been at the hands of institutional inequalities since the development of the Twin Cities. It seems like both of us share a vision of investing time, energy, and resources into marginalized communities to use food as an avenue to break cycles of self-defeat and low self-esteem.

Before he dove into environmental justice work Michael spent 25 years in TV production and broadcasting, but didn't have much more to say about that period. Late in that career he had a relationship working with North High School students in North Minneapolis on web design and production, but when the school came under threat of closure in 2010 he acted to save the school through food. By collaborating with Rose McGee, founder of Sweet Potato Comfort Pies, Michael began to grow sweet potatoes with students in a green room at the school. Sweet Potato Comfort Pies used the historical and cultural role of sweet potatoes in the African American community as the

inspiration for their urban farm/local food production pilot project. This effort was eventually named Project Sweetie Pie, and since then it has blossomed into a movement. In its first year of operation, 2010, Project Sweetie Pie had five gardens on empty lots donated by local residents with fifty partners, and by now there are twenty-five gardens across North Minneapolis with 135 partners. Not only is Project Sweetie Pie working to combat food deserts and poverty, but it has grown into an organization that teaches youth how to grow and sell their own food to encourage food freedom and self determination. Michael emphasizes that it is important to build infrastructure for inner city youth to develop skills to subvert historical marginalization and become both producers and consumers within their system. Michael noted that this is the feat of a "community that came together, worked together for the common good of the youth and families of this community, for it takes a village to raise a child."

Michael briefly talked to me about a different urban agriculture project he pioneered, Growing North. This project, a collaboration with the University of Minnesota, is focused on building pathways to higher education for inner city youth. It involves mentorship programs that help develop life and career skills for youth and facilitates access to higher education. Michael informed me that the program just received a $250,000 grant from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). When I seemed impressed by the amount, he said it was just spit in the bucket. It truly is little compared to the vast amount of wealth being pushed in other industries. He said that he wanted to focus on a partnership with the University of Minnesota because it is a land grant university. Land grant universities are designated by state legislatures or Congress

to receive the benefits of the Morrill Acts in 1862, 1890 and 1994. The Morrill Act allowed grants in the form of federal land to states, using the benefits to establish public institutions to provide agricultural and technical education to the people. These grants are the first line of defense in educating the layperson about innovation and advancement of agriculture through the extension services. However, they are not living up to their original mandate of educating the people— it has become very ivory-tower focused and inaccessible to most people who cannot afford a college education. These are top-down controls that create more barriers for minority students to access knowledge, and it is a system we should actively try to dismantle.

Michael works in horticulture and agriculture, yes, but that's not what he does. It's a means to an end, a strategy. Getting people skills in education to charter their own course is the real vision. He likes to use the garden as an avenue for this because it is synonymous to a petri dish–you have to build the culture. One of his proudest achievements is the establishment of the first urban farm legislation in the nation. Working with Representative Karen Clark and Ed McDonald, the head of the Council on Black Minnesotans, they established cutting edge legislation that allocated money to directly support the training of youth in agriculture in metropolitan communities.

There's not much of an entryway to environmental justice for the average person in his community. It has become a discourse that mostly people with bachelor's and master's degrees participate in. Michael says gardening is literally low-hanging fruit, it is an opportunity for all of us to perceive ourselves as environmentalists. Especially with

his practices of engaging youth with agriculture, Michael is helping foster environmental stewards in his community. He says this is important because we as a whole will not be successful in addressing climate change if it becomes the sole domain of white, educated, elite intellectuals; especially while we have not made a dent in improving the quality of life for communities of color.

Michael spent a bulk of our conversation talking about the Upper Harbor Terminal development project dispute. The Upper Harbor Terminal is situated on a 48-acre plot of land along the St. Anthony River in his neighborhood of North Minneapolis. The proposed plan includes converting the space into an 18-acre park, an outdoor concert venue, commercial development, office spaces, and housing. None of this plan involved input from the local community. Residents are concerned about river access, efficacy of job creation, overall patterns of gentrification and the renovation of a district to conform to white middle or upper class comforts, encroaching on their space.

For the past two years, Michael has shifted his activist energy towards this affair. He is on a coalition team with other local organizations to resist the current plan of development and try to cocreate a better vision for the community. The team wants to challenge the ill-founded concept plan decided over the wrong course of action by raising awareness and expectations of this project. They

They operate based on four pillars: all things ecological, arts and culture, historical preservation, and food and urban farming.

operate based on four pillars: all things ecological, arts and culture, historical preservation, and food and urban farming. According to their vision, the development project would emphasize green technologies and infrastructure, setting a precedent for North Minneapolis on the frontline of putting the Green New Deal into action. They want to establish personhood of the Mississippi River in order to dismantle western domination of nature. Michael said that the vision for the Upper Harbor Terminal project is both rooted in research and development. Experiential learning, workforce development, and applied education are at the forefront of their minds and create an ecosystem within public and private relationships.

Soliciting money from the state all the time is unsustainable, so how do we make a cooperative structure? How do we implement intergenerational wealth building? If $25-50 million public dollars are going into the development of the site, the people should be able to say what they want in the space. What would it look like to have ownership of that site? Michael says that instead of 40 acres and a mule, they're going to build 48 acres and a school.

Michael finds it important to be vocal about this matter

because it is tied to many of the greater issues marginalized communities face. He says it's not good enough to talk about food justice and food access unless you tie it to economics. Why are marginalized communities suffering? Because of disenfranchisement, disinvestment, lack of access to capital. He says that most solutions within social justice are unsustainable. Are they a fancy cause giving someone fish rather than teaching someone to fish? We must give people jobs, and teach skills to set them up to direct their own destiny. Simply giving people food creates codependency, but if we gave people tools to become independent, we can make more progress. Michael says that the trajectory of the future is about me being invested in my future as much as it is about society being invested in my future, because I have gifts and talents that need to be supported. We have to support the young bright minds of today.

At the end of our conversation, we shared some ideas that were really meaningful to me thinking about the future of my work. He was summarizing his work through the decades, first in the 1980s created the first Juneteenth celebration in Minnesota, then in the 1990s co-founded Wendell Phillips Credit Union to aid wealth creation. In the 2010s he focused on urban agriculture, and now he's onto the Upper Harbor Terminal development theme. He says he is always working to create real solutions for real people who have real problems. I noted that the power in his work is that it shows how all these systems that disenfranchise communities of color are embedded into our society. He equates it to probiotic health–if you want to become actualized, it's about living in the moment, living organically. He has always been working to elevate his community through the avenue most relevant. Western

academic society values the accumulation of wealth as the motivation for living, but his motivation is to find out who he is and discover how his talents & skills can be made available to help society at large, to advance the greater good. It resonated with my belief that if I do not have people who are set up to continue my work after me, then my work has been for naught. To this, Michael said that as people, we've been conditioned to live in a self-serving world, but it's an illusion. We as a society need to ask ourselves, "What is our succession plan?" like farmers consider the best succession crop. He says we need to effectively utilize our resources to become good stewards–we're all environmentalists but you're either a good steward or a bad steward. People of color are barred from a seat at the table most of the time, and those who are out doing inspiring work never get representation in the media. From this, I took away that it is important for me to be interested in food justice work as a young woman of color. With as little representation as we get, we are the ones redefining who get to be the movers and shakers of our system, redistributing resources and capital, and are healing fragments in our relationship with the earth. Michael has shown me that there are pathways for me in my future working in alternative food justice movements. I struggled for a period of time trying to figure out how to practically de-commodify food and subvert the capitalist economic system, because that seemed to be the root of injustice. Now, through hearing Michael's experience in

We as a society need to ask ourselves, "What is our succession plan?" like farmers consider the best succession crop.

this movement, I can see that change doesn't happen so quickly, but it should not discourage work from being done. We must help our future generations by building pathways and setting them up with tools to create our vision. I'm being called upon now, in 2019, to navigate through this system that was designed against my favor, and, by recognizing this, it is in our collective best interest to foster a framework to uplift everyone.

Akilah Sanders-Reed: Resisting the Line 3 Pipeline

Miranda Moulis

Akilah Sanders-Reed

When my last class of the week ended on Friday afternoon, I made my way straight to Dunn Bros for my meeting with environmental activist Akilah Sanders-Reed. Pulling up my email as I walked I saw that I had received a recent message from her containing detailed instructions on where to find her in Dunn Bros. She would be wearing a white shirt, with black designs, sitting at a table against the far wall on the right side with a cup of tea and an Apple computer. There was no way I could miss her. As I sat down across from her, I was very excited to be talking to a former Macalester student who now does environmental work, something I aspire to become one day. Right at the beginning of our conversation, Akilah told me she wanted to be helpful, and advised me to stop her if what she was saying would not be useful for my essay. From this interaction alone I could see that she is the type of person who is always thinking of others and how she can help them. As we began to delve into her work, this impression was only further cemented.

Akilah got an early start in the environmental movement. Her story begins in New Mexico, where, as a high school student, Akilah began organizing events for environmental organizations like 350.org. When she began applying for college, she knew she wanted to continue this type of work and looked for somewhere “at the forefront of climate justice”. Her search led her to the Twin Cities, which seemed like the kind of urban area where she could learn from other organizers. Minnesota is not too conservative and not too liberal, somewhere, she felt, that could be in the middle of the conversation about what building a future for everybody looks like. This is how she ended up at Macalester College, after only spending one half day on campus, that day being her first and only visit to the Midwest. Despite the harsh winters, the decision gave her the opportunities she desired. In college, she continued to be active in the environmental movement, including volunteering with MN350, an organization which fights climate change in Minnesota. After graduating in 2016 with a degree in environmental studies, Akilah found her way to the Powershift Network. This organization provides connections and support to over 80 environmental organizations, from large nonprofits to small student groups, and helps them navigate the environmental movement. Akilah’s role in the Powershift Network is supporting young people involved in pipeline resistance.

As Akilah began her career in fighting pipelines, Enbridge, an energy transportation company, decided to replace and expand one of their old pipelines right here in Minnesota. The current pipeline, Line 3, was built in 1961, and cannot be used at full capacity because of several structural issues. Rather than replacing or fixing the pipeline, Enbridge is planning to build a new, bigger pipeline with a new route

through Minnesota. The new Line 3 would transport 760,000 barrels per day of tar sands oil, the dirtiest fuel on the planet. Although Enbridge claims the pipeline would be safe, the company has had over 800 spills in the last 15 years, according to Honor the Earth. Not only would the construction release the equivalent of fifty coal-fired power plants worth of greenhouse gases, but the new route would also go through sacred Indigenous lands, endangering hunting, fishing, and wild rice. Minority groups, including Indigenous people, have long been the targets of the fossil fuel industry. Mines, pipelines, and refineries are all disproportionately located in low income, minority communities, because they have less social, political, and economic power with which they can fight back. The plans for Line 3 have angered both environmental and Indigenous activists, eliciting protests and lawsuits. Even several government organizations, such as the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency and the Department of Commerce, are against the pipeline.

Not only would the construction release the equivalent of fifty coal-fired power plants worth of greenhouse gases, but the new route would also go through sacred Indigenous lands, endangering hunting, fishing, and wild rice.

Akilah sees fighting Line 3 as one important intervention point in the fight against climate change. While companies

like Enbridge claim that oil will be extracted regardless of whether or not the pipeline gets built, in reality pipeline capacity is the biggest limiting factor in growth for the tar sands industry in Canada, where the oil is extracted. Other forms of transportation simply are not profitable. When Enbridge said they had to delay the construction of Line 3 by a year, a mining operation in Canada was cancelled because there was not enough pipeline capacity to move the oil. According to Akilah, “Every day that that pipeline isn’t built is a day that we are not spewing extra greenhouse gases into the atmosphere”. For Akilah, fighting pipelines is a tangible way to get involved, and Line 3 in particular is important to her because it is close to home. Akilah also points out the great work other activists are doing to challenge the fossil fuel industry, including groups fighting oil refineries, groups fighting extraction sites, and groups on the ground in Northern Minnesota who are working to put an end to the construction preparation Enbridge is already starting on Line 3.

Because of the efforts of so many activists, Line 3 has become one of the most well-known and controversial issues in Minnesota. In Akilah’s opinion, the greatest accomplishment of the movement is the scale that it has grown to because “ultimately it’s people power that wins”. To illustrate her point, Akilah explained to me how Minnesota’s current Governor Walz had yet to take a stand on Line 3 when he first arrived in office. However, groups of faith leaders, young people, and climate activists showing up in his office, and politicians like Ilhan Omar and Bernie Sanders tweeting at him drove Governor Walz to commit to fighting Line 3. Because the movement is backed by the power of so many people, activists are more

able to fight the power of the fossil fuel industry and gain support.

When Akilah started getting involved in pipeline resistance, she wanted to uplift the voices of young people, who don't really get a say in these kinds of decisions despite the fact that their future will be most impacted by climate change. She explained that young voices are largely kept out of the process and ignored, "I think a lot of times and in a lot of spaces, the role of young people and the voices of young people are seen as something powerful, but not something that has a place". Akilah, along with twelve other young people, found a place for their voices through the Youth Climate Interveners. Because these thirteen young people were able to show a judge that they would be personally impacted by the pipeline, the judge granted them the right to legally intervene in the fight against Line 3. This legal standing gives the Youth Climate Interveners the same rights as Enbridge, including the right to share their opinions, bring in expert witnesses, and ask questions. By bringing in expert witnesses, these young people not only uplifted their voices, but also the voices of climate experts and Indigenous elders who would otherwise be kept out of this system. The Youth Climate Interveners is the first group of young people to formally

"I think a lot of times and in a lot of spaces, the role of young people and the voices of young people are seen as something powerful, but not something that has a place."

intervene in the case of a pipeline, but they learned from a legacy of other groups. Our Children's Trust, a group of 21 young people suing the federal government over inaction on climate change, as well as land owners in South Dakota, who took action against the Keystone XL pipeline which was going through their land, provided an example of creative legal tactics that the Youth Climate Interveners could learn from and apply to their own unique situation.

Despite the objections of the Youth Climate Interveners and others, the Public Utilities Commission (PUC) approved the project. Akilah sees this approval as a symptom of a larger, broken system of government. She points out that 94% of public comments were against the pipeline and other government agencies didn't think it was a good idea, yet the PUC still approved. Perhaps the $11.1 million Enbridge spent on lobbying in 2018 influenced the decision (Lovrien 2019). The fight, however, is not over. The Youth Climate Interveners are teaming up with law students from the University of Minnesota, another group of young people, to appeal the decision. Akilah is very optimistic about the appeal. When I asked her how she maintained her optimism despite the PUC's dismissal of the objections of so many activists and experts, she said that the community that has been fighting and continues to fight the pipeline gives her hope. Pipelines have been stopped before, and with such a large movement around this one, "it's a powerful force to be reckoned with".

While Line 3 would disproportionately affect the health of Indigenous people and their land, Akilah considers herself a white ally in this fight. She says that although the pipeline itself (aside from greenhouse gas emissions) would mostly affect Indigenous people, it should not be up to these

communities alone to stop it. Two sets of names signed treaties many years ago: the names of today's Indigenous ancestors, and the names of the white settlers, who have many descendants in today's society. When something, like Enbridge, threatens the rights of Indigenous people, both groups must work to uphold those treaties and protect the land and resources that the treaties safeguard. As for being a white ally in the movement, Akilah says that "it is a constant learning process". There is no way to get everything right, and mistakes will be made. In order to be a good ally, one must be willing to accept criticism and learn from it, which is something that Akilah strives to do everyday.

As our conversation came to an end, I found myself amazed at the remarkable feats Akilah and the Youth Climate Interveners had accomplished so far in their efforts against Line 3. Looking at the time on my phone, I realized I had kept her longer than I was meant to, but Akilah was happy to take the time out of her day to help me with my project. With this in mind, I decided to ask the last question to which I really wanted to hear the answer. After feeling so inspired by her work, I wanted to know what her advice was for those like myself who wanted to get involved. Her initial response, "just go for it", was followed with "I think we often shoot ourselves in the foot thinking that we need to learn more or know the whole legal process or have more experience or be absolutely perfect in the ways that we show up before showing up. And I think that's a trap. That's a trap that we fall into that disempowers us". Her call to action inspires me to put myself out there and begin seeking change. As I packed my things to leave, Akilah encouraged me to email her with any follow up questions I may have, demonstrating again her drive to support others.

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Jennifer Nguyễn Moore: Bridging the Gap Between Community and Government Agencies

Elizabeth Hrycyna

Jennifer Nguyễn Moore

Jennifer Nguyễn Moore (she/they) greeted me with a welcoming smile and an even gaze as we walked through the sleek security gates of the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) on the afternoon of April 26, 2019. The waiting area, with its textured reclaimed-wood paneling, seemed to me in stark contrast to the grey and littered streets of the surrounding neighborhood I had traveled through to get here. I could imagine Jennifer experienced a similar disconnect between her roles as an activist for environmental justice, and a government employee for the MPCA. Today I was excited to hear more about how she balanced trying to change and challenge government systems while still having to work within them.

Jennifer traces her passion for the environment back to her childhood. Her parents were refugees from Vietnam, whom she described as having “low resources” when she was a child. She said this allowed her to grow up with an appreciation of how to manage what you have and to

live off of the land. This knowledge fueled her interest in environmental science in high school. It wasn't until her undergraduate degree at the University of Minnesota, however, that Jennifer became interested in environmental justice and its marriage of social justice with environmental protection. Once she saw firsthand how others were bringing human health and justice to the forefront of environmental issues, she really started to appreciate that you cannot address one kind of conflict without considering the others it interacts with. She majored in Environmental Science Policy Management, and Social Justice, creating, as she put it, "my own environmental justice major."

After she graduated, Jennifer started a job as a zero waste education coordinator for the non-profit Minneapolis-based Eureka Recycling. There she designed and managed recycling education for multi-family homes in the metro area. These large apartment buildings isolate tenants from the recycling and trash services, both in terms of access and education. Families living there are often immigrants and refugees, people who might not be familiar with, or given access to, environmental education and recycling. The Twin Cities have some of the country's most segregated areas by race and income, and the state of Minnesota is

The Twin Cities have some of the country's most segregated areas by race and income, and the state of Minnesota is ranked third worst for racial inequality.

ranked third worst for racial inequality. Jennifer saw the push for recycling education at Eureka as a way of making recycling programs more accessible in an area that needed it, and building a relationship with a community too familiar with being marginalized. This job marks a theme that Jennifer would continue on throughout her career: one of community outreach and engagement.

After Eureka, Jennifer worked for the City of Bloomington to help reorganize their unregulated, open hauling waste removal services and gain access to waste removal resources for disenfranchised residents. She coordinated the many different waste removal companies operating in the area so that there were many fewer trucks on the road at one time, something that had posed a safety, efficiency, and environmental hazard. Ironically, despite the overabundance of waste removal companies operating in the city, more than 2,000 homes lacked access to any sort of waste management services. Residents were forced to either burn their trash, dump it in parking lots, or keep it in their homes. People may worry about where our trash ends up out of concern for the environment, but we rarely consider the actual pick up service itself as an environmental justice issue. Yet thousands were forced to put the health of their neighborhoods, families and selves at risk because trash collection was locationally or financially inaccessible. This furthered Jennifer's commitment to making Environmental Justice a priority at the city and state level.

Last year Jennifer decided to try to take that process into her own hands. She ran for Ramsey County Commissioner on a platform of Environmental Justice and civic engagement. Unfortunately she didn't win; she was about

100 votes short of making it through the primary. Yet I was surprised to hear how positively Jennifer spoke about her campaign. Rather than focusing on the loss, Jennifer focused the impact on the community. Not many people know what commissioners actually do, and yet it is a very important job. They manage a $700 million budget for the county covering all things from jails, to health and human services, to solid waste (trash, recycling, organics) disposal. Even people who recognize the position might not realize the significance of the job for environmental justice. Jennifer saw her campaign as a successful push to educate voters about the crucial role of someone in this position and the importance of elections. When she ran she had no political connections or clout, yet she only lost her election by a small margin. “I really didn’t think I would get that close,” she told me enthusiastically. “It was really an amazing result. It was exciting to see that people really liked someone who was talking about environmental justice and not just environmentalism.”

Electing representatives with a clear environmental justice focus, Jennifer says, is the next step. This is the best way for communities to get both the equitable and sustainable futures they deserve. While individual education is clearly important to Jennifer, systems change and policy change is what we need to focus on to get any major progress towards combating climate change. Individuals are not the only ones causing damage to the environment. Industry and capitalism have

The government level is the opportunity for US residents to try to change the system.

far greater negative impacts. The government level is the opportunity for US residents to try to change the system. Most current elected officials, Jennifer notes, recognize that climate change is happening but they don't have the technical expertise to know what to do to address it, and most ignore the equity issues attached. However, the support she received in her campaign leaves Jennifer optimistic that more and more voters will try to elect officials with an environmental justice direction.

Another reason Jennifer ran for office was because she still sees a lot of mistrust between marginalized communities and the government. As both a community member and a government employee, Jennifer feels uniquely positioned to connect these groups, even without being an elected official. The long history of oppression and resistance between these communities and the government does not go away overnight, and government agencies really need to put effort into reaching out to communities if they want to get feedback and input from them. In her current job at the MPCA she supports recycling education and businesses that use recyclable materials to make products. She strives for a balance between protecting our environment, ensuring human health and supporting the local economy, and needing to look at the full picture. She also tries "to be the bridge between community and governmental agencies, because there's no official role that would support that work or challenge these inequities, so I'm infiltrating that space" she told me.

This is a lot of pressure to put on one person. Jennifer emphasized that it is hard for a Black, Indigenous, Person of Color (BIPOC) to be radical all the time in the workplace. Jennifer is one of very few and many times

the only woman of color who advocate for equity in these environmental spaces. She spoke about the contrast between her government jobs and her job at the non-profit Eureka Recycling. At Eureka she felt much more free to talk about environmental justice than she does now; people at the MPCA are still in the process of starting conversations about the topic. Jennifer often tries to put a positive and encouraging spin on her suggestions pertaining to environmental justice by talking about "community engagement" and "relationship building" while still getting her point across. She challenges microaggressions, racism, ageism and sexism when she experiences and sees it. The risk that calling out injustices can pose to her personal well-being means she can't be quite as radical as she would like all the time. She often has to prioritize job security, especially since she has a family to support.

At the same time, it is also her family that compels her to keep doing what might place her job at risk: push for environmental justice. She asks herself what her daughter's future would be like if she didn't work as hard as she does to create these conversations and changes. In her work to educate communities, run for office, or change waste management systems, Jennifer emphasizes conversation and equal involvement. Whether she is talking with MPCA management, or an individual community member, "you can't assume that everyone wants to fight climate change, but you can look at the different priorities of why people are concerned about certain things, and you can always tie it back into the environmental injustices we're facing." It is these connections that will help us come together to make the world a more just and sustainable place. Jennifer sets an example for all who want to advocate for environmental

justice within governmental agencies or whatever community they work in.

2020 Update: Jennifer is pushing for systems change at the MPCA and is incorporating ways to increase access in information, funding and making connections with communities most impacted by environmental injustices. She was recently elected as the Co-Chair for the Health Equity Advisory Leadership (HEAL) Council that advises the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH). This council is currently providing feedback and guidance on how to ensure an adequate and culturally-responsive approach managing the COVID-19 pandemic and compounding negative impacts of racism on our mental, physical and our collective wellbeing. She also volunteered her time and expertise sewing 250 fabric cloth masks to distribute to the SouthEast Asian community in Minnesota.

Halston Sleets: The Right to Clean and Healthy Environments

Christine McCormick

Halston Sleets is an up-and-coming trailblazer of the Environmental Justice movement. In eight years she has accomplished more than some do in their entire career. Interviewing Halston was an honor. As she talked about the issues she cared so deeply about, I could see the fire in her eyes. It must be what keeps her going. Halston is working on diversifying the field of environmentalism, a monumental task for more reasons than one. Despite often being the only person of color in her office, she remains confident and continues to fight for the future she believes in. She has done this through a series of impressive jobs, including Contract Management Specialist for the National Park Service in Denali National Park, planning analyst for Hennepin County, Senior Policy Aide for Environmental Justice and Sustainability (for the Mayor of Minneapolis) and most recently as the Manager of Sustainability for Best Buy. When asked about her work, Halston described it by saying: “The work I do addresses the intersections between the environment and equity. So with all my work and the various projects and positions I’ve had, I’ve advocated and amplified the voices of marginalized people.”

Halston started her career in Environmental Justice eight years ago. Since then her achievements have captured the attention of notable news sources including NPR and the Huffington Post. Halston joined the Environmental Justice

movement because she saw an absence of people of color in policy making and environmental planning. Although the work is sometimes lonely, she perseveres.

Halston's experience of being under-represented in her field is backed up by research. A study executed by Green 2.0 found that people of color only make up 27% percent of full-time staff and 14% of senior staff in Environmental NGOs. The study found that these numbers are overall lower than other areas of the financial sector, making it an Environmental Justice-specific issue.

"White mainstream environmental organizations that say they want to do something about justice but they don't take a strong enough stance. They don't hire people of color to do the directing work. They hire people of color to do the organizing work. That's bad for us. If we want these policies and measures and practices to be sustainable we have to start with centering voices who are marginalized and impacted the most."

In her career, Halston has personally felt the neglect of equity within environmentalism. One of her first jobs out of college was as a Contract Management Specialist for Denali National Park. During her time there, she experienced the same discomfort many people of color face of being the only ethnically diverse people in the room. She noticed differences down to the uniform she was forced to wear.

"While I was at the park service, the memories I have show me that that space was never created with my body in mind. The uniforms did not fit my body. They weren't made for women's bodies in general, especially women of color."

Historically, when women were first permitted to work for the park service they were given non-functional ‘female’ versions of the uniforms their male counterparts had been wearing. Now they wear the same more functional uniforms as the men, but these uniforms are often ill-fitting on a typically female body. Uniforms weren’t the only negative aspect of her experience there.

“I had to leave. There’s only so much you can take. I think the National Park needs to reform. It’s a really toxic place. It’s male-oriented and white dominated… I don’t ever see myself going back to that park. But I would like more pathways of access.”

In 2017 only 7% of National Park visitors were Black. Halston attributed this to the location of parks, which make it inaccessible for many populations to get there. There is also an issue with the lack of acknowledgment of the trauma and pain experienced on the land. National parks haven’t always been so serene. Their origin includes a dark history of forcefully removing Indigenous people from their homes. Halston believes that without proper acknowledgment of this history, the pain and trauma that occurred there will continue to affect Black and Indigenous persons of color who visit.

After her work for Denali National Park, Halston moved back to Saint Paul. When asked about other environmental justice issues facing her community, Halston mentioned air

On average, Black people are three times more likely to be hospitalized for asthma than white people are.

quality. "Air quality in terms of where the neighborhoods are located to I-94… We have air pollution in North Minneapolis that [gives] brown kids asthma." High asthma rates in communities of color expand far beyond Saint Paul. On average, Black people are three times more likely to be hospitalized for asthma than white people are. This issue can be attributed to the historically racist placement of environmental hazards (i.e. landfills, toxic waste, etc). Halston said that many forget to consider that the locations of neighborhoods can also play a factor in the quality of air both outdoors and indoors. She believes these issues have become so severe because policymakers don't acknowledge that people are part of the environment. Therefore when polluting companies choose to locate their factories in neighborhoods with high percentages of people of color, their health is threatened even in their own homes.

Health is not the only Environmental Justice issue concerning her community. Environmental gentrification, or the influx of wealthy residents into historically disenfranchised minority neighborhoods due to new "green developments", is becoming a large concern for many communities in St. Paul.

"My neighborhood doesn't look the way it used to look. We have stadiums coming in, and green space coming in… When that happens we have a rise in property values. They buy land that's cheap and displace the folks who

were originally there. That's one issue I think isn't being addressed adequately."

While discussing this issue Halston mentioned the Upper Harbor Terminal in North Minneapolis, a large development project along the Mississippi River. The project has received some public backlash. Critics of the project point out that it does little to help the community that actually lives there, and if anything the proposed plan will only result in current residents being forced to leave. The proposed project includes a privately owned outdoor concert venue, a privately owned hotel and 19.5 acres of parkland (a reduced amount from Upper Harbor's original plan of 28 acres). While there has been community outreach concerning this project, much of it has been surveys, a form of outreach known to be biased.

With all these issues, most people would feel defeated—but not Halston. She continually works to break down the barriers holding her and other people of color back. When asked what keeps her going she replied, "If I'm not going to do it, who's going to do it?" Halston wants to ensure a better future for brown and Indigenous children. Her work is constantly driven by the thought of helping them. She expressed how even "small" environmental justice issues like asthma can impact a child's life forever.

"If I'm not going to do it, who's going to do it?"

"It's a ripple effect… How damaged one person can become because they have lead paint in their house or have poor air quality that causes them to have asthma."

Halston mentioned that children of color are easily villainized. Simply missing school due to an asthma attack stacks the odds against them.

“It starts with the inability to breathe… A basic human right that is not being protected or actualized at all.”

That is why Halston is so involved in Environmental Justice. She no longer wants people of color’s experience with the environment to be such a harsh one.

“My work with Environmental Justice has helped me establish a connection that is genuine, that is organic, that is mine to own. And it [has given me the opportunity] to restore justice to folks that didn’t have it 400 years ago and still don’t have it today. It is life-giving for me to be able to protect and advocate for folks who would have never seen this.”

Halston is an inspiration for many, myself included. Courageous, she continues to be a prominent voice in a field that is not always receptive to diverse perspectives.

Her advice for activists is split into advice for her fellow Black, Indigenous People of Color (BIPOCs), and advice to white activists trying to get involved in the movement.

“My advice to my BIPOCs is stay in the work, make it less lonely. It’s really difficult to persevere when pushing for change and being the only equity voice in a room with folks who have never lived that experience and don’t understand it and try to dismiss your reality as a BIPOC… It may be lonely and it may feel like you’re pushing a rock up the mountain. However, you have a ton of other people

behind you so continue to push and advance change as much as you can.”

For white people, her advice was to stick with the work.

“You can’t come into an organization or community for three months on your summer break and then leave. If you’re going to involve yourself really involve yourself. Stay in the community, become an ally, and don’t always take the lead on projects, but lift up folks of color to take the lead on projects.”

She also emphasized education. As a POC it is not Halston’s job to educate white people on the environmental injustices. Her advice to white activists, such as myself, is to use our time and energy educating people. Using our personal privilege to shed light on these issues is one of the easiest ways to get involved.

Interviewing Halston was an honor. As I was leaving, I felt a new sense of purpose. Discouragement comes so easily in a field like environmentalism, and Environmental Justice is no exception. Interviewing Halston made me more keenly aware of my place in this movement. Many times we become so passionate about something we see it as our job to “grab the torch” and take the lead, to shout so loud that no one can ignore us. But with cases like this, with environmental justice issues so deeply embedded into society, I know my place is to support and to amplify other voices. Voices who have been holding the torch for years and will continue to hold it until there is no longer a need for extra light. Halston is one of many environmentalists holding this metaphorical torch, and I am proud to declare myself an advocate of her movement.

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Catherine Fleming: Finding Visibility in Invisible Struggles

Alison Bautista

Catherine Fleming

There are few people that you meet briefly who leave a lingering impact on your life; there are even fewer people who leave you with a heightened sense of curiosity, purpose, and belonging. Catherine Fleming and I met ever so briefly at the Breaking Bread Cafe on a snowy Wednesday afternoon in Northern Minneapolis, where we exchanged anecdotes about our lives, speculated on our identities and where we fit in, and discussed pressing environmental injustices that complicate our livelihoods. Catherine's way of speaking coupled with her knowledge and experience captivated me. Her story is long and winding with many twists and turns, and there's no way to directly translate her experiences onto these pages, but I will try and start from the beginning.

Background

Catherine was born in Georgia and raised in New Jersey, and it is here in Minnesota that she discovered the importance of being a part of a community. In New Jersey, she found a sense of home by being around individuals

who shared similar experiences and familiar identities, and being raised in this setting has strongly impacted the work she does and the perspectives she takes on life. Soon after graduating college, she found herself working within the corporate world, traveling from place to place chasing one job after another. Her complex career path allowed Catherine to live all over the United States as well as abroad in Europe, accumulating a wider knowledge of the ways that individuals in different environments understand their surroundings and relationships. As we talked, it became clear to me that she was not only a highly observant person, but also someone who, despite living in many places temporarily, has been able to create deep, meaningful relationships no matter where she went. Catherine seems to have connections in all of the different places she has lived, demonstrating that wherever she goes she is influenced by her sense of home and community. “No one’s path in life is laid out for them. You just follow what you believe is right in your heart and everything else falls into place.” Catherine is truly a woman of passion and belonging.

Catherine is involved in several organizations in the Twin Cities, including the Environmental Justice Coordination Council (EJCC), Project Sweetie Pie, and the Eco-Harbor Coalition, to name a few. She is actively trying to be the voice for the underrepresented and marginalized communities to which she belongs, and finds that some issues hit closer to home than others. In the next few sections I highlight some of the main environmental justice issues that Catherine Fleming is currently involved in.

Housing for the Homeless

Catherine showed up to the Breaking Bread Cafe roughly

20 minutes after we had originally agreed to meet, composed and friendly. She apologized for her tardiness and proceeded to explain to me that she was just at the State Capitol speaking to a senator about the homeless population living along the highway. This is one of the more recent issues she has gotten involved with, as she is appalled by the City of Minneapolis' response to their homeless population (or lack thereof). Rather than working toward a solution for homeless, the city is attempting to relocate these individuals to a less public area. It appears the city is trying to hide their problem rather than solve it, and Catherine refuses to accept this negligence and sleight of hand. She stated "Now, how can the city have enough money to build a concert venue but not enough to provide homes for the homeless?" Catherine is not afraid to call out the way the city pereptuates municipal and institutional contradictions that the city imposes on its people through their developmental priorities. These contradictions are most apparent in the recent Upper Harbor Terminal project.

"Now, how can the city have enough money to build a concert venue but not enough to provide homes for the homeless?"

The Upper Harbor Terminal

The Upper Harbor Terminal (UHT) is a development project that plans to transform a 48-acre parcel of land in Northern Minneapolis. This area has a long history of industrial pollution and thus substandard living conditions. The focus of the UHT is to transform this area into a

large concert venue and boardwalk, ultimately changing this industrialized sector into one of recreation and accessibility. What seems to be a thoughtful plan to transform a brownfield into a recreational space, actually perpetuates both environmental and social injustices. Catherine was quick to deconstruct the UHT and explain a number of these injustices, including the lack of community involvement and the potential for environmental harms. She also expressed a few practical concerns such as parking/transit regulations and the potential for issues with alcohol usage.

A lack of authentic community engagement and involvement efforts made by the City of Minneapolis and its developers are at the forefront of the UHT controversy, says Catherine. Though the city sent out a survey, a mere 200 out of the 48,000 people who live in the surrounding areas of the UHT answered it, and less than 50 people attended the community meetings hosted by the developers. These small numbers represent a small fraction of the population that will be impacted by the UHT, and given the underwhelming participation of community members, the developers cannot justify the claim that they included community input into their

When marginalized areas are refurbished, costs of living are usually driven upward, and residents may be forced to leave their neighborhoods due to increased expenses.

plans. Being a resident of Northern Minnesota, Catherine wants to ensure that her community's voices are heard. She points out that when marginalized areas are refurbished, costs of living are usually driven upward, and residents may be forced to leave their neighborhoods due to increased expenses. She wants to change this narrative, and see that in the case of the Upper Harbor Terminal the city is held accountable to upholding justice.

Catherine quoted from a report done by the National Park Service as well as an environmental report done by the City of Minneapolis, both of which indicate high soil erosion rates, increased noise pollution, and water quality concerns that may be caused by the current proposal. She explained that the sheer size and capacity of the buildings will exacerbate soil erosion and degrade the quality of the land near the river even further, rather than heal it as the plan proposes. The noise pollution will upset the current wildlife, driving away the birds and creating ecological edge effects which will make it extremely difficult to restore the land back to its native ecologies. Being on the riverfront, water quality issues are a major concern due to the amount of waste the concert venue will produce, which has not yet been addressed. All of these environmental issues have been addressed and documented by two major organizations, one of them being the city itself, and yet the developers still fail to explicitly respond to the concerns. This makes their "dedication to sustainability" appear more like an embellishment than a practical application. The Upper Harbor Terminal is a chance for the city to right their past wrongs and to create a space that gives residents access to the river's beauty and nature, actually benefiting them for once, rather than harming them.

There has also been no consideration of transit by the developers, raising questions regarding where people will park their vehicles and what will become of the current public transit. Catherine said that without proper transportation planning, parking during an event at the concert venue will spill into the surrounding community and current transit lines will be overwhelmed, making it more difficult for community members to navigate their own neighborhood. In addition, alcohol will be sold at the concert venue, which will also have negative impacts on the community. When events at the venue end, the intoxicated visitors will relocate into the streets, loitering and littering within a neighborhood that is not their own. All of these issues were not given any consideration by the developers, and Catherine is determined to bring these issues to light before development begins.

Global Warming

The increasingly pressing issue of global warming is the final topic Catherine and I discussed at the Breaking Bread Cafe. As Catherine traveled from place to place, she took notice of how people always talked about the abnormal weather patterns that their areas were experiencing. These conversations were not unique to a particular region—it seemed as though no matter where people went, they were noticing changes in the atmospheric conditions. This ubiquity of the topic of climate change tells Catherine that global change is happening.

She then proceeded to tell me a short anecdote about her hometown in Georgia. There is a groundhog that comes up every year in order to predict whether winter will last for a few more weeks or if spring will arrive a few weeks early. If the shadow of the groundhog is present, it gets scared

away, meaning a few more weeks of winter. If there is no shadow, the groundhog does not get scared away, which means that spring will arrive a few weeks early. Catherine told me that, in her lifetime, this groundhog has never been wrong about its prediction—until last year. I thought that this anecdote about the groundhog showed Catherine's ability to storytell: she had me absolutely captivated as she described global warming through the groundhog. It demonstrated her ability to explain complex issues in a simplistic manner; it showed how she attempts to rationalize global warming in ways that are not necessarily scientific, but communicable to others.

Personal Identities

Our identities, both the ones perceived and constructed by society, as well as the ones we create and shape for ourselves, influence our morals, actions and desires. Being a black woman working in a white-male dominated industry has shaped the way Catherine goes about her life and has influenced her need for involvement in issues that are directly related to her identities. Catherine has experienced difficulties in being taken seriously by her male counterparts and has also faced numerous institutional restrictions that have kept her from climbing the corporate ladder. To have her identity be a factor in her ability to succeed in her career path has ignited this flame within her that fuels her desire to be the voice of communities that are facing the same inequalities. Being a minority female myself, I connected with and understood many of the concerns Catherine expressed and shared with her my personal experiences as well. I understood her drive and her need to help others that confront the same oppressions.

These restrictions are the main motivations Catherine attributes to her need to be involved in the environmental community—because someone needs to be the voice for these historically marginalized and oppressed communities. Catherine believes that there is not enough representation, as she is often the only woman of color who is present during UHT meetings or is willing to go to the Capitol and demand equitable rights for the homeless. Her identities clearly influence the work she takes part in, and I could not help but feel inspired by her bravery and confidence.

Conclusion

Oftentimes, being involved in environmental organizations and movements can be disheartening. It may feel that we, as individuals who are simply concerned about the welfare of the environment and others, are powerless in the face of legislative forces. Our opinions and voices may not always feel as though they are being heard, nor may it feel like our actions and activism are making any real impact on the issue at hand. However, it's important that we continue trying despite the odds being stacked against us, and Catherine refuses to let the disproportionate power distribution influence our agenda—"We are warriors. We are warriors because we keep trying, we are warriors because we refuse to let our losses

"We are warriors. We are warriors because we keep trying, we are warriors because we refuse to let our losses discourage us."

discourage us." This is Catherine's mantra, and it may soon be mine.

Sarah Goodspeed: A Quest to Educating Youth

Miles D'Alessandro

Sarah Goodspeed

I was able to connect with Sarah Goodspeed soon after I reached out to her about our potential interview. Of course, I should've expected such a quick response, since Sarah has a constant connection with the generation below her. Working to fight environmental injustices that young minorities face and helping young people deal with climate change has helped Sarah keep in touch with youth. Sarah doesn't just get how to talk with my generation; she knows how to bring us to lead.

On April 24th, 2019, I had the chance to chat with Sarah over the phone about her experiences working to fight environmental injustices. I hoped to uncover some new perspectives about how to take part in environmental justice movements, as well as to better understand how young people can make a difference in society. I know that what Sarah does is extremely important, as she helps to shape the future of many young individuals who feel the

need to act and make change now to save their generation's future.

Sarah Goodspeed is a Youth and Policy Manager at Climate Generation. Although I knew what a Policy Manager's job might entail prior to my interview with Sarah, I could only guess at what her role could be as a "Youth Manager." Does she manage people's days? Does she schedule their meetings? Does she teach kids? It turns out that Sarah does a little bit of everything. Sarah offers mentorship and organization for young people so that they can take action against injustices. Climate Generation helps to teach young individuals about environmental justice and organizes groups of people to lead programs and movements aimed at combating climate change. Sarah's notion that "Every person has power and should claim their stake in the movement" is a vital message for young people. She follows up on her belief by helping people "claim their stakes" in movements. With the help of the mentorship these young folks receive, they are able to find their voices and share their experiences to make change in the world.

Today, Sarah focuses on mentoring young people who hope to make change and fight against climate change and other injustices in society. However, she did not always have this role. As an undergraduate, Sarah studied at the Scripps College, where she was able to connect with the South Central farm and urban community garden. Unfortunately, the garden was eventually shut down, leading Sarah to realize how important the garden was to the community and how easily an underrepresented population could lose a proactive community center. By campaigning for this community garden, Sarah was able

to witness first-hand the impact of a positive program disappearing. As Sarah noted, “Back then, there were not a lot of classes taught about environmental justice, so a lot of what I learned was self-taught.” Because of a lack of availability of an environmental justice education, Sarah’s community experience was key for her. Seeing the community garden disappear opened Sarah up to the world of environmental justice. Little did she know, Los Angeles wasn’t the only place with a lack of environmental justice education.

When she returned to her home state of Minnesota, Sarah quickly noticed a lack of knowledge of environmental justice around her. Few people around Sarah had even heard of environmental justice as a concept, and even fewer had dealt with environmental issues on a personal level outside of the most impacted communities. To address this, Sarah used her experiences and education from California to teach her fellow workers in government about the necessity of understanding the intersectionality and indispensability of different people. While working for the state and county, Sarah used her inside access to broaden her coworkers’ understanding of environmental justice. Her professional connections with state workers made it possible for her to introduce them to an environmental justice lens. But, when she more recently moved to working at nonprofit organizations, Sarah lost this inside power.

In our interview, Sarah noted that there are benefits to working for the state and outside of state-run organizations. While working for the government, Sarah had more power to make change. However, Sarah also felt that the state often used their power to “push issues into different areas

without realizing intersectionality." Therefore, it was often hard for Sarah to sway the people in power to fully realize their impacts on environmental injustices. Working for nonprofits is hard as well because Sarah has less access working from the outside. Yet, Sarah gets to connect with the community at a closer, more personal level than before, which helps her better understand the issues that the community faces.

Now, Sarah works at Climate Generation, a nonprofit organization that aims to educate and organize the youth to combat climate change. Sarah works as a Youth and Policy Manager, organizing and mentoring high schoolers about how to engage with community leaders. She works with local teachers to develop curriculums for teaching kids about climate change and environmental justice. Sarah also connects with government agencies to help the youth have their voices heard on larger stages. Sarah works with Youth Environmental Activists of Minnesota (YEA! MN) which recently focused on Minnesota Can't Wait, which is a campaign that works to create a clean, equitable environment in Minnesota. As stated on their website, the program involves "Visiting and listening to people, business, and communities impacted by climate and environmental injustice, and having tough conversations with all clean energy stakeholders." These goals demonstrate the need to listen to people impacted by environmental justice issues, rather than having other people making decisions on the behalf of those affected by injustices. Sarah is also an advocate of the Green New Deal, and she interacts with the community to help them better understand the benefits of the deal and the need to go out and support it. Sarah continues to make inroads for young people to make change by supporting important

policies and by teaching these people how to take action themselves.

It is hard to pinpoint an exact issue that has inspired Sarah, as she works in so many programs and works with a variety of young people, meaning that she is always trying to solve a unique injustice. While it is hard to identify just one injustice that Sarah works against, I would say that the most relevant injustice that Sarah deals with on the most frequent basis is climate change and how it affects young people of color. Sarah acknowledges that climate change is the biggest issue we face today, and that the people most affected by climate change are marginalized youth. Sarah works with these youth as they find their powerful voices. Sarah has a role in fighting climate change because young people often want to see change, but because they are young, they do not have access to power and may need help taking action. This is where Sarah helps, as she mentors and organizes the youth in their movements and through innovative and collaborative programs.

It is important to look at the history of climate change and how it has impacted youth and minorities to understand why Sarah's work is so important. In a Minority Rights briefing by Rachel Baird, the author of the book Climate Change and Minorities, she acknowledges that "The close relationship of some indigenous peoples and minorities with their natural environments makes them especially sensitive to the effects of global warming (Baird 1).

The history of inequality for minorities in America leads to climate change impacting these communities more than most other communities in the nation.

Indigenous people are traditionally more in touch with nature due to their cultural beliefs and historical way of life, so climate change, by changing the land, actively strips away key elements of their culture. In addition, minority communities make up a demographic that is most affected by environmental issues. “Minorities tend to live in places that are worst hit by the impacts of climate change – their poverty exacerbates their vulnerability (Baird 2).” Systemic racism and inequality has pushed communities of color to areas of the United States where they receive the least amount of relief and where poverty leaves them less resilient. Lower quality drinking water, more food deserts, and harsher weather and storm patterns are examples of issues that impact poor and minority communities more than others. Poverty adds to the issues facing minority communities, who already have to deal with discrimination and marginalization. Overall, the history of inequality for minorities in America leads to climate change impacting these communities more than most other communities in the nation.

It is important for Sarah to work with young people of color because they are most affected by climate change. We can analyze how climate change impacts young people by using David Pellow’s four pillars of critical environmental

justice: Intersectionality, scale, embeddedness, and indispensability. Minority youth face intersectional issues: they have been historically disenfranchised, traditionally have less power than senior politicians and business workers due to their lack of experience and education, and face high levels of poverty stemming from a lack of support from the government.

The scale of climate change is so huge, and one person cannot make all the change we want to see in the world. So, Sarah works to mentor and mobilize people at a local level. She lifts up voices of those most impacted by climate change to lead solutions that address the intersections they experience. As Sarah explained to me, one of the best parts of her job is that she gets to "work with high schoolers who have never been to the capitol, and helps them to speak to the people who represent them, while being on an equal platform where their voice matters." Sarah works with local high schools and brings these students to a national platform to make a change on a global level. Sarah can use her privilege and experience to help ambitious activists find their voices to be the next generation to take on the global issue of climate change.

With embeddedness, we see that young minorities are discriminated against and have been throughout history. Young minorities often are the most discriminated against because they represent the future of a "different" population. Out of the minority populations, Native Americans in Minnesota are a specific example of an oppressed group. Throughout history, the government has violently marginalized Native Americans by taking their land and forcing these people onto reservations. As a result, we see high rates of poverty and incarceration in the Native

American population. Sarah works to address this by providing mentorship to Native American youth in high school. By helping these young people speak out on their experiences, Sarah helps the Native American youth fight against historical discrimination and the present-day threat of climate change.

Finally, we see indispensability because the minority youth population are seen as more dispensable and less in need of protection than others. Most young people are valued more than people of other ages because they are seen as the future and as innocent people with potential to fill. However, being from a minority population makes these people less valuable to those in charge because they are different. Some even see young people as more dispensable because they lack the full education or experience in the world to be useful. By using David Pellow's four pillars of environmental justice, we can understand how and why young minority members are most affected by large issues like climate change. Their lived experiences guide the complex solutions that will address the root causes of climate change.

Sarah's work has a lot of personal benefits, but also has barriers to success. Sarah gets to work with many interesting and ambitious students in Minnesota. Climate Generation helps teenagers plan monthly environmental justice meetings and spreads education about climate change injustices. Sarah's work can also be challenging. She noted that "teachers might fear bringing climate change in the classroom, but they can gain confidence." With this newfound confidence, teachers can better understand how to portray environmental injustices and climate change in a more positive light to show students

that there is hope at solving these issues. In addition, Sarah recognizes that climate change can be a “really politicized issue, and entering its space can be sensitive.” To solve this, climate change must be discussed more and people must be more open about discussing their experiences with climate change.

Sarah left me with an important message that “mainstream often advocates technological or economic solutions but don’t address root causes such as racism, capitalism, etc. Instead, mainstream solutions are just bandaids that also hurt and cause wounds to be deeper.” This was important to me because it gets at the idea that climate change is not a simple issue, and that the people who have historically discriminated against minorities should not be the people trying to solve the issues that impact minorities the most. Climate change is complex, but it is necessary to talk about it with the people who are most impacted by it, rather than trying to fix it without input and leadership of impacted communities.

“Mainstream solutions are just bandaids that also hurt and cause wounds to be deeper.”

After my interview, I can safely say that Sarah Goodspeed holds a vital role in the future of our generation. Because young minorities are most impacted by climate change, they are the ones that desire to make change in the world. When these people are given the power and education to speak on their personal experiences, they can make change. Sarah helps these people realize their importance and

indispensability, and trains them to be prepared to stand up to community and state leaders and share their stories. By giving a platform to these young folks, Sarah is helping them save their own generation.

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Sam Grant: Creating Pathways Towards Justice

Honor Kalala

Sam Grant

I sent Sam an email on a Monday and not an hour later we had a meeting set up for the following morning at 11 am. My professor had mentioned that he can often be found in the Macalester library, and sure enough we met in a group study room on the 3rd floor. I knocked lightly on the door when I arrived, before I pushed the door open. It appeared that Sam had been in the middle of working on something, and although I didn't get a chance to ask what, I might be able to guess based on the conversations we had about his passions and his life work.

When we met, Sam Grant was leading the Environmental Sustainability program at Higher Education Consortium for Urban Affairs (HECUA). However, he recently shifted to become the new Executive Director at MN350, which is organizing in Minnesota and the midwest to strongly intersect racial justice and climate justice movement building.

Sam's work at HECUA seemed like a full-time job in and of itself, but in reality, it only scratched the surface

of the work he does. In addition to HECUA (then) and MN350 now, Sam is also faculty at the Metropolitan State University where he teaches a foundational course in community organizing and community economic development. He is also a founding member of the Environmental Justice Coordinating Council (EJCC), which brings together community organizations and activists in North Minneapolis. And, Sam leads initiatives on the African continent to build ecovillages centered around schools that teach about environmental justice. While it may seem like Sam has a lot of different or separate areas of focus, his philosophy of intersectionality ties all of these projects together.

When I asked him about how he got into this work Sam explained that it was during his Junior year at Mac, as an environmental studies major, when he attended a protest on campus around asking Macalester to divest its resources from South Africa, that he began to think more deeply about the intersections within environmentalism and the lack of curriculum that highlighted those intersections. So, all of the work that he does stems from this realization and his passion for promoting common liberation on the planet by way of intersectional solutions.

The intersections of environmental, economic, and cultural justice that frame Sam's lifework is clearly present in his work with the communities in North and Northeast Minneapolis. In addition to the work that Sam does with the Environmental Justice Coordinating Committee (EJCC), he also is trying to work with the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) and Clean Air Minnesota (CAM) to develop a partnership with three high schools in this community that equips each of the schools

with air quality monitors and works with the science teachers to train the students in in using them so that the students are the ones who publish the air quality data with the MPCA. This partnership, Sam details, not only builds consciousness and capacity within the students with regards to environmentalism and environmental justice, but it is also building career pathways for these youth to already have this training and hands-on experience.

This theme of self-determination, or as Sam describes it, “not waiting for you to tell us what you’re willing to do…not acting like dependent people anymore”, is not only present in his work in Minneapolis, but also in the ecovillage building he does on the African continent. This project was born after a good friend of Sam’s, Hindolo Pokawa, came into his office to vent about his frustrations with being an African man in the global north, with a graduate education, and being forced to drive a taxi cab to support his family. Sam, pained from the sight of someone he considers a brother breaking down in trauma, responded by pulling a calendar off of his wall, setting it on the table and telling his friend to “pick the day you’re going to turn in your taxi cab, so we can define and work on your dream for the planet and people. They settled on a date 30 days out, did a training in permaculture and agroecology, and began dialoguing with the leaders in Pokawa’s Sierra Leone village on what this project would entail. Despite the role that Sam and Hindolo played in the creation of the ecovillage, this project was very much collaborative with those that would be most affected. On the first day that Sam arrived at the village with five students from his HECUA program, he and 110 people from the village sat in dialogue all afternoon making plans and outlining what their specific needs were and what this ecovillage would look like.

Much of Sam's philosophy of environmental justice and addressing climate change stem from those who are most affected, who make up the majority of the earth's population to take charge of resolving this problem. The way to do this, he says is through expanding our definitions of environmental justice, decolonizing our minds, and healing our consciousness and bodies in relationship with one another. Sam is not worried so much with fighting the system (like the conversation around climate change has often focused) but instead on thinking up ways in which we can nourish the critical and creative imagination of people in communities.

This work is taxing, and painful, but Sam explains that what is vital in this work is to practice really good self-care. It's hard to imagine that someone as accomplished as Sam struggles with this seemingly simple practice, but the reality is that everyone struggles with it. Sam talks about how in some of the major campaigns, members of the community have trouble staying in healthy relation with each other. Self-care is not only about relaxing or 'treating yourself' but also about doing some of that more difficult work and continuing to bring water (support for active healing-in-relation) to it so that everything can continue to move forward.

This work is taxing, and painful, but Sam explains that what is vital in this work is to practice really good self-care.

And the thing that is most motivating for Sam, is to see how the work that is being done is actually working. He

describes how since he started this work in 1983, he has seen a tremendous increase in the support and consciousness around environmental justice. Even the ecovillage building in Africa has begun to spread across the continent, as people are seeing the work getting done and being inspired to do the same things in their communities.

And this work is so inspiring. Sam talks about the giants of heteropatriarchy, colonialism, capitalism, and white supremacy as being the systems that we are ultimately fighting. His work is not narrowly focused solely on climate change, or strictly environmental justice issues, but instead Sam imagines regularly in his work what a future without the dominance of these systems would look like. What a future in which we have a healthy relationship with the earth and its people would look like. And this is integral to Sam's definition of environmental justice, as a discipline that calls on us to care about and to rethink our relationship with the earth and other earthlings.

What this looks like, for Sam, is people realizing that there are fights on the local basis, like those he works on in North Minneapolis with the Environmental Justice Coordinating

Working in Africa, and in BIPOC communities across the U.S. reinforces his understanding that everyone has gifts to bring to movement building, and it is a joy to amplify and connect these gifts.

Committee. But also realizing that there are national fights that unite us, bring us together in our common struggle for liberation from the systems, which have not honored us or our livelihoods and consistently advanced Anti-Black, Anti-indigenous, Anti womyn ecological violence. This nationally can look like the fact that 50% of humanity collectively had as much income as the richest eight people on earth, and that this divide is getting wider and wider as time goes on. Working in Africa, and in BIPOC communities across the U.S. reinforces his understanding that everyone has gifts to bring to movement building, and it is a joy to amplify and connect these gifts. This fight for environmental justice is not one that can be unique to any one place. It must be a global movement that is cognizant of the many intersections between all of our forms of oppression and violence.

Risikat Adesaogun: The MPCA's Role in Environmental Justice

Luca DeGraaf

Risikat Adesaogun talking with U.S. EPA Administrator Andrew Wheeler in Washington, DC in July 2018

On April 24th, I met with Risikat Adesaogun, one of Twin Cities' local environmental justice leaders, at my house to drink tea. As a student in an Environmental Justice course, I was seeking a better grasp of what environmental justice means in practice in our local communities. This is something I thought Risikat was able to speak to very eloquently.

Risikat Adesaogun is currently the chief speech-writer for the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (PCA) commissioner and manages their social media team as a communications strategist, though she has also worked on building the PCA's Environmental Justice Framework over her five years there. The PCA serves as a state government counterpart to the EPA at the federal government level. It carries out its mission of protecting the environment and human health through issuing permits, monitoring and addressing pollution, enforcing environmental regulations,

and offering financial and technical assistance to businesses and nonprofits.

Background on Risikat Adesaogun

Risikat currently lives in Minneapolis with her adorable pug, Maya. In fact, if you were ever to meet Risikat, you could be sure she would show you a picture of Maya, and even joked that if she were in charge, “We’d all have pugs. Ugh, we’d all be pugs, who am I kidding.” But to give some background on Risikat, she grew up in the Twin Cities and began her career with a bachelor’s degree in Anthropology from the University of Northern Colorado and a master’s degree in Strategic Communications Management from Concordia University-St. Paul. Her first experience in social justice work after college was as a Twin Cities metro social worker, advocating for 15 homeless families at a time. After such a consistently-high workload for five years, Risikat said, “It was like being a hamster on a wheel. There is so much inequality. The whole system is broken… I was frustrated, so I decided to become a researcher. That led me to policy work.” She found that her time doing research at the Department of Human Services (DHS) was some of the most fulfilling work she had ever done, but in 2013, Risikat was one of many people who lost their jobs in a mass layoff. This is where the PCA came in.

Why Does EJ Matter?

After being laid off from DHS, Risikat needed a job, and the PCA building was right across the street. “I sometimes tell people that I just walked into the PCA and got lost,” she told me. At first, her new job protecting the environment didn’t seem as meaningful as a job researching the

systematic oppression of people. This all changed, though, when Risikat discovered the field of environmental justice. An important part of her realization was one of the first tough jobs she got assigned. A seventh grade teacher reached out, asking to test soil samples that each of her students sent in from their front yards. When reporting the results back to the teacher, Risikat said, “Some of these kids’ yards that they were playing in, the amount of lead was over a 100 times higher than it should be…some, closer to the 200 times higher range.” Risikat suspects that most of this lead is being leaked into the residential soil from the North Minneapolis industrial area.

“There’s this whole generation of kids that aren’t starting on equal footing, and it’s not just about educational opportunities—though we could totally fund our schools better! Minnesota’s education gap has often been worst in the nation…and it’s not about food security—even though parts of Minneapolis exist in food deserts. It’s not only about homelessness, either—even though there are many homeless individuals and families and we’ve long been headed toward a crisis. For me, it’s the environment, at its most granular level. It’s the air they’re breathing, the water they drink, the fact that they can’t let their brothers and sisters

“People can’t even breathe or drink or play safely, because we’ve decided as a society that these kids and their families mean less than people in richer, whiter neighborhoods.”

go play in the yard and make mud pies like we all used to… It's participating in the most elemental parts of being a person. People can't even breathe or drink or play safely, because we've decided as a society that these kids and their families mean less than people in richer, whiter neighborhoods."

When I asked her what drives her when it is this bleak, she jokingly answered, "Spite." but followed up, "Even though I think it [environmental injustice] is one of the least-seen injustices, at least in my opinion, it is one of the most important injustices to fight."

Environmental Justice (EJ) and the State

So what does environmental justice mean on the State level? Risikat defines EJ as: "Making sure the policies and work we do don't have a disproportionate impact on any particular group, and that there can be meaningful involvement for communities." In her general role as a communications strategist for the agency, Risikat's main concern within the State definition of EJ is the "meaningful involvement for communities" part. However, to set the agency up for meaningful involvement with a community, Risikat says it's important to pre-emptively establish themselves and their intentions as anti-discriminatory. "Everyone really believes in the mission, but still we kept coming across these situations where people were being disproportionately impacted." Because coded racism, sexism, and classism are baked into the State systems, just saying that the State won't intentionally act racist isn't enough. "When I go to work in the morning, there aren't evil villains rubbing their hands together, saying, I'm going to harm someone today. People love the work, they believe in the work. But good intentions aren't enough." The

systemic disenfranchisement and divestment from poorer, higher-minority neighborhoods accumulates over centuries, so at the State level Risikat says, “We had to be really intentional about incorporating EJ principles into the foundation of all our work in ways that can’t be glossed over. There isn’t a “justice” box to check on a list. It has to become second-nature for us to think about who is being negatively impacted at every turn.”

Because the State has played a role in creating and perpetuating those disproportionately-felt injustices, Risikat expressed some internal conflict about whether working for this oppressive structure makes her complicit in the oppressions done by the State. This especially came out when she was talking about writing speeches for candidates who she might not necessarily agree with on certain points. When asked about how she prioritizes her goals, especially within the changing political landscape of the Trump administration, Risikat said:

“I hold my own beliefs and values sacred [that all people have inherent worth], and promote those, even when they don’t seem fully aligned with this or that leader’s goals… Things get hard, but if I just disengage, if I decide, I’m done! I’m just going to quit, the work still has to get done. There always needs to be a tiny squeaky wheel in the room saying, Hey–who’s missing from the table? or… Wow, there aren’t really many people who look like me in this building. How are we addressing this? Is our own backyard clean?”

While she might feel like a nuisance to be one of few in the room pointing out that the PCA may be leaving Black and other marginalized communities out of their decision-making, the work Risikat does as a “squeaky wheel” in

the agency is incredibly important. Some activists working at the grassroots level to represent their communities have criticized individuals for working at the state level. According to Risikat, some people espouse a kind of ideological purity about what activism means that excludes top-down models. Risikat subscribes to a more multifaceted view of activism: “It has to be a 360-degree approach. White supremacy exists at every turn and we need people to go right into the clown’s mouth to get things done… the system is so well-rigged that it can’t be repaired from the outside alone. We need grassroots activism, and we also need people in these decision-making rooms trying to change the tides. We need people shining a light on this stuff from every possible angle.”

EJ Principles: Meaningful Involvement

The PCA has always been obligated to publish their policies in a public setting, but that might mean publishing on a back page of the local paper, where it’s unlikely to be seen, when what is needed is real meaningful involvement of communities. Risikat wants to help change that. In 1992, President Clinton put out an executive order requiring all state departments to form their own EJ Program, but it wasn’t until 2015-2017 that Risikat, working with the newly-founded PCA EJ Program under Commissioner John Linc Stine, co-wrote the agency’s EJ Framework. The EJ Program surveyed many Twin Cities’ communities, asking, “Where are we failing? What do we need to do better? What is it about our internal policies that are inherently flawed?” With that feedback, they created the PCA’s first EJ Framework. When I asked Risikat what participatory justice looks like at the agency, she responded: “Let’s involve people at the very beginning,

instead of at the end when it's basically a foregone conclusion." Surveying communities to create the EJ Framework is getting ahead of the problem before it happens. However, when it comes to policy-making, Risikat says, "The PCA has a lot of work to do before we are in a true, proactive state….When a company submits a permit application, that's even kind of late, because at that point they've already had their consultants and scientists in, and they're ready to move forward, often with thousands – or millions on the line." In fact, because industry is the frontline in decision-making with respect to citing and interaction with communities, Risikat believes that industry has the first responsibility to ask their neighbors, "Who's asking for this? Who's going to be impacted by this?" and "for them to really slow down and talk to people first."

Why the PCA has a Duty to Get Out into Communities

That said, Risikat knows that, realistically, industries can't be relied on to self-regulate. Protecting citizens is the duty of the State—it is the duty that justifies its existence. And real meaningful involvement of communities in deciding what State protection looks like is a necessary part of that justification. Something Risikat thinks is really holding the PCA back from adequately doing its job as protectors of Minnesotans from pollutants in their physical environment is that, "A lot of people in charge have never had to directly confront people from the community." There is a gap in knowledge and understanding of indigenous and communities of color. Risikat asks, "How can you really see the humanity in other people and empathize with them when you're not interacting in organic, authentic ways?"

So I asked her, "What do you think the solution to this is?"

To this, Risikat responded with a story from her first year as a young, middle class social worker. She'd told one of her clients to take public transportation to an unfamiliar part of the city, without directions, despite having never been on a city bus herself. She was reprimanded by a more-seasoned coworker who told her, "Don't ever ask someone to do something you're not willing to do yourself." Risikat took the lesson about the importance of meeting people where they are at, to heart, which she applies to her work at the PCA:

"If we are asking community members to come to our building, which may be an unfamiliar space, and advocate for themselves and speak in formal scientific terms, at minimum we need to be willing to go into these communities and meet people where they are at, speak with them with respect, listen to them and learn about them, to do our own homework, and not expect people to overextend themselves to educate us, because that is unacceptable. I think that is the only solution. We really need to learn some empathy. Many believe the complicated pollution algorithms and equations tell the full story, but they mean nothing if people are being hurt."

Since Risikat joined the agency, the PCA has re-started diversity training to try to bridge some of these empathy and knowledge gaps between PCA workers and ordinary Minnesotans. "It wasn't enough just to have a shiny framework," Risikat says, "We've had to really confront a lot of people's internal biases," and doing diversity training and education within the agency is a big part of that.

Barriers to Risikat's EJ Work at the PCA

In her work to save Minnesota communities from the

harms of environmental pollution, Risikat Adesaogun faces a number of barriers. While we have already talked about many of the internal issues Risikat faces with MPCA attitudes towards working with communities, she also faces issue with political shifts in administration, the "workload perspective" of EJ duties at the agency, the ingrained ways of an older generation, and the overall limits of state power to protect residents.

While it is a well-known fact that the current EPA Administrator, Andrew Wheeler, is a coal-lobbyist and climate-change denier, Risikat says that at the PCA they have been blessed with leaders who are willing to push back. "We're just going to tell the truth and we are going to keep telling the truth and figure out a way to get it out, because, even though the work is political, science isn't—nor should it be." But while the scientists at the agency are committed to the scientific integrity of their work, they may be less excited about the additional training and work it takes to get out into the community. Risikat says that some view the EJ work as an additional workload, but to her, "EJ is the work. If we aren't trying to make our environment better for everyone, what are we even doing here?"

"EJ is the work. If we aren't trying to make our environment better for everyone, what are we even doing here?"

The last major barrier Risikat talked about facing at the MPCA is simply the limits of state protection. "At the state,

we don't really have the ability to say no. If a company can prove that whatever they are doing will fall under whatever limits (set by state law), then we have to approve the permit." So the best they can do sometimes is just to include restrictions in permits, such as special routes or designated hours of operation that won't interfere with residents' daily schedules. Those with the actual power to deny a company a building permit are our local legislators, through things like zoning laws, "and many people don't know that," Risikat says.

Call to Action

So what can you do? To general citizens, Risikat asks that we "don't get too complacent, stay hooked in, pay attention to what's happening." Ever since the 2016 Presidential election, people have been more politically active and aware, but, as Risikat pointed out, "It's easy to get complacent when things look okay," especially in such a beautiful place as Minnesota. Risikat reminds us that even though it may not look like our environments are polluted, "It doesn't take much to get there."

To young activists, Risikat calls for "a dual or triple-thronged approach" to combating environmental injustices. Not only do we need non-profit community organizers and grassroots representation advocating for their community to the State and the world, we also need State activists willing to respond to those grassroots community organizers and reaching out to EJ communities from positions of political power. Risikat encourages young activists with a final quote:

"Our society is built on a sophisticated, universal foundation of oppression. No matter what work field you

find yourself in, you can bet that someone is being exploited or harmed, by design… But that also means you can help make things better, whether at a neighborhood meeting or from a tiny office cubicle. Plenty of people have already been on the scene, and there's more than enough work to go around. It's frustrating that we're not further along, but your voices are wanted and needed. The stakes could not be higher."

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Ben Passer: Energy Access and Housing Justice

Siddhant Singh

Ben Passer

Climate change threatens to change the face of our planet for the worse. The movement for the adoption of renewable energy sources in order to combat climate change caused by carbon emissions has gained significant traction in recent times. But communities of color are often left out of this narrative despite the fact that they are the ones that are going to face the brunt of the impact of climate change. On April 24, I interviewed Ben Passer, Director of Energy Access and Equity, Fresh Energy to see how a small non-profit in Minnesota is trying to incorporate the interests of communities of color and lower-income communities into energy policy.

On what was perhaps the most beautiful afternoon this April with the sun shining crisply in a clear blue sky, I met with Ben Passer at the Bad Weather Brewing Company in East Saint Paul. He came in on his bike straight from work,

and greeted me with a large smile that seemed to spread infectious positivity around him. He tells me that he is currently working on organizing a meeting for an umbrella organization focusing on water efficiency, even though that does not relate to his field of work in energy efficiency and access directly. As we find a seat, he strikes up a conversation with my co-interviewer Elizabeth Hrycyna and we find out he knows her interviewee, Jennifer Nguyen Moore, who is on the environmental justice council of the Pollution Control Agency. In hindsight, this is almost unsurprising considering how much he interacts with different parts of the government and the emphasis he puts on building good relationships across the lines.

Ben is the director of the Energy Access and Equity program at Fresh Energy, a non-profit organization focused on creating and supporting policies to adopt renewable energy and solve global warming. His role in the organization revolves around making sure that the policies that are proposed by Fresh Energy benefit all sections of society equally and do not further existing inequalities through oversight in policy recommendations. Because of the nature of the work, this often spills over onto issues of housing justice as well. His program particularly focuses on making solar energy more affordable for lower income communities, as well as trying to make building owners adopt more energy efficient systems for both economical and ecological reasons.

Ben has been working at Fresh Energy for four years now, having joined them in May 2015, straight out of law school. While the work he initially did focused on energy efficiency, as time progressed and he did more and more projects, he realized there was a very obvious connection

between environmental justice and the work he was doing. One such project was geared towards increasing the affordability of housing for lower-income groups by encouraging landlords in large apartment buildings to adopt more energy efficient practices thereby decreasing the cost of living due to lower energy bills, and at the same time increase the health and safety in the buildings. Another project involved pushing towards electrification of public transport, especially in regions with high air pollution, which he found to be chiefly occupied by communities of color. Seeing these connections to how embedded inequalities are within the system, Fresh Energy started their “Energy Access and Equity” program about a year ago, with Ben at the helm.

The work they do takes a variety of different forms, one of which is working at the Minnesota state legislature on bills. This can include direct lobbying in bill development, but a lot of it is also just reaching out to candidates or elected officials and educating them about why issues of energy and environmental justice matter. They also work with the

“It’s easy to just look at the target – we have to get to 100% renewable energy – but it’s the ANDs – we need to get to 100% renewable energy AND make sure it is affordable for MN’s lowest income families AND they’re part of the job growth created by that sector.”

Public Utilities Commission (PUC) which is where a lot of utilities programs are proposed and approved: utility rates are set, long-term energy plans are filed, etc. Recently they have been trying to make the PUC more public-facing as well so that people know more about it, including what it is responsible for and how to access it. For Ben, working through an equity lens is extremely important. This involves making sure that the energy policies they work on don’t unintentionally leave out any group from the benefits, that they are not exacerbating any current disparities that exist, and finally ensuring that they don’t cause any unforeseen or unintended negative consequences. Moreover, it is not only important that everyone benefits from the policies going forward, but that they act on the situation right now to make sure that the inequalities that currently exist aren’t exacerbated due to inaction. On the issue of addressing entrenched inequities, Ben said something really powerful which demonstrates how his work not only involves pushing ahead but also its emphasis on uplifting everyone together. “It’s easy to just

look at the target – we have to get to 100% renewable energy – but it's the ANDs – we need to get to 100% renewable energy AND make sure it is affordable for MN's lowest income families AND they're part of the job growth created by that sector – I love looking at all of those ANDs to make sure that's part of the solution".

Building relationships with partners and allies across different lines is fundamental to the kind of work he engages in. He notes that people involved in policy work too often tend to treat it like a transaction, where organizations take a quid pro quo approach in which they are thinking about what they can give up in order to get a particular policy implemented. When organizations exclusively do that, they fail to realize the value of forming good ties with groups who hold similar interests, and this makes them ineffective in the long run. The relations Fresh Energy builds with its partners are particularly useful in order to have access to community voices. As a more policy-oriented organization Fresh Energy has not traditionally been in public spaces and so they rely on their partners such as Sierra Club, ISAIAH, MN350 and Community Sustainability Project (CSP) who have more direct ties with community members. Fresh Energy has been working with CSP on the Saint Paul Tenant-Landlord Energy Project for quite some time now. The program's objective is to level the power dynamic between tenants and landlords , which is usually the worst for lower-income tenants, by elevating renter voices and encouraging transparency of energy costs on rental properties. Ben had also been pursuing an ordinance to make access to average monthly energy bills to prospective buyers or renters a mandatory disclosure, thus giving renters additional decision-making powers they do not usually have and

allows them to make more informed choices. The ordinance was recently passed by the city of Minneapolis, marking an important milestone in housing equity for the city.

When I asked Ben about the obstacles he faces in his work, he let out a hearty laugh and said he would need at least two hours to answer that question fully. On a personal level, Ben says it is quite a dilemma to decide what kinds of issues he could be working on. “There’s so much we have to do – the climate crisis is real, there’s a lot to get done and there’s only so many different things we can keep our eyes on and trying to identity the issues on which we can make an impact and how much time and bandwidth and resources we have to give can be really challenging.” In his job on the ground, the main barrier to progress tends to be political will. Political will ends up playing a major part in helping with the implementation of bills and policies statewide or even within a locality, and unfavorable legislative environments or internal barriers in government organizations are factors that impede the amount of progress that can be made with energy policy. So what keeps him motivated to keep working in the face of stubborn politics? Ben feels that it is understanding the significance of this challenge he is working on, in terms of not only introducing renewable energy but also making sure that there is equity in how different sections of society get access to it, that helps him carry on despite the barriers he faces in his job with political obstinacy. The responsibility and burden of knowing that the work he does is to benefit populations and entire communities of people that haven’t benefited in the past motivates him to show up and do better every day.

But has he ever had to deal with climate change deniers? He reveals that thankfully there are not many who deny climate change is happening in his field of work. “There is a general consensus that something needs to be done, but there’s many different voices on how we should do it”, he said. However, he feels that environmental racism as a concept is not something that is being considered by most energy advocates. Even though people have started having conversations about equity and inclusive processes, yet there still exists a mental disconnect between working on energy issues and seeking to recognize and remediate historical disparities faced by communities of color and lower income communities to ensure everyone reaps the benefits of renewable energy and sensible tenancy practices. There is a general air of skepticism around energy work and social justice / racial equity coming together and they are still seen as mutually exclusive entities. Ben is quick to point out that his peers somehow fail to see that several studies have shown that communities of color in the US and around the globe are disproportionately impacted by climate change. He thinks the link between promoting renewable energy to mitigate climate change and social justice is quite explicitly clear – climate change is going to affect underrepresented groups the most, and they’re working to adopt policies which reduce climate change.

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When asked about advice he would give to younger people aspiring to work in an environmental justice related field, Ben is chock-full of suggestions. He recommends getting involved right now, however that might look for someone. Getting involved in politics, going to rallies, volunteering or interning at local organizations, are all great ways to "get in". The benefits are twofold: one can not only soak in what it is like to work in environmental justice, but it also is an opportunity to get facetime with people who are already in the field and networking with a lot of people in this way is helpful to form connections which can come up later during job searches. The other thing he suggests it to have an open mind about the form your work can take and not to rule anything out. He gives his own example – going into law school, he was prepared to work in a team of 500 attorneys and work 80 hours a week and if he hadn't been open to all possibilities it wouldn't have allowed him to start working with Fresh Energy as a policy associate and do the work he was doing today.

Ben serves an important example of how one can engage with and contribute to the environmental justice movement in many different ways. For some, being on the frontlines as an activist, as a part of "Blockadia" (Klein, 2015) is what makes the most sense. And yet for others, environmental justice can take the form of engaging in desk jobs in order to create a framework and precedent for dealing with environmental justice issues. Their non-activism does not necessarily mean that they are somehow less involved or invested in the movement. This is best summed up in Ben's own words: "I think environmental justice wasn't something that I really set out to do or I even knew I really wanted to do but once I realized what was happening it just kind of clicked. I started to recognize that

environmental justice is important and how it is present in the work I'm doing everyday and it began to resonate with me. Now, it drives me on a daily basis."

Patty O'Keefe: The Sierra Club's Role in Connection Environmentalism to Social Justice

Kiwa Anisman

Patty O'Keefe

After much anticipation, I was joined by Patty O'Keefe at our local Dunn Bros coffee shop and immediately noticed her positivity and enthusiasm. Patty eagerly jumped into conversation, offering insightful commentary as to how her work interacts with environmental justice issues. After five years at Minnesota 350 (MN 350), Patty joined the Sierra Club staff as an organizing representative last year. A Minnesota native, Patty graduated from the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, with a major in Youth Studies. Although entering college fairly familiar with environmentalism and issues of equity, Patty actively entered the environmental justice movement during a study abroad program in Durban, South Africa, through the Higher Education Consortium for Urban Affairs (HECUA). This opportunity highlighted how social justice is intrinsically connected to current environmental justice issues we are facing. "That was my first time

learning about environmental issues through that [social justice] lens and through a human lens." Patty's study abroad experience, along with an internship at MN 350, awakened her to new ideas and perspectives. She realized how institutionalized racism and classism predetermine the longevity and health of particular groups. Ingrained systems of oppression have disproportionately left communities of color and low economic standing to bear the consequences of environmental exploitation and devastation. From that moment on, Patty made it her goal to form meaningful relationships with marginalized or previously silenced communities and to more broadly raise awareness about Environmental Justice issues.

At the Sierra Club, Patty works on a multitude of projects and programs pertaining to environmental justice. Patty's work largely involves working directly with community members, but she also notes the other aspects of her position. Her community-based engagement is supplemented by legislative and regulatory work, along with the logistics element involving email and procedural duties. Patty commits herself to community-based projects and outreach initiatives in hopes to form lasting relationships with community members and to build platforms through which marginalized groups can express themselves and advocate for increased environmental sustainability and justice.

Patty strives to incorporate an environmental justice lens into the many issues and projects that she is involved in. Having realized how certain groups are treated as disposable, Patty notes how these populations are disproportionately impacted by issues of pollution, poor water quality, asthma, and cardiovascular disease, to name

a few. Patty assists in projects pertaining to pipeline issues and pollution more generally, but a main focus of her current work is the Upper Harbor Terminal Project, a redevelopment plan for a 48-acre plot of land in North Minneapolis. Patty works to address the issues emerging in the redevelopment process, noting "…there are lots of plans for it to turn into this big destination spot and there are concerns from the community that it's going to lead to increased gentrification and that the area will remain cut off or inaccessible from North Minneapolis community members." Although the developers provided a Development Concept Plan (link) and community committees for the project, in Patty and other community members' views, the creators tend to speak vaguely about environmental and sustainability goals and have failed to incorporate the views of community members in the early stages of formulating the plan. The project includes plans to incorporate a music venue and areas for office space, housing, and commercial use. According to some community groups, the redevelopment plan seems to favor the interests and financial gains of private business as opposed to the general public (Friends of the Mississippi River). With these priorities, there have been insufficient attempts to consider the ramifications of the project on surrounding neighborhoods and to provide platforms for the community to be involved in the redevelopment process.

As a population composed of predominantly people of color and poor communities, North Minneapolis acts as a microcosm of the nation and world, as vulnerable communities have been historically neglected and dismissed when a government funds redevelopment plans. Bearing this in mind, Patty wants to see "the North

Minneapolis community be included and centered in terms of thinking about what they want to do with that land in the future." She has already spoken with many community members and gained a comprehensive understanding of how the public perceives the redevelopment project. "Popular views (about the development) are that they want it to be an area that is accessible to all incomes, that is open to the public and not just private land, that there is affordable housing, just because that is getting harder and harder to find, and that there is art and a cultural aspect that really reflects the community in which it is in." Because "there is not a lot of faith that the city or the developers will create something that feels like it is for Minneapolis," Patty prioritizes building trust and facilitating the construction of platforms for marginalized communities to express their opinions and be included in the redevelopment project.

In this era of climate urgency, many are seeking immediate solutions to mitigate our impact on the planet. Unfortunately, in the rush to solve the climate crisis, many underlying justice issues are left in the dark. This

Some might view environmental justice issues as disconnected from or irrelevant to specific issues of carbon emissions, but "it is part of the same fight and the same problem."

realization made a clear imprint on me as Patty noted the challenges she faces in her work. Some organizations formulate initiatives to reduce carbon or ecological footprint, placing a priority on mitigating climate change while neglecting its relationship to environmental and social injustice. "In this hysteria that we are in with climate change and how big of a threat it is and how much urgency there is to act right away, I feel like some of these environmental justice issues don't get the attention that they deserve." Some might view environmental justice issues as disconnected from or irrelevant to specific issues of carbon emissions, but "it is part of the same fight and the same problem." Patty acknowledges that Sierra Club has improved in its efforts to connect environmentalism to issues of environmental justice and equity, however she asserts "it's a big ship to resteer and there are a lot of other organizations that are not making that an intentional focus."

Additionally, it is difficult to form meaningful relationships with community members under time and resource constraints. It's a balance between recognizing the timeclock and moving "at the speed of relationships, rather than hopping in and out of a community." Without partnerships in the community, effective and impactful

projects cannot reach fruition. Relationships are fundamental to building trust between people of different perspectives and have an integral role in maximizing a community's ability to address environmental justice issues. Given this reality, Patty grapples with the question, "How do we do good work that takes time also knowing that we're on this urgent timeline?"

Lastly, another obstacle is responding to skeptics of climate change. Under time and resource limitations, the Sierra Club needs to choose which groups to focus on mobilizing or persuading, whether that be outright climate change deniers or individuals somewhere in the middle of the spectrum. The organization has found the most success when focusing on individuals who are undecided or are concerned about the issue but "haven't been given the pathways for involvement or exactly don't know what to do about it." Thus, Patty considers the disconnect between climate change programs and environmental justice issues, along with limited time and resources, as the main challenges to fulfilling the goal of environmental justice and sustainability.

I am often disillusioned by the obstacles we face in pursuing environmental justice, but I felt uplifted when Patty shared several heartening messages about what keeps her motivated in this fight for environmental justice. Under

time constraints and worsening environmental conditions, Patty celebrates the successes and progress made by the environmental movement. “I’ve seen a real shift in the public of people being more open and interested in these ideas of equity and really understanding that we need to make a radical shift in the ways we are living and the ways we are treating each other.” By shifting focus to magnify the voices of marginalized and previously silenced groups, the environmental movement can more readily incorporate programs and messages supporting equity and justice. With more perspectives, we can mobilize under a more holistic platform that connects ecological issues to principles of equity in order to dismantle ingrained systems of oppression and environmental injustice. Patty recognizes the obstacles in this national and global fight, but remains motivated and persistent. Her inspiration springs from “feeling committed to wanting to make the world a better place and feeling like we are making progress, albeit it’s slow.” There are significant barriers and issues to address, but the cherished moments of success and progress encourage us to keep pressing forward.

By shifting focus to magnify the voices of marginalized and previously silenced groups, the environmental movement can more readily incorporate programs and messages supporting equity and justice.

Amidst the chaos of trying to find solutions that address both ecological and environmental justice challenges, I was most looking forward to hearing Patty's recommendations for young activists. I, like all individuals, have limited time and resources, so it was important to me to learn how to optimize my opportunities and ultimately help expedite the process of attaining environmental justice. To start, Patty emphasizes the importance to "be bold" and push for a popular movement capable of benefiting society as a whole. Patty acknowledges the impact of incremental work in advancing environmental justice, but she argues that priority should also be placed on mobilizing on a larger scale to advocate most effectively and efficiently. Second, Patty stresses the need to reframe and reorient issues of environmentalism around goals of equity and justice. The current environmental justice fight is not solely pertaining to how we can switch from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources, but "making some fundamental paradigm shifts in how we relate to each other." Connecting climate change to systemic forms of oppression and injustice allows us to reach a comprehensive understanding of the roots of our current problems and the methods through which to seek remediation and sustainability. Lastly, Patty recognizes the value in "self-care" and finding a balance between dedicating yourself to the fight and understanding your personal needs. She suggests that we change "the culture within our movements to make sure that we are seeing ourselves and treating ourselves as whole people and not completely sacrificing our mental and physical well-being for the work." Thus, Patty's advice seems extremely beneficial to young people wanting to participate in or lead the emerging environmental justice movement.

Learning about Patty's involvement in North Minneapolis

had me pondering questions about what effective community engagement looks like and my role in fostering environmental justice. Our conversation left me curious as to what deliberate and specific steps can be taken to increase agency and autonomy given limited time to form relationships. I understand that public events and public outreach are readily-used tools, but how do we measure their effectiveness? It seems a particularly difficult task to support and offer guidance as an external actor with different background and experience compared to the community. Hearing about the impact Patty and the Sierra Club have given these obstacles was impressive and has inspired me to explore these complex dynamics further.

Patty's passion for environmental justice was palpable throughout the interview. She sees the common disconnect between climate change initiatives and environmental justice issues and hopes to more clearly link current environmental issues to goals of social equity and sustainability. I was inspired by Patty's thoughtful and pragmatic recommendations regarding the actions young activists can take to further the environmental justice agenda. Hearing her perspective on the issue has motivated me to similarly question my surroundings more often and to formulate programs that suit the goals of both carbon reduction and environmental justice. Although the sense of urgency is ever-present, with significant obstacles yet to be addressed, Patty's heartfelt account gave me hope that we can make a difference and pursue a future of environmental justice and sustainability.

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Melanie Walby

Melanie Walby

Melanie Walby majored in Graphic Design at the Minnesota branch of The Art Institutes International. She has worked at multiple places, including Media Loft; Juxtaposition; and FLM+. Early in her career as a designer, Melanie often found herself creating designs for clients that didn't align well with her ethic of sustainability. Many clients were more interested in aesthetics, and little time was dedicated to the quality of materials or environmental-friendliness of the packaging. Melanie was uncomfortable with this lack of a sustainable focus in her work.

To find a way to express her sustainability ethic, Melanie began volunteering at AIGA Minnesota, the local branch of a non-profit that is centered around graphic design. At AIGA, Melanie was the volunteer/committee chair of sustainable design. Here she was able to create designs and pieces that were centered around sustainability, and this better aligned with her personal interests and ethic. Melanie believes that as a graphic designer you have an intrinsic amount of power just by being a person whose work is visible and influential. While she had creative

liberty volunteering with AIGA, she was not getting paid for this work, which only further complicated the fact that in order to get paid, she had to work for corporate clients and create designs that she did not always believe in herself.

Melanie is not alone in struggling with work that oftentimes lacks an eco-friendly focus, and she says that many of the individuals she works alongside in the field have shared similar struggles. The contradictory nature of her work eventually led her to seek positions where she does not have to choose between an income and creating ethical designs. Melanie was offered the Design Director position at Pollen Midwest in 2017, where she now commissions illustration, design, and photography to tell stories of individuals enacting meaningful change.

Pollen Midwest

Pollen is a company that believes in the power of a story, where stories act as a vessel to foster human empathy and ultimately bring people together through the collective sharing of similarities, differences, and perspectives. As stated on their website, “Pollen is a media arts organization that fosters empathy, encourages connection across difference, and inspires meaningful action by sharing stories of individuals who want to change our collective story for the better.” Pollen uses visceral illustrations and intimate writing to transform these stories into narratives filled with emotion, with the ultimate goal to enact change. By providing a voice to people to share their stories, more ‘pollen’ is spread and thus collective action and movement might be enacted. Melanie is one of the many artists and creative motifs that work towards sharing stories and igniting passion for future change.

Pollen's focus on empathy through storytelling is a powerful way to bring people to action for environmental justice. Melanie thinks complacency is dangerous. The majority of the people who are in privileged positions and could potentially help change things tend not to think about the lives of other people. It's not necessarily that they don't care, it's just that they don't have the same life experience, and they don't understand what other people are going through. A lot of the issue comes from other people's lives being out of sight, out of mind. Empathy encourages people to think about the lives of others with different experiences. Because of this, people have a greater understanding of what others go through, it becomes a personal issue, and then they're significantly less likely to be complacent.

Environmental Justice

For decades, poorer and marginalized communities have suffered disproportionately from the effects of pollution, resource depletion, dangerous jobs, limited access to common resources, and exposure to environmental hazard. Environmental justice is recognizing the many inherent structural components and active agents that have created these disparities and working to create a more equitable environmental experience for all. Many of the stories that Melanie takes part in sharing, through her illustrations, are focused on the unequal distribution of environmental burdens on the BIPOC community, aligning with the environmental justice framework. These narratives can range from reimagining public safety during a pandemic to energy equity and justice and everything in between. Melanie lifts the oftentimes overlooked or silenced voices of BIPOC and vulnerable populations and shares their

experiences through Pollen. As someone who prioritizes environmentalism and is a person of color herself, Melanie feels as though it is her part to share these stories that she can relate to. At Pollen, Melanie is able to design and create for causes and people that she feels more connected to, a welcome shift from when she began as a designer.

One series she is helping illustrate, titled A Wild and Precious World, focuses on environmental justice related stories. The first story centers itself on Ben Passer and Janiece Watts, the individuals that comprise the Energy Access and Equity Program at St. Paul's Fresh Energy, a nonprofit organization that works to advance clean energy policy. The second story focuses on the co-founder and executive director of the Center for Earth, Energy and Democracy (CEED), Dr. Cecilia Martinez. CEED is an organization that equips marginalized communities with the tools and education needed to have a meaningful impact on issues of environmental justice, and Dr.Martinez has devoted her life towards noticing the details. The third story features Louis Alemayehu, an influential environmental activist in the Twin Cities. By highlighting stories centered around environmental justice, Melanie is doing more than fostering a community of shared experiences. She is showcasing the different ways environmental injustices are experienced and understood by different individuals.

Conclusion

Melanie believes that, as a designer, she has an obligation to be as ethical, true and sustainable as possible in her work. Being in a position where others trust her in sharing their stories to the world means that Melanie has to remain honest and purposeful in her work: as a designer she is

creating for the purpose to represent others, not just herself. Packaging, signs, blogs, interactive media are not only an item to get a point across but also represent ideas that can be inspirational to those who read and interact with those stories. If she and her team use their art and creativity, they have the power to address and draw attention to many environmental justices that individuals within our communities encounter. Pollen, by setting a precedent for this, encourages other designers to do the same.

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2020

Erica Chung: Bringing Environmental Justice into the Public Health Sphere

Hannah Murray and Madeline Prentiss

Erica Chung

Another short Minnesotan winter day was coming to a close when Erica Chung appeared in the waiting room for our Zoom meeting. Despite the distant nature of virtual communications, Chung's infectious smile and upbeat personality transcended the Zoom screen. Throughout our conversation, Chung's effectiveness for interpersonal connections and communication stood out. It is not surprising that she finds her passion as a health communications specialist at the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH). Through her work, Chung communicates the impact of environmental hazards that disproportionately affect the health of BIPOC communities throughout Minnesota. By approaching her work from an equity standpoint and using her voice to advocate for the entire community's wellbeing, she has proven invaluable in the fight for environmental justice.

Chung's background is telling of her path to health and environmental justice. After moving from New York City

to Taiwan, civil unrest drew Chung's family back to the United States. In a small Pennsylvanian town just outside of Pittsburgh, she experienced first-hand the intersectionality between environmental justice and public health – and she didn't even realize it.

"Growing up, I was so sick all the time, with these crazy lung problems that no-one knew the answer to," Chung said. "Similarly, my family got sick really often too. We were all chronically ill all the time."

After moving to Minnesota when Chung was 8 or 9, her family found out that they lived on an old coal mine site. "My family was in the process of moving and selling homes," she said. "They had to look into the history of the home to make sure the ground was stable, and that's how we made the connection" Chung said.

According to the CDC, exposure to coal mine dust leads to a higher prevalence of pulmonary diseases like asthma. This exposure could result from working in a coal mine, or in Chung's case – living on the site of one. This exposure is likely the reason Chung's family saw respiratory health problems while living in the area.

Questions about environmental justice shape Chung's work today, but she wasn't always sure she wanted to pursue a career focused on combating social injustices. Instead, Chung thought she would be pursuing a more traditional career path in public health. She became interested in public health during her undergraduate degree at the University of Minnesota, where she studied Biology and food science. This sparked her interest in two summer internships with the Department of Homeland Security, where Chung worked in food defense.

“Food defense is making sure that our food system is pure, not adulterated, and that things coming in are labeled actually as they are,” Chung said. “The salmon that you’re buying is actually salmon, the olive oil you’re buying is not canola oil, something like that.”

Work in food defense furthered her interest in public health. Chung was fascinated by the idea that there are different, everyday things in the environment that people take for granted – like clean drinking water, and clean air – and that there are people working in the background to make sure that we have a safe supply of these things. Chung didn’t tie these ideas of clean water and air as public health issues into questions about social inequality until a few years later when she was back in New York City at Columbia University.

“I didn’t hear about the term ‘environmental justice’ until my second year at my masters program,” Chung said. “And it was specifically because I sought out a class to take on environmental justice. That was basically the first time I had heard anyone talk about it.”

Now, Chung works for the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH). She started working right when the COVID-19 virus was first hitting Minnesota. Like many other workers this year, her job was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

“The position I was originally hired for was a health communications position, specifically for chronic disease,” Chung said. “The day that I started working, they reassigned me to the COVID-19 Emergency Response Team, working in the communications sector.”

Chung's day varies a lot. She wears many different hats, performing tasks like writing stories that showcase the work of the MDH, updating the MDH website with new signs and symptoms of COVID-19, working with diverse media contacts to present important MDH information, or helping to organize community testing events around the cities. Most importantly, Chung is tasked to ensure diversity and inclusion within health communication projects. Within this work, she focuses on reaching communities of color, who have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19.

In addition to bearing the burden of COVID-19, BIPOC communities are more impacted by environmental hazards. According to the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, 91% of communities of color experience pollution-related risks above health guidelines compared to 32% of all Minnesotans. This disproportionate exposure to pollution can be attributed to long-standing structural and social inequities that have placed undesirable polluting industries besides neighborhoods of color throughout Minnesota. These environmental hazards include but are not limited to highways, incinerators, dumps, pipelines, and toxic waste sites. The health impacts of persistent exposure to toxins are significant such as increased rates of cancer, asthma, and other chronic illnesses. The CDC reports that cancer, asthma, and other chronic illnesses are also risk factors for severe illness from the virus that causes COVID-19. It is easy to see the overlap between living near environmental hazards and poorer COVID-19 health outcomes. Through Chung's work on the COVID-19 Emergency Response Team, she must communicate the risk factors of COVID-19 many of which are consequences of environmental injustices.

Chung thinks that the pandemic and the COVID-19 Emergency Response Team have actually helped the Department of Health gain a new justice and equity perspective that they may have been lacking. Through Chung's work and life experiences, she has learned a lot about fostering equity through community involvement. She believes that this may have been a missing piece in the Minnesota Department of Health's path towards health justice.

"For the first time in a really long time, we are connecting with community members," Chung said. "And we are really understanding, what are the disparities that exist?"

"For the first time in a really long time, we are connecting with community members," Chung said. "And we are really understanding, what are the disparities that exist?"

Chung and the rest of the Emergency Response Team listen to personal stories around the community. The goal is to understand more than just overarching health inequalities surrounding different demographics. Listening to personal stories directly from impacted areas around the Twin Cities, Chung and her team can make more informed decisions about health justice and health equity.

One of the ways she brings environmental justice experience into her work in public health is communication. By making information accessible to

everyone, Chung can help empower marginalized people to make the connection between environmental hazards and health risks. She fosters this skill generally in her work and especially in her current position, where she communicates information surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic to all Minnesotans.

Besides her work at the Minnesota Department of Health, Chung was also an advisor on the Environmental Justice Advisory Group of the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA). Chung heard about this position while working for Healthy Building Network, a national nonprofit campaigning for the use of sustainable, nontoxic building materials. Immediately, she was motivated to apply to bring her perspective to the table and uplift the voices of others within her community.

Once on the Environmental Justice Advisory Group, she and sixteen other environmental justice leaders met with the MPCA's Commissioner, Laura Bishop, each month to advocate that the MPCA's decisions be made using an equity framework. The advisory group intends to act as a voice for BIPOC communities to have a say in matters that they traditionally wouldn't. However, under the current commissioner, their voices were often left unheard. Most recently, the Environmental Justice Advisory Group expressed concerns to commissioner Laura Bishop regarding the construction of a new Line 3 pipeline. In general, the group strongly opposed the construction of the pipeline. However, this did not deter the commissioner from approving its construction anyway.

On November 12th, 2020, despite opposition, commissioner Bishop decided to approve Line 3 water crossing permits. The approval of Line 3, a new tar sand

pipeline that will traverse Northern Minnesota and Anishinaabe tribal lands, disproportionately disregards the health and futures of the Anishinaabe people. The pipeline is prone to oil spills and leaks, which can impact waterways, soil quality, and crops like wild rice that Indigenous people in Northern Minnesota rely on. The pipeline would be a replacement for an already existing Line 3 pipeline that intends to transport tar sands from Alberta, Canada to Superior, Wisconsin.

The existing Line 3 pipeline was implemented by Candian energy transportation company, Enbridge, in 1968. Over the years, numerous leaks from the pipeline have polluted the surrounding land with tar sand oil. Concerns of structural integrity resulted in decreasing the amount of tar sand oil transported and eventually for the pipeline to halt transporting oil entirely. Enbridge, relying on the transportation of oil through the pipeline for the economic future of the company, proposed construction of a new Line 3 pipeline, which would increase their operating capacity. This proposal was met by strong opposition because of social and environmental consequences. Like the original pipeline, the new Line 3 would undoubtedly be prone to leaks and oil spills and it would run through a significant amount of Indigenous land. Besides polluting waterways and land, the pipeline violates treaties between Indigenous communities and the state of Minnesota that vow to protect the Indigenous land in Northern Minnesota. Line 3 is an injustice deeply intertwined with settler colonialism. Inevitable oil spills threaten the cultural heritage of the Anishinaabe people who rely on the land, water, and environment to exercise their culture, economy, and political self-determination. Additionally the “man camps” established by Enbridge that would house workers

during construction traditionally have led to heightened gender-based violence and multiple accounts of missing and murdered Indigenous women.

Construction of the pipeline, which has already begun in Northern Minnesota, is also occurring during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Increased traffic into Indigenous communities will also increase rates of COVID-19 transmission. This threatens their everyday lives and livelihoods, including putting the traditional knowledge of elders who are in high-risk categories for severe illness from COVID-19 at risk. Enbridge's interest in profit over the environment and Indigenous peoples along with the government's complacency continues the legacy of the erasure of Indigenous peoples. While Line 3 is a pressing environmental injustice in Minnesota, the consequences of the fossil fuels it transports will be felt on a broad scale.

Although Chung and her family do not directly live in an area that would be directly impacted by oil spills from the pipeline, she feels that she has a personal connection to the problem, along with the other members of the Environmental Justice Advisory Group. As part of a larger BIPOC community, Chung thinks that members of the advisory group have a responsibility to stand up to injustices against Indigenous people.

"Black, Indigenous, and People of Color really have to stand up for one another," Chung said. "It's so easy to be divided…but at the end of the day, I think change really comes when we're able to use our voices collectively."

To stand up for this larger community and to have a meaningful voice, Chung knew that she needed to take action – and she wasn't alone. Many had a building

frustration with the MPCA's inability to hear BIPOC voices, and for most members of the Advisory Board, the commissioner's decision to approve permits for construction of Line 3 was the last straw. On November 16th, 2020, twelve out of the seventeen advisors resigned en masse. In their resigning statement, the advisors said: "the decision to approve the permit sends a clear message that the Walz Administration and the MPCA hold no regard for the well-being of Minnesotans or our relatives around the world, who depend on us to dramatically, rapidly, and justly transition our economies away from fossil fuels."

A lot of the people who decided to step down realized the battle was lost. Chung says "if we are not valued and if we are not listened to then we just become a pawn in the whole process". The advisory board conveyed a similar message when they stated "we cannot continue to legitimize and provide cover for the MPCA's war on black and brown people".

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Chung can't speak to the future of the advisory board as she is no longer part of the communications channel, however, she does comment: "I am hoping that stepping down sends a powerful message, that there needs to be some serious relooking at the priorities of the MPCA and just exactly how this advisory board feeds into actual actions that are done. I am really hoping that folks in the leadership take a good hard look at

what needs to change before they decide to recruit new members or whatever they start to do”.

Outside of work, Chung is in the process of starting an organization to diversify the medical field. Traditionally and currently, there is a lack of diversity in medicine. Doctors tend to be pretty overwhelmingly white, wealthy, and male. Communities of color, while being more likely to be exposed to environmental health risks like air and water pollution, are less likely to find a doctor that shares their identity. Without consulting with a doctor that truly understands one’s culture and experiences, the quality of the care that someone receives can suffer. This means that injustices against BIPOCs continue even when they need to visit a doctor.

Chung’s goal is to provide resources and a safe space for students interested in medicine to connect. Chung plans to pull in her writing and communications background to help students from traditionally disadvantaged backgrounds write their personal statements to demonstrate that they have so much to offer as a doctor. Chung hopes that this work will continue to chip away at the lack of diversity within the medical field.

“If anything, COVID-19 has shown that we need doctors that come from diverse communities, that can connect with different patients from different backgrounds, races, ethnicities,” Chung said.

Chung hopes to continue her work in health communications and equity, and has a lot of hope for the future of environmental justice. Her hope lies in the leadership coming from historically marginalized identities. She believes that 2020 has challenged the status

quo of the dominant group and brought institutionalized injustices to the forefront. At the forefront of these discussions of justice are many BIPOC leaders.

“I think that we have a lot of powerful people. I am not saying powerful at leadership level, I am talking about people in communities that are really rallying together to make sure their voices are heard and are just so loud and overwhelming to the point that their voices cannot not be heard. You have to listen to them and change needs to happen” Chung commented.

While there has been no end to environmental, social, and health injustices, Chung reminds us of the importance of patience and sustained engagement. “Big changes happen slowly, but small changes can happen fast. So, working hard to make sure those small changes happen and then in time they add up into larger changes” Chung said.

Chung concluded our conversation by explaining what the term environmental justice meant to her. She said, “words matter… being able to succinctly sum up this historical racism, current racism, marginalization, and all these horrible things that are happening to people because of where they live and their environment into two words, and to get that message out, is so, so, important.”

After 57 minutes and 52 seconds of Chung’s positivity, enthusiasm, and wisdom, a sense of optimism and motivation to create change hung in the air. What Chung emphasized was the necessity to translate this energy into real change. She continuously wove the theme of using one’s voice into our conversation. “I think the biggest thing is using your voice and being that lone voice when no one else agrees or steps up for what is right” Chung stressed.

This bravery to speak up, no matter how difficult, is a selfless trait held by so many environmental justice leaders – including Chung. Everyone has a voice, but how will you use it?

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Yordanose Solomone: Equitable Engagement with MetroBlooms

Hannah Grosse and Evelyn Jauregui

Yordanose Solomone

An integral part of the Environmental Justice (EJ) course was learning about, and from, activists surrounding various EJ issues. Amongst those is Yordanose Solomone, the Director of Equitable Engagement for Minneapolis-based environmental organization, Metro Blooms. Despite the virtual barrier of interviewing over Zoom, Yordi's passion and drive for environmental justice activism was apparent. Furthermore, her background in community organizing has paved the way for her work with Metro Blooms and the Minnesota community.

Yordi Solomone is a graduate from the University of Minnesota, where she studied Environmental Science Management and Policy. Her focus was on sustainability and outreach for marginalized communities. Between 2018-2019, Yordi was a member of the GreenCorps and worked with Metro Blooms. Towards the end of her position in the GreenCorps, she was offered a chance to

continue her position with Metro Blooms. However, it was important for her to continue her personal community organizing and find a job that allowed her to develop that work. As a result, Metro Blooms created a position for her as the Director of Equitable Engagement.

Metro Blooms is a non-profit organization based in Minneapolis, Minnesota, whose mission is "…partners with communities to create resilient landscapes and foster clean watersheds, embracing the values of equity and inclusion to solve environmental challenges" (Metro Blooms, 2020). This mission is based upon the beliefs that everyone deserves access to clean air, water, and land. Metro Blooms' ultimate goal is to provide access to resilient green spaces and infrastructure to underserved communities, an environmental justice issue. The organization is committed to achieving this goal through equitable engagement, which they define as creating and providing the conditions for community stakeholders to be meaningfully involved in the organization's projects. Metro Blooms also aims to ensure that the local communities are engaged in the decision making for the systems and policies made in their area. Yordi helps lead this organization in its development and the maintaining of deep, meaningful relationships with the community, and its residents. The relationships developed,

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One of the most common programs that Metro Blooms provides is the implementation of rain gardens and pollinator gardens. Due to community response, they have also worked to provide more livability elements for green spaces. This includes general shade and nature play, as well as playgrounds, and outdoor seating (Metro Blooms, 2020). More specifically, Yordi's position is focused on stormwater management and green space expansion in BIPOC communities, where natural space is lacking.

The disproportionate access to resilient green spaces and infrastructure primarily impacts the BIPOC communities of the Twin Cities. This environmental injustice results in BIPOC communities suffering from the urban heat island effect, caused by more impervious surfaces and less natural landscapes, as well as more pollution than the surrounding white neighborhoods. Metro Blooms' goal is to eliminate this disparity by implementing rain gardens and bioswales in the local communities. Yordi's passion for Metro Blooms stems from her passion in forming and maintaining connections with the communities involved.

Within cities, green spaces and gardens are crucial in helping to reduce the effects of pollution experienced by those living in the city (Why We Need Green Spaces in Cities). They also help to reduce the heat island effect, where cities experience warmer temperatures due to a lack of tree cover and green space. The city structures absorb and trap the sun's heat, resulting in higher temperatures. Not only is the heat island effect reduced with an increase in tree cover and gardens, but it also helps reduce the

pollution that enters surrounding bodies of water, watersheds in the city, and the air pollution experienced by the residents (Heat Island Effect, 2020).

It is important to note that due to redlining, and systemic racism, those who live within cities, and who are disproportionately impacted by pollution and the urban heat island effect, are BIPOC communities and those of lower income. Redlining was brought on by the Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC), which classified certain neighborhoods as “red”, being more risky for loaners, which was also where the residents were majority low-income and BIPOC identifying. Neighborhoods that were designated “green” were less risky and typically high income and White identifying (ArcGIS). As a result, the existing environmental injustices are centered in the “red” areas because the wealthy did not want to invest in the infrastructures and amenities in these neighborhoods.

While Metro Blooms originally started as a group of volunteers who loved gardens and gardening, it soon developed into a non-profit organization that aims to benefit underserved communities with the implementation of community gardens and greenspaces. Regarding public green spaces in Minneapolis: “The neighborhood parks that get the least money for certain types of recreational spending, such as lessons, supplies, and maintenance, are disproportionately in North Minneapolis…Some of the city’s poorest communities are located there, with a large concentration of ethnic minorities. Four of the 12 neighborhood parks that received this stream of spending in North Minneapolis received less than $85,000 last year, and three got less than $25,000. Meanwhile, no neighborhood park listed in the city’s affluent Southwest

area received less than $150,000" (Campbell, 2016). The lack of greenspaces, and the insufficient funding of greenspaces in BIPOC communities is the environmental justice issue that Metro Blooms seeks to mitigate.

One of the projects MetroBlooms work towards implementing in the Northern Minneapolis neighborhoods are rain gardens. Rain gardens are shallow depressions in the ground that help to capture rainwater and runoff using plants native to the area. This prevents the water from flowing over driveways, streets, sidewalks, etc. which the water would collect pollutants from before it enters storm drains. Rain gardens act as a medium to collect the water and its pollutants, ultimately improving water quality. It also helps to prevent localized flooding. The capture of rainwater also allows the water to be absorbed into the earth, preventing localized flooding. The use of native plants also helps to create habitats for pollinators and other wildlife (Metro Blooms, 2020).

The program begins by having a consultation with a resident to help determine the best location for a rain garden. Once this location is determined with the community's discretion, the rain garden is designed to best fit the yard and the resident's interests. Plants are ordered, and the installation is scheduled. The Conservation Corps MN (CCM) helps in providing a crew to help with the installation which includes any excavation or mulching. Residents can also pick up their own plants and do their own planting with the help of a provided guide. This allows residents to get to know the plants and the future pollinators and wildlife that will be in their yard.

In her work with Metro Blooms, Yordi considers herself as a liaison. Her work is focused on the transitional period

towards environmental justice. Some of the questions she asks are, “How do we keep those types of institutions accountable? What does accountability look like [for them]” (Yordanose Solomone, 2020). She bridges the gap between communities and larger organizations with the power to address those questions. Yordi ensures that the work Metro Blooms does is in line with their own missions and vision and, if it isn’t, she problem solves a way to get them back on track.

Another major project that Metro Blooms has focused on are Boulevard Bioswales. Bioswales are conveyance systems that provide an alternative to storm drains in the capture of stormwater runoff (Bioswales, 2020). There is both a lack of funding and infrastructure to combat the increasing threat of flooding in BIPOC communities. Climate change has contributed to the increase in rainfall occurrences and to the extreme, heaviness of them. Not to mention that most stormwater infrastructure was designed in the 1960s, and this infrastructure can not keep up with the increasingly heavy rainfall (Farber, 2019). Metro Blooms has worked to replace the traditional turfgrass boulevards with native plants to help improve the water quality and provide habitat for pollinators and wildlife, similarly to rain gardens. Bioswale boulevards help to reduce stormwater runoff, and improve the ecological resilience of the community, which is defined as “the ability of an ecosystem to maintain its normal patterns of nutrient cycling and biomass production after being subjected to damage caused by an ecological disturbance” (Ecological Resilience). They also increase the visual appeal of the landscape with flowers, and strengthen communities by bringing them together to work on this project. Metro Blooms coordinated this project by

partnering with community organizations, volunteer leaders who helped to recruit community members to help facilitate and engage in the project. Metro Blooms was also able to turn the installation and planting into paying jobs for local community members, providing supplemental income and stormwater infrastructure. This showcases another component of Yordi's work: capacity building for communities in need. Her goal is to provide them with the necessary resources and support so that they can build their own cohorts and do the work in their own communities. This helped to form closer relationships within communities and to Metro Blooms, which is the driver of Yordi's work at Metro Blooms.

In the community space, Yordi takes on the role of "a supporter and an amplifier of… whatever is happening" (Yordanose Solomone, 2020). Her work has focused heavily on relationship building between various BIPOC individuals and groups. Instead of concentrating on the outcome of the project, like most other environmental justice campaigns do, the work that Yordi does is based in fostering those strong connections from the get go. For example, when there are meetings with a council person, or others, Yordi will be there if someone needs a body from another environmental justice organization to be present. She is the support system acting with transparency and integrity.

To those that are looking to get involved in environmental justice, Yordi recommends that you take your time. Don't rush into a movement just for the sake of getting involved. Spend some time soul searching. When Yordi first got into

To those that are looking to get involved in environmental justice, Yordi recommends that you take your time. Don't rush into a movement just for the sake of getting involved. Spend some time soul searching.

activism it was centered around anti-policing work. At that time, it was performative activism, something that she rushed into. That type of activism was unsustainable, and she had to take a break for two years until she really figured out what she wanted. Her measure of success shifted. She found more and more value in relationship building and the connection with others. It's important, "to really invest in relationships. Invest your time, and it may feel like a waste of time because you're not out there, like protesting,… but at the end of the day, if you are feeling like you don't have a reason or a foundation, or something you can land back on, you're not gonna last" (Yordanose Solomone, 2020). It's important to make time to figure yourself out and understand *why* you want to get involved.

Metro Blooms is an organization dedicated to providing clean air, water, and land for all. Their work is centered around equitable engagement, and implementation of their programs and projects to underserved communities. Their primary project is that of rain garden installations which help the water and land of pollutants, and provide habitat to pollinators and other wildlife with the use of native plants. Metro Blooms works to provide additional green spaces

throughout these communities, and educate the community on the importance of green spaces, resilient landscapes, and clean watersheds. They have also made a commitment to environmental justice. Yordi has been crucial in building capacity, supporting communities, and holding larger power structures accountable in the work that Metro Bloom has done. Her work as the director of equitable engagement helps facilitate deep connections between and within the BIPOC communities in Minnesota. Her passion and drive for strengthening community relationships are apparent in the environmental activism work she does for Metro Blooms.

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Dr. Zeke McKinney: The Intersection of Environmental and Medical Justice

CJ Denney and Carter Newport

Despite the initial excitement we felt for the interview project, Zoom fatigue weighed heavy on both of our minds as we dialed in to talk to Dr. Zeke McKinney for the first time in person. We knew relatively little about him: simply that he was a professor at the University of Minnesota and he had some knowledge in the medical field. So few expectations were set. He still managed to pleasantly surprise us, however; his laid-back yet knowledgeable presence put us both at ease and cleared our exhausted minds. The topics discussed were new and intriguing to us. His fields of study as an occupational physician and research investigator were ones that we (and I'm sure most people) had never heard about, but it was soon made clear that they are vital and interesting positions. It also has given him a unique perspective and experience in terms of environmental justice; as a person of color in the medical field, he had many interesting insights to share.

Background

Dr. McKinney knew he wanted to be a doctor since he was a little kid. He was always interested in the idea of going to medical school and he was fascinated by learning how to wield medicine to help people. He has a familial connection and some familiarity to medicine; his mother was a nurse. Dr. McKinney went to the University of

Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and earned his Bachelor's of Science in Computer Science. Dr. McKinney explained that, although unusual, knowing about programming has helped him a lot in the field of health informatics and has allowed him to better problem-solve using IT skills. He eventually enrolled in medical school at the University of Minnesota and achieved his childhood dream of attaining his Doctorate of Medicine. He also earned his Master of Public and Environmental Health at UofM. Dr. McKinney said that until graduating from medical school, he had never even heard of occupational medicine, which is the field he currently works in. He gained exposure to environmental and occupational medicine during his time as an intern at Hennepin Medical Center. He continued down this path because he found a need for this practice and to be able to treat issues or "play detective" as he puts it.

There's no question that Dr. McKinney has had to work hard and devote a lot of time to his work to be successful in his field, but it's his roots that drive him. He noted, "Growing up in Minneapolis made me recognize the disproportionate impact of infrastructure and environmental hazards on BIPOC communities." McKinney described how the inequities are reflected everywhere in Minneapolis, especially in the water. If you stand on the Lowry Bridge between North and Northeast Minneapolis, you can see the pollution reflected in the Mississippi. Environmental contamination varies significantly at different points of the river in the Twin Cities, and in more gentrified areas where more space is allotted to greenspace (such as parks), rather than to industry, water pollution levels in the river are lower. Injustices ingrain themselves in all aspects of the

environment, and large corporations and governmental entities can no longer hide them. We want to highlight this and emphasize that it's so important to acknowledge the injustices inflicted on communities around us. It's comforting to know that doctors like Zeke McKinney aim to bridge some of those gaps and disparities that exist in medicine by actively serving BIPOC communities but by also acknowledging systemic issues and working to combat them.

Work

One common theme threads through Dr. McKinney's work: he is devoted to investigating and identifying problems that exist *before* they cause much issue. He always aims to prevent the worst and nurture the best. Dr. McKinney is passionate about being able to investigate his patients' social determinants of health to identify and target health issues brought on by work or environmental factors. Social determinants of health are the set of conditions in which one lives, works, plays, or learns that have an affect on health and health risks, as well as quality-of-life outcomes. Dr. McKinney's official title is Occupational, Environmental, and Preventive Medicine Physician. Currently, he works as a physician at HealthPartners in Anoka, Minnesota. On a daily basis, he sees patients who come to him for treatment related to chronic or acute illnesses brought on by work or their surrounding environment. During our interview, Dr. McKinney told us that he found it extremely important to incorporate medical ethics and justice into his work. This is because he acknowledges that BIPOC communities have continuously been discriminated against within medicine and the

healthcare system and he wants to use his position to change that.

Dr. McKinney believes the biggest barrier to healthcare access is health insurance. The disparity between White and BIPOC people covered under a health insurance plan is staggering, and there has always been discrimination against BIPOC communities in health. He described issues like race-based medicine and lack of representation in medical occupations, which are products of a systemically racist system. These forms of discrimination perpetuate the "othering" of BIPOC communities and lead to health disparities that are astonishing. These barriers are systemic because they are a product of many other inequities thwarted upon BIPOC people that intersect and work together to further alienate people with different identities. Dr. McKinney made connections between the polluted and under-resourced communities of North Minneapolis and compared that to the trend in patients he sees on routine. A lot of the patients he treats from this area suffer from asthma or other respiratory issues, as well as the development of other risks that come with living next to hazardous waste and industrial facilities. This discounts the values of medical ethics that all doctors

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should practice, and that Zeke utilizes to dismantle racial and ethnic disparities in medicine.

Dr. McKinney's role as a physician is a large part of his life, but he finds it important to devote time and energy to other facets of his work as well. He works as an Affiliate Associate Professor in the Division of Environmental Health Sciences at the University of Minnesota, though we did not delve too deep into this topic. He also told us that right now, he is the Co-Investigator on the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine trials. This has been taking up a lot of his time, seeing as trials are an important way of ensuring the safety of a drug or vaccine for all people. He finds it important to be able to analyze the data from the trials and make sure there are no discrepancies that would put people at even more risk.

Environmental Justice and Activism

As one of only a few Black male occupational physicians in the state of Minnesota, Dr. McKinney feels a certain level of responsibility to treat people fairly and uphold standards of environmental justice. He is especially focused on medical ethics and medical justice, fields focused on equal treatment for people from all social and economic categories. He feels that if a person needs medical attention, no matter their race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status, he has a "responsibility to do something about that". This field and his personal responsibility have thrown him headfirst into topics of environmental justice.

Dr. McKinney became part of the Environmental Justice Advisory Group (EJAG) for a year when it first opened in 2016. This group was formed by a diverse group of people

who wanted to provide feedback and recommendations to the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) concerning environmental justice. Through his work with EJAG, Dr. McKinney became more aware of the environmental injustices surrounding Line 3. First, he noticed that many minority voices within the organization and within the Stop Line 3 movement were not heard, in part because Line 3 was advertised as a project that would bring jobs to northern Minnesota. This led to opposition being "muted" and having "no impact on (Gov. Walz) passing these permits". In his time with EJAG, Dr. McKinney also noticed that the MPCA was claiming to take environmental justice seriously, but in reality, they were standing aside in the fight against Line 3 along with other environmental justice issues. When another member initiated a group resignation to protest the MPCA's approval of Enbridge's Line 3 water quality permits in November of 2020, Dr. McKinney joined in and resigned. He stated that ultimately, he had to stand in solidarity. He had more reasons to leave than to stay.

Recently, as he has been working with the COVID-19 vaccine and its medical trials, Dr. McKinney has observed more instances of environmental and medical injustice. He claims that the biggest barrier to BIPOC and other disadvantaged groups is access to health insurance; the quality of care and coverage varies wildly between companies. However, other huge problems exist, including a lack of representation in the field and the discriminatory practice of race-based medicine. There are also barriers to other groups in terms of stigma, Dr. McKinney says. This is mainly true for mental health problems, tobacco use, and obesity. Overall, a lot of systematic problems exist. The fact that Dr. McKinney is aware of them and is actively

fighting against them is promising and inspiring; it shows that good people still exist even within flawed fields.

His work with EJAG and in the medical field has led Dr. McKinney to have some good insights and advice into what others can do to join the fight for environmental justice. His primary advice was to look at the historical context of modern movements: what has led up to today's events and why? He also recommended that we work locally. Many fights can be fought close to home, and sometimes that closeness makes the fight more meaningful. Dr. McKinney emphasized that an activist should get something out of it themselves; he is always asking himself "What do you want to get out of it?". The local fight is especially relevant in Minnesota, because MN has worse health inequities than any other parts of the country.

Overall, Dr. McKinney is determined to contribute to the fight for environmental justice. He hopes that enough pushback will be generated to make waves and support minority groups affected by environmental and medical issues. He explained that while there is already some things being done to fix environmental problems, many of the solutions are centered in white areas. Little funding and help is given to BIPOC communities. He wrapped up his talk with an especially powerful statement: he imagines a world where

He imagines a world where "equity isn't an issue because we reduce the barriers for equity becoming a problem."

“equity isn’t an issue because we reduce the barriers for equity becoming a problem”.

Marco Hernandez: The Role of COPAL in Uniting Latinx Communities with Environmental Justice

Jillian Kirk and Anthony Chin-Wing

Marco Hernandez

Hope is a necessary part of any justice work. In the context of environmental justice, though many prospects seem bleak, it is necessary to maintain hope and passion when working against the multitude of injustices. The environmental activist, Marco Hernandez (he/they), is the embodiment of these traits. Although the ending of a term is always a frantic time, especially during a global pandemic, my classmate Anthony and I were able to carve out a time to meet Marco despite our hectic schedules. After exchanging emails, we all met on a gloomy Friday afternoon over a Zoom call. Although we were not able to meet in person as the pandemic raged, I could clearly feel Marco's passion and warmth through my computer screen. As someone who grew up facing environmental justice issues in his own neighborhood and continues to work

against local issues every day, Marco's passion and drive was strong and unwavering. His hope for the future endured throughout our conversation as he seemed confident conditions were improving and public opinions were changing in favor of the environmental justice movement.

Living in Minneapolis after the murder of George Floyd and the nationwide outcry that followed, I've felt a change in the climate of justice. It is much more visible, and many more organizations have come to the forefront on this work, specifically BIPOC led initiatives. With all this in mind I gravitated to Marco and was thrilled to have the opportunity to interview him. Both Anthony and I are seniors at Macalester interested in environmental activism. Graduating in a seemingly unstable political climate with a wavering job market due to the pandemic, we were excited to learn about the work of a recent Macalester graduate as this is work I could potentially see myself getting involved in next year.

Marco Hernandez is the current Public Policy Director at COPAL Minnesota, an organization that seeks to, "…unite Latinxs in Minnesota in active grassroots communal democracy that builds racial, gender, social and economic justice across community lines". He graduated from Macalester in 2019 with a major in political science and a minor in Latin American studies. Since graduating, Marco has been working with COPAL fighting the construction of Line 3, the HERC incinerator in North Minneapolis, and the existing racial and economic injustices that have been amplified by COVID-19 and the subsequent economic depression.

Growing up in the San Pablo, California area, Marco was

exposed to environmental injustice at an early age. The nearby city of Richmond is home to a Chevron oil refinery, the second largest in all of California, which polluted local communities daily and left an impression on Marco in his younger years. The San Pablo area mainly consists of BIPOC communities, which are often underrepresented, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation by big businesses such as Chevron. Marco stated that this facility was always visible in his community, constantly reminding them of the mistreatment they experienced from the government.

An explosion at the Chevron refinery in 2014 impacted the community for years after. Marco recalled being told to stay inside with windows closed, and the sharp increase in hospitalizations and asthma cases in the days that followed, which affected his mother. This was seemingly a turning point in Marco's life as he realized the type of environmental discrimination their community felt. He recalled being a child, thinking clouds came from the refinery, a level of innocence that was shattered by this life changing event. This was an eye-opening experience for him as he saw the institutional and historical racism connecting to environmental racism in his own community. It took years of litigation for a settlement to be reached between residents, the city of Richmond, and Chevron, with a college scholarship fund being created for young

He recalled being a child, thinking clouds came from the refinery, a level of innocence that was shattered by this life changing event.

students of color called the Richmond Promise. Chevron continues to impact the community by endorsing political candidates, enlightening many to the grasp that Chevron has on the city both financially and politically. Because of this, it was hard to hold them accountable for the explosion and subsequent damage. This exposed Marco to the influence of corporate money in politics around this time.

In his senior year of high school, Marco was appointed to be part of the San Pablo Youth Commission, where he got involved in healthcare and immigration activism through Organizing for America. He was able to connect with organizers in the city and was able to work to provide subsidized healthcare for undocumented families. Marco's experience at Macalester learning about political, race, and class theory helped him to further strengthen his foundation to become more involved with local issues in Minnesota. He saw that issues plaguing BIPOC communities in Richmond continued in Minnesota as well, especially with the placement of the HERC trash incinerator in North Minneapolis which is a primarily BIPOC community.

At COPAL, Marco has been part of global delegation trips to frontline communities that seek to learn about global environmental injustices and how communities are fighting back. He notes that mining operations in El Salvador function as a state and corporate collaboration, where police and military prevent organizing against mining pollution. With this experience, Marco connected environmental injustices to those in Richmond and Minneapolis, exemplifying that they are present all over the world at a wide range of scales. Many people who attempt to escape these atrocities and unhealthy environmental conditions come to places such as

Minnesota, only to find that the racial discrimination is present in addition to environmental hazards. At COPAL Marco is working to break this cycle as they aim to “think globally and act locally”. The pattern of companies incentivizing economic gain over the environment and rights of human beings is seen all over the world. In order to fix this at a local scale Marco is working on a cumulative impacts bill.

Marco is a member of the governor’s advisory council on climate change and is pushing for a bill in the state legislature that addresses the cumulative impacts of climate change. This would force the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) to examine how new proposals impact communities along with a variety of well-being measures. Marco discussed the connection felt between this legislation and communities such as Richmond where he grew up. He went on to emphasize that these facilities are continuously placed near BIPOC and front-line communities. Locally, this connection can be seen with the construction of Line 3 and the HERC trash incinerator.

Enbridge’s Line 3 pipeline renewal project seeks to build on the existing Line 3 tar sands oil pipeline, first constructed in the late 1960s. The project has been vehemently opposed by activists since its inception in 2014 as it would add 337 miles of new pipe to the existing Line 3 pipeline, crossing the Mississippi River twice and going through Ojibwe territory. This presents an environmental justice challenge because leaks and spills from Line 3 threaten Ojibwe access to clean water and crops, and because the Ojibwe people have had little-to-no say in discussing the implementation of Line 3. Additionally, much of the old Line 3 is planned to be left decaying and

polluting underground. Taken together, both of these points illustrate short-term injustice to the Ojibwe and long-term injustice in contributing to the global climate crisis. Research formed the basis of Line 3's final environmental impact statement (FEIS), which projects it would contribute to $287 billion in social cost over the next 30 years.

Another prominent local environmental justice issue that Marco and his team at COPAL have been fighting is the Hennepin Energy Recovery Center (HERC) trash incinerator in the low-income BIPOC North Loop neighborhood, which claims to contribute to renewable energy. Research has shown that HERC releases harmful chemicals, including dioxins, lead, and mercury from the burning of waste. This leads to higher rates of cancer, miscarriages, respiratory diseases, and other illnesses in the surrounding area for populations which already have inadequate access to healthcare. HERC shows the intersection of economic, environmental, and racial injustice as it conceptualizes low-income BIPOC communities as dispensable through environmental pollution. The COVID-19 pandemic further amplifies these injustices; immune systems are weakened from exposure to HERC's pollution and from COVID, making exposure to one lead to an increased health risk for the other. People who are economically suffering and may have lost their job, as low-income BIPOC workers in the service industry disproportionately have, are less able to escape HERC's pollution. Healthcare hemorrhaging and delays mean that those affected with COVID-19, pollution exposure, or both are less able to access life-saving care. At COPAL, Marco has been working in a campaign against the HERC trash incinerator since 2019. The campaign seeks to address the

injustice that HERC receives renewable energy credits despite polluting the North Loop. Marco, in conjunction with Eureka Recycling and State Rep. Frank Hornstein, seeks to pass a zero-waste bill for companies. This includes shifting away from un-recyclable plastics, using plastics that other countries deem valuable so that they can effectively be recycled, and shifting towards greener materials, such as tin and cardboard.

When we asked Marco what kept him going when working with injustices which can often be disheartening, Marco pointed to a personal experience in El Salvador. He was told a story in which people hid out in a forest from guerrilla attacks and later reminisced how the forest protected them. They respected the forest, turning it into a national reserve to pay this protection forward. He was moved by the respect people had for the forest because of how it took care of the people. Following this, he discussed the uprising in Minneapolis that followed the murder of George Floyd. The discourse that followed these uprisings led to an increase in funding and public support for BIPOC organizations. White-led groups turned their focus to listening to the conversation rather than leading. Marco also talked about how in this legislative session at the BIPOC table, they plan to no longer water down bills, but rather to advocate for more robust racial and environmental justice bills with shorter implementation timelines. Both of these experiences Marco pointed to as sources of hope and things that keep him going in this type of work.

Marco’s advice for young activists centered on lifting up the voices and stories of frontline organizers. He

encouraged volunteering with groups, joining if they have a membership option, and listening to others. He talked about how it is important to help others without making yourself the face of the campaign. Marco also mentioned the importance of accessible language. Too often organizations, specifically White-led organizations, can get too caught up in things like bill numbers and specifics, alienating others from participating and creating a sense of imposter syndrome for those not constantly updated.

Too often organizations, specifically White-led organizations, can get too caught up in things like bill numbers and specifics, alienating others from participating and creating a sense of imposter syndrome for those not constantly updated.

As he concluded, Marco discussed how an institution like Macalester College can work towards an environmental justice mission. Suggestions included investing in BIPOC organizations, divesting from fossil fuels, and connecting students with organizations in this area who are doing this work. This framework could be expanded to other institutions of this kind in order to promote environmental justice around the country.

Through all of his experiences and work, Marco has a

clear mission to help communities of color which are disproportionately affected at the hands of the government, drawing on his own experience in Richmond. He aims to break a cycle of injustice, drawing on many elements of racial injustice. With his environmental justice focus, he clearly aims to work against the embeddedness of these issues as racial inequalities permeate the structure of our society. He also sees the scale of these issues as environmental injustices pass across country borders and can be seen all over the globe. These injustices intersect specifically with economic disparities and racial disparities, and through Marco's work he aims to fight against this whole cycle of governmental mistreatment of these communities.

Throughout our conversation, Marco seemed hopeful about the future of environmental justice work. His work in the fights against Line 3, HERC, and the multiple intersections of racial, economic, and environmental justice are inspirational for us, and representative of a stronger populist-left movement across the country. Our key takeaway from our time with him is that by centering and listening to frontline BIPOC leaders, organizers can create positive change in both the legislature and on the streets.

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Charles Frempong-Longdon: Using Food & Art to Bridge the Gap Between Nonprofits & Community

Marisa WIlliamson and Jojo Zhang

It has been a tough year for everyone in this global community due to the overreaching pandemic, and the interview assignment that should be happening in person became an online project. Luckily, we still had the opportunity to sit down with Charles together via Zoom and have an open conversation on the topic of environmental justice and how he has contributed to other related fields to build a healthier community. Centered around the idea of connecting people together and calling their attention to environmental and social problems, Charles very willingly shared his personal engagements on how he got to work with others towards that end.

Before we got on the Zoom call with Charles, I was imagining that we were going to be speaking with a very old man. Knowing that he was a part of the Sierra Club I was picturing a John Muir type of person. But when we got on the call, I was very mistaken! Charles is a young person whose family is from Ghana, but he lived mostly in Minneapolis and experienced growing up under American culture. Though the cultural root he inherited is not comparable to the works he was doing for environmental justice, Charles was actually inspired by his Grandpa and the life he lived in Ghana. At the age of

eighteen, Charles went back to Ghana to visit his Grandpa, and he remembered the talks he had with him on the changes happening in Ghana. He was surprised by the natural, slow-paced life that his Grandpa was living in being just next to urban expansions such as high-speed railways. This is the first anecdote Charles shared with us, and it undeniably set the base for his continuing works. To our understanding, that was a critical conflict between modern constructions and the existence of nature. Charles rethinks about whether this has been ecological or not, and it is where he begins to explore environmental justice issues. Initially inspired by the conversations Charles had with his Grandpa on topics like nature and urban expansion, these experiences are what first piqued his interest and started his journey in environmental justice.

One of the stories that struck me the most during the interview was Charles' path to his Sierra Club job. Charles explained to us that his career started with him working on a food truck for many years. During this time was very passionate about going to protests and was very into activism. One day he just randomly walked into the Sierra Club because people looked like they we're having fun. Someone came up to him and asked if they could help and they had a conversation about the work done at the Sierra Club. They talked about environmental justice and Charles realized that it was something he was very interested in and passionate about but had never had the exact words for. Soon after that he got an internship at the Sierra Club. When he started working there, he thought he was doing a bad job. But, throughout his internship he had many conversations with people who work in environmental justice, and through those conversations realized that he had so much confidence in what he was passionate about.

His job today allows him to have conversations and lets him be able to work with and advocate for disadvantaged communities.

Later in our conversation we asked Charles about what kept him going in his work, his main drive for his fight in Environmental Justice revolves around building a better, stronger, and bigger community. Charles told us how, due to his job at the Sierra club, he gets to be around really inspiring and amazing people. He gets to work alongside and learn from these people and it's his job, an ideal working environment, that makes him feel very grateful for his job position, the people he works with, and all of the work he gets to do. While his work community is incredibly important and inspiring to him, Charles discussed how creating spaces for people in the larger twin cities community as a whole is something that he's very passionate about. Getting to use vulnerability to connect with people and familiarizing himself with others helps build a better and stronger community.

After hearing just how important community relationships are to Charles, I reflected on the murder of George Floyd this past May. As someone who also worked in the Twin Cities this summer doing community engagement and centered work, I remember just how much impact the murder had on my job, on Minneapolis communities, and conversations on racial and environmental justice. When I asked Charles about how his work was affected, he told us how all of his work really started changing in March to be more focused on the pandemic's impact on Brown and Black people. He told us how the murder of George Floyd was the breaking point. People were exhausted with all of the unjust killings of Black and Brown people for

years, but this was the event that put people over the edge. Charles' work became less about environmental justice and more about Black liberation. Topics he worked on were seeing ACAB as an EJ issue, thinking about access to green spaces, interactions with Black and Brown bodies, and the impacts and implications of borders. During the time of the large beginning protests, Charles was working on the front lines with people that he had worked with forever, which showed the power of how the intersectionality between environmental justice and police brutality. Through this work Charles started to see environmental justice as a way to help protect the BIPOC community. He strongly believes that healing justice and community care needs to be an active part of our movements.

Being so interested by just how much the pandemic and the murder of George Floyd changed his work and what he focused on, we asked Charles more about the exact work that he does at Sierra Club. Charles is a chapter organizer which entails listening to community members and having conversations with people, making small wins into larger

Food and art are holistic ways of getting in touch with people, that's why Charles has been focusing a lot of his work and community outreach on urban gardening and trying to eliminate food deserts.

ideas. Charles does work on a large geographical scale and focuses a lot on environmental justice issues with trash incinerators. He helped set up an interface on how people worked on these problems. Another large aspect of his job is figuring out how to translate non-profit language to community language. Nonprofits can use confusing terminology and overall inaccessible language when trying to work with communities and end up very much sounding like a condescending outsider. Charles mentioned how a great way to help bridge this gap is through the arts. Charles was a chef on a food truck for many years and always found that food is a great way to bring people together. Food and art are holistic ways of getting in touch with people, that's why Charles has been focusing a lot of his work and community outreach on urban gardening and trying to eliminate food deserts. Overall, his work is about building up relationships with the community in which he combines things that he is passionate about like the overlaps between food, art, and environmental justice awareness.

I was so interested to hear just how much art and food were a part of his work in environmental justice, whenever I think about community engagement and events I always

think of events with tons of food and music, and I was wondering if this was the case for the work that Charles did. So, we asked him to speak more about the intersectionality of art and environmental justice. Charles told us that before he started working at the Sierra Club while he was a cook, he was also making music and writing poetry as a way to process interactions and knowledge. He was very into eco-poetry which is based in an Indigenous and BIPOC way of interacting with nature, that has an aspect of gendering inanimate objects. He explained to us how traditional White Western poetry about nature is called nature poetry which depicts aspects of nature or nature itself as being a damsel in distress. Where in eco-poetry humans are seen as an extension of nature and human expansion into nature is not the end goal. For Charles, this was a way to learn how to interact with the world and created an opportunity to build connections with people through art and poetry. Which has similar roots and energy to the work he does with community organizations at the Sierra Club.

Where in eco-poetry humans are seen as an extension of nature and human expansion into nature is not the end goal.

While Charles enjoys his job and loves the connections with other environmental justice advocates and community members, he told us that he also has suffered from imposter syndrome. With having environmental justice as a career, in the beginning he felt like everything that he was doing was wrong. When working he had an underlying capitalist

view on the work he was doing and was constantly wondering if he was doing enough. But he soon learned just how much ingrained capitalism was affecting him and also focused on how environmental justice is not a capitalist concept. So therefore, no type of capitalist work scale can measure the type and importance of his work. Another part of his imposter syndrome was trying to live up to an imagined standard as a young Black man in a corporate capitalist society. He learned he had to advocate for a seat at a table.

In class while discussing the recent news around Line 3, we were informed that there was a large number of people that resigned from the EJAG to protest the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency's decision to grant water crossing permits for Line 3. Charles was one of those people! When we asked him about the situation, he told us that having a seat at the table does not give you legitimate access to the meal being served. The EJAG was advertised as the community being able to have a say in environmental justice issues happening within the state of Minnesota, but this was not the case, they were simply mitigating casualties. For many of the board, Line 3 was the last straw. The board was telling them not to grant the permits, but they did it anyway. To Charles and many others on the board this action was soul crushing, the Pollution Control Agency could have stopped it but instead they looked the other way. After this disaster Charles is just even more fired up to fight for creating real solutions that benefit people, and now truly understands public justice vs. cooperative justice from organizations and agencies, which is really just performative and often not real justice.

After hearing all of the amazing and inspiring things that

Charles said about his journey and path to working with environmental justice, I am even more excited to participate more in activism surrounding environmental justice! So, we asked Charles what he recommended to young activists who want to get involved in the environmental justice movement. Charles first mentioned how after the youth climate strike he saw just how much people patronize youth. He continued with how he thought that youth are talented and intelligent and great at holding space for people. They are true to themselves and stick to their guts and those are all admirable and important qualities for those participating in environmental justice activism. He recommends that we have conversations with those we admire and that we should be open to learning, engagements, and reaching out to people. I will definitely take his advice and our conversation with him was a great start for the furthering of my environmental justice activism!

Analyah Schlaeger dos Santos: Knowledge as One of the Most Important Tools to the Next Generation of Climate Leaders

Rachel Eder and Sayira Silverio

Analyah Schlaeger dos Santos

Have you ever wondered about the placement of the Hennepin Energy Recovery Center in downtown Minneapolis? How about the skewed amount of people with asthma in neighborhoods that are predominantly Black, Indigenous, Persons of Color (BIPOC)? I had the chance to talk about these issues and more with Analyah Schlaeger dos Santos. Analyah is the Environmental Justice youth program coordinator for Minnesota Interfaith Power and Light (MNIPL), an organization that strives to build the interfaith climate movement throughout the state. Analyah plays an important role in empowering and mobilizing youth to help them gain the tools and experiences necessary to implement real changes in their community. Although Analyah does not have an academic background in Environmental Studies, her background in Communications has allowed her to increase accessibility within the Environmental Justice movement to people

regardless of their background. Moreover, Analyah strongly believes in creating an Environmental Justice movement that includes everyone. She mentions, for example, how excluding people from the environmental movement because they do not fit into the category of a conscious, clean, minimal waste producing human means less progress can be made. My interview with Analyah gave deep insights into her passions about this project and the issues that the youth involved in the Environmental Justice movement are discussing today.

In order to break the ice, I began the interview by asking Analyah how she would define the Environmental Justice movement. For Analyah, this question called in a recollection of an encounter at a Youth Climate Summit, where much of the discussion centered on how Environmental Justice is the intersection of environmentalism and social justice work. To put it plainly, "Environmental justice is climate justice, food justice, sovereignty, caring for the planet, migrant justice, and health justice… and then some" It requires acknowledging that we do not have a lot of time before irreversible changes to our climate will shape the survival of human beings. It also requires recognizing that traditional cultures protect the Earth, that indigenous people around the world

"Environmental justice is climate justice, food justice, sovereignty, caring for the planet, migrant justice, and health justice… and then some."

help to cultivate land and water, and that it is important that organizers work with these communities in order to help sustain our planet. Analyah sees growth in the future of the Environmental Justice movement and wants to look to the next generations' leaders for support and mobilization.

It was interesting to hear about Analyah's motivations for getting involved in Environmental Justice work. Analyah took the opportunity to branch out from her Communications major by taking up an internship with the Higher Education Consortium for Urban Affairs. This was a study away internship that focused primarily on environmental sustainability and involved farming once a month. Analyah applied for the internship after learning about environmental communication, which aims to make environmentalism more accessible for a variety of different communities in order to grow the movement.

From there she met Sam Grant, who is the executive director at MN350, and Julia Nerbonne, Executive Director at MN Interfaith Power & Light. Both are currently her EJ mentors. Discussions of what was currently happening within the community and discussion of an energy efficiency summer camp led to the current position she holds today. Analyah values her time in the internship as it introduced her to the world of Environmental Justice and also helped her to understand what community organizing truly is and how it works.

Analyah believes that in order to create widespread change, people from all over the globe, no matter their way of life, need to be included in the conversation around Environmental Justice. In order to do this, Analyah starts

with the next generation of climate activists and leaders, giving them the resources, experiences, and tools they need to create communities they want to be a part of. Analyah recalls organizing the first summer camp for her program Youth N' Power. Expecting only about 10 kids to show up, she was surprised when they had 25 participants, 5th through 12th grade, eager to get involved. She describes the way she works with youth as, "looking at environmental *injustices* in order to change them into *justices*".

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For example, the program has looked at the placement of the Hennepin Energy Recovery Center (HERC) in downtown Minneapolis, asking questions like, why place HERC here? And, who is this facility affecting? HERC is a waste management facility that burns garbage to create energy for the city, one of the 73 incinerators across the United States. Of these 73, 79% are situated within three miles of low income and minority neighborhoods (Milman 2019). HERC is no different. The effects of the facility harm the surrounding BIPOC communities that have little influence over the matter. The burning of garbage releases hazardous emissions and leads to serious health problems. Pollutants such as lead, particulate matter, mercury, and nitrous oxide are released from the incinerator. Although the incinerators in the United States usually follow rules set for the allowable amount of emissions, researchers say

that even those operating within the range of allowable emissions pose serious health problems, mainly burdening Black, Hispanic, and poor communities (Milman 2019). Like many other incinerators across the country, there have been efforts to relocate HERC in the past years, however none have been successful in removing it from its current location. The power imbalance between those affected by HERC and those placing the facility is obvious. Living in hazardous conditions not only causes life threatening effects for the people there now, but also develops into generational health issues. Incinerators also provide less jobs than that of recycling facilities, an alternative and more environmentally friendly alternative to HERC. Not only does this facility impose detrimental health impacts on the community, but it could also be replaced by a more economically beneficial facility instead. Considering all this, Analyah and the organization Youth N' Power examine the impacts of HERC on the surrounding community and work to find alternative solutions.

In my conversation with Analyah, she recalls how there are minimal trees and, instead, concrete covers most of the area, leading to hotter weather and worse air quality. Looking out her apartment window, she says that for as far as she can see, there is only concrete. In a survey conducted by the organization Neighborhoods Organizing for Change looking into the neighborhoods of North Minneapolis, out of the 130 people surveyed, 99% said they had or knew someone with asthma (Watts 2016). The reason for this can be linked to data released by the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency which shows an unhealthy amount of lead and toxins in the air of North Minneapolis. The noticeably hotter weather and worse air quality than that of the suburbs of Minneapolis can be attributed to the fact that the

suburbs are filled with trees and green space while North Minneapolis is not. Youth N' Power has discussed the impacts this has on their community and considers ways of changing this injustice. Systematic racism perpetuates these disparities among BIPOC communities. Redlining is just one example of how Black people have been forced to live in worsened parts of the city, exposing them to high levels of toxins, little green space, and further putting people in these communities at a greater disadvantage.

Another passion of Analyah is the accessibility of food. Food is essential to human survival; high quality and healthy varieties determine whether people have a good quality of life. Furthermore, food and health are interconnected, which is why social determinants of health play a large role in food accessibility. Among the questions Youth N' Power discusses, asking, why do certain areas have easier access to fresh food, and why healthier options tend to be more expensive compared to less healthy options are important questions that Youth N' Power tackles. Both location and income are factors that determine whether or not people in a community are able to acquire high quality items. Potential solutions to these issues include pushing the people at the top who plan city structures and spreading information to youth in order to mobilize and enable grassroots change.

With opportunities such as intern training and visits to the state capital building, Analyah works to make Environmental Justice issues relevant and inclusive to everybody. Her end goal is to reach every person without placing blame or deeming people "unfit" for the movement. She believes that starting locally to teach kids these lessons early on will increase the awareness of our

global community and create more equality for those who currently have less of a voice. Utilizing her studies in Communications allows Analyah to connect with all types of people and bring them into a conversation that previously excluded them and their perspectives. Through Analyah's work with youth in Minneapolis, they have questioned the systems surrounding them and pushed for systematic and transformational change.

Kristi White: Bringing Clinical Health Psychologists into the Discourse on Environmental Justice

Ayize James and Ariel Hasak-Lowy

Introduction

Kristi White

One of the most impactful ideas in environmental justice that we've learned is that the hard work is integration and transformation. Dr. Kristi White showed us how she does the work of centering environmental justice in her field that asks what people need to be well. As a clinical health psychologist for Hennepin Healthcare, a network of hospitals and clinics for the residents of Hennepin County, Dr. White's work is to see patients in two primary care clinics. She specializes in health psychology and behavioral medicine with an interest in how they connect to issues of climate change and environmental justice. In the hour or so that we had with Dr. White, we talked about her work and what it means to be advocating for sustainability, health equity, and environmental justice as a

health practitioner who sees patients every day, as well as the very real implications that a changing climate and environmental injustice can have on our mental health. Throughout the interview Dr. White brought forward a perspective that we don't often get the chance to hear at Macalester, on-the-ground insights of how we can pursue genuine health in increasingly uncertain times.

Environmentalism and Psychology

Dr. White went to graduate school for health psychology. In these fields she approached behavioral changes and managing chronic illnesses. Her main focus was on

researching the psychological and physiological effects of stress. Because climate change has been created by human behavior, Dr. White explained to us that psychologists have an important position in approaching the subject of environmentalism and climate change. Dr. White began her work trying to connect the fields of Health Psychology and Environmental Justice. Over the years, interest has continued to grow among researchers and psychologists in the interdisciplinary exploration of health behavior and environmental sustainability. Dr. White defines Environmental Justice as everyone getting an equal shot at benefitting from sustainable and equitable practices including protection from environmental hazards, as well as ensuring that our society does not perpetuate racist systems in environmental work.

Dr. White defines Environmental Justice as everyone getting an equal shot at benefitting from sustainable and equitable practices including protection from environmental hazards, as well as ensuring that our society does not perpetuate racist systems in environmental work.

Research

Dr. White's background is in stress research, focusing on

the impacts that external stressors have on our overall health as well as health impacts of making effective changes to our behaviors and habits. An environmentalist at heart, Dr. White explained how she began integrating the known stress of climate change, environmental degradation, and environmental justice in her work. She describes that intuitively, climate change is driven by human behavior and has an impact on human health. Expanding her focus on health psychology and environmental sustainability, Dr. White wrote her dissertation investigating the restorative effects of natural environments on recovery from stressful experiences and the implications for the practice of including aspects of nature in recovery settings. This would later deeply root her work as a health psychologist committed to advancing sustainability and environmental justice in the healthcare setting.

Climate, Environmental Justice, and Mental Health

When we asked Dr. White what impacts that climate change and environmental justice have on mental health, we were fascinated to hear how so many facets of environmental justice, many of which we've studied in class, have serious health implications that she engages on

Climate change is an ongoing crisis that can precipitate trauma and PTSD caused by disasters and hazards.

a daily basis. One of the most curious external issues that Dr. White works on is simply bringing clinical health psychologists into the discourse on environmental justice, where evidently, there is so much to learn and contribute. From her perspective in psychology, she described her definition of environmental justice as both the equitable access to environmental benefits and the equitable protection from toxins and chemicals. Both sides have serious and significant implications for our mental health, but have traditionally been absent from the field of psychology. Some of the major connections Dr. White explained were between trauma and resilience, the implications of systemic and institutional racism and other marginalities, and wellness. Climate change is an ongoing crisis that can precipitate trauma and PTSD caused by disasters and hazards. Often underlying hazards is the systemic and inequitable distribution of environmental goods and bads, for which Dr. White cited the impact of toxins in predominantly poor and BIPOC communities as well as the systematic denial of green space access to BIPOC communities through residential segregation. The conditions, which we often interpret to be unjust can often have serious implications on communities' mental health. Lastly, Dr. White shared with us her work to advocate for education and practice around the psychological toll of environmental inequities and climate change in her field.

Sustainability Transitions in Health

As we look forward, the psychology field is growing and becoming more committed to investing in the effects of climate change as it relates to health and behavior. The American Psychological Association recently declared climate as a more focal point of their work. Dr. White is involved in a committee at HCMC on climate change and health. They are working on understanding how to train people to address climate change as a public health issue. One area of focus they have is to educate the workforce and community on adaptation and mitigation behaviors that will improve physical health and environmental health. Dr. White says it is most important to focus on what she calls “high currency interventions” that have both human and climate benefits. Some of these interventions include changes to dietary habits such as eating less red meat, community gardening, and creating more green spaces. These interventions can help communities support themselves while also working to support the environment.

Dr. White discussed how many levels of intervention an example like community gardening has. The process of gardening can support a community in learning how to grow food, what foods are native to their local area, produce fresh and healthy food for their community and create a green space locally. Dr. White went on to express the conflicts she has run into with white superiority mindsets, resource appropriation, and gentrification when supporting historically marginalized communities set up these interventions. She told us a story of white women who saw a community garden and wanted to be able to use the fresh produce that was not intended for them. Dr. White expressed it is important to understand how specific

communities need these interventions, and it is very easy for the superiority mindset that many white people have to gentrify and steal the resources and healthy interventions that other communities are working on together.

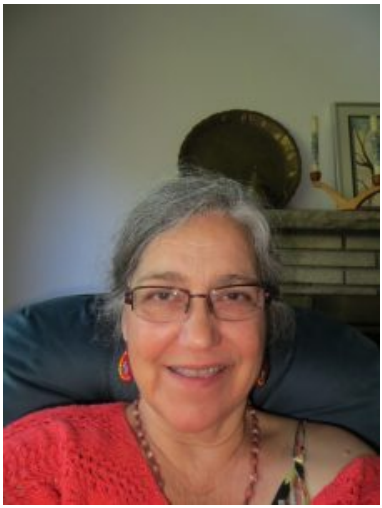
Looking Forward

Dr. White told us that through these crises there are many lessons to be learned. In relation to our climate crisis, it is important to acknowledge and allow yourself to feel the despair that often comes with experiencing and thinking about climate change. But, Dr. White emphasized the importance of not getting stuck in that despair but using it as motivation for bringing yourself to a place of action. When doing environmental justice work, Dr. White also explained that it is crucial to be intentional about whose voices are being centered. She noted that BIPOC communities have been experiencing environmental injustices and creating their own solutions without white people for a long time, and do not need white people to come and save them from climate change. Regarding how environmental justice is related to the crisis of the pandemic, Dr. White noted that we are seeing the importance of spending time in nature to support resilience and cope with stress. It is important to ensure equitable access to be outside and connect with nature, including the availability of natural spaces and cold winter gear. A success that came from this pandemic is the acceptance of telemedicine as a new way to engage with healthcare. Dr. White says that telemedicine is here to stay and much more accessible to the public especially right now when it allows people to avoid high risk transportation. But in general, relying on transportation is no longer an issue when telemedicine is an option. From an environmental

perspective, telemedicine also has benefits by decreasing the number of emissions because people are not driving to their appointments. It is clear from our time speaking with Dr. Kristi White, that the field of health psychology and how it overlaps with environmental justice is growing and changing right in front of our eyes.

Lea Foushee: A Lifetime Committed to Confronting Environmental Injustices

Amanye Reynolds and Lydia Macy



Lea Foushee

The sun had gone down after several Zoom meetings, but we had one more to cap off the day. Typically, adding another virtual event to the end of a long day is anything but energizing, but an hour and a half of talking to Lea Foushee slipped by quickly, as we were drawn into her world of passion, excitement, and joy for life. Lea is a longtime environmental justice activist in the Midwest, whose work has touched the lives of many and has spanned farther than either of our lifetimes. Speaking to someone with so much experience and wisdom under their belt is a gift, and we are honored to have the opportunity to retell her story. We could not possibly touch on all the details of Lea's experiences and accomplishments, however, we hope to illuminate some of the amazing work she is engaged in today, and the powerful story of how she got to where she is today.

We began our conversation with a background of Lea's current work. She described various projects she has been working on lately, which are all centered around Indigenous people in the U.S., and shining light on their history and culture. Lea spoke passionately about a project where she replants wild fruits and berries across Minnesota's Northern reservations. She says it is about "giving back what has been stolen or taken or not replaced." Lea also discussed her involvement with *Landscapes of Conflict*, which is a 35 poster exhibition of indigenous life pre-contact and the subsequent invasion and colonization. Before COVID-19, visitors would "walk into this huge semicircle of all these images." Lea worked with the University of Minnesota to curate this exhibition, and once pandemic-life hit, she created a digital version as a resource for education. Lea has also put together an educational curriculum, **Sacred Water/Water for Life,** with a co author, Renee Gurneau from Red Lake that features the teachings of a spiritual leader Eddie Benton-Benai and James Dumont. In the book there is a page titled Landscapes of Conflict where it "juxtaposes indigenous worldview with Western European world view" to "explain the two world views [which] resulted in this exhibition of images." Lea also conveys the horrors of killing buffalo and people, demonstrating that genocide against Indigenous people has never stopped, and has been going on for over 500 years. Lea shared how her work that exposes the continued genocide and attempted elimination of Indigenous people can be really heavy, and said "that's where the wild fruit comes in."

We were really excited to interview Lea, not only because of the incredible work she engages in with Indigenous communities, but also because she was part of the

groundbreaking resignation from the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency's (MPCA) Environmental Justice Advisory Group (EJAG) after Commissioner Laura Bishop approved Line 3's final permits. When we eagerly began asking her questions about EJAG and the renowned resignation, there was an apparent shift in Lea's tone, to one of irritation and frustration. Lea was invited to be one of the original members of EJAG under the previous commissioner. She rejoined the advisory group when the second commissioner filled the position. When we asked Lea what kind of decisions she helped make or advise Lea immediately said "none" and that "anything we had to say to them they ignored." Lea told us about the hypocrisy of Commissioner Bishop who "said that [her] premiere concern was doing things in a manner that didn't worsen the carbon footprint of Minnesota. [So] what does she do, permits tar sands oil." We asked Lea more about the duties of the committee and she said "they basically had us writing their papers, writing their language." Lea elaborated on the way the committee was used by saying the committee basically would "tell them what environmental justice is in our language, and then they use it, as their language." What really stuck with us is when Lea said "It was a con job, both commissioners. The best con job I've ever seen." So Lea knew that there was nothing more she could achieve by remaining on the advisory group. Lea made clear the ways in which environmental injustices are deeply embedded, even into the institutions and organizations whose primary purpose is to create environmental justice. It was fascinating to hear from Lea that there had never been a point in her time with EJAG that she felt their recommendations were taken seriously. Her experience speaks to the many ways in which the government pays lip service to social and

environmental justice and uses it as a way to advance an ongoing agenda of profit over people.

Our conversation with Lea meandered between her current and past work, and we were intrigued to hear a bigger picture of how she got to where she is now. Lea has been tirelessly working on environmental justice issues for decades, well before her involvement in EJAG. Originally from South Dakota, Lea moved to North Dakota (just north of the Standing Rock Reservation) in the early 1970s, as the Powerline Struggle was growing as a movement across North Dakota and Minnesota. In 1974, Lea became the Chair of the North Dakota Chapter of the Sierra Club, where she organized with ranchers, farmers, and Indigenous people against coal companies to stop the destruction of the prairies, ecosystems, and waterways that coal companies' were destroying in order to sell electricity. Around this time, Lea met George Crocker, who was organizing with farmers across West-Central and South-Central Minnesota, known as the General Assembly to Stop the Powerline (GASP) and the Southern Landowners Alliance of Minnesota (SLAM), to confront the CU Project. The CU Project, owned and operated by United Power Association and Cooperative Power Association (now Great River Energy) , was made up of the Coal Creek Power Plant (located near Underwood, North Dakota), an 800+- kV DC power line, and the 345 kV Wilmarth Line. Additionally Lea graduated from the University of Minnesota in 1990. She made her own degree, titled Social and Cultural Factors Affecting Human and Natural Resource Management, through the Anthropology department because an Environmental Justice degree did not exist at the University at the time.

Lea described George as “what you would call dangerous,” because he was relentless in his efforts for justice. He was a Vietnam War resister after all, meaning that he chose to go to prison instead of kill on command overseas. Lea and George’s work was deeply intersected, and she was there in North Dakota when the Minnesota farmers that George was working with took down 20+something powerline towers in the night. Lea then began attending meetings with the West-Central and South-Central Minnesotan farmers and was encouraged to move out to Minnesota to continue organizing with them. Lea began to get very engaged in this movement to stop the powerlines. In our interview, she recounted how inspired she was that “people were actually standing up and doing something, they weren’t taking it.” Lea then got invited to a conference with GASP, attended by many Twin Cities activists, farmers, and members of the American Indian Movement that had formed a few years prior in Minneapolis. This conference was such a pivotal moment for Lea, that afterwards she packed her bags and moved to Minneapolis. She said in our interview, “the only reason I went home was to get my daughter, I had found my calling.”

In the 1980s, Lea got really involved in the Black Hills Alliance (BHA), a coalition of Lakota people, environmental activists, Black Hills residents, and ranchers and farmers opposing the plans of 27 multinational corporations that were set to extract the Black Hills of South Dakota for energy and other resources, such as uranium mining. Lea recalled to us the powerful organizing that she took part in with BHA, including the National Gathering of the People in 1979, where six or seven thousand people marched through the hills to stop corporate extraction. The next year, in 1980, Lea

participated in the Black Hills International Survival Gathering, where 11,000 people camped out in the shadow of the Ellsworth Airforce Base for 11 days. Lea recalled that this multi-day direct action was a huge opportunity for many activists (including herself) to learn skills for organizing. People were skilled in a variety of areas such as media, fundraising, renewable energy work, etc. and every one had the chance to teach and learn from each other. This gathering also was successful in securing a 30-year moratorium on new uranium mining in the Black Hills.

Lea and George continued organizing together against the infringement of the coal industry on Indigenous people, in particular. They worked to draw attention to the

contamination of fish and other aquatic life by Methyl-mercury, and other heavy metals released from burning coal, and how this posed a disproportionate threat to Indigenous communities. In 1982, they formed the North American Water Office as a 501 (c) 3 organization in order to "connect energy development with economic democracy, our environment, public health, and social justice" (NAWO website). Lea described NAWO as a continuation of her organizing with George and a "trifecta of three different movements"; the Black Hills Alliance, The No Nukes Movement, and the West Central Minnesota Power Line Fight. The No Nukes Movement opposed production of nuclear weapons and the generation of electricity from nuclear power plants especially following the Three Mile Island accident. Lea fondly recalled how The Black Hills Alliance, West Central Minnesota Power Line, and the No Nukes Movement "coalesced into us," by which she means, NAWO.

Lea told the stories of these formative years of her life with passion and nostalgia, for they created the platform that propelled her into a lifelong journey of working in community with others to bring justice to the Earth and its most marginalized communities.

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that propelled her into a lifelong journey of working in community with others to bring justice to the Earth and its most marginalized communities.

After hearing the details of Lea's path in environmental justice work, we were both very amazed by Lea's capabilities to remain so engaged in issues that can be so devastating to see up close. Lea worked for years on the frontlines to stop powerful corporations from stripping the land and Indigenous communities of their precious resources, and today she continues her work against these corporations in tandem with Indigenous communities to bring life back into their reservations through planting wild berries and fruits, among other projects. Being so intimately connected to these issues can be heartbreaking, and can lead to a loss of hope. Lea voiced her feelings of hopelessness in our interview when she said that she fears that "we are backing ourselves into a shit-out-of-luck place." She spoke to her concerns that we are on a path moving forward as a society where people and corporations can't seem to stop consuming, but that she tries to counter this by living a simple, non-materialistic lifestyle. After hearing Lea express this sense of hopelessness, we were curious how she keeps herself going in this tireless work for environmental justice. When we asked her, Lea paused, took a deep breath, and said, "Well, I love the Earth… that's simply what many people don't do." Lea's relationship to the Earth and the communities that she

"Well, I love the Earth… that's simply what many people don't do."

works with fuel her work and allow her to continue her decades long legacy of environmental justice activism.

With years of experience organizing on the frontlines and behind the scenes and working with countless activists to further environmental justice, we were eager to hear what advice Lea has for young people like ourselves who want to get more involved in environmental justice efforts. Environmental justice is, of course, a huge umbrella term that encompasses so many issues and movements. Lea recognizes this, and the stress that comes with knowing that you cannot possibly fix all the environmental injustices as one activist. Thus, Lea urged us to just pick a cause that we're passionate about, that we can get really inspired by, that we want to support, and that we can get other people to support because of our passion. She explained that "it almost doesn't matter which [cause] we pick because every movement out there needs more help and needs more people that want to do something."

After an hour and a half of conversation effortlessly flew by with Lea, we realized it was time to say goodbye. Whenever you close a zoom call, there's this sudden feeling of emptiness in the room, as the people you were just speaking to disappear in the blink of an eye. However, Lea's stories and wisdom did not disappear into the void, in fact, they have lingered in our minds and left us eager to engage in the environmental injustices that we are facing today. Lea had the ability to speak bluntly and honestly about the condition of our world today and the myriad of injustices that are occurring all around us. Sometimes this bluntness can be mistaken for pessimism, but with Lea, it is clear that she sees things for how they really are, and understands the deep commitments we must make in order

to generate meaningful change. Lea was willing to speak to us, as young people, as though we were equals. She did not shy away from describing the harsh realities we face today and the intense work that lies ahead of us, but she also showed us the kinds of powerful changes that are possible when you commit yourself to a life of activism and justice. Lea's decades-long legacy of environmental justice activism is an example to young people of how we can engage with the injustices all around us, and work to create the kind of justice that seems unimaginable.

Kira Liu: The Power of Storytelling as a Tool to Combat Climate Change

Aaron Backs and Karson Hegrenes

Kira Liu

For a global problem, how often do we neglect climate change's impact on individuals? Even if we may acknowledge how monolithic, how enveloping our problem really is, the way we traditionally think about climate change lends itself well to compartmentalization. Our heads struggle to conceptualize the extent to which industry pollution, or even our own carbon footprints, affect anything except for problems far removed from our lives. Kira Liu, Senior Community Engagement Coordinator at Climate Generation, recognizes this as a problematic way to view our most existential problem—**it lacks that ultimate catalyzer, the human heart.** She works to draw together communities—urban and rural—by using a tool embedded in our nature to bring together the head and the heart: storytelling. When we share our climate-related vulnerabilities with our neighbors, from hearing their Khmer-American bedtime stories, to how their solar company was inspired by the passing of their brother, climate change travels from the farthest stretches of the world to our own communities.

Kira's own climate story begins in Boston, Massachusetts, or rather, its Wingaersheek and Crane beaches. There, peering into the tidepools, basking in the sun, and listening to the waves fostered in her an interest in biology at a young age. She pursued that interest at Saint Paul's Macalester College until she took her first environmental studies class. This push away from the hard sciences into people-oriented classes like Environmental Justice introduced to her a lot of local environmental problems in the context of injustices to marginalized communities. Upon graduating in 2017, she worked a brief position at the Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Department, where she educated the community on issues like water quality, before joining the Minnesota GreenCorps with her worksite at Climate Generation. After working there in her GreenCorps position for a year, Kira was hired on with her current position.

Climate Generation is a Minnesota-based non-profit founded in 2006 by educator and former polar explorer Will Steger. Climate Generation's mission as a whole is to empower individuals and their communities to engage in solutions to climate-related issues. They achieve this by

Rather than discuss climate change through a scientific lens, Climate Generation hopes to discuss these issues on a personal, more tangible level in order to ground them in a more accessible way.

providing educators with teaching solutions for climate change and partnering with high school-age students seeking to mobilize and take action against climate issues in their communities. In a way that honors Steger, Climate Generation places a large emphasis on the importance of storytelling. Rather than discuss climate change through a scientific lens, Climate Generation hopes to discuss these issues on a personal, more tangible level in order to ground them in a more accessible way. Many people typically conceive of climate change as entirely scientific and far-removed, and it is often difficult to make a personal connection this way. However, everyone has their own climate change-related story whether or not they realize it as being climate change-related. People can use these stories to reach those less familiar or less on board with climate change, as well as to reach representatives and others in positions of power.

Much of Kira's work at Climate Generation centers on the issue of climate justice. Even though climate change is regarded by many as the single most existential threat to humanity in the 21st Century, many do not acknowledge that low-income communities, communities of color, and

Indigenous peoples experience the brunt of the impact despite contributing the least to its effects. Factors like systemic racism predispose these underprivileged communities to vulnerable health conditions that a warming climate exacerbates through increases in temperature. Lower quality infrastructure and the lack of a safety net renders these populations more vulnerable to extreme weather events like hurricanes or wildfires. Climate change is also an issue that operates on large spatio-temporal scales and is deeply embedded in the structures of our society. By using personal anecdotes about social justice issues and the environment, Kira and her team at Climate Generation add to climate change discourse through an environmental justice lens. This non-traditional, human-centric approach to climate justice advocacy is a great way to persuade people who struggle to relate the conceptual, scientific framing of climate change to their lived experiences. The work that Kira, Climate Generation, and many others are doing is fundamental to rectifying our society's overreliance on harmful, unsustainable practices that create unequal outcomes and damage livelihoods.

Among Climate Generation's many wonderful stories, a few of Kira's favorites are those of Liz Lat, Bob Blake, and Ben Passer. Liz recalls the bedtime stories her parents would tell her as a child about life under the Khmer Rouge, as well as her own youthful memories of Minnesota weather as a first-generation Khmer-American. Bob's is a touching story about the passing of his brother and his resultant journey navigating being a surrogate father, founding a solar company, and taking on issues of climate change as a member of the Red Lake tribal nation. Ben's is a heartfelt story about growing up mixed-race in an all-

white family in conjunction with environmental and social justice issues in the Twin Cities. Each of these stories demonstrates a clear connection between personal identity and place. Our connection to the environment shapes our lived experiences and molds us into who we are as individuals. Climate change threatens this connection, so understanding this threat, communicating it to others, and coming together to mitigate it is increasingly important.

In addition, Kira has helped run the youth program at Climate Generation, where she has connected with students and communities across Greater Minnesota. This was certainly eye-opening for her, as it was the wake of the Trump presidency and the first time she had spent in a conservative rural region whose views on climate change sharply differed from those of the communities in which she grew up. She learned that each local community presents its own challenges, and their unique stories can provide for climate solutions, even in traditionally unreceptive areas. She allied with many students who pledged to use their own personal climate stories to navigate tough conversations with climate-denying parents and Line 3-supporting community members. Climate Generation also partners with local park organizations and chapters from other non-profits, like MN350, the Sierra Club, and the

Each local community presents its own challenges, and their unique stories can provide for climate solutions, even in traditionally unreceptive areas.

100% Campaign, to host climate change-themed events and build community resilience.

Climate Generation's stories have been collected and shared on local and state-wide levels, and have even reached international audiences. The project Kira feels most proud of to date is the publication of the collection *Eyewitness: Minnesota Voices on Climate Change*, a book inspired by the work of Terry Tempest Williams. *Eyewitness*is full of diverse student, artist, and activist perspectives from around Minnesota, telling the full story of how various communities are coping with global warming. Earlier this year, Kira helped plan an event for the 50th anniversary of Earth Day to distribute copies of the book to every legislator on the Saint Paul Hill until the COVID-19 pandemic forced a hair-pin turn to a virtual storytelling slam. It garnered over 1,000 participants, including some from outside of the United States. This success has crossed over to virtual Climate Generation workshops as well, opening up an avenue for future climate justice organizing. Plans to share *Eyewitness* with legislators continue, now with letters from each district's constituents attached to their representative's copy.

Since George Floyd's murder on Memorial Day, 2020 and the subsequent international protests in support of Black lives, Climate Generation has incorporated a stronger component of racial justice in their work. As Kira notes, storytelling reveals these systemic problems and communicates them in an approachable way to people in positions of power. It challenges the unjust reality in which the greatest burdens are placed on BIPOC communities, who have been historically excluded from climate decision tables. As media and Presidential Debates address global

warming more frequently now than in the last 20 years, Kira works to ensure that racial justice follows climate change in the same sentence.

Even though Kira is relatively new to the environmental justice movement, she still holds an inspiring vision for the future: one with activism ranging from the federal level down to the local; one where students address climate justice not just in science class, but also English, social studies, and art; and one where root problems for each individual community have been properly addressed. For Kira, the best advice for other budding climate activists is to jump in and start branching out and making connections. There are many amazing organizations, especially in the Twin Cities, that are looking for support in resolving climate issues. Lending a hand to the various local causes is a great way to develop leadership skills, learn important lessons for the future, and meet like-minded individuals who are similarly invested in climate-related issues. Additionally, building broad networks among organizations and individuals helps to elevate the stories of the most marginalized communities and empowers them to inform solutions and actions.

Our interview with Kira was an enlightening experience—in reflecting on our discussion, we both started thinking about our own climate stories. Seeing as Kira is not too far removed from taking her own Environmental Justice class at Macalester, we began wondering about our lived experiences and what compelled us to be so interested in the environment as to take this class. In a world where issues of science are increasingly politicized, we reflected on our struggles in discussing pertinent issues like climate change with our

often skeptical relatives, peers, and representatives. After conducting this interview, we gained a sense of clarity that perhaps we were trying too hard to sell the conceptual arguments of science, rather than the cherished memories of our lived experiences in relation to the environment. After all, each individual has their own climate story about our beautiful planet, and we should share it from the heart.

Kaleigh Swift: How Joining a Political Community on Twitch or Asking a Neighbor for a Cup of Sugar Is Environmental Justice

Kaela Bloemendaal and Rory McCollum

Kaleigh Swift

Kaleigh Swift, an environmental activist and 2018 graduate from the University of Minnesota, entered the virtual political sphere to push back against the overwhelmingly moderate, white, and male space that is Twitch politics. Twitch.tv is an online platform that has historically been for video game streaming, but more recently has become an avenue for political and justice-oriented organizing. The "politics" tag on Twitch.tv has 47,900 followers as of December 2020, but the content available to those viewers isn't necessarily reflective of the full political spectrum. Hoping to offer a channel that delves deeper into politics than federal electoralism, Swift draws upon Black radical tradition, political thought, and theory and applies those frameworks

to current organizing efforts while bringing a radical perspective to an intensely homogenous arena.

In addition to streaming, Swift, along with other Black political thinkers, journalists, writers, and streamers, runs a multi-platform collective which includes a Twitch, a patreon (a membership-based platform where people pay to consume content), and a podcast. These all come together to form something of an indie media network. Their podcast, Afrogyn Revolt, aims to uplift the voices of non "liberal" left Black women and femmes as they discuss their lived experiences, emphasizing sisterhood and empowerment while acknowledging the struggle and trauma of living in this place and time. Swift also has been working as the Program Coordinator for the CREATE Initiative at the University of Minnesota, which researches the relationship between greening (developments lauded as being "environmental") and gentrification. Add to that list her membership on the MN Pollution Control Agency's Environmental Justice Advisory Committee, which was established to provide feedback and suggestions to the MPCA on their implementation of their environmental justice framework. On top of her activism, she also works retail part-time. It's a lot, but for Swift, social and environmental justice are inherently connected, so to address one she must address both. She believes that environmental justice is inseparable from other divisions of justice, so you can't just reduce your waste or donate a couple bucks; you have to examine the issues within your own community and make those your driving force.

Swift's dedication to environmental justice came to fruition during college, where her major combined natural and social sciences to focus on environmental justice, but Swift

says that “Environmental justice has been a part of my life for a very long time, even though I definitely didn’t have the language to speak about it as such until college.” Though Swift had always loved the environment (at this point she acknowledges that she’s zooming in from a room covered in tapestries of trees), she says she didn’t understand how narrow and racialized our conception of the environment really was until college. Swift theorizes that an interest in sustainability or concern about climate change can radicalize people who, in digging a bit deeper, begin to understand that the roots of the problems are systemic. Her radicalization was only natural as she has been aware of these systemic injustices since childhood, as her single mother struggled with housing, food, and the welfare system. Swift critiques the welfare system as it, in her personal experience, cuts people off from benefits as soon as they start making anything near living wage and categorizes this as yet another way that systemic oppression operates. Welfare programs work in conjunction with other systems of oppression and are therefore “designed to keep you subservient.”

Welfare programs work in conjunction with other systems of oppression and are therefore “designed to keep you subservient.”

Once Swift recognized the interconnections throughout injustices in college, she became involved in environmental justice work. Her work with the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency’s Environmental Justice

Advisory Committee began in college as an internship, and after graduation she went on to work for University of Minnesota through the CREATE initiative, coordinating the program's research into the relationship between greening, or developments of parks or spaces presented as environmentally friendly, and gentrification. Through this work, Swift connected with environmental justice organizers in the Twin Cities, especially those working against the Upper Harbor Terminal (UHT) development, a plan to turn 48 acres of riverfront, previously a shipping barge, into homes, businesses and green space. Her connection though, is not one of support, but of strong apprehension and frustration, as is the case with many other organizers.

While at a glance, the UHT appears strong as the City of Minneapolis claims to approach this project with racial justice at the forefront of the plans, unfortunately their actions at every step of the way have been contrary to that statement. The developers behind the UHT have failed to be transparent and instead plan to give this public land in a predominately Black community over to private and white-owned companies. This will continue the extractive relationship, taking money from those who live there now to benefit people who don't actually live in the area.

This is not the first time Black communities in the Twin Cities area have been injured by major construction. In the 1950's the Rondo neighborhood, which was the vibrant heart of the Black community in Saint Paul, compared to the likes of Beale Street and Lenox Avenue, was split in half by highway I-94. There were other proposed routes for the highway, but they were slightly longer and thus would inconvenience white business people, so the construction

company once again favored profit and this demographic over the residents of Rondo. One in every eight Black Americans living in St. Paul lost a home due to the construction of I-94.

Similarly, the UHT will likely displace local residents as new businesses attract middle-class white people, one of the main symptoms of gentrification. These outsiders are statistically more likely to call the police on their Black neighbors and will drive rent prices upwards, forcing those who can't afford to own property to leave. Gentrification might at first seem like more of a social justice issue than an environmental one, however, as Swift sees it, environmental justice is connected to everything from housing security to policing to labor. Involvement in even seemingly disparate projects furthers her ultimate goal of environmental justice. Housing insecure people have a higher risk of living in unhealthy or unsafe conditions, and as such, get sick more frequently. Historically, EJ advocates and research have approached housing in terms of surface-level issues like increasing energy efficiency, reducing air pollution, and removing toxins (like lead paint), but this framework completely misses the root cause, and has yet to address why Black and Brown people are disproportionately impacted by housing insecurity.

But housing insecurity in BIPOC communities is not only a problem in the Twin Cities. We see this pattern globally, especially during the current global pandemic. It's no secret that Black and Brown people are being disproportionately evicted and experiencing worse health impacts from COVID-19. The history of redlining— when the government refused to grant loans or subsidized housing based on whether an area was deemed risky or

stable based on the community's racial or ethnic makeup—means that today these communities have less access to greenspace, are more likely to exist in food deserts, and are more likely to be in close proximity to extreme pollutants like factories. But racism isn't the only structural inequity that many of these people are fighting against because intersectionality also plays a role in these issues. Intersectionality describes the ways in which an issue puts disproportionate pressure on those with multiple disenfranchised identities and how these identities come together and intensify the impact. So, things like sexism, homophobia, and transphobia interact with racism and create problems like intensified homelessness for LGBTQIA+ youth of color.

One commonality between many of the projects she works on is, unfortunately, that Swift's push for radical change often must confront a system that claims that it is indeed on her side while its actions show otherwise. In the same way that Twitch politics were overwhelmingly moderate despite claims to the contrary, hypocrisies run rampant and actions speak louder than words. The UHT claims it will create jobs, keep rent affordable, and increase Black residents' access to green space, but Swift fears that it will gentrify the North side, displacing many while "taking publicly owned land and putting it in the hands of private developers who are white and billionaires and inheritors of their wealth." Whether or not those claiming to do the right thing genuinely believe that they are (with the system directing their beliefs), their actions can cause real harm if they don't listen to the people actually being affected.

Likewise, Swift describes how the "non-profit industrial complex" can take away from grassroots momentum for

change. Nonprofits serve as a link between institutional and movement spaces. While introducing institutions to movement goals and ideas seems productive, Swift warns that it can often backfire. Nonprofits can not only hire organizers away from movements, co-opting their energy, but they also contribute to the co-optation of movement language. By using the same language as progressive movements, institutions can present a facade of concern without changing their harmful actions. Think of corporate greenwashing, where oil companies talk about carbon footprints and green technologies while still producing and profiting off of fossil fuels.

Swift has experienced firsthand a local example of this co-optation of movement energy and language through her time on the MN Pollution Control Agency's Environmental Justice Advisory Board. Swift was on the EJAG board for less than a year before resigning along with eleven of the seventeen other members in protest of the MPCA's approval of the Line 3 oil pipeline, which would cause prodigious harm to both people and the environment. The MPCA cited the work of the EJAG as pivotal in their decision, despite the fact that the EJAG has always been vocally opposed to the pipeline. Swift says that she and the rest of the EJAG has "known this entire time that the MPCA was most likely to approve it anyway. But then they turned about and used our work to cosign that decision." MPCA used the concept of being advised on environmental justice, if not the actual advice, to excuse their actions as being "the least harmful for the most people," which EJAG of course never said, all while falsely claiming to the EJAG to be in a legal bind that forced their approval.

In part due to this experience, Swift says that she has

no interest in doing any more work within any kind of institution, including government or the schooling system, as her time working at the University of Minnesota and CREATE is almost over. According to Swift, “working within institutions always relegates you to the institutional timeline, which is significantly slower than the timelines that happen outside of institutions because the reality is that our needs are immediate and emergent. We need things now. We have material conditions that are not being met now in the community. Institutions, though they may express a willingness to work towards meeting those, are really not interested in doing so at a speed that results in people not dying.”

More than questioning the speed of institutional progress, Swift also questions the direction: even as institutions co-opt movement language and claim to work towards progress, “these institutions have a vested interest in keeping things exactly how they are.” And though Swift believes that her and the rest of the EJAG’s work may have managed to reach some of the younger workers at MPCA that genuinely believed in the importance of environmental justice in their daily work, a larger cultural change could take five to ten years. This is time that we don’t have, especially since those who lie at the intersection of marginalization are struggling today.

A common thread throughout these environmental injustices is the fact that they continue to perpetuate harm on the historically marginalized. We see that with COVID-19 and the murder of George Floyd. The pandemic has disproportionately impacted BIPOC communities, and while we are all dealing with the ramifications of the virus, the additional trauma of George Floyd’s murder was

devastating for members of the Black community. Swift mentions that since his death, for her, there has been no time to process since immediate action is constantly needed. Organizers seem to have no other choice besides moving forward until there is actually space to give the feelings the recognition they deserve. In reality, Black people are dying disproportionately from two health crises, the COVID-19 pandemic and state-sanctioned violence enacted by the police. Both of these disasters deserve responses that center on safety for all people. An important element to emphasize when counteracting violence and moving towards true freedom for all people is the centering of Black liberation. To this end, Swift says that Black studies are the study of everything because of how interconnected and this is why she centers these studies in her own work. By focusing on Black studies, we find that anti-Blackness is at the center of all oppressive systems, including colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism, so the Black struggle is also central to dismantling these systems. Many liberatory groups and organizers have used the phrase “we’re not free until we’re all free” which underscores that by placing the liberation and equity of the most disenfranchised people at the forefront of your justice, everyone else will become free with them.

It is possible that after learning all this, some might be jaded, or feel helpless, but Swift isn’t one of those people. She shared some ways in which an average person can get started. First and foremost, she emphasized that there is

“We live in a world where we no longer feel comfortable asking our neighbors for a cup of sugar. That is such a clear indicator of how we’ve been completely separated from each other.”

always a way to get started because so much work is happening constantly. Her initial suggestion was to start with non-profits as they connect you with others in your community who are interested in doing similar work, so get on their lists, go to their meetings, and move forward from there. Swift goes on to emphasize the importance of mutual aid in the future if we are to have non-extractive communities that look after one another, so that means meet your neighbors! “Part of mutual aid requires that we know the people around us… we live in a world where we no longer feel comfortable asking our neighbors for a cup of sugar. That is such a clear indicator of how we’ve been completely separated from each other.”

This separation has only been exacerbated by COVID-19, with people feeling more isolated, so meet your neighbors (safely of course) because those connections and that kind of care makes you more resilient. Mutual aid and community care is also deeply connected to the struggles for food sovereignty and security. Food connects people, so get involved with community gardens or make food for other people and your neighbors. Care work more broadly is revolutionary in Swift’s eyes, because you can’t pour

from an empty cup, “it’s really important that we not only take care of ourselves but that we allow others to take care of us and take care of one another.” So, while fighting for the liberation of all Black people, make sure to treat yourself with kindness so you can sustain this fight.

Clearly environmental justice is a lot more complicated than planting a couple trees or composting, it requires you to look around your community and think about what problems need to be addressed. As soon as you do that, you’ll realize that the ways to get involved are almost never-ending! You could join a political community on Twitch, participate in a community garden, join a non-profit, or protest in the streets. Whatever you do, it’s important to acknowledge and research how different communities are being disproportionately impacted by whatever issue you choose and consider centering Black liberation in your work. While understanding the struggles and difficulties facing organizers, whether you choose to work within the systems or outside of them, remember to take care of yourself so that you can continue to care for others. Last but not least, understand that someone is probably working on any problem you identify, so look them up and get to work!