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A Call for Change: Minnesota
Environmental Justice Heroes
in Action, Volume 2

A Call for Change: Minnesota Environmental Justice Heroes in Action, Volume 2

Macalester College

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Introduction

Minnesota's natural beauty has long captivated the hearts of its residents and visitors alike. From the shores of Lake Superior to the forests of the Boundary Waters, the state's landscapes are beloved. Unfortunately, the adverse impacts of human activity are easy to see in Minnesota, and marginalized and low-income communities have been disproportionately burdened with the harmful consequences of pollution, resource exploitation, and ecological degradation. From the industrial complexes in the Twin Cities to rural pipelines that violate treaty rights, the effects of environmental injustice in Minnesota are apparent.

Yet, a collective voice is emerging in the fight for justice and a more sustainable and equitable future for all Minnesotans. This pressbook, part two in a series, is a collection of the stories and efforts of environmental justice activists at the forefront of this movement. It is a compilation of interviews, conducted by students at Macalester College in 2023, to understand the layers of environmental injustice in Minnesota and bring attention to the resilience and determination of communities.

While the work described in this book is extraordinary, the people featured in this book commit their everyday life to environmental justice, showing that this work is attainable and relatable. In this pressbook, activists and advocates share their experiences and advice with those just entering the field of environmental justice in hopes of

answering the question: What can I do to get involved in environmental justice?

From the beginning of the interviewees' passion in environmental justice to what now inspires them to keep going in the face of challenges, each interview strives to describe their unique perspectives and contributions. These interviews highlight stories of equitable solar developers, urban farmers, and grassroots organizers, all of which only begins to detail their efforts to build a more just and sustainable future. But, it also describes the nitty gritty of environmental organizing: Zoom calls, community meetings, hours sitting and waiting to talk to state representatives.

Through this pressbook, we invite readers to immerse themselves in the narratives, insights, and lived experiences of the featured environmental justice organizers. May their stories inspire readers to partake in collective action and empower us all to work toward a more equitable and environmentally conscious Minnesota.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Louann Terveer for her expert guidance throughout the process of completing this second volume, and Tala Tabishat for the cover art.

2023

Sophia Benrud: “How Can We Change This? What Do We Need?”

Izzy Ryde

Sophia Benrud is a person of action. When we met over video during a busy April week, she explained her work for the future of Black lives and the overwhelming number of white people in climate justice, all while driving and organizing her house. She brings that same drive (pun intended) to the numerous environmental justice issues that she fights for, especially Black Visions and intersectional climate justice, within the Twin Cities.



Sophia Benrud

The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement formed in 2012 in response to the murder of unarmed black teenager Trayvon Martin in Florida. After Martin’s murder, BLM founders Opal Tometti, Patrisse Cullors, and Alicia Garza wrote a letter on Facebook. The letter detailed their desire for a world where Black people can be independent, powerful, and safe from the threat of violence. BLM has since grown into a multifaceted, multinational movement to improve the lives of Black people. BLM projects include

advocating for police oversight, stopping gentrification, and investing more in Black communities, among many other efforts. Fighting to improve Black lives may not seem like an environmental issue. But as David Pellow pointed out in his book *What Is Critical Environmental Justice?* part of the violence committed against Black people is ecological in nature. When Black bodies have a higher rate of health issues correlated with a higher number of hazardous waste sites in their communities than, in white communities, their lives become threatened by the environment they live in. When the lived environment of Black people is threatening their survival, it becomes clear that they need justice for the circumstances within their physical environment.¹

The connection between environmental justice and BLM is clear in the case of the Flint Michigan water crisis, as explained by Sophia. Since the closing of two large GM car factories in the 1980s, Flint has lost most of its white and wealthier residents as they fled the economically depressed city. Flint is now majority Black, majority low income, and so deeply in debt that the city has been under the control of a state-appointed emergency manager since 2014. The emergency manager decided to switch Flint's water source from the pristine Lake Huron to the heavily polluted Flint River to save the city money in 2014. The water switch caused the perfect storm of environmental injustice. Not only did the polluted water corrode lead out of the pipes and pollute residential water, but this water switch targeted Flint's predominantly Black and low-income communities. Flint's emergency manager decided that saving money on water was more important than the health and lives of the people who lived there. In switching the water source and then lying about where the lead came from, the emergency

manager decided that the environment and lives of the citizens of Flint did not matter.

Similar to BLM, thinking about climate justice requires thinking about whose lives matter, or do not matter, in the fight against climate change. Scientists agree that climate change is on course to make the Earth as we know it uninhabitable to humans. In order to continue living on this planet, the global community must get serious about reducing greenhouse gas and fossil fuel burning. The concept of climate justice takes the concept of stopping climate change further. Climate justice argues that climate change cannot be stopped if the fossil fuel based, corporate, exploitative economy that caused the vast majority of climate change is not dismantled. The global corporate economy has too often treated people as if their lives do not matter, outside of creating consumer goods. Climate justice also acknowledges that the people who are already hit hardest by climate change are groups that have done the least to cause it, including the poor, Indigenous groups, and people from the “Global South” (Africa, Asia, and Central and South America). These groups deserve special focus and support because they are the most threatened and also the least likely to have the power to stop climate change. In short, they deserve justice for the harm that climate change has caused their already suffering communities.

But the issue is most groups fighting climate change are not climate justice focused. Climate advocacy groups tend to be white spaces focusing on top-down policy-making, rather than considering equity and the issues people are facing in their daily lives. What good is it to create policies around limiting climate change when your community can’t escape health issues from breathing polluted air? Can you trust policy to protect the environment when laws governing the use of police force so often do not protect

the lives of people of color? Even Black activists who are passionate about fighting climate change face barriers in the mainstream climate movement. Sophia yearns for “more stories being told from a different background about what climate justice is.” She is not alone. A Green 2.0 report evaluating diversity within large American environmental nonprofits found that nearly three-quarters of staffers are white. Only 15 percent of these organization’s leaders are people of color. In addition, nearly 40 percent of these organizations have no diversity plan. Not only are these “Big Green” organizations not diverse, but they have no plan or process to make their organizations represent the broader American population.³ The Minnesota situation is not much better. Sophia explained that even with 30 different climate “tables” in Minnesota, all the same people sit on those tables, because they are the only people who have time, energy, and resources to devote to the tables. She found the predominantly white and wealthy Minnesota climate tables lacking a racial equity lens in their work.

Sophia got started in formal environmental justice activism about three years ago after police murdered Philando Castile in Falcon Height, Minnesota and worked on shutting down line 3. To her, environmental justice is anything that gives justice to people in their environment, from not putting polluting industries in low-income neighborhoods to culturally specific schooling. Sophia has been active in Black liberation and environmental justice informally throughout her life. Two years after the Castile shooting, a group of former BLM Minneapolis members joined with others to create the Black Visions Collective (BLVC). Their name reflects the commitment to fighting for the safety and dignity of all Black lives. The ever-wise Sophia had a go-to explanation ready for people who didn’t

see the intersection between Black Lives Matter and environmental justice. “Environmental justice is about an environment, and Black people have an environment. We have a life to live and needs that are or aren’t being met in our environments. Currently, there are a lot of needs for Black people that are not being met in our environments, and the statistics reflect that.”

Sophia’s current environmental justice work is based within BLVC. At the organization, she is one of seven core team members, and also a BLVC staff member. Sophia has “made a commitment to be in the BLVC until it is built and sustainable.” With BLVC, she supports direct actions such as shutting down the light rail during Super Bowl weekend to protest income inequality and gentrification in the Twin Cities. Gentrification is part of residents’ lived environment within a city. Fighting to make sure everyone can access appropriate housing, not just those who are white or wealthy, is thus a form of environmental justice. One piece of Sophia’s work is a

“Environmental justice is about an environment, and Black people have an environment. We have a life to live and needs that are or aren’t being met in our environments. Currently, there are a lot of needs for Black people that are not being met in our environments, and the statistics reflect that.”

Black, Indigenous, Persons of Color (BIPOC) climate justice study group to counter the white-dominated climate tables. The BIPOC EJ study group’s job in regards to climate change is to ask themselves, “How can we change this? What do we need?” The study group currently has more than 100 BIPOC members, working to form a new climate table that elevates the voices of all.

Along with amplifying diverse opinions, Sophia seeks to elevate diverse work. She wishes that more people would see their work as part of environmental justice. In her view, anything that improves the lived environment of marginalized people— through housing, political representation, or education, — contributes to the fight to protect the environment. She emphasized that environmental justice is “not just white people fighting for their camping grounds.” When I asked about what she would add to environmental justice that is not traditionally considered environmental justice, she mentioned housing justice work— an issue close at heart to many of her BLVC colleagues. Working so that everyone can have safe, affordable, and nonpolluting housing solves the problem of lead-contaminated housing while also allowing primarily low-income people of color to focus on higher-level needs than housing.

Beyond her formal involvement with BLVC and diversifying the field of climate justice, Sophia spends her time doing other community work that fits under her broad definition of environmental justice. She works as a postpartum doula and Certified Lactation Consultant. Her work as a doula brings her into contact with people in the community facing issues ranging from physical inaccessibility to postpartum depression. Sophia does work with the “Big Green” organization Sierra Club through the Summer Program, or Sprog Collective. I was curious about

why she was collaborating with Big Green, but it made more sense after she explained it. The Sprog Collective is a week-long training through the Sierra Student Coalition for young people aged 17 to 28 to get involved in environmental activism and diversify the environmental field.

Sophia muses that her jobs outside of BLVC, including Sprog, “fuel her in a deep way.” One of her most exciting projects is the new venture Divine Natural Ancestry (DNA). She co-founded the Collective with friends and fellow Black queer activists Marcellina and Sarah to counter a food system that puts BIPOC communities “under food apartheid.” DNA is a community food justice organization that grows and donates vegetables to local community members. In addition, Sophia employs her professional culinary skills to cook fresh veggies grown at DNA and delivers them to people. In this way, Sophia can help her local community reach self-sufficiency, an issue she is passionate about. Of self-sufficiency, Sophia explains, “I don’t believe in individual self-sufficiency, but I do believe in community self-sufficiency and sustainability. I ask, ‘How can communities become self-sufficient and sustainable outside of the current system?’” In addition to fighting for environmental justice, her work is also fighting for her broad definition of self-sufficiency.

With all of this excellent and necessary work, it’s easy to wonder how Sophia handles it all. So I asked her how she avoids burnout. At BLVC meetings, Sophia makes space for herself and other BLVC members to “center ourselves and take care of ourselves.” Since its founding, BLVC has put a lot of work into making the organization into a transformative and healing justice space. She also extolled the importance of knowing your own body and needs, as well as being transparent and communicating that to others.

Sophia sees a somatic practitioner once a month, whose work helps ground Sophia in her body when the rest of the world is overwhelming. She confessed that even though it has become something of a joke in the activist community, she actually does enjoy taking hot baths for self care.

My final question for Sophia was asking if she had any advice for aspiring environmental justice activists. She did not disappoint. For budding environmental justice activists of color, she enthusiastically invites them, “Come hang out with me!” She also encourages them to find an activist niche that they are passionate about and then find other folks of color who are doing that thing. She could not speak highly enough of the importance of getting connected with one person in the movement who could then connect budding activists to more and more people.

Sophia was surprisingly optimistic about the role of white activists in environmental justice, despite the racism and tokenization she has experienced from white environmentalists in the past. She recalled “some very beautiful, grounded white folks in this city [Minneapolis] that I trust to be a good guide to what is happening” with climate justice. She named dropped Climate Equity, a BIPOC-focused and led climate table, as a great resource for white activists to look at. Finally, she exhorted white people to be wary of how they move, both inside and outside of environmental justice spaces. Sophia spelled it out simply— “If your climate movement is not led by BIPOC, it’s not that great. If there’s no BIPOC in the room, it’s not that great. If there are BIPOC in the room but they are being ignored” — she paused for effect— “it’s not that great.”

As Sophia continues fighting the good fight for people of color and the environment, she continues to ask questions and interrogate who has power. Environmentalists would

do well to work towards Sophia's goal of "power built within to shift and really change the environmental conversation." From speaking with Sophia, I began to see the importance of inclusion and using big, diverse strategies to solve a big, diverse challenge like climate change. As Sophia sees it, "Climate change is not the problem, it's a symptom of us not taking care of people." We should follow her lead and take care of people. We just might solve climate change in the process.

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Bob Blake and the Legacy of Environmental Justice: Pioneering Solutions for a Sustainable Future

Jake Murakami and Ryan Przespolewski

Bob Blake, a member of the Red Lake Nation in Minnesota, stands as an influential figure in the realm of environmental justice, championing equitable solutions for a sustainable future.

Though he likes to think of himself as more of a solar developer than an environmental activist, through the interview we conducted with him, we soon became aware of how Bob has actively strived to bridge the gap between environmental concerns and social equity. This interview allowed us to examine his life's work



Bob Blake

which not only showcases his unwavering commitment but also serves as an inspiration for current and future advocates striving to create a more just and sustainable world.

Born and raised in a community targeted for marginalization in Minnesota, Bob experienced firsthand the adverse impacts of environmental degradation and the

deep-rooted inequalities that accompanied them. Growing up amidst polluted air, contaminated water sources, and limited access to green spaces, Bob witnessed the disproportionate burden borne by his community. In a moment that stood out in our interview with him, Bob shared that a pivotal event in his life was the premature death of his brother, which launched him into being a surrogate father to his brother's children. Bob described to us how this caused him to have a large shift in perspective, as he was no longer working for his own career, but rather to create a better world for his nieces and nephews.

As Bob completed his education, his formative experiences propelled him toward seeking solutions to the pressing issues of environmental justice, primarily in the energy field. He shared with us that in Minneapolis and Saint Paul, 34% of all residents are considered poor. His mission is to rewrite that statistic while providing clean energy for historically underserved communities. He focuses his efforts on communities in Minneapolis and Saint Paul in an attempt to give them the support that he himself never got while he was growing up.

In 2017, Bob started Solar Bear, pronounced “Gizis-omakwa” in Ojibwe, which has now grown into a successful Minnesota-based solar panel installation company. It is also notably the only American Indian-owned solar installation company in Minnesota. Additionally, in 2020 Bob started Native Sun Community Power Development, a nonprofit that promotes renewable energy and helps members of tribal communities make the transition from regular energy sources to clean energy. Through Solar Bear, he has facilitated numerous solar panel installations across Minneapolis and Saint Paul. This has led to great success and has helped the company grow more prominent while providing access to renewable energy to

“In Minneapolis and Saint Paul, 34% of all residents are considered poor. His mission is to rewrite that statistic while providing clean energy for historically underserved communities.”

communities with lower economic resources. It was important for us to note that he isn't doing this for money, or for himself, but he is doing it for the future fighters against climate change.

Bob's current energy is largely invested in Solar Bear and the various future projects that they have on the horizon, spurring economic development through renewable energy in Minnesota communities that have been targeted for marginalization. For

example, Bob discussed with us the Prairie Island Net Zero project, a \$46 million government-assisted project focused on making the Prairie Island Indian Community one of the first communities in the United States to achieve net zero carbon emissions. He seemed deeply invested when he told us about the importance of honoring and harnessing the power of natural resources and creating a delicate balance with Mother Earth in this process. Additionally, Bob discussed the three large upcoming solar power installs which will harness up to 150 kilowatts of solar energy, a big step forward in spreading solar power in under resourced communities. Another important development Bob discussed with us is the installation of electric vehicle charging stations spanning from Red Lake all the way back to Minneapolis. These projects are of pivotal importance

and these advancements will help people's everyday lives by putting the infrastructure in place for climate mitigation, but also for climate adaptation and resilience. In his own words: "If we're not focusing in on adaptation and resiliency strategies, then we're stupid."

Much of Bob's work is focused on the future of environmental justice and climate change. It was clear to us through the interview that he believes young people like ourselves are the generation to save the planet. As Bob said, it's time to "make history while we're doing this." We were struck by the importance of understanding that the well-being of our planet relates to all of our lives and therefore we need a way to combat it and find new, renewable ways to fuel our earth. In terms of Solar Bear's future endeavors, Bob is hoping to spin it into a worker's co-op. As for Native Sun, he wants to focus the non-profit on helping communities that don't have access to renewable energy sources. Bob's own mission for the future includes continuing to inspire future activists and rally people toward his cause. He plans to mentor and inspire individuals to combat climate change for years and years to come.

"It was clear to us through the interview that he believes young people like ourselves are the generation to save the planet. As Bob said, it's time to 'make history while we're doing this.'"

Ultimately, our interview with Bob left us feeling inspired after learning about the efforts he is making to

combat the issues of environmental justice by championing clean energy for all. Talking with Bob made us realize that anyone can do something to protect the environment and the planet we live on. We have found ourselves reflecting on being more enthusiastic about fighting climate change and inspired by the efforts of Bob and others like him. We extend our sincere gratitude to Bob for generously sharing his time and insights despite the demands of his busy schedule. Talking with him was a transformative encounter and a remarkable opportunity to learn from someone who genuinely cares about the Earth and entrusts its future to our hands.

Krystle D’Alencar: Environmental Justice and Grassroots Activism in the Twin Cities

Darina Benissan-Eteh and Aisyah Wilda Batin

An integral part of environmental justice consists of learning from the people at the frontlines of their respective initiatives. One important figure at the forefront of grassroots environmental justice work in the Twin Cities is Krystle D’Alencar. Krystle is currently a full time community outreach member for Minnesota Environmental Justice Table (MNEJ) and has been since 2021.



Krystle D’Alencar

Krystle’s passions and visions for the future were clear from the minute we began our interview and they were happy to share their knowledge of frontline community organizing, distributing understandable and accessible information, and creating collective awareness for policies affecting marginalized communities. Krystle explained to us that, immediately

after our interview, they were headed to engage in door knocking with the Northeast Minneapolis community to further connections with people and help them understand the policies that are affecting their communities. MNEJ is a diverse collection of organizations and community members working to establish an environmental justice movement throughout the North Star State. The MNEJ community is very focused on social justice work, achieving many changes since its founding in 2020, such as their fight to close the Hennepin Energy Resource Center in North Minneapolis and the Cumulative Impacts Bill.

Krystle is originally from Boston, where they completed their undergraduate studies. They have a background in public policy and a range of experiences in Boston, Washington D.C., and Minneapolis-St.Paul. During the global COVID-19 Pandemic, Krystle was a student in the Environmental Engineering program at the University of Minnesota, working a bartending job to support her education. Yet, Krystle and co-workers operated within an environment devoid of pandemic precautions, inspiring Krystle to organize their peers, seek safer working conditions, and communicate regarding the alarming need for better COVID-19 precautions. This initiative became more than just a group, and Krystle used their position to create a safer environment for the company's patrons, which was important in the predominantly Black and Brown local community. Krystle spoke with us about how they were highly involved with the Twin Cities community throughout the 2020 uprisings and supported it by cooking food for the people, giving goods to those in need, and protesting with their peers. Krystle also gave a speech about Manuel 'Tortuguita' Terán, who was killed by Georgia police on January 18, 2023 during a raid on Atlanta's South River Forest, where he and other forest

defenders were attempting to halt the construction of a sizable police training facility known as ‘Cop City’ by its opponents. Krystle supports the environmental justice initiative through speech and shows up for their community whenever needed.

In their work for MNEJ, which was founded by Nazir Khan, Krystle is committed to creating a space for Black and Brown people to work and organize, and provides tools for their communities so they can determine what happens to their environment. MNEJ aims to coordinate their representation to tackle state energy and climate policy while also assisting base-building initiatives in frontline areas. Reusing, recycling, and composting can help create jobs that are desperately needed while achieving MNEJ’s environmental justice and zero waste goals by lowering harmful pollutant loads and GHG emissions. Krystle assured us they are committed to ending Minnesota’s use of burning facilities and creating a zero-waste strategy for the state. MNEJ works with those who are most marginalized, such as BIPOC communities, the impoverished, the homeless, and those who are in prison.

Krystle wanted to show us one very essential aspect of their social organizing. In their own words:

“I know I mentioned listening and observing rather than having reactionary stances on things – even if you feel so sure of them – having patience and building relationships with people and earning trust in order to change attitudes, but it’s perhaps more important to read as much history of Black and Brown movements and working-class struggles as you can! Not just ‘leftist’ literature that is trending by major media – I usually approach this with suspicion – but finding writing outside the academic setting. A lot of ‘progressive’ academia is still embedded in neoliberal

and white supremacist frameworks. None of the movements today are new, people have been tirelessly building and fighting for eons, so make sure to always check citations of anything you read! What are people's sources for whatever claim? Where do these 'gotcha' takes, or theories come from? Is there data to support the 'vibes'? It is important to know about the history of the people because if we don't; how are we going to give accurate information?"

When addressing racial and environmental justice, Krystle believes it is important to understand the history of previous injustices and inequities that have greatly influenced the way the environment and society are organized today. For instance, how many communities of color have historically experienced environmental racism and a disproportionate amount of exposure to environmental risks and pollutants? This includes air pollution and toxic waste dumps which may be greatly harmful to the health and well-being of individuals and communities. Redlining, discriminatory zoning, and unequal enforcement of environmental standards are only a few examples of the policies and practices that contribute to these environmental injustices and are frequently rooted in systemic and environmental racism. Krystle argues that we can more clearly comprehend how these injustices contributed to the existing inequalities if we are aware of their history, and we can more effectively act to eliminate these harmful policies and practices if we do know them well.

Krystle reminds community organizers that you have to remember who the real enemy is: the forces outside of the community causing harm:

"Keep your eyes on the prize. Think about: how are we going to move forward to liberation? Don't put yourself in a position of harm for the sake of the movement. Patience,

“I know I mentioned listening and observing rather than having reactionary stances on things – even if you feel so sure of them – having patience and building relationships with people and earning trust in order to change attitudes, but it’s perhaps more important to read as much history of Black and Brown movements and working-class struggles as you can!”

relationship building, and trust are the most important components in the movement. If you don’t trust each other, you don’t know each other, yeah of course you are then going to judge and fight and not move side by side. So it takes time and patience. But there’s no other way to do it.”

Change takes coalition building and if we are not strengthening our communities and getting involved in these issues, Krystle admonishes they will come back and haunt us:

“Our folks are blaming each other when we need to be targeting the system that made these circumstances to begin with. The big picture is that this country is in the western mode of imperialism and the capitalist state, putting our people in the needful positions they are in! And so, we need to collectively

really come together and figure out deeping our coalitions

and solidarity among each other and across communities.

As long as we are fractured in their way, it's a win for them, watching all this in-fighting."

Recognizing the contributions that marginalized populations have made to environmental and conservation initiatives is essential to properly educating oneself to create change today. This requires comprehension of the history of Black and Brown people and how some peoples have maintained a culturally profound relationship with the environment and have long operated in society as environmental stewards supporting the

safeguarding of the natural world. That is exactly what Krystle and MNEJ set out to do: educate, organize, and reform. The environmental justice movement, which emphasizes the connection between environmental concerns and social justice, is one example of how such communities of BIPOC peoples have contributed significantly to environmental activism.

“The big picture is that this country is in the western mode of imperialism and the capitalist state, putting our people in the needful positions they are in! And so, we need to collectively really come together and figure out deeping our coalitions and solidarity among each other and across communities.”

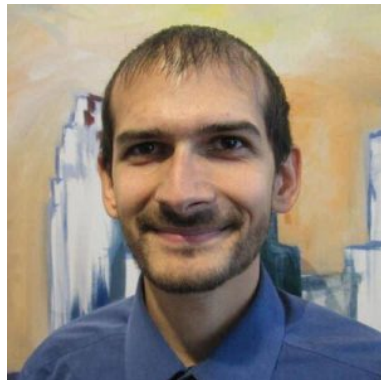
Timothy DenHerder-Thomas: Title: Empowering Communities Through Clean Energy

Jackie Keegan and Isabella Marcotullio

Energy is fundamental to human well-being: we use it in our homes for things like heating, cooling, and lighting. Many of us do not think about it, as electricity to middle class homes is reliable and turning a switch or plugging in an appliance is part of our everyday lives and not something we question.

On April 21st, we had the opportunity to talk with Timothy over Zoom and learn about his journey and the incredible work he has done to help improve and transform the energy sector. In talking to him it was inspiring to see how passionate he is about these topics.

Timothy began by explaining to us the issues with the Minnesota energy sector. Approximately 73% of energy supply in the state is generated by fossil fuels and, therefore, the use of electricity comes with an environmental cost. Clean energy alternatives such as wind, solar, biomass and hydro power provide



Timothy DenHerder-Thomas

approximately 29% of Minnesota's total electricity generation, a small fraction of our energy consumption. For some Minnesotans the cost of energy use is more than just the environmental damage. For these households, energy is expensive and they are encumbered by energy burdens which take up a large percentage of their annual income. In Minnesota the average energy burden per household is 2% which means that, on average, a household spends 2% of annual income on energy bills. However, for those in the bottom 30% of the area median income, the energy burden can be over 7%. Nearly one in three counties in Minnesota has an average energy burden of 5% or higher.

In addition, the humid summers and cold winters of Minnesota exacerbate this economic burden. Disadvantaged residents across the state struggle to pay their utility bills every month and end up sacrificing the purchase of other necessities like food and medicine. They can suffer from the "heat or eat" syndrome, where they must choose to spend money on food or heating their homes. Yet, Timothy has found a way to provide low-income and underserved communities with both cheap and clean (renewable) energy through the use of cooperatives.

When we asked about how he found his way into the energy field, Timothy explained that he became interested in climate justice at a young age and, when he was in high school, began to think about how people were affected by the climate. He was most interested in energy use from an economic standpoint and wondered how we can make energy beneficial for everyone. Timothy attended Macalester College, where he majored in environmental studies, with a double minor in geography and biology. From his experiences studying at Macalester he began to think more about how dominant stories often shape our view of society, but are not experienced by everyone. He

“He emphasized the notion that work towards environmental relief can further sustainability, be profitable, and promote justice.”

emphasized the notion that work towards environmental relief can further sustainability, be profitable, and promote justice. He shared he was most inspired by Chris Wells, an Environmental Studies professor at Macalester who also served as an advisor and mentor for Timothy during his four years of

college.

During his time at Macalester College, he engaged in many green projects such as CERF (Clean Energy Revolving Fund), a money pool program he started with Macalester Board of Trustees, as well as a \$70,000 project to change 19,000 of Macalester’s fluorescent light bulbs to energy efficient ones. He also created a program called “Summer of Solutions”, where he invited students from all over the country to a two-month leadership training in social development.

At the end of college, in 2009, Timothy partnered with some college classmates to form the company called Cooperative Energy Futures (CEF). CEF is focused on reducing energy use and producing clean, renewable energy for low-income and underserved residents as well as the general public. Today Timothy is the manager of CEF and has accomplished many important goals throughout his career as an advocate for clean energy. Timothy and CEF have made remarkable progress in making clean energy affordable for the disadvantaged. He has helped raise awareness and educate people across

Minnesota about the numerous advantages of clean energy. This involves collaborating with non-profit organizations such as Community Power which aims to bring more members into the clean energy community. CEF has helped develop eight community-run solar gardens in Minnesota. These solar gardens are energy installations owned and operated by communities, allowing more energy sovereignty and understanding of energy processes. Local utility companies purchase the power generated by the solar panels and, in return, community members receive benefits in the form of energy bill rebates. CEF has already obtained over 16 million dollars in funding for these solar gardens and is now in the process of building seven more. The company continues to expand and currently has nine employees and more than 1,000 members. CEF, with the guidance and knowledge of Timothy, is helping to create a just energy democracy and a system that benefits local economies while encouraging public participation. Not only has Timothy created change within Minnesota, but he has also impacted the clean energy movement on a national scale through his work with People's Energy fund.

We asked Timothy about the barriers he faces when doing this work and he listed a number of obstacles. He highlighted that the financial system is structured to benefit big investors and Wall Street financiers. Most incentives for the alternative energy industry that currently exists serve the interests of large institutions and powerful corporations. This leaves individual households and entire communities with limited opportunities to access and produce alternative energy, such as solar. He argued that because the system is legally set up in this way, when discussions and decisions about energy solutions are being made, marginalized communities are not often at the table.

Another major challenge is that many residents across Minnesota are unaware of the affordability, reliability, and long-term benefits of solar, which makes it difficult to gain their support for these projects. For this reason, Timothy focuses on education to encourage support in solar energy systems and projects.

“When discussions and decisions about energy solutions are being made, marginalized communities are not often at the table.”

When we asked which projects he is especially excited about, Timothy shared that it was providing rooftop solar panels for renters. Renters are often not aware that they have the ability to switch to solar, but Cooperative Energy Future helps them through the entire process. Timothy shared that some of the best parts of his job is talking with the people he’s helping and educating them about how energy works. He also enjoys seeing new types of relationships to energy unfold while working on the most frustrating and challenging parts of his operation.

Like many environmental activists, Timothy encounters personal struggles but he emphasizes a mindset that supports action instead of burnout. He expressed that it’s exciting to be involved in a project that is much bigger than yourself, but it’s also important to find peace with not being able to control everything around you. Instead, he suggests that we all need to be more focused on our relationship with the world and each other. People are being hurt by our effects on the climate and we need to care about those most affected.

In his final remarks, Timothy shared some wisdom for the next generation of students interested in community engagement in sustainability. Like his work at CEF, he advises those interested to connect low-income neighborhoods to green energy initiatives and to search for communities that are already working or looking into these issues. While he acknowledges that the lack of financing is a huge barrier for getting projects off the ground, he believes that green energy education and outreach is a top priority.

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Dr. Michelle Garvey: Advocating for Environmental Justice and Intersectionality

Renee Nicholson and Anneke Stracks

Before our interview with Dr. Michelle Garvey, we read about her work. We wondered which of her many ongoing projects she would talk about. Michelle's professional engagements primarily revolve around her role as an educator at the University of Minnesota. In addition to her academic commitments, she advocates for environmental justice with organizations such as the



Michelle Garvey

Minnesota Environmental Justice Table, the East Phillips Neighborhood Institute, Community Members for Environmental Justice, and The Women's Environmental Institute.

Michelle's academic background lies in women, gender, and sexuality studies, which has played a significant role in shaping her perspective on environmental justice. She credits University of Minnesota Professor Emeritus and

Women's Environmental Institute (WEI) co-founder Jacquelyn Zita for encouraging her pursuit of environmental justice and feminist environmentalism.

During our interview, Michelle elaborated on feminist environmentalism—also called ecofeminism—which approaches environmental issues starting from the lenses of sex, gender, sexuality, and/or reproduction. While it is similarly intersectional to environmental justice, Michelle differentiates it by its different foundations and global scale. The WEI is a regional non-profit that bridges feminist environmentalism and environmental justice, supporting regenerative urban and rural farms, devoting a portion of their CSAs to a Veggie Rx program that distributes fresh produce to hospitals, spotlighting gender minorities in educational workshops, and advocating for Green Zone residents in Minneapolis.

Michelle's academic journey, coupled with her environmental justice organizing, has empowered her to make meaningful contributions to the field of environmental justice, bringing awareness to the importance of recognizing diverse perspectives in creating sustainable change.

Michelle told us about how she knew she wanted to do environmental work since restoring land with EarthCorps in Seattle after college. But she describes a turning point when reading Karen Warren's *Ecofeminist Philosophy* (2002); she realized that the human world and "more than human world" were not as separate as she had been taught.

“She describes a turning point when reading Karen Warren’s Ecofeminist Philosophy (2002); she realized that the human world and ‘more than human world’ were not as separate as she had been taught.”

She wanted to combine her love for people and planet, and realized that environmental justice was a way for her to do that.

One of the biggest environmental justice problems in the Twin Cities is the Hennepin Energy Recovery Center (HERC). The HERC is an incinerator that burns trash and converts it into energy. While the energy it provides is “renewable,” it’s neither sustainable nor just; it actually produces toxic pollutants that cause

health problems in neighboring communities, primarily low-income and communities of color. Michelle currently organizes to shut down the HERC with the Minnesota Environmental Justice Table. She has worked on art builds to create protest signs, circulated a petition used to persuade the county, and supports the development of zero waste legislation.

Michelle told us about another environmental justice issue she has organized around for almost a decade, which is the East Phillips neighborhood urban indoor farm. East Phillips is an ethnically diverse neighborhood in Minneapolis that has historically been polluted and experienced environmental injustice. The neighborhood has an unoccupied former Sears warehouse that residents planned to retrofit into affordable housing, an indoor farm,

a solar array, and local business site. But the city wanted to tear down the building to erect a public works facility. A tear down would increase the release arsenic into the community, and the facility would bring more traffic emissions and sound pollution. Michelle has partnered with other organizers to support EPNI in their fight for the urban farm and helped to secure state funds to buy the site from the city.

Some of Michelle's environmental justice work involves more traditional "academic" skills. She has written grants for food justice org Project Sweetie Pie; conducted early research for MN350's Minneapolis Green New Deal (titled the People's Climate and Equity Plan); and now facilitates internships with UMN grant team Minnesota Transform, for organizations like Tamales y Bicicletas. In her capacity as a scholar, she also testifies as an expert witness for bills related to environmental justice, like the Cumulative Impacts Bill or the K-12 Climate Justice Education bills that both passed state congress this year.

As for her teaching work, Michelle describes her classes as a "container" holding her passions for student mentoring, environmental justice education, experiential project-based learning, and community engagement. This semester, her students researched the efficacy of the 2022 Inflation Reduction Act from an environmental justice perspective with the guidance of seven community experts. Michelle is affiliated with the University of Minnesota's Institute on the Environment, from whom she received an education award for creating courses that combine environmental justice and sustainability. During the pandemic, she directed the Environmental Justice at the Higher Education Consortium for Urban Affairs (HECUA), which she describes as "the best time of her life". At HECUA, Michelle created an experiential

environmental justice program where students learned from dozens of environmental justice advocates and received hands-on, place-based learning, from working in farms and forests, to canoeing and bicycle touring.

As far as the future of environmental justice movements,

“Michelle expressed her belief that dramatic changes need to occur quickly. She quotes Michael Krause of Renewable Energy Partners who says, ‘We don’t need a green transition, we need a green transformation.’”

Michelle expressed her belief that dramatic changes need to occur quickly. She quotes Michael Krause of Renewable Energy Partners who says, “We don’t need a green transition, we need a green transformation”. Currently, environmental justice is gaining momentum through in-person interactions and social media. More young people are getting involved in activism, environmental and climate justice are making their way into K-12

curriculums and higher ed, and in general, environmental justice has become a societal topic of discussion. At every level of government, there has been some implementation of environmental justice. Still: she warns of a danger when grassroots movements become assimilated into inherently colonial institutions. For example, while the Inflation Reduction Act is the biggest investment in environmental equity in U.S. history, the investment pales compared to other types of resourcing for fossil fuels or militarism.

Michelle emphasizes that while the work being done through the government is a good first step, as long as new fossil fuel drilling and mining sites are being opened, we need to remain skeptical.

Curious, we asked Michelle what advice she would give to people ready to get involved in environmental justice movements. She encouraged everyone to experiment and try being active to find out what you are really passionate about. Don't be afraid to try on different hats because the ones that fit might surprise you. She recommends showing up at community or municipal events to get involved. She hopes people leverage what brings them joy and are able to lean on the community around them, which she also believes are effective ways to avoid burnout. Finally, when it comes to figuring out how you can best contribute to environmental justice movements, Michelle recommended filling in a venn diagram from the All We Can Save Project which includes the three questions: What is the work that needs doing? What brings you joy? and What are you good at? The overlap between answers to these three questions can help people discover how to make meaningful, sustained contributions to environmental and climate justice goals.

Jothsna Harris: Sparking Stories in the Climate Justice Movement

Ari Eggert and Sinalei Wagner

The climate justice movement is increasingly becoming harder to ignore as more people are suffering the consequences of climate change. Every day people are affected by the sea levels rising, scorching hot summers, frigid winters, droughts, floods, landslides, hurricanes, and more. But, their voices are not being heard in the mainstream media. In our interview we learned about the work that Jothsna Harris, the founder of Change Narrative LLC, has been doing to empower and center everyday people's voices in the climate justice movement by engaging in storytelling. It became evident when speaking with her that her work to honor these everyday experiences is born out of her own experiences with unfair systems that prioritize corporate greed over individuals.

Jothsna Harris is a born-and-raised Minnesotan deeply committed to combating climate change injustice through the power of storytelling. She received a Bachelor of Arts from St. Thomas in Political Science and



Jothsna Harris

Environmental Studies but did not initially start her career working within the environmental field. She discussed with us how, out of college, she found herself in the financially

extractive industry of managing financial aid and loans at private higher education institutions. One day, still at the beginning of her career, she reflected on her place in this extractive system and realized she could no longer reconcile the negative emotions she had surrounding these exploitative practices in for-profit education. With this, she found herself reassessing her life path. Her deep passion for the well-being of others was evident as she spoke to us.

Jothsna explained to us how, in 2011, she and her husband took a long look at their lives: the house they had just bought, their two lovely children, and decided they needed a change. This change found its form in the World Wide Organization of Organic Farms (WWOOF). Jothsna and her family moved to Italy and began working on small farms in the Italian countryside. Through this experience, she began to better understand her own spiritual discernment, realizing that her true passions lay with environmental work. Jothsna went on to describe to us how she has now been working for 10 years in spaces where the goal is to combat climate change. Returning from Italy, she reacquainted herself with the climate change sphere. To get up to speed with the new environmental data released since her time in college, Jothsna began work with the MN Green Corps/Americorps with the Burnsville, Eagan, and Savage schools working to reduce school energy use. She then moved on to working with Climate Generation, where she focused on special projects, partnerships, and community engagement.

In 2021, Jothsna left Climate Generation to found Change Narrative LLC. Change Narrative works with individuals, groups, organizations, and more to build capacity in the environmental movement through personal stories around climate justice. The focus is to empower and give confidence to people in their stories. As Jothsna put it,

we are all experts in our lived experience and live with climate change. For

“For centuries, people’s narratives have powered social movements. Jothsna works with people to develop and adapt these stories for various audiences such as theatre productions, legislative testimony, artwork, performance, and an anthology of written stories.”

centuries, people’s narratives have powered social movements. Jothsna works with people to develop and adapt these stories for various audiences such as theatre productions, legislative testimony, artwork, performance, and an anthology of written stories. Two examples of this are Eyewitness: Minnesota Voices on Climate Change, an anthology of stories, poetry, and art, and Climate Stories for Justice, a show at the Minnesota Fringe festival. A copy of Eyewitness was sent to every legislator in Minnesota. This put first-

hand experiences of climate change from various people in the hands of decision-makers. At the Minnesota Fringe Festival, live stories were shared about climate justice on stage.

A large part of Change Narrative’s mission is to change the dominant and damaging narrative around climate communication. This dominant narrative tends to exclude everyday people and lacks a first-person point of view, solely focusing on the facts and scientific data. Change

Narrative works to include every day and marginalized voices; this includes and is not limited to Black, Indigenous, People of Color, low socioeconomic status, LGBTQIA, and people with disabilities. Centering marginalized voices is critical to this movement because it amplifies the voices of those who are disproportionately affected by climate change. Using a first-person narrative allows marginalized people impacted by climate change to define their own identity through an intersectional approach by combining the head, heart, soul, and spirit. As Jothsna mentioned in our interview, many people feel that they do not have a story to tell but she works with them to help find their spark.

Jothsna goes about helping people develop their stories in two ways: group storytelling workshops and one-on-one coaching. Group storytelling workshops are done through talking, writing, and focusing on identity and climate experiences. This is an exercise in vulnerability for all who are involved. They are able to connect and share with one another and see how their stories may be similar and how they may differ. These workshops provide people with community. The goal of this workshop is to find the spark or heart of their story. Group workshops also provide individuals with practice in sharing their stories. One-on-one coaching starts with listening and then facilitating a space for reflection for the individual. Jothsna says this process is not the same for every person and she goes off of her intuition. But like the group workshops, Jothsna's goal is to find the heart or spark of their story. These stories do not have to follow traditional storytelling practices, as storytelling has persisted in many forms in many traditions across the globe for thousands of years.

Currently, Jothsna is working on a project in the Gulf South. When we inquired about any specific story that

has been on Jothsna's mind, she shared about Ms. Marsha Jackson in South Dallas. Ms. Marsha lives in a majority community of color in South Dallas. The land next to Ms. Marsha's house, originally a field of green grass next to a creek, became a dumping ground for roofing shingles in late 2017. When the company neglected to properly dispose of the shingles, local residents named the pile "Shingle Mountain" due to the enormous height of the shingles, and it looks as if it were a landfill behind Ms. Marsha's home. Many people in the area experience health effects due to fiberglass and formaldehyde being airborne and from the pollution that runs off into the nearby creek. The pleas of Ms. Marsha and many other residents were ignored, until at least a year into this project of sheer negligence and disregard for the lives of BIPOC folks. After many lawsuits and community-led activism, the removal of Shingle Mountain was officially completed on February 26, 2021. Jothsna expressed to us how Ms. Marsha's story is a prime example of how BIPOC communities are disproportionately affected by environmental injustice, and is just one of many stories that she is working on. She is also currently working on a project with "We Choose Now," highlighting stories from Appalachia, and the Gulf South to show the similarity of stories surrounding harmful patterns of extraction practices, victories and re-imagined futures, across regions of the US despite differences in the region.

Nearing the end of our interview, we asked Jothsna about advice for young activists, to which she responded by strongly urging young people, especially those working within activist spaces, to "just DO" to make the world around them better. In doing this work though, she urged young activists to take a deeper look around them: is the work you are engaging with at this moment happening in

the right –spiritual, moral, ethical– way? What different ways are there for you to engage in work done in the right way? The work you see happening should reflect the work needing to get done, reflect on what makes you feel alive, and seek out the people engaging in the ways that you want it to get done. Jothsna says that one of the largest barriers within the climate movement is finding partners who are actively engaged in inclusive work based on non-extractive practices that engage the head, heart, soul, and spirit. Jothsna expressed that working on your own can be an empowering journey and that when you are blessing other people through the work, you are also blessing yourself. Because of this, she urges young activists to work with integrity and not for personal gain. She asks young activists to reflect on the question “What does beautiful work look like to you?” Because, she says, beautiful work ripples out and then there will be more of it. She continued on to say that young activists should just show up in the ways that they can, any form of activism rooted in the head, heart, soul, and spirit will result in work that gives to you, just as much as others.

Kieran Morris: The Revolutionary Power of Urban Farming

Stella Gardner and Ben Woloch

We met Kieran at a local coffee shop near Macalester and sat down on the patio, sandwiched between a luxury condo building, a parking lot, and a row of shops. Kieran, sitting across from us, definitely looked like a gardener. His green army



Kieran Morris

style jacket was complemented by a brown leather belt complete with gardening tools and a watch with an attached compass. Before we started the interview, Kieran wanted to hear about us, where we were from, what we study, and how we ended up conducting this interview. Intently listening, his eyes lit up on multiple occasions, at mentions of us being from Seattle and Brooklyn, our interests in Agriculture, Geography, and History, and at a mention of Hüsker Dü being an inspiration to move to the Twin Cities. In the interview that followed we got more than the description of environmental organizing and food justice that we were expecting. We listened in complete fascination for nearly an hour as he covered his experiences with urban wilderness, the revolutionary power of gardening, sustainable urban agriculture, and an insightful

view of the cyclical nature of humans in relation to burnout.

Kieran grew up in the Twin Cities and attended the University of Minnesota where he studied history. From exploring the vast urban wilderness of the Twin Cities, camping in Northern Minnesota, and his family history with farming and gardening, his engagement with nature was a constant throughout his childhood. He described how his experience with urban wilderness “was formative for me and for who I am.” It became clear that these experiences directly influenced his environmental and food justice work which centers around gardening and urban farming. Many aspects of Kieran’s path towards activism strongly resonated with us. He described his idealistic, “the system sucks” style of thinking in college and how this theoretical framework changed in the wake of the murder of George Floyd and the protests across the Twin Cities: “Seeing all the violence that was done to people and getting rubber bulleted in that, I was just like man, I actually want to gear my life towards doing something about this, just not thinking about it theoretically.” In the Twin Cities especially, and amongst the younger generation of organizers, these events were certainly formative to forming resistance and organization in response to the brutality. Police brutality, militarization, the inescapable grasp of capitalism, and the growing effects of climate change, are the reality in which young people—like both Kieran and us—live in. Drawing on the push from the uprisings, and a passion for change, Kieran started organizing around food justice and establishing his path to environmental justice.

The geography of space is strongly connected to the formation of communal identities and helps to shape the ways that activism can exist. In our interview with Kieran,

it became increasingly clear that the Twin Cities, and Minnesota in general, are important aspects of his identity. Much of the unique geography of the Midwest comes from the Mississippi river. Kieran explained how the Mississippi is “paramount in the ways the cities are set up.” He elaborated that the river serves as a natural barrier preventing urban expansion and industrial development, something that is uncommon in many cities, such as Seattle and New York. This does not mean that the Twin Cities are exempt from the effects of urban sprawl, however, Kieran noted that “the way the city was built, accounting for the river, there is a lot more urban wilderness that you can access.” Additionally, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources has enabled legal protection to prevent over-development on and around the Mississippi. Kieran explained that these protections serve as a “sort of buffer zone” around the river, allowing for the Mississippi to be enjoyed by people living in the Twin Cities. Kieran said:

A lot of my life living in town, I’ve just been exploring the area and figuring it out kind of. It’s a tremendous resource that we have in the twin cities. Going to other places I’m just like, man I can’t just go for a 10 mile hike in the woods by the river, but I can just do that in the Twin Cities if I wanted to.

Because of its geographical structure and spatial organization, environmental activism in the Twin Cities often presents itself in distinct and unparalleled ways. For Kieran, the Mississippi river allows for greater potential to make significant change through urban gardening and farming in the Twin Cities.

Over the course of the interview Kieran spoke of countless organizations he works with. From Project Sweetie Pie, to his work with the Twin Cities Community Land Trust, Urban Farm and Garden Alliance, and his

apprenticeship at the arboretum, it was clear that Kieran spends a lot of time with urban farming and gardening. All of his work centers around food justice, from his initial entry through food shelves, to gardening and training kids on farming. He explained that he is, “really into agriculture and guiding and all that stuff because those are the things that go beyond politics, and just connect us to the earth and solving these issues that are leading to real material damage in our lives.” His organizing, alongside his broader world view, is centered around a small community level. In response to one of our questions, he said clearly that urban farming and community gardening is: “One of the biggest steps [to creating community autonomy].” Because of its geographical structure and spatial organization, environmental activism in the Twin Cities often presents itself in distinct and unparalleled ways. For Kieran, the Mississippi river allows for greater potential to make significant change through urban gardening and farming in the Twin Cities.

Setting up the interview had been a little tricky, and we soon learned that Kieran and Project Sweetie Pie were in the midst of organizing a large event the week before we met. Kieran’s description of the event emphasized the joy inherent to community organizing.

It was a really awesome joyful event, there was dancing and some spoken word, I did a poem and Michael did a poem...it was just really fun. Moving forward we want to do more stuff like that where we are talking about what needs to be done, but we’re also making a space for the community to come prosper.

“His views on his own organizing, and broader food justice organizing, can only be described as deeply inspirational. In a world filled with climate despair and increasing environmental violence and injustice, Kieran looks to urban farming and gardening as a sign of hope.”

Deeply connected to this was how Kieran centers the importance of education and teaching gardening to young people. Central to Project Sweetie Pie is teaching youth how to garden, in what Kieran described as a “train the trainer” mentality and philosophy. He said that, “If you can get people involved from a younger age in growing this stuff, they grow up and they’re going to throw those seeds out—no pun intended—as they go forward through life.” Working with youth and communities in this area of food justice, clearly advances a sense of community sovereignty, central to Kieran’s

broader philosophy of organizing.

The US continues to push the logic of industrialized agriculture and the western ideal that growing one crop at a time will maximize production yields. Kieran made it clear that the monocrop approach of agriculture does not actually provide more food; instead it destroys the soil, making farmland unusable in the long run. Kieran talked about how “Indigenous people had many different ways of working with the land to increase yield.” With polyculture, each

individual crop provides a different purpose allowing for a more complex, collective, and healthy ecosystem. Kieran talked extensively about the importance of reintroducing permaculture farming and his vision for food justice incorporates these ideas of permaculture into urban farming.

Working with the land and figuring out ways to better the way that we live and provide food for ourselves that don't require destroying a bunch of stuff, that's a very human thing to do that people are doing and have done for a very long time.

He explained that we need to start utilizing urban spaces to produce food as we learn to adapt to the impacts of climate change: "To deal with the new world that is coming, we are going to have to make a lot more people-power, and that takes the form of urban farming." One of the core beliefs of Project Sweetie Pie is that the food we produce should represent the nutritional needs and cultures of the people who are consuming that food. Kieran shared that Michael Chaney, the founder of Project Sweetie Pie continually says, "we will have achieved food justice when what is on shelves looks like what the people want to eat." The first step in this process is providing people with the knowledge and resources to grow their own food, and that starts with workshops for community youth and spreading the benefits of permaculture and urban agriculture.

The problem of food insecurity is usually not caused by a lack of food supply, but is instead an issue of access. To address issues of food agency and access, Kieran looks to urban agriculture. "There's so many ways to farm inside: vertical farming, rooftop farming, hydroponics, aquaponics, greenrooms." The move towards urban agriculture, by utilizing the indoor and outdoor spaces outlined above, does several things to challenge the

mainstream food system. Kieran's vision for the future of agriculture can also be seen as a possible way to address land rights issues and land-dispossession. Reclaiming urban spaces for agriculture is a way for people who have been dispossessed from their natural resources to have agency over their environment. This is a potential way to address the unjust concentration of land and wealth.

Kieran's vision for the future of food justice will create more food security, restructure traditional systems of agricultural power, respond to the real demands of people, create employment, and potentially even address land rights issues. This vision is beginning to become a reality through Kieran's organizing with Project Sweetie Pie. Although this vision has not yet been fully realized, Kieran's passion and ability to pass on his message allows for young people, such as us, to see his ideas as a reality for our future.

With everything that Kieran is involved in and constantly thinking about the future, he spoke candidly about being burned out and losing motivation at some points. "I'm doing a lot of different stuff at once, so I do get burned out quite a lot." In environmental justice fights it's clear that people need a break, and the toll on mental and physical health can often be too much. Kiern emphasizes that honoring these feelings is essential.

For about five years I've been practicing archery and I have a couple of friends who will go out and shoot with me. If I'm starting to feel rough in a day, I'll just take an

hour and go shoot arrows. Likewise with hiking or going to work in the garden.

He went on to discuss how we, as humans, have dealt with crises before, and will deal with them again. He emphasized that one cannot put the pressure on themselves to solve the issues of environmental justice. We can fight for what we believe in, while still enjoying life and the things that have been around forever.

The things that do last are traditions...we can ground ourselves in music, cooking food, and going out and growing something in the garden and be at peace with the fact that we're part of a cycle.

We walked out of the coffee shop, thanked Kieran for the incredible interview, and walked away in a sense of complete awe. The knowledge and passion that Kieran possesses is so powerful, and he made clear that the fight for environmental justice is in good hands. He left us feeling that we can do more, and that the start to pursuing environmental justice can be as simple as planting a seed, or ripping up one weed. Kieran has a strong power to

“The knowledge and passion that Kieran possesses is so powerful, and he made clear that the fight for environmental justice is in good hands. He left us feeling that we can do more, and that the start to pursuing environmental justice can be as simple as planting a seed, or ripping up one weed.”

inspire young people through his passion, story-telling, knowledge, and ability to connect. Being in his presence made us feel like his vision for the future is possible and imminent.

Whitney Terrill: Nurturing Communities through Environmental Justice, Art, and Agriculture

Rachel Campbell and Minori Kishi

Whitney Terrill’s environmental justice work is multi-faceted and community-oriented.

We met with Whitney over Zoom on an early summer day as she was on her way to her studio to pick up prints for an upcoming campaign. Throughout the interview we peppered her with questions about her passions and projects in hopes of learning what we could do to follow in her



Whitney Terrill

footsteps. It became clear that it is not just her achievements that make her efforts so valuable, but also her deep-rooted connection to nature and her caring and creative approach to organizing.

Whitney grew up in Minneapolis, primarily in the Marcy-Holmes neighborhood, and spent a significant amount of time in the Rondo community of Saint Paul. She describes herself as always having a spiritual home in these communities. When we asked her if the places she inhabited growing up at all inspired her journey as an

environmental justice activist, she explained that although the places themselves did not directly inspire her, it was the people within these communities that had a profound impact on her, and continue to influence her decisions today. Being part of these communities made her constantly think about how she could solve problems with, and for, her community members, leading her to feel accountable to them and driving her passion for environmental justice. Whitney's connection and dedication to her communities was clear to us throughout our interview with her.

In explaining how she started on her path to becoming an environmental justice advocate, Whitney recalled the significance of her middle school trip to the Wolf Ridge Environmental Learning Center near Lake Superior. Spending a few days with her classmates in this natural setting gave her an early experience in nature, which she now notes was instrumental in shaping her decisions, both spiritually and professionally.

After graduating from college, Whitney initially pursued a career at an investment bank. However, she found that this path did not fulfill her and left her yearning for a deeper sense of purpose. Upon reflecting on a time she did feel fulfilled, the memories of her transformative trip to Wolf Ridge Environmental Learning Center resurfaced. It made her question how she could make a meaningful impact on the people and communities in North Minneapolis and Rondo, where she had personal connections. The dissonance between her career in investment banking and her aspirations to help her community pushed Whitney to seek fulfillment in another way.

“In her current role, she works to strengthen communities most affected by environmental injustices, and she herself is motivated by her communities growing up and the ones she surrounds herself with now.”

Recalling the influence of Wolf Ridge, Whitney sought to align her career and lifestyle choices with her passion for environmental justice. She pursued further education at Columbia University, earning a certificate in Conservation and Environmental Sustainability. She embarked on several trips to Nicaragua, after which she decided to prioritize consuming fair trade and organic food. This commitment to environmental justice

continued to grow, shaping both her career path and personal lifestyle. Whitney became the Environmental Justice Program Manager for Minnesota Interfaith Power and Light (MNIPL), a non-profit that works in partnership with faith and spiritual communities to address the climate crisis. After a number of years with MNIPL, Whitney joined the Sierra Club, North Star Chapter, as an Environmental Justice Organizer. The knowledge and passion that Kieran possesses is so powerful, and he made clear that the fight for environmental justice is in good hands. He left us feeling that we can do more, and that the start to pursuing environmental justice can be as simple as planting a seed, or ripping up one weed.

Whitney described how she has found particular

meaning in her current work focused on shutting down HERC (Hennepin Energy Recovery Center). HERC is a trash incinerator located in North Minneapolis, a neighborhood that has been targeted for more than its share of toxic facilities. HERC has become a focal point of concern and opposition in Whitney's environmental justice efforts. It's primary function is to burn off municipal solid waste in order to decrease the volume of trash that Hennepin County has to deal with. As a byproduct of the incineration, HERC also generates energy. However, because of the cumulative impacts of the pollution generated by HERC and other nearby facilities, it has garnered significant criticism from environmental justice activists and community members alike. The adverse health and environmental impacts experienced by the neighborhoods surrounding HERC have sparked a widespread call for its shutdown. Whitney has dedicated herself to this cause, finding profound meaning in these efforts.

We were delighted to hear about how she uses public art to engage the community in campaigns such as this one. To raise awareness for the campaign, she has organized five group exhibitions featuring murals on buildings as well as portable murals to reach out to community members and create visibility. Whitney also invites community members to participate in art builds, where they create the art used in demonstrations, such as those to shut down HERC. She enjoys using her skills as a printer to create posters and prints for outreach to the public. For example, she was excited to share with us her plans to raise awareness during an upcoming Minnesota Twins game by giving away "HERC Hankies," a clever play on the traditional Homer Hankies.

In our interview we learned about an additional

dimension to Whitney's life: she is a small-scale organic vegetable farmer. Cultivating crops like pumpkins and sweet potatoes, she has developed a deep connection to the land and the agricultural practices that sustain it. Whitney's experience as a farmer enables her to engage in conversations with rural farmers on an equal footing. She cannot be dismissed or excluded from discussions about farm issues because she shares similar experiences and challenges. Additionally, her role as an environmental justice organizer brings an invaluable perspective to these conversations. She can approach farming-related issues from both an agricultural and environmental justice standpoint, bridging the gap between these two spheres. Whitney describes her combination of perspectives as the "secret sauce."

Operating her farm in Washington County, Whitney is conscious of the policy side of farming, and she actively engages in discussions about land access, recognizing the importance of equitable distribution of resources and opportunities for farmers. Her involvement in these conversations amplifies the voices of farmers who are often marginalized and ensures that the perspectives of environmental justice organizers are integrated into agricultural policy.

When she first entered farming, her initial focus was on growing healthy food and saving on her budget, however, she described to us how her understanding of farming has expanded to encompass broader considerations such as soil health and water access. She now appreciates the multifaceted nature of farming, recognizing that it involves much more than simply growing vegetables. Her dual role allows her to navigate the complexities of farming while advocating for a more just and sustainable food system. By actively participating in urban and rural dialogues, she

strives to create positive change and promote equitable access to healthy food and agricultural resources.

As a mother, organizer, farmer, and artist, Whitney's efforts and energy extend across many communities and, like many other activists involved in environmental justice, Whitney encounters barriers and burnout. Yet, in our conversation with her, it is clear that she never falters from her goal and she is powered by her community. When we asked her how she cares for herself while working tirelessly to make a difference in her communities, she replied,, "I don't know, I'm still figuring it out". Whitney attributes her endurance for the environmental justice movement to "trying to do work in a way that's not mechanical, but instead allows for it to be sustainable". She does this by putting effort into meals for herself and her community, focusing on doing things with care and beauty rather than convenience and having a good time in a whirlwind of work. Unlike many in the working world, Whitney expressed to us that she does not believe in the separation of work and family life, and often brings her children to organizing: "I think the way I'm trying to sustain it is to blur the lines a little bit between like professional and personal in a way that's mostly respectful and productive."

Towards the end of the interview, in a state of awe and inspiration, we asked Whitney what she recommends young activists do to get involved in environmental justice work. Without hesitation, Whitney told us to spend time outside in order to create a foundation while learning about your favorite natural places and how you can protect them. In the environmental justice world, even if you're not ready to engage politically or on a larger scale, the first step is to interact with nature and appreciate it.

We finished our interview with Whitney feeling nothing short of inspired. Whitney brings passion and art and a sense of family to the environmental justice movement and the work that she, and so many others, are doing. Her efforts pave the way for true, purposeful progress.

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Princess Titus: Cultivating Justice and Healing in Environmental Spaces

Luciana Menendez Iglesias and Mateo Useche Rosania

Environmental justice, without getting too technical, is simply a connection not only with your relationship with the environment but also how others relate to it. Princess Titus' interest in environmental justice initially came from her grandmother, who grew her own food. As her grandmother grew older, she was unable to support her love of gardening and began eating processed, accessible food. Soon after, she discovered tumors in her breast and passed away. While telling this story, it was clear to us that Princess saw a connection between health and processed foods, and this went on to inform much of her work in North Minneapolis.

Today, Princess is a Twin Cities resident and environmental justice advocate with Community Members for Environmental Justice, among other groups. When she came to Minnesota 28 years ago, the first thing



Princess Titus

she aimed to do was grow her own food. Following in her grandmother's footsteps, she was taught by the Hmong community in the Twin Cities who were very welcoming and helpful to her. Princess said she felt in tune with the Earth and loved being a part of it which acted as one of

many motivating factors for her involvement in environmental justice.

Our interview with Princess not only highlighted various environmental justice issues in the Twin Cities but also showed how, on the community level, we can provide remedies and places to heal. Princess' work goes beyond what we will cover; however, there was a trend of three main buckets: healing work, teaching work, and fundraising work. Across these three themes, Princess emphasizes the importance of knowing your role, and how we cannot do everything alone. This alludes to taking the time to discern where you fit in environmental justice and what your upbringing and circumstances allow you to do for your community. With this discernment, she told us about the distinction between the internal and external environment. The difference lies in recognizing that we should take the time to know what we need, and how our role is to be a part of the solution. At the end of the day, internal environmental justice is knowing that all of us are part of the solution and we must reflect on what we need for ourselves and how to help. Once you have established the internal environment, you may choose, although it is not necessary, to take on external environments. The challenges of external environments are more systemic in nature but require knowledge of the internal environment. Throughout our interview, we talked about how some people are not ready and may never be ready to take on the external environment, and that is okay. Ultimately, whether it is in the internal or external environment, we all must contribute to be part of the solution.

Princess began her environmental justice work many years ago by bringing together 400 community members to attend 8 cooking sessions to talk about the foodscape of the Twin Cities. Appetite for Change, an organization

Princess works closely with, has aided in passing a new bill that ensures breakfast and lunch for all students enrolled in Minneapolis schools. AFC is now celebrating 12 years of success and has distributed 309,000 meals to community members while also growing 12,500 lbs of produce for local use. Princess believes accessibility to breakfast and lunch greatly improves the external environment of community members from a young age. Furthermore, she makes sure that community members know to understand their “relationship to the fish not just teaching them how to get it or give it to them”. In other words, she helps by making sure that the solutions are facilitating the progression and improvement of the system rather than mirroring the current systems that continue to cause oppression. Instead, these productive solutions should improve the internal and external environment of community members.

Communities of color often do not have the necessary spaces to heal, converse, or enjoy the environment. An important first step for Princess was to dive deep into what the community needed and begin the conversation about how people wanted to heal. The process quickly formed into a community garden. Princess described the process of building the community garden as “very organic.” The project started by engaging in conversations where community members voiced their needs and questions and, from there, the logistical pieces fell into place. Yet, Princess emphasizes that the most important part was listening to what people had to say.

“Communities of color often do not have the necessary spaces to heal, converse, or enjoy the environment. An important first step for Princess was to dive deep into what the community needed and begin the conversation about how people wanted to heal.”

In another community project, a healing garden was proposed by a mother who lost her son to gun violence and who wanted to have a safe space to keep her son’s legacy alive. There was a lot in the neighborhood perfect for a garden but the city would not give it to the mother as an individual, however, they would give it to an organization. Community members quickly mobilized to create the community garden and transform it into a space for communities of color to gather and heal, while

also fundraising for this bureaucratic win.

The importance of internal and external environments proved to be a recurring theme throughout our conversation with Princess. Princess believes that the discussion of these themes is crucial for the healing process to take place, especially in Black communities.

Due to many systems of oppression that operate in all aspects of American life, whether it is trauma at home, loss of jobs, loss of lives, or loss of belief in themselves, many people are not able to fight the big external environmental issues. Nonetheless, Princess declares that each and every one of us can continue the necessary fight for a more just internal environment. Fighting for internal environmental

justice can look different for every person but the most noteworthy is beginning an individual internal dialogue to ask what you can do. If you are in school or work somewhere, it could be as simple as getting involved with community groups or asking around about what issues people are facing. Just by engaging in these conversations, you will reflect on what matters most to you and how, or if, you can do something concrete about it. Princess points out that it does not always have to be some grand community project but that, as long as you are being part of the solution, it is enough.

Consistent with many of her other messages, Princess preaches food sovereignty and defines it as giving individuals the right and ability to choose what they want to eat and how. This is a vital point to consider when it comes to the “teaching work” that she provides to her community members. From an individual perspective, she emphasizes the importance of people having the knowledge to identify foods that are nutritious and of good quality while also being aware of the different options that they can choose from. Reaching this standard of awareness can come from community members learning how to grow their own food and having the agency to do it. The lack of knowledge about food deserts and their consequences can have long-lasting adverse outcomes on people’s health and well-being. Therefore, it is critical for the community to continue expanding its ability to identify systemic issues regarding food distribution and how to work together for positive change.

From a community perspective, she touched on two important points. The first point she mentioned is that there is a high number of water, food soil, and air polluters in Black communities. These polluters are contributing to illness, such as asthma and diabetes which are causes of mortality in these communities. This toll on Black communities greatly affects the external environment in which the members live. Princess suggests three important questions to consider: which rules are these big corporations following, do they even need to be in these communities, and what will the cumulative impact be of their presence in the community? If these big corporations do not need to be in your community, then should you display resistance by boycotting their products, or do you

“Due to many systems of oppression that operate in all aspects of American life, whether it is trauma at home, loss of jobs, loss of lives, or loss of belief in themselves, many people are not able to fight the big external environmental issues. Nonetheless, Princess declares that each and every one of us can continue the necessary fight for a more just internal environment.”

have the mental capacity to do more by mobilizing others and including them in your external environmental justice project?

Additionally, she argues that, although the community has access to food, it is not the food necessary to ensure a good quality of life. In one neighborhood in North Minneapolis, for example, there are 38 fast-food restaurants but only one accessible grocery store. The lack of access to grocery stores contributes to undernutrition and deficiency of important vitamins only available from fresh produce. Princess hinted at the fact that this lack of grocery stores was not linked to a lack of space or necessity. In fact, she mentioned how there are many vacant lots and empty buildings that have the potential to become sit-down restaurants or grocery stores from which the community could greatly benefit. However, there are structural problems at a higher level that prevent equitable access to nutritious food across races and socioeconomic statuses. She believes that North Minneapolis is definitely an example of a food desert, as members of the community do not have access to nutritious food on a regular basis.

To get started as an environmental justice activist, Princess' advice is to look for people who are curious and community-minded, who are also ready to do community work. The next step is "looking for who got what", which she explains is essentially getting involved in social circles and having one-on-one conversations in order to identify who can contribute. Additionally, this means looking at corporations and other organizations that have the same visions as community members. It was surprising to learn that even corporations that actively pollute our lands are willing to fund community projects that provide solutions to environmental justice issues. However, this definitely means getting out of your "comfort zone", taking the first

step to build a community outside of your usual circles, and “connecting as a human family at a food and environmental justice scale”. Essential to the last step is believing that they can get the money. Princess believes that approaching an issue with a positive mindset and confidence can shape the solution. Fundraising is another aspect of Princess’ journey that involves teaching. Fundraising, at a community level, requires more people to be involved; it requires people to have training and know who to ask and what to ask for. Princess facilitates this process by hosting fundraising training events, in which community members learn the “who, what, when, where, and how” of fundraising.

Whether it is through healing, teaching, or fundraising, Princess cares about her community and will do as much as she can to be part of the solution. She works effortlessly to involve others as part of the solution which is something truly phenomenal. To engage her community, she uses her themes of internal and external environments as a framework for environmental justice and tirelessly fights for our future.

Joe Vital and The East Phillips Neighborhood

Ozzy Osborne and Ayuna Lamb-Hickson

On a Sunday afternoon we received a bustling phone call from Joe Vital. “At the stop sign turn right”; Siri gave him directions in the background as he spoke. We were glad to catch him in between capitol visits and activist protests. The interview turned out to be brief, fascinating, and inspiring.

Joe is an increasingly well-known activist fighting for equal land rights and community

authority in the East Phillips neighborhood of Minneapolis. An East Phillips resident himself, he is heavily engaged in the environmental justice



Joe Vital

work surrounding the East Phillips Roof Depot. The neighborhood is part of the South Side Green Zone. Within it sits the Roof Depot – an abandoned building that has sparked conflict over who has the right to develop it. Organizers in the East Phillips community want to redevelop the site into a community-owned mixed-use development project that includes a solar array for green power housing, a cultural market, educational spaces, urban farms, and local accessible food.

Yet, through privatization, the city of Minneapolis is

making the community's vision less possible. Instead, the city wishes to buy the Roof Depot building in order to tear it down and put a public works facility in its place. This would include a fuel station and parking garage that would increase traffic, pollute the land and its inhabitants, and displace East Phillips residents. The main polluters already in the area are specifically tar production and railway systems, and the current Public Works facility (Hiawatha Campus).

“The Minneapolis city council is thus rendering those who live in the East Phillips neighborhood dispensable and prioritizing money and business over citizens.”

The Minneapolis city council is thus rendering those who live in the East Phillips neighborhood dispensable and prioritizing money and business over citizens. Joe, who a lead organizer of the East Phillips Neighborhood Institute (EPNI), plays a large role in fighting against this demolition of the Roof Depot building. Joe

started out as a chair of the Native Peoples Caucus, where he helped organize for DFL conventions. He was then asked by Cassandra Holmes and Jolene Jones, members of Little Earth of United Tribes, to become more involved in 2020. He says he also realized the pressing nature of environmental injustices in his community, which led him to become more involved in activism. He soon after stepped back from his position with the DFL and began at EPNI.

As the volunteer community relations coordinator for three years, Joe's main role includes keeping residents and

constituents informed on progress and delegations occurring surrounding the neighborhood. He also strives for “building a coalition...[Not] in a superficial way of like ‘this coalition that’s helping me vote for something,’ [but a] broad based coalition for states.” He says his role is “like the Swiss Army knife,” always doing what is required of him. He likes to think of his work as uniting a front between individual community members, larger groups such as Climate Justice Committee, and immediate stakeholders like Little Earth. A major part of that is making sure that the coalition moves in the same general direction as well. He sees his role as a translator, sometimes literally—he speaks Spanish— but usually more metaphorically at a larger scale between powerful institutions and the people they have the most impact on. He wants to inform them on processes of government, especially surrounding these questions:

He brings these questions into his work as a lens in which to improve environmental justice. Recently, he has taken on a larger legislative role, fighting for residents’ land ownership of the Roof Depot. He focuses on the system of oppression deeply embedded into society—city governments buying out citizens, specifically low-income and folks of color, without listening to their concerns. Minneapolis city officials claim that the demolition of the Roof Depot is not an environmental hazard, yet the community experiences some of the highest rates of asthma, lead poisoning, and cancer in the entire state. The area is a food desert as well, severely lacking in healthy and nutritious foods.

Joe defines environmental justice as community – specifically community zones that have access to and ownership of clean and healthy environments. He emphasizes that environmental justice encompasses many other forms of justice as well, so the inequalities in East Phillips is an injustice, and environmental racism is at its core. Because of decades of divestment and enabling of polluting industries, the neighborhood is disproportionately suffering the consequences from toxic waste and unequal land access. Joe explains how the only other neighborhood comparable to this injustice is North Minneapolis.

The city of Minneapolis recognizes these areas are in need of “more investment in green technology, reduction in air pollution, and just more community autonomy over what is happening in their spaces,” according to Joe, as both are labeled Green Zones.

“Joe defines environmental justice as community – specifically community zones that have access to and ownership of clean and healthy environments. He emphasizes that environmental justice encompasses many other forms of justice as well, so the inequalities in East Phillips is an injustice, and environmental racism is at its core.”

However, the city perpetuates environmental racism by implementing policies that do little to no good in helping the community. The actual residents are getting little say over decisions, and private developers' investment in campaign fronts holds more power than the constituents themselves.

Therefore, communicating these issues to residents, from those of Little Earth to broader taxpayers, is crucial to Joe's work. He discusses how taxpayers pay for most of the medical bills, especially related to asthma. "The median household income is \$33,000 for a family, so it's a relatively poor area," says Joe. "Most folks are on [their own] paying for this... the average asthma hospitalization is about \$100,000 annually." Thus, informing citizens of these problems helps increase awareness and funding. He also highlights that this injustice is not localized: "whether you live there or not you do pay for this, for these aspects, for this injustice." The demolition affects all demographics, regardless of the zipcode they live in.

The communities of East Phillips plan to improve these conditions, disrupting this all too familiar narrative, with Joe at the forefront of implementing change. Recently, EPNI won an enormous victory: The city agreed that they can buy the Roof Depot site. This was an extremely important win, and Joe described it as "a huge surprise." He discussed what it was like:

I was at the meeting with...city representatives...None of this is working for anybody— fighting each other, occupation, arrests... The city is uneasy because, well rightfully so, they're being faced with persistence because nobody wants this project in their backyard. So in this meeting, the city did openly state that it'd be willing to sell if... we could acquire the dollars to pay them back... which was a surprise to me...I wasn't expecting them to say that.

I was expecting to write out the process of like ‘well, you know, if the money is real we’ll see. We’ll entertain it. We’ll think about it.’ But for them to say, if you give us the money, we will sell. It’s a surprise. And then I was even more surprised when the media caught wind of it.

Joe emphasized the importance of the media catching on. Because of the media attention, the city was forced to release an official statement, thus bringing the issue to a larger stage. The recognition was helpful in working towards EPNI’s \$20 million goal* for development, 16.7 of which will go to pay back the city, while the rest will go toward construction. One of the first projects they are building is an urban farm. Access to healthy foods, leafy greens, “can help clean the toxins in one’s blood,” says Joe, so increasing access in this sense will not only benefit the community economically, but physically as well.

He encourages young people to get involved with the environmental justice movement wherever they live. “Please get involved,” he says. “Show up. If you have a passion, something that resonates, show up. Ask questions. And give your ideas, because the next generation is what pushes this forward.” He told me how when he was young, renewable energy was the popular environmental push, and now, communities and industries are actively working toward it. Yet, he wants younger generations to go in different directions that have received less focus. However, he laughed and added, “Also, listen to the old heads... They can be frustrating. I get it...Old heads can be off putting with, you know, are they PC or not. But the old heads...they’ve been there, they can really show you the ropes.”

When asked what keeps him going in this not-so-easy role, his passion overflows. He gives all the credit to his community. He says in moments of doubt and burnout, the

community always shows him another way. He is willing to go as far as they dictate, because their time is long overdue in a system where they have not been heard in the past:

What keeps me going is grounding myself in community... because that directs me. You know, it's like a moral compass, but more importantly, it's a reminder that I'm in relation, not just with this issue but with my relatives in this land. And it's why I'm doing everything in the first place. Yes, it is hard. But I've never done anything in my life that has made me feel more alive... those moments of alignment when folks are on the same wavelength...that's what it's all about.

*If able, please consider donating [here](#) to EPNI's \$20 million goal for the urban farm!

Akira Yano: Shutting Down HERC and the Zero Waste Movement

Harry Cheng; Lily Cooper; and Miri Leonard

It was a normal Wednesday afternoon when we gathered to meet with Akira Yano over Zoom. Akira is currently working as an environmental justice organizer for the Minnesota Environmental Justice Table, which, he explains to us, is a local organization that seeks to guarantee environmental justice across Minnesota through campaigns to

fight against the systemic harm to frontline communities, developing solutions that build a more environmentally just world, and bringing resources to the movement.

Curious as to how Akira became involved with the environmental justice movement, we learned that his interest was sparked in

AP Environmental Science at Central High School in St. Paul. While Environmental Justice was just a vocabulary word to him at that time, the idea that climate change would affect people differently based on their identity, demographics, and country stuck with him. Akira later attended the University of Minnesota, where he initially



Akira Yano

was a Journalism major, but switched to Environmental Sciences. In addition to classes, Akira sought out external internships and ended up at a nonprofit organization in North Minneapolis called Neighborhoods Organizing for Change. There, he started to learn firsthand about Environmental Justice as he worked on a campaign to address the issue of waste incineration and its health impacts.

Akira explained to us how he felt shocked and angered after learning that a waste incinerator was the reason North Minneapolis had the highest asthma and asthma hospitalization rates out of the entire state, and how this was largely being experienced by low-income and BIPOC communities. It also frustrated him that his Environmental Science classes up to that point had never addressed this issue.

Akira's classes had talked about climate change as it is often popularly talked about: something that would affect animal habitats and glaciers in five to ten years. Akira was concerned that this rhetoric positions the consequences of climate change as being very far away, both in space and time. "It doesn't really communicate a greater sense of urgency of what the issue is," he told us. At the same time that he was being taught about climate change as a distant issue, marginalized communities in his city were, and still are, being poisoned as a result of unsustainable waste

management practices that also ultimately contribute to climate change.

“At the same time that he was being taught about climate change as a distant issue, marginalized communities in his city were, and still are, being poisoned as a result of unsustainable waste management practices that also ultimately contribute to climate change.”

This disparity opened Akira’s eyes to the huge gaps present in many contemporary education systems. “It motivated me to pursue environmental education,” Akira said, “to provide that information and insight into Environmental Justice and local Environmental Justice issues that I didn’t receive when I was in school.” For the rest of his three years at college, Akira took on a variety of other Environmental Justice internships, which ranged from teaching about climate change at middle schools to working as an intern in the Energy and Environment Department

at Hennepin County.

Akira’s Current Work: HERC

Currently, in his role with the Minnesota Environmental Justice Table, Akira is a full-time environmental justice organizer working on a campaign to shut down the Hennepin Energy Recovery Center (HERC), a trash incinerator located in downtown Minneapolis, close to the Twins stadium built in 1989. HERC was constructed in

the city following plans to create a landfill in the suburbs, near a majority white and affluent community. Residents threatened to pursue legal action against the construction of the landfill. As a result, rather than build a landfill in the suburbs, a trash incinerator was to be constructed in downtown Minneapolis, an area historically populated by low-income, BIPOC communities. Immediately the community protested. Akira emphasized that even back in the '80s, local residents knew HERC would cause health issues for years to come. They were right.

Akira is passionate about raising awareness for and fighting against both the climate issues and environmental injustices HERC has created. The facility burns about 1000 tons of trash every day and consistently places among the top five emitters of pollutants in Hennepin County. It is clear HERC poses serious health risks and impacts to nearby marginalized communities.

Within mere miles of HERC live 230,000 people: 49% are low-income, and 49% are people of color. The area around the incinerator has a greater prevalence of

“Within mere miles of HERC live 230,000 people: 49% are low-income, and 49% are people of color. The area around the incinerator has a greater prevalence of particulate matter than 90% of the state of Minnesota, and it has a higher rate of diesel particulate matter than 98% of the state.”

particulate matter than 90% of the state of Minnesota, and it has a higher rate of diesel particulate matter than 98% of the state. North Minneapolis also has the highest rate of asthma and rate of asthma hospitalization out of anywhere in Minnesota.

Through his work with the Environmental Justice Table, Akira is pushing Hennepin County to redirect the millions of dollars invested in HERC and instead fund zero-waste infrastructure. However, he believes that HERC is but a symptom of a much larger waste crisis that is at the root of the problem.

The Waste Crisis and the Zero Waste Movement

Akira explains to us that the idea behind the zero-waste movement is to foster a circular economy, where products are being produced with reuse, recollection, and recycling in mind, rather than the current single-use production mindset. Implementing this can look like a wide variety of policies, including more robust recycling and compost collection, increasing what can be accepted in recycling, and creating reuse facilities – places where people can bring items to be either repaired, repurposed, or redistributed.

Akira is currently working on a transition plan with some of the top zero-waste experts in the country. “It’s not like the amount of trash is going to magically disappear,” Akira pointed out. As a solution to this, the transition plan proposes that as the country works to transition to a lower-waste system, the County could work with landfills that would be open to contracting to operate at higher standards than are required by the U.S. EPA or MPCA, and which are comparable to or better than the European Union Landfill Directive. That could result in the creation of new special cells of the landfill that are better lined, monitored, and managed than the rest of the landfill, for

materials coming under contract from Hennepin County to that facility. That could also result in incentives being included in the contract between Hennepin County and the landfill to add reuse, recycling, composting, material recovery, and/or biological treatment operations at or near the landfill, to form a [Resource Recovery Park](#). This would limit the places landfills could be located by following certain criteria. For example, a landfill couldn't be placed within a certain distance of communities that have high rates of health disparities, are within a certain index of low-income brackets, or have a certain percentage of people of color. This, in addition to a greater standard of management, would help reduce the environmental impact on the communities surrounding landfills, without creating new ones. Akira does not believe these are long-term solutions, but the goal is to eventually develop zero-waste systems to help reduce the amount of waste that's getting thrown away in the first place so that neither landfills or incinerators eventually remain necessary.

The reason we have these waste problems in the first place is that a lot of companies have helped feed into a larger culture of consumption. The creation of products is profit-driven, which means that products are designed using the cheapest possible material. Akira also mentioned that he thinks there is a deeper culture of overconsumption that exists, especially within the United States. "A large qualifier for success is, how much can you consume? How much can you afford?", Akira said. He later explained that he believes it is more of a social problem, and one that there isn't really a short-term or easy solution for. But Akira has hope that increasing accessibility for participation in more sustainable waste management systems can help to shift that mindset.

Akira's Challenges and Inspirations

Akira is inspired by the potential positive impact their work could have on their local community and people who have been marginalized by existing systems. He believes that environmental issues can be daunting to tackle on a global scale. “It can be very easy to look at the larger picture and to feel like there’s no chance of having an impact or shifting the problem,” Akira said. However, the relationships built through community organizing help to connect movements. He also finds momentum in the shared visions and unity of the environmental justice movement. Though Akira told us he doesn’t “think it’s fair for people to be born into problems that they then feel a responsibility to solve, despite having not created it themselves,” he is inspired by the possibility of making things better.

Doing environmental justice work does not come without challenges: “I think the biggest is that you’re pushing back against systems, which have been embedded for decades if not centuries. You’re combating a narrative that has the support of governments, of corporations, of millions of people and billions of dollars,” Akira said. Environmental issues are also difficult because their impacts are not always immediately apparent, and the causes of the issues may not be visible. Lastly, Akira notes that there are many other urgent problems in the world, and it can be hard to get people to prioritize environmental justice issues when they are focused on more immediate concerns like personal safety or other daily needs.

Environmental justice is an issue that needs to be known and addressed by more people around the world. Akira believes in the power of telling stories: “[Statistics] might not grab as many people as hearing from somebody who lives in the community, talking about how sometimes they can’t let their kid play outside because their child will

have an asthma attack due to the poor air quality. And that they'll have to take them to the hospital, so they literally can't let their kids play outside some days. I think lived experiences and life stories connect with people way more than statistics," Akira explained. He also has plans to get young people involved in the movement. "There's a lot of power in youth organizing. Don't ever underestimate the potential of your own impact," Akira said. As we wrapped up our conversation, Akira reminded us of the importance, as young people, of using the internet skeptically, checking sources, and listening and learning from past movements, particularly those historically led by underserved communities.