

A Celebration of Life as Resistance to Environmental Racism: Roots Community Festival
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Low-income people and people of color most intimately experience the effects of climate change and environmental degradation. However, they also (1) may not have been exposed to the concept of environmental racism, (2) do not know how they can change the circumstance of their neighborhood, or (3) do not have sufficient resources to execute the changes they want to see. Residents on the Southside of Fort Worth, Texas find themselves in this situation. People who live within the 76104 zip code, in which the Southside is included, have the lowest life expectancy in Texas despite a one-mile proximity to Fort Worth's medical district. The reasons are multifold: Gentrification, minor government investment in recreation centers, and nearby polluting infrastructure, such as highways, encumber community health. Currently, the Historic Southside Neighborhood Association is advocating for affordable housing and legal recognition of the cultural site Evans Plaza as a public park. Land use policy impacts air pollution concentration and access to green spaces. Next year, private investors are slated to convert a portion of Evans Plaza into housing that is cost-prohibitive for the majority of multigenerational residents on the Southside. Not only are developers displacing low-income residents, they are also minimizing the decarbonizing effect of the only public green space in the area: Evans Plaza. Through my project, I plan to recruit young people on the Southside who, unlike their busy parents, have the vitality to engage in environmental justice (EJ) initiatives, such as the preservation of Evans Plaza. Roots Community Festival would highlight the importance of Evans Plaza as a communal center, introduce EJ to future leaders on the Southside, and provide local wellness organizations with a community platform to share their services and information.

This proposed project is a three-day event, with the first two days consisting of an environmental justice workshop for local youth and the last being a health and wellness festival open to the entire Southside community. The workshop will focus on education (learn what EJ is), partnership (meet individuals who are committed to the EJ movement), and advocacy (articulate goals to lawmakers and community). Youth completing the workshop will gain a working understanding of EJ, connections to local organizations engaged in EJ work, and narration strategies to engage others in their cause. Student participants will also receive mentorship for post-secondary education. Drawing on my experiences as a peer educator and organizer, I hope to inspire the students to pursue EJ in their education and careers.

Continuing my partnership with the Historic Southside Neighborhood Association, Kids Environmental Education Network Group, and sustainability gardening organization AfroGreen'D, I will organize a two-day-long EJ workshop for twelve high school students. The first day will focus on education and coalition building. Environmental justice is a neglected topic within Texas classrooms, so we will begin with defining EJ and reflecting on how each student experiences their environment. To forge connections between the students and local EJ organizations, the day will conclude with either a cooking class using fresh produce from a local AfroGreen'D garden or a guided tour of one of the gardens.

Knowledge and collaboration are the groundwork for advocacy. Therefore, on the second day, we will transition into actions students can take to advance EJ on the Southside. We will examine case studies of successful community advocacy, such as the Ironbound Community Corporation in Newark, New Jersey, and explore the state of the EJ movement in Texas. The curriculum will also include video screenings and conversation with a Texan environmental justice leader, such as Dr. Robert Bullard or Juan Parras, as well as multimedia art opportunities to imagine how the Southside could be. Students will realize that they are architects of the future of their neighborhood. I will also highlight examples of how students can embrace EJ in their school and professional careers. I hope to be a mentor to students who are interested in applying to college and have secured the participation of two experienced local

educators to assist these students in pursuing post-secondary education. This workshop could be a springboard for students to study law, medicine, or pursue grassroots organizing in the EJ movement.

Students will also be featured in a short film created by a local, trained filmmaker who will document their personal reflections and snapshots from the workshop. The film will serve as a medium for present and future dialogue about EJ organizing on the Southside. It will remind students that they are agents in their community who can change their environment for the better. The documentarian will teach students about storytelling through the visual arts and share best practices for capturing video on cell phones. Students will then have the opportunity to explore these documentary techniques using their personal devices and articulate the dreams they want to share with their local lawmaker on the following day. The purpose of this workshop is to cultivate students' awareness of their environment, connect them with people practicing EJ work in Texas, and highlight accessible resources for catalyzing change in their community. In an area heavily burdened by environmental racism, a project of this sort has not been previously implemented in this space yet is greatly needed.

The third day will culminate with an outdoor health and wellness festival that will bring neighbors together for a celebration of local cultures, sharing of resources on health and wellness, and reflection on what health and wellness mean for the community. The objectives of this festival are to amplify the work of local grassroots organizations and provide a space for community members to blueprint the dreams they have for the Southside. Similar to the event I organized last year on the Southside, called Roots Community Cookout, each local organization will have an information booth. In addition, I will purchase books concerning environmental justice from local minority-owned bookstores for guests to read and take. There will be tented seating, music, and free food catered by local Black, Indigenous, and People of Color-owned restaurants. Guests will be encouraged to describe how they envision the Southside on a canvas that will be used to inform future community initiatives, and I will invite city councilmember Chris Nettles to listen to their concerns. Student workshop participants will have the unique opportunity to present the visions they outlined the day before to Mr. Nettles. This event will serve as an example of people using Evans Plaza as a recreational space, which would advance the current effort for legal recognition of the Plaza as a park. As green spaces, parks have numerous wellness benefits such as air quality improvement, physical activity promotion, and mental health boost for people of all ages. Through highlighting the use of Evans Plaza, this project will directly advance a long-term EJ initiative and galvanize community members to preserve and establish similar wellness spaces.

Relationship building is vital to enacting social change and manifesting both personal and communal peace. A challenge with this kind of project is that it can be "one and done," but I will support the sustainability of the EJ movement in Fort Worth by (1) involving Festival partners in planning and executing "next steps" and (2) facilitating relationship building between local youth and advocacy groups. Meeting with decision makers during the Festival will empower young students to become leaders while enabling community organizations to identify and support those who are interested in pursuing EJ. If past experience is any indicator, this determined focus on EJ in the community is likely to generate financial support to sustain the efforts of student participants and partnering organizations. Indeed, I was able to fundraise over \$1,100 for community partners that participated in the Cookout last year.

Environmental justice concerns the protection of those with the fewest resources whose success translates into success for us all. The issue is that those living in EJ communities are not empowered to do anything about their environment. When marginalized communities feel powerless, violence born of frustration is likely to result. The relationships and resources that are fundamental to this project will facilitate communication and peaceful solutions to environmental racism. I will assess the impact of this project in terms of (1) student participants' plans for ongoing involvement, (2) strategic next steps of my community partners, (3) the legal status of Evans Plaza, and (4) collaboration with residents of other historically underserved communities in Fort Worth who express interest.