

Promoting Clean Energy Education in Ecodistricts to Enact Sustainable Development USA

University of Richmond

Indya Woodfolk Upper Marlboro, MD USA; McKenna Dunbar Washington, D.C.

Indya Woodfolk is a senior at the University of Richmond with an Anthropology and Environmental Studies double major. McKenna Dunbar is a junior pursuing a B.S. in Business Administration with a concentration in International Business and a B.A. in Environmental Studies, as well as a minor in Anthropology at the University of Richmond. Promoting Clean Energy Education was a project that inspired action against and mitigated instances of environmental injustices throughout Virginia. In Portsmouth, VA- we performed 35 green energy audits and provided residents with energy efficiency kits and educational resources. Additionally, we hosted a three-week environmental education program for high school students in that area with a focus on environmental justice.

During our project we were able to empower students of Richmond, VA and residents of Portsmouth, VA with tools and educational resources to combat injustices in their communities. We were able to connect with over thirty households in Portsmouth with energy justice resources including educational brochures and energy efficiency kits, which included light bulbs, water efficient shower heads, solar-powered path lights, reusable bags, weather stripping, and more. In Richmond, we hosted a three-week program educating eleven students on how to recognize and advocate against environmental injustices within their community. We are currently in the works of producing a documentary showcasing our work and educating a broader audience on environmental justice.

Doing an environmental justice based project was a given, based on our interests, and through using existing foundation and university based connections we were able to find the gap that is educational resources. We have partners who had similar interests, and whose projects mirrored and amplified our goals, taking place in the Portsmouth area which played a large role in our demographic decision. Additionally, the Eco District Hampton Roads Project, based in Portsmouth, VA, brings together one of the largest African American communities in the country. In the United States, African-Americans have had disproportionate wealth gaps in comparison to their white counterparts. This injustice has been further exacerbated by our climate crisis, where African-Americans have less access to climate resources and education such as clean energy. A large proportion of residents from the Hampton Roads Ecodistrict, including many senior citizens, rely solely on their fixed incomes. Climbing utility rates coupled with a lack of energy efficiency initiatives and solutions have strained this community with increased financial burdens. There is an economic group and inequality between white and black communities. Furthered by this energy inequality which takes up a greater portion of black households' incomes. This means that black households have a smaller portion of their income to spend on clothes, food, or water.

Working directly in the community made the project complete. Being able to connect with the residents and our students on a personal level contributes to the efficiency and sustainability of our work. The nature of the community of our host site allowed us to engage within the community like never before. We truly attribute the success of our project to the receptiveness of the community. This project has shown us the very overt way that corporations discriminate against black and brown communities, both directly through higher energy burdens or indirectly through declining access to healthy, natural resources. However, it is apparent that that has not stopped us from advocating for ourselves. During our time we watched as residents played at the recreation center, had cookouts, and just sat outside to enjoy the weather. Our natural environment plays a vital role in our everyday lives and it is important that we take advantage of that.

There were many challenges that we encountered throughout the duration of our project. Many of those had to do with planning and implementation during the COVID-19 pandemic. The uncertainty on how to go about the project (in person, virtual, hybrid) played a big role in the moving pieces that made

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structuring the project more difficult. However, after being able to establish the questions surrounding COVID-19 safety, we were able to produce a project that included a hybrid of both in person and virtual events which was the most efficient way to engage our students with keeping them safe. To future Projects for Peace grantees: Don't reinvent the wheel! There are likely many organizations and groups all working towards similar goals as you. Take advantage of their expertise and resources.

Peace is the grounding nature of societal welfare in all regards and is the binding ingredient that unites citizens and enhances community engagement. In essence, peace can be created and fostered to promote better living conditions, increased efficiency practices, and a more equitable world. Our project achieves this by honing in on grassroots community development work by putting residents first and learning more about their utmost needs in the city they reside in- whether that be improved environmental infrastructure, accessible extracurricular activities to reduce crime, or even more widespread natural areas to be able to convene. Concerning the energy audits, we pursued this idea because we were interested in assessing how much energy is consumed in a resident's home over time while fostering awareness of energy usage and the collective impact of sustainability initiatives. Additionally, we wished to share information about how energy burdens can disproportionately impact communities of color and the elderly. As a result of the energy audits and the interview experiences, McKenna has decided to pursue an Anthropology minor to better understand humanity and how culture, society, history and the environment shape the human experience. For Indya, this project has further affirmed her passion for pursuing a career in environmental law and her interdisciplinary work supporting marginalized populations at the intersection of environmental infrastructure crises. We obtained additional financial support for the project through the North Face and Greening Youth Foundation due to McKenna being awarded the Moving Mountains Grant and becoming a Greening Youth Woman of Color Environmentalist.

Both Indya and McKenna have profound interests in grassroots community development initiatives as well as addressing environmental disparities in marginalized populations. Through Indya's work as an Environmental Planner at PlanRVA, Richmond's Planning Commission, Indya has a vast knowledge on the public education of sustainable practices and implementation of various grant deliverables while emphasizing the voices and needs of a community. Last fall, McKenna founded an environmental justice advocacy non-profit organization, The Ecological Justice Organization, a research team curated from environmentalists and advocates of sustainability with varied backgrounds who bring knowledge involving environmental advocacy to tangible and accessible frameworks to the public. Thus, we selected a few EJ scholars to act as environmental consultants that would mentor our REESD participants.

"“This project was so meaningful to me because I was able to work with people who look like me, or reminded me of family, and I gave them something substantial — the knowledge and tools to advocate for themselves,” Indya Woodfolk (woodfolkindya2018@gmail.com)

“In getting to know the locals of this area and talking with them about the economic disparities they experience, I absorbed the powerful testimonies of hope for improved environmental infrastructures for their children to play, their neighbors to garden, and for all civilians to have a closer and healthier relationship with the natural environment around them.” McKenna Dunbar (theecojusticeinitiative@gmail.com)

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