

“I Didn’t Choose This. It Chose Me.” Community-Based Environmental Justice Leaders

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Abstract

On 13 February 2020, the University of Michigan School for Environment and Sustainability held the Michigan Environmental Justice Summit 2020: Commemorating the Thirtieth Anniversary of Michigan’s 1990 Conference on Race and the Environment and Looking Toward the Future. The Summit hosted a dynamic panel of community environmental justice leaders throughout the region who have “boots on the ground” in the progress and pursuit of environmental justice. The panelists included Donele Wilkins, the President/CEO of the Green Door Initiative in Detroit, MI; Andrea Pierce, Chair and Founder of the Anishinaabek Caucus, Idle No More Michigan, MI; and Theresa Landrum, co-founder of the 48217 Community and Environmental Health Organization, Detroit, MI. This article includes an edited transcript of the panel discussion. The panelists detail multiple grassroots efforts to remedy environmental injustice in Michigan.

Keywords

environmental justice, environmental racism, community-based activism, Michigan

Introduction

On 13 February 2020, the University of Michigan School for Environment and Sustainability (SEAS) held the Michigan Environmental Justice Summit 2020: Commemorating the Thirtieth Anniversary of Michigan’s 1990 Conference on Race and the Environment and Looking Toward the Future. The summit hosted a dynamic panel of community environmental justice (EJ) leaders throughout the region who have “boots on the ground” in the progress and pursuit of EJ today. Moderated by SEAS Professor Paul Mohai, this action-oriented panel featured founder and CEO of the Detroit-based Green Door Initiative, Donele Wilkins; co-founder of the 48217 Community and Environmental Health organization, Theresa Landrum; and chair and co-founder of the Anishinaabek Caucus Idle No More Michigan, Andrea Pierce. The panel discussion is presented here. A video recording is available on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SFFWaHRqz5k&feature=youtu.be>. This issue of *New Solutions* (Volume 30, Issue 3, 2020) also includes the discussion from a panel of National Environmental Justice Game Changers as

well as an introduction of the conference and the two panels.

How Did You Get Into This Work, and Who Most Influenced You?

Paul Mohai: Could you tell us a story? The story about how you got into this work and how it began for you and who were the people who most influenced you?

Donele Wilkins: OK. Well, actually, one of those persons just walked in the door and sat down, down the aisle; I hope I don’t get too emotional. My thirty years of this work didn’t get started officially for me until someone tapped me on the shoulders and said, “Hey, you need to be in attendance at this important meeting

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Photo: Community EJ Leaders explain how they became involved as advocates for their communities, discuss their successes, and provide advice for the next generation of EJ advocates and leaders. From left to right: Dr. Paul Mohai (moderator), Ms. Donele Wilkins, Ms. Andrea Pierce, and Ms. Theresa Landrum. Photo by Dave Brenner, SEAS, University of Michigan.

that's going to happen in Washington, D.C. in 1991." He had watched me do some work on the ground around some occupational health advocacy work and what have you. And I'm like, "Well what is that?" And he's like, "We need people like you in this meeting. It is the First People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit." That was 1991. And that someone was Dr. Bunyan Bryant (choking up). And I just want to say, while you're in the room—and I try to say this every time we encounter each other—if it were not for you, recognizing something in me, the life work that I believe I was born to do would not have taken place and launched without you giving me a platform. And I just want to thank you for that, because at that meeting, those four days, they were powerful days.

We worked hard with all kinds of people I had never sat down with: people from native lands, people from Hawaii, people from Chicago and Savannah, Georgia, and others who are sick and tired of being sick and tired in their communities. And they wanted to make a change and they wanted to redefine the environment that would respect and honor our lives, our children's lives, our communities. And I found my place in that room and in that space. I contributed to the defining of the

seventeen principles of EJ. And I knew at that moment this was what I was going to do with the rest of my life—was to work for people in my community. And it had me actually take another look at my community. While I was on the side of labor, working for healthier workplaces and fighting for black workers in particular, who were disproportionately exposed to bad working conditions, unhealthy conditions, and all that comes with that. It didn't occur to me that in the shadows of all these factories and polluting situations where I lived and my family lived and my community lived, and I was just grateful at that moment to know that I could make a difference. I didn't know how it was going to happen.

I just saw Tracy Easthope and some Ecology Center people come in here and I remember back at that moment. The organization I was working for, we were also connected to the Ecology Center and they just pretty much said, "Hey, have free reign. Whatever we can do to support you to make this work matter, you go on and you do it." And then we just organized. We organized Detroiters Working for Environmental Justice. I was the founding director of that organization and we did the work there. And today, I'm pleased to continue that work under the umbrella of the Green

Door initiative. But I don't know what the exact question was.

Paul Mohai: You answered that very well Donele, that was very inspiring. In fact, I really would like to ask that of each of the panelists. Andrea, what about you? And I can repeat the question. Tell us the story about how you got involved in the work. How did it begin for you and who were the people who most influenced you?

Andrea Pierce: Well, that's a good one. I started off as part of Idle No More Michigan. I was an in-the-streets activist with a megaphone, and we had light boards and it was against Line 5.^a Line 5 is on my tribal lands, and I'm deadly afraid—I think it's going to explode any day or time. And our fishing rights will be decimated. Our culture will be gone. Every time I sit back and think about Line 5, it just gives me scary chills, and I have to do something. So we started Idle No More Michigan and we've been doing the Pipe Out Paddle Up Flotilla with Jannan Cornstalk.^b And there's a group of us that work down there, and bringing in people, tribal citizens and organizations and legislators and everybody who would be impacted. We get people from other states coming in. Because it would affect a lot of people: 20 percent of the world's freshwater will affect a lot of people.

So we started that. And then I started bringing out more information, because I'm from Ypsilanti now, down here. We light up the water tower in Ypsilanti and have protests in Detroit. Dakota Access Pipeline came up, and that was even more, so we were fighting against that here. Everybody else left, but I couldn't leave. We had Nexus (Global) coming in in Ypsilanti, my hometown. We were fighting that. I couldn't leave. We fought and there's a whole community. There was Deisha Myles with Nexus and it's just so many people that we're fighting and they built it. Thankfully, Ohio, I think, is still fighting it. Nexus has not started pumping through there. That's like less than a mile from my house. That's kind of scary. Now I'm in the eminent blast zone. We've been fighting that and it's just been fight, fight, fight, and everything's going so far and stops. Nothing's changing. What's missing? Why isn't this changing? Why are we still fighting, fighting, fighting, and not getting results? Why, we're bringing awareness—we're educating people, we have town halls, we have people come and talk everywhere about the issues, I start making homework sheets. If you came to any of my protests, you got a homework sheet that said, "Call this person, call that person, do this, do that." We put it up on the web site and still everything went just so far and stopped. You could just feel the energy going." And then it would just *whew*, all right, now what?

That's when I met Dana Nessel, she was running for the attorney general, she was saying, "Well, I'm going to

shut down Line 5. We need to do this. We need to enforce these laws. We need to work on this." And I was like, "Yay Dana."

Went to the convention and found out that the Anishinaabek people in this state, the Native Americans, who are here in these occupied territories of Michigan did not have a caucus. We had no representation at all. None whatsoever. I questioned, "Could that be where it stops?" And I'm finding out, yes, that could be. So, my boyfriend says, "Well you know the rule of the house!" And he says, "If it makes you mad, you gotta go fix it." So that's what we did. We built the Caucus of Anishinaabek People in the state (Crowd applauds). We just had our first-year anniversary last week. It was a big Omigosh. We sat back and thought up everything we've been a part of, we have a lot of bills that are coming through and moving, getting introduced, hopefully will get passed. We need people to still call your house reps and call your senator, call your governor. Dana Nessel says she has arrived and the laws are not there. We do not have the laws for her to enforce. Now we have to make these laws. Otherwise, nothing will change; environmentally, socially, anyway—because we have to have the laws in place.

That is what we're working on. Go up to Lansing when House reps invite us, or the senators, "Hey, can you come and help us?" Sure. Give a press release and try to get the native people, all of our people, involved because it's affecting everybody. My goal is set that we'll have the Anishinaabek people, the Native Americans, environmentalists, grassroots. If you like water, you should be part of this. If you like clean water or clean land, yes. If you would like to breathe. We should be a part of something. We have a lot of caucuses now that are banding together.

I really think that research is part of this. We get the information from the researchers. The activists get all excited and get everything moving where we need to go and what we need to do. We need the political part to make it happen. We make the laws so that we can enforce these and say, "No, no, no, we don't want this in our water. Get it out. We have this law here." And then they have to remove it. That is where we're at.

There has been a whole community helping me. We have the Ann Arbor Light Brigade now, out of the work that we've done with Detroit Light Brigade and Idle No More Michigan. We light up signs bringing awareness, and Ann Arbor Light Brigade came out of that. We have two light brigades down here, and I hear there's another one up in Ingham County. We are growing and building and that's what we need to keep doing. Get involved. Join in. Don't sit back and say, "Oh, I went to this talk." Say, "OK, I learned this. How can I implement it? Where can I go? What difference can I make? Who can I go talk to?" And go do it. If you can't think of

anybody, contact me. I have a whole bunch of people you can talk to, because I totally believe with all my heart; we are stronger together—and one person will not do anything. It's a community—and we have to bring our communities together to make the changes.

Paul Mohai: Thank you very much, Andrea. Theresa, the same question. Tell us about how you got involved in this work and how it began for you. Who are the people that most influenced you?

Theresa Landrum: I became involved in this EJ movement in 1985. I was just beginning my college career and I was working as a mechanic at General Motors. In our community we have two salt mines. We have Morton Salt, which produces the table salt, and we have Detroit Salt Company, which produces the road salt. We learned that one salt mine was shut down because of instability of the shafts. And we had heard inkling about them wanting to inject toxic waste in the wells in Ypsilanti. So someone said, "Well, Theresa, come go to this meeting in Ypsilanti and listen, because this is dangerous." So I went to the meeting and I was shocked at what I heard. Well, back then, the people came out and that was rejected. But later, the issue was brought up. However, in my community of 48217, as Dr. Mohai said, being deemed the most polluted zip code in the state of Michigan, they decided that they wanted to store toxic waste in the shafts of the salt mine. We live in an area that's below the water table and we are considered a flood zone. We're right on the side of the Rouge River, which is a tributary leading to the Detroit River, which is our drinking water source. And if the floods and water get in that salt mine with those toxic chemicals in there, and the salt is corrosive, I was afraid that those barrels, tubs, whatever they were going to use to store it would cause contamination into the water source.

So I went to the city council and I heard that our council was considering allowing this to happen. So I went back and I met up with a couple of the older seniors who had been in this fight and said, "What can we do?" They said, "Well, when you go down as a single person, it doesn't work." So we came together as a group and went down. And I was chosen as one of three people to speak because everybody else was too afraid. And I said, "We can't be afraid when they're talking about poisoning something that we all need." So I went back and we were successful and that ended that.

However, in 1999, the salt company was sold. Our city council gave the salt company a twenty-year lease to blast and excavate salt right underneath our homes. And when that happened, we started to experience many earthquakes. We started to see sinkholes form in our property. We started seeing cracks in our windows and our foundations. And when we went to speak about it on an individual basis, they said, "Aw, that could've

happened because your house settled," and no one was really paying attention to what was happening. And how I discovered it is I went out. My family owned several properties and we had renters. So the renters were calling my parents who were elderly and said my furnace exploded, my chimney caved in. And we were like, "What?" So we sent the maintenance person over there. He said, "No, their furnace is fine, their chimney is fine." They said "Well, every day something's exploding in my house." And so I went to the neighborhood organization, the Original United Citizens (of Southwest Detroit), as Dr. Mohai mentioned. And I said, "You guys, do you know where this is coming from?" They said, "No." I said, "Has anybody questioned it?" They said, "No." I said, "Why haven't you questioned it?" And they said, "Because it won't do any good."

So I realized that my community was feeling helpless and hopeless and they felt they didn't have a voice. So I said, "We got to do something." So we got a group of about ten people and we went down and we really found out that in actuality we were experiencing earthquakes. We were able to get a grant and hire a seismologist, and he told us that we were (experiencing quake activity) from the blast. They were using the same materials that Timothy McVeigh used to blow up the federal building to excavate salt. And our city council allowed them to do it. And they were only paying the city council of Detroit, fifty-two cents a ton that they excavated. Then they were leasing the acreage underneath our homes for three dollars an acre. That's what the city was getting. So they were selling us for peanuts and we were experiencing this destruction to our homes and impeding on our quality of life. So I and Doctor Leonard (a leading advocate who has been fighting for clean air in her Southwest Detroit community for years), who's not here today, said we can go down as a collective voice. And we did. And we were successful in getting the salt mine to stop blasting underneath our homes. But this was, unlike Miss Wilkins, this was not my life's choice. In actuality, I didn't like it. I was fearful, too. I didn't want to be the voice for the community. But somebody had to step up and somebody had to do it.

So I went back to my happy little life. And then in 2003, the power grid failed and North America and part of Canada suffered a blackout. And unbeknown to us that when our power went out, the more than twenty-six industries that surround our community, their power went out. So all pollution controls were out of order and poison was being emitted into the air. People were getting sick and didn't know why. And then we found out that the company, as Dr. Mohai mentioned earlier, the only oil refinery in the state of Michigan, Marathon Petroleum Corporation, was emitting poisons to the heavens. Out of that came a lawsuit because the



Photo: Community advocate, Rhonda Anderson, speaking with SEAS students about pollution and EJ issues in Detroit. Photo credit, Paul Mohai.

surrounding communities, suburban communities of Dearborn and Lincoln Park and Melvindale, and Allen Park, during that blackout, they did a mandatory evacuation. But the city of Detroit did not evacuate my community in which Marathon sits. So the African-American community was not evacuated when poisons were being emitted to the heavens. And when we found out a lawsuit had been filed by the white suburban areas, the African community was not included in the lawsuit.

So one African-American young lady went down and asked the judge to stop the lawsuit. The African-American community was not included in this class action lawsuit and Marathon sits in 48217. The judge did. And so therefore, we were able to sue. And the judge would not allow us to sue on health. He only allowed us to sue on property damage. And mind you, my area is an area that has a high rate of cancer, asthma. We have been deemed the epicenter of the pediatric burden in lower Wayne County. And we have a growing rate of asthma in our adults. And so that was just a slap in the face.

So, again, that was not my life's purpose. I went back to my happy little life and then we learned that Marathon wanted to do an expansion, 2.2 billion-dollar expansion in an area that was already overburdened with industry. And they wanted to go from refining what they called the sweet clean oil to processing

the dirty tar sands oil, and they would have to change the process. So that meant different types of chemicals that would be emitted into our atmosphere. Now, mind you, in that time, I learned that our area was in non-attainment for SO_2 —sulfur dioxide. And then it would be in non-attainment for ozone. But just a little history. Growing up in my community, we often saw brown air, we often saw dusty air, we often saw metallic air. And I'm saying that because we were having a lot of fallout back then. It was Great Lakes Steel and Ford Rouge, from Detroit Edison (DTE), from Marathon. We thought it was normal, not knowing it was having an adverse effect on our health.

But in early 2000, Dr. Leonard introduced us to a young lady by the name of Rhonda Anderson. And she came to our community and asked, could she be invited in? I was like, invited in? Nobody asked us could they come in. Get *invited* in? People just come and do what they want to us. And she asked, could she come? And she told us about the EJ principles that Miss Wilkins talked about. And she taught us how to organize and to have a voice. She taught us how to log the trucks that were coming from all of these industries. She taught us how to take photos. She taught us how to identify different types of smoke: the brown, the orange, the black, the gray smoke to teach us if it was harmful or not. And so we went to the then MDEQ, that's the

Michigan Department of Environmental Quality,^c to ask for help. And that was like going to a dog, asking a dog to show us how to farm. They were no help. So we were failed on all levels. We were failed from the federal government to the state government, to the city government, to the county government. And we had to learn to speak up and have a voice.

So I just learned—just last week—this is my life's purpose. Because I've been doing this since 1985. So who inspires me? I have to say in meeting Miss Anderson through Dr. Leonard, who inspires me. Miss Donele Wilkins inspires me.

And I've got to say, I'm getting emotional (choking up). Because this is a wonderful thing. Because we're getting people to pay attention. And who inspires me is Dr. Leonard and Miss Rhonda Anderson. And I'm happy because I sat in here today on the students' presentations, and they were wonderful. So thank you.

The Critical Role That Activists and Community Residents Play in the EJ Movement

Paul Mohai: Thank you so much, Theresa. I'm going to ask a somewhat related question. Being a professor here for about thirty-three years now, I'm very used to researching and writing about EJ, and we had the student presentations earlier, where the students also talked about their research work. But—and I'll start with you again, Donele—could you talk about the critical role *activists* and *residents* play in the EJ movement? When you think about, “What is it that I can do to move the needle forward?,” what are some of those things?

Donele Wilkins: Well, I have to say that in the beginning of our work, one of the realities I had was we need to change policy. We had to change policy. And while we're out fussing and marching, and those are good parts of a good strategy. But if we don't change public policy, we just keep repeating ourselves, and there's no change in the lives that we are representing and fighting for. What I realized was that one way to change policy is to have corresponding research that could prove that we're not just being emotional and, you know, crazy out here. But that if we had some reliable data and information, it makes these connections. I've learned a lot about research and how you can't really say that this particular stationary source, whatever, is going to cause asthma or cause cancer or whatever. Right? But there is strong evidence, you know. Thank you, Barbara (Israel)—I see you out there—through the Detroit Urban Research Center, who helped me to understand that.

How can you all have helped in that regard? Like, let's take this information to the city council. So as

they're talking about making decisions about whether or not it's OK to have a salt mine blow up under . . . Do we have something to prove? Empirical data or something to show that this is just not a good decision to make. Shame folks with research if we can. But having sort of this collaborative effort while we're organizing on the ground, we're also holding up and trying to bring in to this conversation reliable information that helps us defend our case, if you will.

So for me just to see and listen to some of the students' projects and to be able to witness the growth, because in the early days, there wasn't much information that helped us make our cases. And now I'm looking at, you know, how grand it is that young people are choosing to pursue this academically. Folks in our communities are like PhDs and experts in being able to discuss this stuff, you know—PhDs in their own community, their own lives, but also being able to translate technical information in a way that helps us make our case. Those partnerships and realities are key with folks like you, Paul, and Dr. Bullard and Dr. Wright, and Dr. Bunyan Bryant, and of course, Barbara and that whole team of folks. This is this how we come together and we work together. We're not used and abused, but we are valued in this process and everybody is valued in the process. That's how you can help.

Paul Mohai: Thank you. Donele. I just want to comment, because I oftentimes also hear criticisms that academics come in and exploit the community. But all the people that you mentioned, I don't think are those people.

Donele Wilkins: They are not. But there are folks that do.

Paul Mohai: Personally, I want to thank you for raising that.

Theresa Landrum: Can I make a comment on that, Paul? I feel just a little different. Why should we have to create empirical data when it's already out there? We can look at it across the nation. Black and brown communities are on the frontlines. They are the ones that are sitting in front of these industries. I mean, the history of Erin Brockovich, of the Love Canal, of the Ray-Ban sun glass poisoning the water, in I think it's California. And they leave it on the community to create data that they already know. And they are failing us. They're sitting in their ivory towers and they're leaving people to die for corporate greed. Our lives are expendable to them. It took us to do a health survey presented to the University of Michigan with Dr. Mohai and Dr. Byoung-Suk Kweon, to show that we had a serious problem before the MDEQ would even come down and sit with us. So the burden should not be on the people. It should be on the health organizations. It should be on the Environmental Protection Agency. What did they do? Who do they protect? What does

Environmental Protection Agency stand for? So, I mean, you know ... (*Crowd applauds, shouts of "Go Girl!"*)

Paul Mohai: Thank you Theresa. Do you want to add anything to that question, Andrea?

Andrea Pierce: Actually, I do. Because we have the researchers, and the information is out there. They know about everything, pretty much. You know, we're still learning about PFOS (perfluorooctane sulfonate), right? I've been to so many PFOS meetings, every time it seems it's a little bit different. I do think that when we do talk to MDEQ, now EGLE (Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy), or any of the other organizations, we need to be en masse. We need to fill up all the rooms. When they say there's a town hall, there should be at least a hundred, two hundred people sitting in there and more outside. We have to let them know we care about what is happening. We are going to hold you responsible. You are letting us get hurt. You are letting us be poisoned and we are sick of it. We will remove all of you. You know, that's where we need to be at. We need to really stand up. In my culture, we think seven generations. I'm not fighting for me. I'm not fighting for my daughter and my grandson. I'm fighting for my grandson's grandkids. Seven generations. I have to think that far ahead. What am I doing today and what is happening today that will affect them? That's why I'm fighting so hard. I didn't choose this. It chose me. I would rather be sitting at home, beading, working, and watching some TV show or something, but here I am, you know, and we have to—we have to *show up*. If you see a town hall public meeting, community meeting, go, we need you.

Important Successes and Accomplishments

Paul Mohai: Thank you, Andrea. I think we're running a little low on time, so I want to ask some questions to end on a positive note. So I'll start again with Ms. Wilkins. What do you believe have been some of the important successes and what accomplishments do you feel most proud of? I'm going to ask all the panelists that same question.

Donele Wilkins: One, I think that when I started out, we wanted to make EJ a household phrase. No one talked about it. It was misunderstood. It was in the face of the environmental movement, they're like "There's no such ... What is EJ?" You know. And so today that's a household phrase. And I'm proud of that, and that I had a hand in that in Detroit and in southeast Michigan, to join a movement across this country and linking with others, fighting for the same thing. And even beyond this country, the kind of international

work to make sure that everybody matters no matter what their zip code is.

So what am I most proud of? Let's see. I think we still have a lot of work to do, but we have had moments where, as I think about the different administrations, the state of Michigan, gubernatorial administrations. We started out with the most egregious, John Engler, when I started this war. And he was the devil—his administration was the devil. Right? And as a movement, there was this sort of false attempt to get us engaged in the work of getting some policies in the state. Right? And we know that was a farce, and we know that was fake, remember? And so we walked away from that. You know, it's like, "We're not going to waste our time with this. We have better things to do." This administration (Governor Whitmer) has established an EJ working group, or task force, interagency or whatever it is, and some marvelous, strong voices are on this. Like we're still moving. We're still moving. Right? We've had some incremental changes that keep us in, you know, shutting down the incinerators and whatever. We see some of those things. And so, yeah, we can be a force and we just can't give up.

Paul Mohai: Thank you. Thank you, Donele. What about you, Andrea? What do you believe have been some of the important successes and what accomplishments do you feel most proud of?

Andrea Pierce: Mm hmm. In fact, quite a few, I believe, accomplishments. The Pipe Out Paddle Up Flotilla that we have every year on Labor Day is growing and growing and growing, and it's against Line 5 at Enbridge and now the tunnel. When I look out and see all the people that are coming up there—and we're not paying anybody. If you look at all those people there, they are all showing up because they care about the water and that that really makes me happy. I like to look out and I see all my friends and it's like my supporters—my support system is really here and everywhere I go, they are with me. When the phone call comes up and somebody is one of the activists, I go, "Oh my God, I have such amazing friends!" That is really what keeps me going is, you know, I see all my friends; my support system and all these people moving together, trying to take care of not just one issue, but all the issues of so many. We are being hit on every level. There's so many people working over here, working over there. If I say we need help over here, people will come and help. And the proud thing I have is that we are building a really comprehensive, caring, loving network of people who are fighting together for our future generations. That's what makes me the happiest and probably the proudest; is to be a part of that, that these people are actually letting me join them. It is amazing.

Paul Mohai: Thank you, Andrea. Theresa, what about you? Successes and accomplishments that you're most proud of?

Theresa Landrum: Well, the accomplishments are, one of them that I'm happy to hear, is that we're making people aware and the movement is growing. And as we look at this global emergency, industry and the administration are aware that we are here and that we're pecking and pecking and pecking. We helped stop a company coming in to get tax abatements and brownfield dollars, Great Lakes Petroleum Terminal. And it was just a small group of people, but that was massive. And another thing is, one of the things that we worked on, as Paul mentioned, we won establishment of the Environmental Justice Working Group 2017/18 under Governor Snyder. First time the community had a voice and a seat at the table. And it was because the voices of the EJ communities were being heard and we weren't going to be shut out of the meetings anymore. The thing that I'm most proud of is that we have been able to break down some of those silos. I live in a community. We have a large population of Latinos. We have the African-American population. We have the Arabic-Lebanese population. And nobody was talking. Now we're able to break through and we're talking. We're learning that what impacts me, impacts them. Pollution has no boundaries, and it doesn't discriminate. So the movement is working. If we could just get this administration up top, get young people out to vote and get the evil out of America and give America back to the people. Because the thing that I wanted to say about the change of policy, once we elect an official, they have a position as a civil servant. They work for us. But once they get in there, they get these egos and they assume we work for them. And they actually have the audacity to say, you knocked on my door and you wrote me a letter. That's our job as constituents—to be good constituents. And we have to do that every day. And those that do not want us to challenge them, for them to do their job, we need to take our voting voice and we need to get them out. So I'm proud of the young people today that we're making them aware of the EJ movement and that it's moving and it's not going to stop.

Lessons to Be Shared With the Younger Generation of EJ Activists

Paul Mohai: Thank you, Theresa. I think we have time for one more question and it actually kind of segues into a question I was hoping we'd have time to ask. What advice would you give to the younger generation who want to contribute to the movement? And I've seen some really positive steps that people have taken to do that, but I want to ask you for *your* view.

Donele Wilkins: So once again, I will say that it's been really, really rewarding. The list of young people that come through on my watch and to see them take their rightful places, whether it's in the grassroots nonprofit work, in academia, and even in industry and government. That because they have come through us, they have an awareness that will allow them to make change in whatever venue they find themselves in. Don't shy away from what's in your inner gut about where you think you could make the greatest impact, because we need good folks across the board. And don't be ashamed if you find yourself at a Dow Chemical, because it may be the place that you can change the way they do things from the inside out. Right? I want you to embrace that. But be open to contributing your voice, your talent, your skill set in a way that is going to improve lives for people and not just put profits over people.

Paul Mohai: Thank you, Donele. What about you, Andrea, what advice would you give to the younger generation?

Andrea Pierce: The younger generation. Well culturally, among the Anishinaabek, we really listen to our children and our young people when they speak up. That is where a lot of our movements come from, is from our young. We let them guide us. Our young people have a lot to bring to the table. And we really think as adults and elders need to pay attention to what these younger people have to say, because a lot of times they know more than we do. They are listening to, in our way, to what the creator is telling and we have to follow. A lot of the movements, DAPL (Dakota Access Pipeline), were brought about by young people. They led that movement and everybody came and joined. We have to let the young people come and take their places and we let them lead. We follow them. We give you what you need. Whatever we've got, we give to you. You know we are here for you and we fight alongside them.

I think that's an important thing for us to remember as adults, that we need to let the children and the young people lead. We need to bring them in and listen, let them speak. We support them. I try to do that a lot. My grandson is a lot of times at protests with us since he was a munchkin, and I listen to him and he'll say, "What about this grandma?" He has actually told House Rep. Yusef Rabhi, "Do you know we're at a water event?" and he looks at him, and he says, "Why do you have a Nestle Bottle?" Yusef is like, "Oh my God. I forget whose grandkid this is." We have to listen. We shouldn't be using Nestle bottles. We should not be using any water bottles as far as I'm concerned. Somebody somewhere is fighting for their water because of some corporation that's providing bottles. We have to listen to our children and the young people. Let them

lead. Let them guide. Give them a seat at the table. Bring them in. That is how the Anishinaabek Caucus is here. Because we weren't invited to the table. We weren't there. And I said, "Oh, no. We are going to be at the table, even if we got to knock down doors and bring chairs." And that's where we're at with it. Make room. Right, Everybody?

Paul Mohai: Thank you very much, Andrea. And Theresa, what about you? What advice would you give?

Theresa Landrum: The advice I have for the young people is to realize your power. And remember, for the people, by the people, and of the people. This is your democracy. So put democracy back in our country. Put it back in our constitution and realize your power. And if you know somebody that is not registered to vote, get them out to register to vote. I mean, start this mass movement. You have to start it at the university level. You have to start it at the grade school level, high school level. To teach them that their vote counts so that they won't grow up in a community and realize that the people around you have felt hopeless and helpless for years. Because you're there pushing them. You're the forces. Say, "Nope. You don't have to be hopeless anymore. Nope. You don't have to feel helpless anymore because we're here to support you." We need to realize the deep fabric of America. Racism is interwoven into it. And we have to start cutting that out. And we have to start challenging. It's not going to take brown and black people. It's going to take young white people. And I hope you get that. To knock on those doors. If they don't open, kick them down.

Paul Mohai: Thank you very much Theresa. Well, we're close to being out of time. But I do want to ask the panelists, is there one thing that you'd like to say that you didn't get a chance to say, while this panel is still convened? I don't want to put anybody on the spot on that. But is there anything that you'd like to say as a final remark?

Theresa Landrum: Miss Wilkins hit on it. What we have are weak laws. They don't protect you. And if you know it or not, the Environmental Protection Agency doesn't have as much power as you think, nor does the EGLE (Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy). I don't care what they change their name to, they still operate in those silos. You still have those old, white mentality people sitting in a chair. We have to go. And we need to talk to our governor. Get them out of there. They've been there twenty, thirty-years. That's too long because they still have that old mentality. And they're not going to look at a community and realize that there are human lives that they are impacting. "Well, we're just going by the laws. Our hands are tied." Get to your state reps. Like right now, call your state reps.

I have to say, one of the representatives in Michigan has made a big mistake. He has supported a bill that will take twenty-one million dollars away from the bottle deposits, away from moneys that will clean up contaminated sites. We just heard about the green ooze (discovered 20 December 2019, leaking onto Interstate highway I-696 in Madison Heights), and hundreds of other sites that need clean-up. They're going to de-fund that if this passes. Call them up. Isaac Robertson is one of our representatives. Tell him he's wrong. And the guy that sponsored it is (Brandt) Iden. Call his office and say, don't do that. Because Michigan has a pollution problem and they're not admitting it. PFOS to SO₂ to hexavalent chromium, lead. Flint should not have happened. So in Michigan, everything is Flint in Michigan.

Paul Mohai: Thank you Theresa. Any more final thoughts?

Andrea Pierce: Yes, I would like to say raise your children to vote. When I had my daughter, I would take her to the voting booth with me—she sat there. I lived in Detroit then, we were (zip code) 48209 at that time, and it would be an hour and a half, two hours, to get into the polling area and she'd bring a box of crayons, and we sat there. I raised my daughter to vote. It was a common thing—we went and voted. She is raising my grandson. She takes him to vote. We talk about voting. We talk about candidates. We talk about issues. If they don't know and they don't understand it, then they can't make decisions or think about it or ask questions. They can't learn. You have to make voting a normal part of life. Talking about voting, we have House bills out there that are to protect our water. We have (bills) 5290, 5291, 5292. Yousef Rahbi, Laurie Pohutsky, and Rachel Hood have introduced them and it is the Water Protection Act. It is to put the water in a public trust; the groundwater. We can control that. It closes a small bottle loophole. Department of Natural Resources will have more abilities to enforce the water laws, and it will keep our water in the Great Lakes Basin—so it's not being shipped all over the world. We need to call up your house reps and talk to them about this. We need to get this passed. Eighty thousand comments were ignored by MDEQ. That says WE don't matter. Let's show them how much we do matter.

Paul Mohai: Thank you, Andrea.

Donele Wilkins: I will end with this and say that it is not OK: if we have children that cannot breathe; if we have households that cannot drink safe water; if we have schools that aren't clean enough and are triggering asthma attacks and those kinds of things. It's not OK. My kids deserve to breathe clean air like anybody else's. My children deserve to be on playgrounds free from contamination, and to be in schools safe, where they can learn and they can thrive. It's not OK. And if I

leave you with anything, walk away with that it's not OK. It takes all of us to make it right for the least of us, OK? That's it.

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Notes

- a. Line 5 is a 645-mile light crude and natural gas liquids pipeline owned and operated by Enbridge Inc. It travels through Michigan's Upper and Lower Peninsulas.
- b. Jannan Cornstalk is a citizen of the Little Traverse Bay Bands of Odawa Indians and an organizer of Pipe Out Paddle Up Flotilla protests against Enbridge's Line 5 pipeline under the Mackinac Straits.
- c. The MDEQ was reorganized into the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy by Governor Gretchen Whitmer's Executive Order of February 2019.

Authors' and Panelists' Biographies

Andrea Pierce was raised in lower Michigan and is a registered member of Little Traverse Bay Bands of Odawa Indians. Andrea was a board member of North American Indian Association of Detroit and served as a trustee and vice president from 2003 to 2010. She is currently the chair and founder of the Anishinaabek Caucus, Idle No More Michigan.

Donele Wilkins is the president/CEO of the Green Door Initiative in Detroit, MI. She has demonstrated servant leadership in her hometown Detroit for nearly twenty years. She has led the local movement for EJ on the frontlines and set the direction to achieving true sustainability for all. Her achievements include participating in the development and adoption of an EJ policy in the state of Michigan, and conceiving and launching Detroit's first Green Jobs Training Program. She's been an advocate for citizen involvement in brownfields redevelopment and other environmental policies, placing environmental stewardship on the agenda of many community leaders and decision makers. Wilkins is noted for inspiring young people to take a lead in their communities.

Theresa Landrum, a community organizer and activist, has been fighting against Environmental injustices for more than twenty years. She is co-founder of the 48217 Community and Environmental Health Organization, a resident-based advocacy group that fights heavy polluting industries' encroachment on residential neighborhoods. Landrum is a member and volunteer of the Sierra Club. She is acting Communications Liaison for the Original United Citizens of Southwest Detroit and a member of the Community Advisory Panel at the Marathon Petroleum Corporation, and newly elected board member at Southwest Detroit Environmental Vision. Landrum is one of Southwest Detroit 48217's (an area deemed the most polluted zip code in Michigan) most outspoken community activists where she promotes "Green Jobs less Emissions" for a cleaner environment. Landrum is a former member of the Environmental Justice Working Group 2017/2018 convened by former Governor Rick Snyder and currently sits on the Michigan Advisory Council on Environmental Justice appointed by Governor Gretchen Whitmer. Her commitment is to assure that community has a seat at the table.

Paul Mohai is a professor in the School for Environment and Sustainability at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. In 1990, he co-organized with Prof. Bunyan Bryant the "Michigan Conference on Race and the Incidence of Environmental Hazards." He is a co-founder of the EJ program at Michigan and a major contributor to the growing body of quantitative research examining disproportionate environmental burdens and their impacts on low-income and people-of-color communities. He has served on the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's National Environmental Justice Advisory Council and the Michigan Advisory Council on Environmental Justice and has provided testimony on EJ to the U.S. House of Representatives, the U.S. Senate, and the Michigan Civil Rights Commission.

Bunyan Bryant is professor emeritus in the School for Environment and Sustainability (SEAS) at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. In 1990, he co-organized with Prof. Paul Mohai the "Michigan Conference on Race and the Incidence of Environmental Hazards." He was instrumental in establishing SEAS' Environmental Justice Program, served as a director of the Environmental Justice Initiative and coordinator of SEAS Environmental Justice Program, and was a co-founder of Detroiters Working for Environmental Justice. Prof. Bryant's research interests include both domestic and international foci, particularly on climate justice. In addition to his forty-year devotion to SEAS, Bryant was a member of the Urban

Technological and Environmental Planning Program and held an adjunct position with the Center of Afro-American and African Studies.

Craig Slatin is professor emeritus in the Department of Public Health, College of Health Sciences, University of Massachusetts Lowell. His work has addressed health

and safety training, occupational and environmental health policy issues such as health inequality, healthcare and other industrial sectors, and sustainable production and climate change and health. Slatin is the editor of *New Solutions: A Journal of Environmental and Occupational Health Policy* (SAGE Publications).