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Angelo Taranto > Secretary/Treasurer, Allegheny County Clean Air Now

change MAKERS

As local residents of the Pittsburgh region become more concerned about environmental conditions, grassroots organizations and other groups are providing individuals with opportunities to get involved and to add more diverse perspectives to the environmental movement.

By Elwin Green | Photos by Elan Mizrahi

In June 2014, the Neville Island Good Neighbor Committee decided to change the group's name.

For years, the committee had sought greater regulation of the Shenango coke processing facility on Neville Island. The plant, almost 10 miles northwest of Pittsburgh, was owned by Detroit-based DTE Energy and spewed pollutants into the air near and far.

"We were trying to be good neighbors," said Angelo Taranto, 73, who lived in Emsworth, one of the affected communities at the time. "The owners of the Shenango Coke Works were not."

The group became Allegheny County Clean Air Now, and the sense of urgency conveyed by the new name was demonstrated by a ramping up of its efforts. Having already filed complaints with the Allegheny County Health Department, the group got health department members to attend its meetings and hear from residents directly.

"There were pretty dramatic stories," said Mr. Taranto, now secretary and treasurer of ACCAN, "including [from] people who had moved from other areas ... having their asthma aggravated, asthma that hadn't been a problem for years."

ACCAN members bought shares of DTE stock and began attending shareholder meetings, where they questioned company officials about the lack of response to their concerns. They wrote letters to the editors of local publications.

And they formed a partnership with Carnegie Mellon University's Community Robotics, Education and Technology Empowerment (CREATE) Lab that resulted in the lab installing a video camera to monitor the coke works' emissions — and to stream live video over the internet, 24/7, for public viewing.

At a November 2015 meeting, with more than 150 people in attendance — including representatives from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency — CREATE Lab staff

presented videos documenting pollution events. The next month, DTE announced the coke works' closure, which occurred in January 2016.

The company cited market conditions as the reason for the closure. "We do believe our activism had a lot to do with it," Mr. Taranto said.

In any case, area residents have seen improved health outcomes, said Dr. Deborah Gentile, medical director at Community Partners in Asthma Care.

In 2014, she led a study of 146 children in Avalon's and Bellevue's K-5 schools that showed more than a quarter — 25.3 percent — had been diagnosed with asthma, a rate much higher than state and national averages of 6 to 7 percent.

In a 2017 follow-up study of 153 children, 19.1 percent reported physician-diagnosed asthma — still a high number but significantly less than in 2014.

ACCAN's story is just one example of southwestern Pennsylvania communities learning to have more of a say in what happens to and around them concerning the environment. Sometimes that takes the form of education and activism at the narrowly local level. At other times, citizens organize across a broader geography.

Building advocacy regionally

The Center for Coalfield Justice, based in Washington, Pennsylvania, works in two counties south of Pittsburgh, Washington and Greene, to help residents gain the knowledge and skills to hold fossil fuel companies to account in their resources extraction.

Executive Director Veronica Coptis grew up in the area, but that still makes her a relative newcomer among neighbors whose families have lived there for generations. For her, their tenure makes it all the more important that they be equipped for, and included in, decision making.

"I just think it's imperative and critical that those folks are coming from the communities because what we are fighting is outside companies coming and exploiting our communities," she said. "And the environmental movement at large has replicated that same problem sometimes in frontline communities, by having outsiders come in with their issue agenda and not actually understanding complex dynamics on the ground in the community."

The Center for Coalfield Justice resisted that impulse by reconfiguring staff, which once consisted primarily of Pittsburgh commuters. Now eight of its 10 staffers are local residents.

But beyond that, the group's entire approach to issues, such as the impacts of longwall mining, coal refuse and slurry, fracking, and coal ash, centers on developing resident leadership.

“We fully believe that we’re only advancing our communities if we’re equipping our residents, our neighbors and our communities to be able to identify the problem, analyze the power dynamics, and find and develop the tools they need to make it work for them, no matter what the issue is,” Ms. Coptis said.

The center has cultivated such leadership by offering residents training on such topics as how to testify before government bodies, how to question officials and candidates for office about their plans to help the region transition away from a fossil fuel-based economy, and what powers specific government officials, such as planning commissioners, actually have.

Expanding representation generationally

Such training may be viewed as part of a larger process of providing more information to more people than those people have had in the past, or, to put it another way, democratizing information. For some, the phrase may suggest that information was deliberately withheld.

But that need not be the case. Heinz Endowments Equitable Development Program Officer Karen Abrams described how information access could be limited simply by defaulting to habitual behavior.

“The institutions that are supposed to address these things are not responsive to people of color, Black people specifically, in this region,” she said. “On the flip side of that, historically the institutions that are supposed to be responsive to community concerns — whether they’re grassroots nonprofits, or government agencies, or colleges and universities — are not in the practice of hiring people who are from these communities... and who can relate to these communities in ways that they can’t.”

The lack of community members in agency spaces combines with the lack of agency community members feel in their own spaces to create a disconnect, a failure to communicate.

“There is a community of [Black] people who talk about environmental issues but not in the ways that folks in power talk about environmental issues,” Ms. Abrams said.

The Black Environmental Collective works to bridge that gap between environmental organizations and Black people who care about the environment but also want to pursue environmental justice.

Founder Dr. Jamil Bey formed the group four years ago after attending a University of Pittsburgh event featuring Jacqui Patterson, then the senior director of the NAACP Environmental and Climate Justice Project. In an audience of about 115 people, eight were Black.

“That told me that we as a people were not organized around those issues,” he said. So, the Black people at the event

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Veronica Coptis > Executive Director, Center for Coalfield Justice

asked Ms. Patterson for a breakfast meeting the next day. She agreed, and they reached out to their networks. Less than 12 hours later, 19 people showed up for a breakfast meeting. The ensuing conversations resulted in the group establishing priorities for its members’ work going forward.

They recognized that, like the residents served by the Center for Coalfield Justice, Black citizens were often under-represented in environmental groups that came to work in their communities. So, they prioritized grooming young people to join those organizations “so that they could be more responsive and respectful around these priorities,” Dr. Bey said.

To that end, the Black Environmental Collective created a training program, focused on young adults ages 18 to 22, that has placed more than 30 people on the boards of such environmental organizations as Grounded Strategies (formerly G-TECH Strategies), Landforce and Allegheny Clean Ways.

Alyssa Lyon, who had been sustainable communities director at the Green Building Alliance, became the collective’s director in March and hopes to launch an enhanced version of the board development process in the first quarter of 2022.

The new process will include what she called “two other prongs.” The first prong will focus on the board candidates’ mental health and wellness by helping them to consider such questions as: “Is this board good for you?” “How do you deal with microaggressions?” “How do you deal with being possibly the only Black person on your board?”

The second prong will help recruiters develop strategies not just for recruiting board members from diverse backgrounds but also for retaining them.

“The boards that are coming to us have been traditionally white,” she said. “Now, since being Black is ‘in,’... people are looking to diversify their boards. The problem is, they’ve never really truly closely interacted with people of color that way.

“So how can we equip those board members and have honest conversations about how they can recruit and retain board members of color?”

Finally, she hopes to add a process for following up to see how new board members are doing six months to a year later.

As a Heinz Endowments grantee, the collective’s work to help environmental organizations diversify their



boards is in line with the Endowments' commitment to promoting diversity.

"As I work through my conversations with each group we fund," said Phil Johnson, the Endowments' senior program director for Environment & Health, "I always do check-ins with them on diversity, diversification training, and what I would call indicators of the group's movement in the direction of having their staff and leadership be more representative of the communities that they work in. Over the past three to five years, it's become much more of a priority for groups in the region."

Creating diversity intentionally

PennFuture, a statewide environmental advocacy organization, completed its current strategic plan in 2018, a plan that placed an emphasis on diversity and equity.

"The plan captured a set of aspirations," said President and CEO Jacquelyn Bonomo. "Where it became real was how we go about the implementation of those aspirations."

George Floyd's murder "added an urgency to the work," she said, sparking internal conversations about "the history of the environmental movement promulgating white supremacy."

In June, as protests against police brutality and white supremacy surged worldwide, PennFuture opened an office in Erie to launch its "Our Water, Our Future" campaign.

"When we landed in Erie and put together this clean water agenda, we had to struggle pretty mightily to build relationships and trust with communities of color ... We wanted to give them a voice and perspective in this agenda that we were formulating."

Perhaps the most important expression of the desire to dismantle racism is the current composition of PennFuture's board of directors. Thirteen of 18 seats are filled. One board member is Indian and one African American. But the empty seats are the most telling.

"We are holding those five other spaces open with the aspiration to fill them with additional diversity," Ms. Bonomo said.

That intentional holding of space is a sign of hope for a future in which efforts to disempower, if not eliminate, racism continue to increase across many sectors, including environmental advocacy.

As Ms. Abrams put it, "It's an exciting time. It's a scary time. There has to be a way for us all to work together." **h**

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Alyssa Lyon > Director, Black Environmental Collective