



*In collaboration with*

**VERONICA CARTER**

**Town of Leland Councilmember**

**Date:** February 21, 2023

**Interviewer(s):** Rachel Kamis

**00:00 Rachel Kamis** Okay, so I'll do some introductions. Hi, I'm Rachel. I'm a junior here at Duke. I study Cultural Anthropology and Psychology, and I'm working with Cameron (Oglesby) on this project to record oral histories, of both environmental justice advocates, as well as community members (of) the Piney Woods Free Union.

We're doing this project in collaboration with William Barber III, and the Rural Beacon Initiative. The recordings, when they're done, we'll transcribe it, and then send the materials back to you. And then eventually, the recordings will be—one, they'll be archived in Duke Archives; Then they'll also potentially go up on the Rural Beacon Initiative's website, if you're okay with that, and then we will also likely be creating a website for our project, and it would go up there. But all this is your story, it's your oral history, so whatever you want to be shown—if you don't want your story shown, that's OK. Do you have any questions about that?

**01:20 Veronica Carter** Nope. Sounds good.

**01:23 R.K.** OK. Well, I guess you can start by, I just want to ask you to tell me a little bit about yourself.

**01:33 V.C.** My name is Veronica Carter, and I am not a native North Carolinian. I moved here about 19 years ago, with my late father, Earl Carter. We—he moved here from Brooklyn, New York, where I grew up, I moved here from New Jersey. I am a retired Army officer. I spent 20 years in the Army. And I ended up back in the New York metropolitan area towards the end of my career. I'm an only child. So, it was my mother, my father, and me for

many years, and when I first retired from the military, my mom was still alive, but was not in the best of health. And actually within six months of my retirement, she passed away from a massive stroke, which is a little bit of a significant emotional event, as you can imagine, for both myself and my dad. Not having any siblings, that kinda meant that looking after my dad, who was mourning my mother, fell on me. But also about six months after I retired from the Army, I started working at the UN, at the United Nations, at the Department of Peacekeeping Operations<sup>1</sup> as a Logistics Desk Officer in the Africa unit. And so, we were actually responsible for doing logistics for new and ongoing UN peacekeeping missions. And I had responsibility for several—and this was in 2002/2003—I had several large missions; One in Sierra Leone, one in the Congo, a couple of new missions in Liberia and the Ivory Coast/Côte d’Ivoire. And so I was on very short notice, sometimes going to those countries, while my father, who was mourning and not in good health himself, was sitting alone in the same apartment that my parents had lived in for close to 50 years. And so, I realized, after a couple of those trips, and seeing my dad when I got back, that that this wasn't gonna work. I was worried about him. He wasn't always taking good care of himself, there was nobody else there that I really trusted to look after him. So, I said, “OK.” Initially, when you sign on with the UN, you're there for two years, and then I guess both the UN gets to evaluate you, and you get to evaluate the UN as to whether or not you wanna stay, and I had already decided I was going to leave when the two years was up.

And so, we had relatives that were here in North Carolina, (who) had been here since 1990. I had visited Wilmington a number of times, and said, “This is a pretty nice little area. I kinda like this. It’s got a little city, it's got water, I like water,” and (it had) family members who I liked—which, you don’t always like your family members, you can't choose your family (like) you can choose your friends, but these I liked. So, I said, “Hmm, this could be a good move.” And more importantly, my dad’s older sister was one of those family members, and so I said, “OK. If I’m going to move my dad for the first time in 50 years, it probably ought not just be me and him at the new location; It would be nice if he had someone else that he knew and felt comfortable with. And so that's how we ended up in the Leland area.

And so, there were a lot of good things happening. He got his first house. I grew up in a four-story walk-up, as we call it in New York, which meant it's a four-story apartment building without an

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Peace Operations\* (DPO)

elevator. He never had a house before, but he got a little three-bedroom, two-bath house on a half-acre of land, and he was very, very happy. We both were kind of sad that my mom didn't get to see it and enjoy it, but, got him out of New York. He had been the kind of husband that relied on his wife for his social connections, so this meant that he had to go out and make his own friends. And he did just that, he did pretty good, but I also realized that with him moving for the first time in 50 years, I probably needed to stay with him for a little bit, and not just throw him out there, because when we finally put money down on the land for the house, I think he called me five times within, like two hours, (while I was) at work, kinda asking all kinds of questions and nervous, and I, in the 20 years I was in the military, I moved 11 times, and so moving for me was like, "OK, I guess I'm moving." Moving for him was like, "Aahh!" And so, I said, "OK." I gotta be the good daughter. "I will go, and I will help you move and help you get settled." And then, when I think he's settled, I need to move close, but not in the same place, because I also knew that my father at that point—he was in his 70s—was pretty self-sufficient. He could cook, he could clean, he could drive, and I didn't want him to become so dependent on me that he lost some of that those abilities.

And so about probably a month or so after we got here, my Dad had just come back from the Piggly Wiggly—I know that sounds really Southern, but yeah, we have a Piggly Wiggly here—and he had some handmade pamphlets and they were from people who said, "We have to stop the landfill." And he brought them to me and he said—and my dad's a retired mail man; let me also say I'm a first-generation college graduate. My mom and dad both graduated from high school. My mom had three other siblings—there were four in her family; My father is one of 13, so there was a lot. They're both from West Virginia. They're both children of coal miners, both my grandfathers were coal miners, and neither of my grandfathers made it past the sixth grade, but they ensured that all of their children made it at least past high school. And on my mother's side of the family, no one at that point had gone to college, until I did.

And so... I'm sharing that with you to say that a lot of times, my parents would get their money's worth from my college degree. Because, no matter where I was stationed in the world, and my mother was brilliant. My mother could have gone to any college, I feel very sure of, and have done well. But she just never had those opportunities and possibilities. But she decided she was gonna live vicariously through me. So... she was also very brilliant with

money. She was an assistant bookkeeper, and she started investing in the stock market, while I was in the military, and the first time she decided to buy some stock, she got the prospectus, she read it, and she express-mailed it to me, in Germany—with a note that said, “I’m gonna call you on Sunday, be ready to talk about this, OK?”

And so, she would say, “OK, so did you read what I sent you?” “Yeah, I did.” “What’d you think?” (I’m like) “Ma, are you trying to invest in the stock market?” She goes, “Yeah, I was talking to the guy at the bank, and he said this might be good,” and she said, “I’m looking at the return. You know, we’re only getting this much interest on our savings, and I think this will be good in the long term, and it didn’t seem to be losing,” and I mean she had done all this research, and I was like, “OK, how much money are you planning to invest, Mom?” And so, she did quite well. Let me just say this, much to my surprise—when I suddenly took over the money when she passed away—she did quite well. So again, I have no doubt she woulda done well in college, had she had the opportunity to go. But my dad and mom, whenever they found anything that they thought they kind of understood, they would bring it to me, even if they understood it, just to kind of, bounce it off me, and say, “What do you think? Let me give my money’s worth of this education that you got here, let me see what you think about this.”

And so, my dad brings these leaflets home to me, and he says, “Listen, these people were giving these out outside of the Piggly Wiggly, and this doesn’t sound like a good thing. They’re gonna put a landfill like five miles from here.” And he said, “They’re having a meeting at one of the churches, I think I’m gonna go.”

Now in my mind, I kinda looked at the leaflet, went, “OK.” But I was more proud of my dad. I mean, this guy is a retired mailman. He’s not exactly a social justice kinda fighter. He and my mom raised me in the Civil Rights era to be very aware of what was going on, and be supportive, and to stand up for my rights and all that, but they weren’t out there marching on picket lines with their only child. We voted in every election, they took me with them to go vote, they taught me the importance of voting, and how particularly people of color and African Americans in the South were segregated and were unable to vote, were basically denied their right to vote through force, and so—but to see my dad suddenly decide he was gonna be an activist like, “I’m going to go to this meeting and find out what they’re talking about, and I’ll come back and tell you about it”... I’m like, “OK!” I was kinda

happy like, “Yeah, go ahead, dad, go, go! Let's see what happens.” And when he came back, he said, “You know what, I think they've got something here, but I want you to go with me to the next meeting.” And I'm thinking, “Agh. OK, Dad, what happened?” He said, “They kinda need you.” (I said) “What do you mean, they need me?” He said, “They weren't kinda organized; They need you.” “Did you volunteer me for something, Daddy?” He's like, “I told them I was gonna bring you, that you were an Army officer.” I'm like “Great, Dad.”

OK, so that's how I got into being an activist, to be very blunt with you. I went to the next meeting with my dad. And I realized, ‘maybe they do need me.’ When you're any leader in the military, you learn how to organize, you learn how to get different people from different backgrounds to do stuff. You can, surely you can give them an order, but it's so much better if you can get them to do it on their own accord. And so, you learn group dynamics, you learn decision-making, you learn problem-solving, you learn to be organized, you learn how to identify a problem, come up with possible courses of actions to solve that problem, and figure out what resources you need to get there; And then you implement all of those things, and then, when you're finished, you go, “OK, how did that work? Let's see how we need to adjust,” and then go back and fight the next battle, and that's kind of what he meant when he said they needed me.

Well, it turned out at that meeting there was a retired Naval Commander and a retired Air Force Master Sergeant. And the three of us, I guess spotted each other, must have been our military bearing or something, and we and a retired social worker and a couple of other retired professionals: one current lawyer, practicing lawyer, decided, “OK, let's form a 501(c)(3), let's get organized, let's figure out how we can stop this, let's figure out what's going on, let's just not be these—” What they were claiming (was) just, ‘these people who don't want any development, they don't want any, the not in my backyard, the NIMBY folks’— “Let's figure out if this is really dangerous and be able to prove it. Let's prove them wrong that we're [not] just a bunch of screaming tree-hugging Liberals. No, we actually have some points here.”

And by the way, this wasn't a household landfill. This was going to be auto shredder residue,<sup>2</sup> which is when, after you've taken everything that you can possibly recycle out of a car, there's still stuff left; That stuff is kinda melted down. And in some countries,

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<sup>2</sup> Automobile shredder residue (ASR)

like China, India, and I think Pakistan, maybe Bangladesh, [but] not to the full extent as China and India—they will use some of those materials for streets, sidewalks, different things like that. But it is been proven that you can't get everything out of those materials; i.e., You can't get all the carcinogens. You're melting down mercury, the ignition switches, you're melting down mercury, you're melting down other things that are carcinogenic, and so this auto shredder residue, or auto fluff is a nickname, has a great deal of carcinogenic qualities to it. And that it also tends to be spontaneously combustible. It will catch on fire. And if it's in water, it will leach—those carcinogenics will leach out—and they were talking about putting it in landfills. And we're on the coast, and we're probably at best, 12 to 15 feet above sea level, at best, depending on what the location is, and most liners leak. So, if you're putting this stuff in a liner that potentially is near a water table, and the liner is eventually gonna leak, what—you're basically asking for this carcinogenic leaching to go into people's drinking waters, the aquifer, potentially wells—there's still people on wells back then, this is 19 years ago.

And so, all of these things were troublesome to us. And oh, by the way, they were saying that they wanted to go as high as 350 feet tall. Now this is the coast; If you've ever been to the coastal planes, we don't have anything that's 350 feet tall here, OK?

**14:45 R.K.**

**I've been to Wilmington.**

**14:46 V.C.**

Yeah, you're not seeing anythin' (that tall). Maybe a building—matta fact, I think the tallest building might be PPD<sup>3</sup> and I think it's about 200 feet tall. So, 350 feet tall is kinda tall. But they told us not to worry, we wouldn't notice it I cause they were gonna put flowers, they were gonna put dirt on it and grow grass and put trees on it. And I said, "Oh, it's gonna be like Mount Rushmore or something. It's gonna be like the—we're gonna have our own little Redwood Forest here on the coastal planes, we won't notice that, surely." And so, we began to call it Mount Fluffmore. And we said, "Well, what are you gonna do about this stuff? You pile it into all of this, what happens during hurricanes? Now because we were at that point just starting to grow here in the Leland/Wilmington area, we had a lot of people coming to this area, who were very, very—and retirees—who were very, very upset to hear that their little piece of Paradise, was about to be invaded by this 350-foot tall mountain of stuff that could be in up to 750 acres of property.

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<sup>3</sup> Thermo Fisher Scientific building, known as the PPD until 2021.

And so, they were coming, started coming to our meetings and started joining forces. A couple of them live near this company's plants in other parts of the country. So, one of them called, one who was a retired chemist, of all things, called his brother-in-law, had his brother-in-law get to the plant near where he lived, and got us a little sample of the stuff, which we sent away to a lab and had it analyzed. And what I, what really shocked me was when we got samples of it, it looked like shrapnel that I had seen walkin' the battlefields of Verdun in France. And I'm like, "Oh, great, so, we're gonna have these little pieces of carcinogenic shrapnel flying around in the middle of a category 1 hurricane, with 74-mile-an-hour winds; What could possibly go wrong, with having shrapnel flying around with hurricane-force winds?"

So that's how I got involved in being an environmental activist. But then I noticed that one of our big problems was this piece of property was technically in the town of Navassa, and I say technically, because it was a satellite annexation; All of the property around it was not in the town of Navassa, so none of those residents who would have been abutting this property had any rights or say in this particular use of the property—

**17:05 R.K. Was that on purpose, do you think?**

**17:06 V.C.** Oh absolutely, absolutely. And so, the town of Navassa is a predominantly African American town still to this day. Back then, it was about 90 / 94 percent African American. Now it's down to about 70% African American, with growth, and with people moving in. Our county, Brunswick County, is about 86 percent White. So, think about that, you've got a 90 percent Black town, and then an 80, almost 90 percent White county.

**17:40 R.K. Yeah.**

**17:41 V.C.** And you're about to put this auto shredder residue mess in the Black town. And so I started learning more about this Black town, because I live in Leland—which is the neighbor to Navassa, (and is) a predominantly White town. It's about 90 percent White, we might be up to, we're getting close to 10 percent—let me back up—it's probably about 86% White, because I think we're about 8.7 percent African American, with probably about 2 percent Asian, and then a 1 percent of a mixture of some other folk.

And so, I started looking into Navassa and finding out like, ‘why aren’t they growing?’ Because everywhere else was growing, around—Leland was just exploding with growth, it still is. And it turns out Navassa had a Superfund site, and it had five brownfields,<sup>4</sup> and now was about to put this monstrosity that, oh, by the way, spontaneously combusts. And one of the things that they told the town was, ‘we’re gonna give you a fire station.’ The (town) had a volunteer fire department—they still do. So, ‘we’re gonna give you a fire department.’ And the more research we did on this, I said, “Of course they are, ‘cause this stuff catches on fire; That’s not doing anything for the town—they’re trying to save their landfill.” OK? So that’s when I was introduced to the concept of environmental justice. And I was like, ‘this is just wrong; You can’t tell me it’s coincidental that all of the crap, all of the nonsense in this county, is all in this one little area where the predominantly—the only Black municipality—is. That can’t be coincidental.’ Now, learning a lot more about the town and the county since then, there were advantages to the Black population. Remember, this is during segregation over the years of having a lot of these industrial bases there, because it gave them the only jobs—well-paid jobs at the time that they would have gotten. There were fertilizer plants, there were oil refineries, there were meat-packing plants; All of these things, as you know, are very, very pollutant type of industries. And they are usually undesirable in “nice neighborhoods.” But they’re also jobs, and if you live in a segregated society where you can’t just go out and get any job, whether you’re qualified or not, then some job is better than no job.

**20:22 R.K.**

**Yeah.**

**20:23 V.C.**

And so that is part of the polluters—I call it Polluters Handbook—where they will dangle jobs to a lot of these communities, the BIPOC communities to say, “Hey, you know what, look, we’re your friends, we’re giving you jobs.” And folks will say, “Oh OK, we gotta pay bills, so, sure,” not realizing that there may be other industries and better ways to help their communities. So bottom line was, we were able to stop this, and I say we—it was a coalition, it wasn’t just the new people, or just the neighbors. There were people in the town of Navassa who were not happy with this either. We found out that there were six other mega landfills about to be permitted in the state of North Carolina, and that’s how we got the Solid Waste Management Act passed in 2007. And it, to this day, is the only permitting statute that takes

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<sup>4</sup> Land that is abandoned or underutilized due to pollution from industrial use.



environmental justice into account, where DEQ<sup>5</sup> has the tool of saying, “Hey, this is an environmental justice community; What are you doing to prevent injustice from happening?” It is the only permit—not air, not water, but the Solid Waste Management Act still has that in it, because of that fight where we realized, “Oh, by the way, all those mega landfills were either in African American, Indigenous, or Hispanic communities.”

So that's how I got into environmental justice. I think I was both fascinated and appalled, that it was like this whole school of people that were making money because they were basically purposefully going to poor communities of color and exploiting them, because of their weaknesses and because of their poverty. And it just seemed morally corrupt to me, like, you're not helping these folks. But you're telling them you're helping them because you're throwing them some carrots. You're making millions of dollars, at their expense, and then you will leave them later on to clean up this mess, and it will either become a brownfield or a Superfund site down the road.

So, that's my journey into the environmental justice fight. Now once we prevented that landfill from happening, I still lived here, Navassa was still my neighbor, and I felt obliged—I remember going to meet the mayor, who is still the mayor, by the way, at the town, at the time, and saying to him, “I know you don't know me, I know we've just kinda been on opposite sides of this in a way, but I want to tell you that whatever I can do to help your town, I'm gonna try my best to do it. You have my word, which may not mean anything to you, but I am an Army officer, my word is my bond. I'm gonna try to help you get and bring some affordable housing, or whatever I can do.”

And so, I did serve on the Board of Directors for Habitat for Humanity. There are Habitat homes now in Navassa. I have been working with them on other—getting them resources, connecting them with folks from the Superfund (Community) Engagement Core group there at Duke, the Nicholas School. We've got them (along) with the UNCW<sup>6</sup> School of Nursing. So, they brought in health—there are no doctors, right now, in the town of Navassa, there's no pharmacy, there's frankly no supermarket, there's a lot of again, very, very typical environmental justice community issues there. We've gotten local doctors to set up health clinics.

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<sup>5</sup> Department of Environmental Quality

<sup>6</sup> University of North Carolina Wilmington

- 24:02 R.K. How many people are in Navassa?**
- 24:03 V.C.** Currently I think there's about 1,500 based on the 2020 Census. It probably might be, in the last couple years, up to maybe 16, 1,700. But they have permitted a couple of planned unit developments, or PUDs, and so they will have subdivisions, so they will have soon a subdivision of about 2,500 homes, and then another subdivision of about 3,500 homes. Now, quick math, two people per house, that means that there will be three times as many people in Navassa than there are now, and that those people probably aren't gonna look like the current population of Navassa, either. So, there's already a gentrification thing that's gonna happen, very soon, and eventually to the town.
- 24:54 R.K. Yeah. And I'm sorry, I interrupted what you were saying— what were you in the middle of saying (before)?**
- 24:58 V.C.** That's kind of what I've been doing, since 2007, is trying to help the town look for opportunities, connect them with people that might be able to help them clean up their brownfields, clean up—the Superfund site is already being cleaned up, as a result of a bankruptcy lawsuit that ended up going against the company that polluted; It's called Kerr-McGee (Corporation). There are a number of Kerr-McGee sites. The EPA is involved, DEQ is involved, they're both benefactors, and... a company called the Multistate (Environmental Response) Trust was appointed by the Bankruptcy Court judge to oversee the cleanup of the site, which is riverfront property in Navassa, and right now, in our region, there is an explosion of development, and so riverfront property is like a premium deal. And Navassa was built on what's called the bluffs. If you say you've been down here, you know that on the Wilmington side of the river, they're built kinda higher up, on high ground. Well, Navassa happens to have some of the highest ground, along the Cape Fear and Brunswick river(s). And so that particular area near where the Superfund (site) is is actually very, very marketable property. So, they've been cleaning it up. They found some creosote. It was a creosote factory, and creosote is heavier than water and a whole lot of other stuff, 'cause they've actually found creosote 100 feet down, yeah, and it's along the river, and it's in the marshes, and there's parts of it that probably

aren't ever going to get cleaned up; They're just gonna have to be contained and monitored forever, because there's not really a good way to clean `em up and not screw up some other stuff. (In) some of the marshes, the creosote has gone down below the marshes, but now there is actually primary nursery areas above it. And so, they've been monitoring the fish to—doing fish samples to see if they are experiencing any of the pollutants from the creosote. Interestingly, they're not, they're getting it from other stuff that's in the water. It's the Cape Fear—there is a lot of stuff in the water. But they are still primary nursery areas, and so add to the health of the river overall. So it's a long run there...

So that's for the marshland, but just recently, the Multistate (Environmental Response) Trust agreed to convey a little under 30 acres of land to the town and to the (North Carolina) Coastal Land Trust, and they're going to do something called a Heritage Center, a Moze Heritage Center.<sup>7</sup> On that property used to be a plantation, ironically, and so they'll be able to talk about their rice-growing heritage, their Gullah Geechee heritage. The residents of the Navassa are descendants of the Gullah Geechee people, who are the formerly enslaved people who were brought here from West Africa because of their rice-growing abilities. There are still people in Navassa who speak with the dialect of Gullah, and hopefully they'll be able to use that for an economic development driver, as well as capture their history. I'm familiar with oral history projects—an actual oral history project in the town of Navassa was done regarding the Gullah Geechee people by some students from UNCW, a few years ago.

**28:43 R.K.**

**That's great. Where is it now?**

**28:47 V.C.**

There is a book, there's a very small book. But it was done by a professor in the English department. I'll have to find—I think I have, somewhere back here I have a copy of the book, I'll find out who it is. But yeah, they came and interviewed a lot of the older people and captured their thoughts on the town, and what have

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<sup>7</sup>Proposed [Moze Heritage Center & Nature Park](#). Slated for former Superfund site.

you... And I'm sure the actual sound bites are somewhere archived in UNCW's collection.

**29:14 R.K.** **Yeah, no, definitely. I wanted to ask you to talk a little more about when you first got involved in forming the nonprofit, and fighting against the landfill, and then getting that act passed—can you talk more about like the process of making that happen?**

**29:35 V.C.** Wow. So, again, I moved here, in total, in February of 2004, and like I said, the act took three years, and so forming the nonprofit was something that, they had kinda started—the group that got my dad to come from the Piggly Wiggly—but because we got a local lawyer who owned property not too far away from where the landfill was going to be built, and a couple of retired lawyers who had just moved here, and again that Naval Commander, whose name is Mike Roberts, who still is in the area, and Leonard Jenkins, who was a native of this area, whose family grew up in this area, who had gone into the Air Force for a number of years, and then come back home and was now working for Brunswick County Schools. We all said, “OK, let's form the nonprofit; That way—because it's gonna take money to fight this. We're gonna need to, if they're putting out nice, shiny pamphlets to say, ‘Look, look, we're bringing jobs and prosperity to the area,’ we have to counter that, we have to be able to, one, counter it with facts.” Just like I said, we got the sample, and then took the sample to the lab, and could get those results and say, “See, this is what this means.”

I'm a very faithful person, so I believe divine providence helped us, because one of their, the Hugo Neu (Corporation) facilities in California caught fire, while we were fighting this... in Terminal Island, in Long Beach, California caught fire and burned for six hours. The LA Fire Department could not put it out for six hours, had to evacuate like 12 miles around the facility. And this was the same time we were busy telling people, “Hey, this stuff spontaneously combusts; They are not giving this town a fire department out of the goodness of their hearts, OK? Notice that the fire department they're giving them is right on the corner of their facility—that's not by coincidence.” And they were going, “No, these people don't—they're just a bunch of rabble rousers, pay no attention, pay no attention to the man behind the curtain, pay no attention to these people, they don't know what they're talking about.” And then, there it was on CNN News, with a spokesman—and their names were Neu, spelled Neu, not N-E-

W, but N-E-U. So here was this piece on CNN about this fire in Los Angeles that was burning for six hours, and they had to evacuate 12 miles, and there was a local reporter here, Ann McAdams, and I said, “By the way, next time you talk to them, ask them about their fire, in Los Angeles.” She's like, “What fire?” And so, I told her about it, and so she got a piece of the clip and downloaded it on a DVD, and she handed us a copy of it, thanking us for the tip about the fire, and we took it up to one of the state senators who was insistent that, “Nah, nah, we don't need any laws,” and we said, “By the way, next time you talk to your lobbyist from Hugo Neu, show him this clip.” And we played it for him. And he went, “Can I keep that?” And we went, “Absolutely, we made a copy just for you.” I said, “Notice the—when they tell you that it's not them, ask him about that unusual name of the spokesman for the company, N-E-U.” I said, “We've already looked up the company online, with the Security Exchange Commission, so we already know who he is and how he's related to the news, but if they lie to you again, here's your backup information.”

And so doing things like that, being able to provide decision-makers with facts, to counteract whatever that other person, the polluters, were saying, was helpful because it gave us credibility, and we knew that we needed that. I think when people organize, grassroots groups organize, they get labels. And you probably if, when you're doing your research, have heard these labels: We're tree huggers, we're NIMBYs, we just don't want it in our backyard—well yeah, no, I don't want any pollution in my backyard, I don't want something that can potentially kill me in my backyard, I don't know if that necessarily makes me a tree hugger, or I'm not ready to strap myself on the hull of a whaling ship or anything like that, but I want my property to maintain its value, and I wanna be able to drink the water, and I wanna be able to breathe the air; That doesn't make me necessarily the greenest of green environmentalists, but if you say it does, then I'm an environmentalist, `cause I think that's important.

So we organized in—we also realized, lemme just say this, that at the time, the African American town wanted this facility, because it was gonna bring them money. Because when you site a business in a town, there's certain fees and sales taxes and other things that they can collect from this. And they had no businesses at the time in the town, so the elected officials were basically for it at the time. And so, one of the outcries we heard was that this was

racism; they just didn't want this little town to have any businesses, look at what was happening next door in Leland, they were enjoying all this new business and stuff, and they just didn't want the little Black town to have—and we're like, “No...”

**34:55 R.K. They were calling you guys racist?**

**34:59 V.C.** The opponents.<sup>8</sup> Because initially, the opponents were the face of the opposition group. And at the time [we were] called Brunswick (Area) Citizens for a Safe Environment,<sup>9</sup> and then it became Cape Fear Citizens for a Safe Environment, as more people from around the region started joining us. The faces initially were predominantly White. And so, when we were having our meeting, we set up as a 501(c)(3), we had bylaws, we organized, we figured out what would be the best way—we had a president, vice president, secretary, treasurer, members, an executive committee, and then members-at-large, and kinda agreed that we would vote on things, and how we would proceed to fight this. And then at the end, once we realized that we had won, we voted to basically put our 501(c)(3) in mothballs, because we felt there were other groups out there that were doing the work that needed to be done to protect the area, and that we could just kinda go back to our lives, and they did. They just recently deactivated the company totally about a year or so ago.

But getting back to this, so when they were calling the group racist, we had a meeting and decided it was about time for elections. And I said, “Well, one of the ways to take the race card off the table is to, when your spokespeople or your elected officials include people of color. If members of your Executive Committee include people of color, it's kinda hard to call them—say that those people of color are racist.” I said, “because you don't wanna be talking—this isn't a race thing, this is an environmental thing, we wanna get the attention back on it being an environmental issue right now, and then we can talk about how the fact that they're targeting the largest, predominantly African American town in our area, we can talk about that.” And I said, “I probably can do a better job talking about that as a person of color than someone who's White can.” And the group agreed. And so suddenly I became the president; Leonard Jenkins, who's African American, became the vice president. And Leonard actually became the president one year, and I was vice president, and then

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<sup>8</sup> I.E. the polluting companies and their supporters.

<sup>9</sup> Known as BACSE, established in 1990

the next year I was... vice president, he was president. So, we wanted to ensure that the faces people saw were people of color, and that was a decision that the group made, and we had close to 200 members at one point, that would come to meetings, yeah. So it was quite a number of folks.

So that was one issue. The other thing was that we, because it was Leonard, myself, and Mike Roberts, who I mentioned before—Mike was the secretary, and I think Elsie Peterson, who just recently passed away at 90 was our treasurer—and all of us, by the way, at some point had, we just kept kind of switching roles in the Executive Committee; Not that we were doing it on purpose. People were nominating us and saying, “No, you guys are doing good, you stay there `cause we don't really wanna do it, just stay there.” We, Mike, myself, and Leonard had all been in the military, and so we kind of treated this like, “OK, what’s our”—we treated it like a military problem: “What's our objective? Our objective is to stop this landfill. What's the best way to do that? Well, the local officials don't have any power, by the North Carolina Constitution to really stop this from happening.” So we hadda, I tell people, I had not used my Political Science degree in like 30-somethin’ years. All of a sudden, I get to North Carolina, and I'm pulling out my Political Science my undergraduate Political Science degree, to learn North Carolina State law. And I said, “Well, it seems to me that the reason all these mega landfills are coming here is because we don't have any laws that prevent them from coming here. So, we're probably gonna need to get a law passed; OK, how do we do that?” So we went, met with our state representatives. They were running for reelection, so we met with the both candidates, `cause we're nonpartisan—we were a 501(c)(3)—(and) we said, “OK, tell us how you would prevent this from happening, if you would prevent this from happening, what are your thoughts on it?” And we did that with both candidates, and we tell people you vote for the one that you think is gonna help us. And if they don't help us in two years, we'll be back, and we'll get somebody new who will help us. Well, the person who got elected was State Representative Bonner Stiller, who happens to be a Republican, But he told us, “If I get elected, I'm gonna do everything within my power to stop this,” and at the time the Republican party was the minority party, so that was a pretty bold statement to say. But I give him credit; He worked very, very, very hard, and was instrumental in getting some of the bills passed, some of the legislation and the wording done, to get this to stop. He would invite us up to Raleigh, tell us who we needed to speak to, if the bill was stuck in committee. He would say, “OK, well, this person has the bill that will stop it, and it's in

this committee, and that's the representative you need to see.” We would see if there was another local environmental group in that person’s area that could come with us, because sometimes it's more helpful if you're going to talk to a representative, to have people who actually vote for him there with you... say, “Excuse us, you want our vote, we want your attention.”

And so we were busy formulating plans, and it was because of one environmental lobbyist. His name was Jim Stephenson. He's since passed away, but he worked for the North Carolina Coastal Federation.<sup>10</sup> Jim kept seeing people come up, groups come up and talk about these landfills, and he started putting two and two together, and realizing, “Wait a minute, all the groups that are coming up for these mega landfills seem to be groups of color; They seem to be posting them all near either Indigenous, or Hispanic, undocumented folks, or people of color, Black folks—something's going on here, with environmental justice.”

And so, Jim reached out to me and to some other folks, and actually got a big meeting of all of us, together, which really helped, because now we realized, “Aha! There's about to be seven of these bad boys in the state. Let's get a bus day when all of us show up. We get buses full of folks from all of our different areas, and we all show up and descend and go to each of our legislators, all the buses show up, outside of—” And if you've ever been to... Raleigh, you know those offices aren't that big, all right, so if you suddenly have folks from seven different regions show up outside of a state representative’s office going, “Hi, we're here to talk to you about this piece of legislation and what you're doing on it,” that gets their attention. They go, “Woah, OK what’s going on here?” And that kinda got the bus rolling. And by the way, I am now on the Board of Directors for the (North Carolina) Coastal Federation, the group that Jim worked for, because of how instrumental he was in just pulling all this—noticing what was going on, and then pulling all of those groups together, and then really helping with the wording of the original Solid Waste Management Act, to ensure that when the bill was written, it would eliminate all of the landfills in all of the different regions. He literally was on the phone with us that night when they were trying to get the final wording going, “OK, if they put a 100-foot buffer here, what would that do—would you still be OK? Do I need to make it, can we go down as low as 75 (feet)? OK, Good. I'll call you back.” And then he would call and get somebody else and figure out what was going on. So, I was just so impressed that this organization, this nonprofit organization, would a) have a full-

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<sup>10</sup> Jim served as Policy Director for this organization.



time lobbyist up there fighting for environmental issues, and (b) that this guy would just take it upon himself to work on something that wasn't on the coast, `cause not all of these landfills were on the coast, that when they actually said, "Listen, we're looking for a director, would you like to join?" I was like, "Yes, I will join you, I am here for you!" And I've been a member of their Board of Directors since 2007.

**43:10 R.K. That's a great story, yeah.**

**43:13 V.C.** ...So that's how we became a nonprofit, and how we basically started working together with other nonprofits to get the legislation passed.

**43:26 R.K. Yeah, and out of curiosity, Hugo Neu, did they go on to create new landfills in other parts of the country?**

**43:37 V.C.** You know I don't know. I'm sure they did, unfortunately. We monitor them. I think technically they still own the piece of property, which has not been built on yet, out here in Navassa, and they may just be waiting to sell it, because there's so much development with new subdivisions going in, that I'm sure they will make their money hand over fist if they sell it right now to another developer for residential.

But for many, many years the group—I told you I left, once we were successful—but the group kinda stayed in kind of a little more of a subdued way, until recently; They were monitoring the ownership of the property to make sure there was no movement afoot, to see if we needed to suddenly reactivate everything and come back and fight again, and they didn't come here. They couldn't come here `cause it would not have been prof—the way the law was written, it would not have been profitable. They were not allowed to build within so many feet of houses, schools, churches, waterways, they couldn't build up (to) 350 feet, and a number of other things that were put into the rules.

**44:53 R.K. That's good, yeah, it's good to make it harder.**

**44:55 V.C.** Yeah, anytime, in my time here in North Carolina, anytime I see that South Carolina has stricter laws than we do, I know we're in trouble. And that was the case for solid waste—we had junk coming to us from New York, New Jersey, South Carolina, like, "Whoa! Whoa! What do you mean?" Virginia, Tennessee, and South Carolina had more stringent rules than we did.

That's happened for a couple of issues. Recently, we got a rule in place for methyl bromide, which is another pollutant that was about to be let loose into our rural areas here in Columbus (County) and Brunswick County, and I noticed that Virginia, Tennessee had more stringent rules. This one particular company had tried to put up a fumigation operation, block fumigation operation, in the Commonwealth of Virginia, and Virginia passed rules that made it more stringent for them, made it tougher for them. And so where did they come? They came to North Carolina. I'm like, "Well, so it's OK to pollute in North Carolina, to risk our health, but it's not okay for the people who live in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Really, state legislature, really—is that what you're telling all your residents?" And that doesn't usually go over big, when people start hearing things like that, like, "What do you mean Virginia won't let `em pollute, but it's OK here?"

**46:25 R.K. Did they then pass a (stricter) law here?**

**46:28 V.C.** We didn't pass a law, they passed a *rule*. Again, I've been using my Political Science undergraduate degree more in the last 20 years than I did in the first 20 years of my life—or my first 20 years after graduating. (But) there are ordinances, there are rules, administrative law rules, and then there are laws. Laws are, of course, rather harder to get passed, but rules, there are rulings that certain legislative agencies have that decide what can be emitted in the air. For example, like DEQ, DAQ,<sup>11</sup> which works for DEQ, can say, "Well, you can only have this many, this much pollutants in the air from your stacks." And that's a rule, it's not necessarily a law. And that's—it goes through some administrative hearings, it has to, it's quasi-judicial, it has to not violate any other laws, either in the state constitution or federal laws. It's a little tightrope, but it can, one, help protect people in the state, and it can make the lives of polluters a lot more difficult. And so in this case, it was, we can probably get a ruling passed, without worrying (about) the legislature too much, faster than we can try to get a law passed, to make it deemed a hazardous pollutant.

**47:58 R.K. And that worked?**

**49:00 V.C.** It did.

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<sup>11</sup> Division of Air Quality

**48:01 R.K.** **That’s really impressive. And since 2007, you said that the nonprofit slowly disbanded or it became less active, and that you personally have been really involved in Navassa, just on various issues, kinda acting as the point person?**

**48:18 V.C.** Yeah, exactly. As the Coastal Federation, as I became a member of the Board of Directors, I said to them, “We probably need to be concerned about environmental justice issues,” and there are other nonprofits in the area who also are concerned with environmental justice. The Cape Fear River Watch, which of course has a great riverkeeper, Kemp Burdette, who is worried about the Cape Fear River. The Coastal Federation is worried about those 20 counties up and down the State of North Carolina that make up the coastal counties, and are covered under the Coastal Area Management Act. The Sierra Club has its deal. Frankly, the NAACP, the NAACP has an Environmental Justice and Climate Committee,<sup>12</sup> at the state level, and has many of those at the local levels. New Hanover County NAACP has a very active Environment and Climate Justice group.

And so, it makes more sense, again— pulling out now my graduate degree in Public Administration—sometimes, you have to go to court to fight these things, and when you go to court, you have to have standing, if you're gonna sue, and if you are fighting something that's on the Cape Fear River, it makes more sense if Cape Fear River Watch is the group that sues; If you're fighting something along the coast, it may make more sense if the North Carolina Coastal Federation is the group that takes it to court and sues; If you're fighting something that involves trees and birds, it might make more sense for the Audubon Society to be the group that sues; and those other groups, those other environmental groups... do amicus briefs, become kinda friends of the court, and join in. But you gotta make sure that you have legal standing— whoever has the strongest legal standing takes the lead, and the rest of the folks come in and help do the backup work, and join with `em. The Southern Environmental Law Center, I'd never heard of the Southern Environmental Law Center before I got here, to be honest, and now I have a lot of good friends at the Southern Environmental Law Center, because we can bring them into issues.

And they, too, have been kinda overseeing things that happen in Navassa to make sure that—and by the way, the town of Navassa is environmental justice now, they get it, they understand it, that they have been dumped on, and they need to be cleaned up, so that

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<sup>12</sup> Environmental and Climate Justice

they can get the best bang for their buck, for the property that's around them, and also that their folks can get those jobs, but they can be clean jobs, good-paying jobs, and jobs that aren't going to kill them—their futures and themselves.

**51:00 R.K. Yeah. And out of curiosity—it's not directly related to environmental justice, but with these new subunits coming in and gentrification...how are you working to protect the current residents of Navassa? If you can—**

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**51:19 V.C.** Well, I can't really. And I say that `cause now I'm an elected official in the neighboring town. And so, I can't go into another town and tell them what to do, OK? I can certainly talk to my fellow councilmembers and see what—we talk; There's (a group) called the (NC) Black Elected Municipal Officials group. We all work together, we share information, we try to support one another, and so we talk. I think, unfortunately, or fortunately, growth is inevitable. There's some things you can't stop. There are things you can do to try to help, and support residents that are in existing places. And so, some of those things we try to implement—and I say we (as in) not just in the Navassa, but throughout the region—we try to implement. And some other things are just probably gonna require a stronger approach at the General Assembly. And I'm not sure that the appetite is there yet, but I know that there is power in the people, that if people come together—particularly voters—and bring these things to the attention of the elected officials at the state level, then things can change.

But it's really difficult right now. It's not just the town of Navassa. It's happening in neighborhoods throughout Brunswick County, there are little pockets of neighborhoods that have been traditionally African American. It's happening in New Hanover County, on the north side of New Hanover County. There's a lot of building going on—new houses, new condos. And as those condos push further and further east, they are taking a lot of traditional African American neighborhoods, and people are being—how do you tell someone who gets an offer for their house, that maybe needs repairs and God forbid they're behind on their taxes, and they suddenly get an offer for \$200,000 on their house, not to take that, “don't take that offer because they're just buying it to gentrify the neighborhood”?

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**53:37 R.K. Yeah.**

- 53:37 V.C. I mean, how do you, how do you tell somebody not to do that?
- 53:41 R.K. **Yeah, if they need the money.**
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- 53:44 V.C. ...I'm not smart enough yet to know how to totally fix that problem—
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- 53:54 R.K. **It's a big problem.**
- 53:55 V.C. ...It is. And it's a disturbing problem and we're trying to—we, a number of activists in the area, are trying to do things like get with Legal Aid of North Carolina, as well other groups have come in and done a lot of workshops on heirs' property. During Hurricane Florence, we discovered a lot of the people who lived in a lot of these houses were not the owners, per se, of the houses, they weren't on the deeds—that it had been great-great-grandmama's house, and then great-grandmama got it after great-great-grandmama died, and then great-grandmama got it, and then grandmama got it; And now grandmama's gone, and now I got it, but oh, by the way, there's like 17 other heirs, technically, legally, because great-great-grandmother, when she died, didn't have a will.
- 54:39 R.K. **OK.**
- 54:39 V.C. So, by state, by the laws of the state, everybody had like a little portion, and then, when they died, it went out to their heirs, and their heirs. So now there's like 17 different heirs on this piece of property that, frankly, people in my family may have been living in for four generations, and maybe paying for the house and paying the taxes and keeping the house up, and everything else, but legally, there's 17 different heirs on this property, and if just one of `em gets an offer to sell the house, it can become a problem. And so, we've been doing workshops on heirs' properties to try to help people understand that, yeah, when great-great-great—first of all, you need a will. Don't care how much money you have, or don't have—you need a will. And you can go get a cheap will done at these workshops that Legal Aid of North Carolina and other groups put on. So that's number one. Number two, once you get your will, make sure that when you die, the people involved take that step and go down to the county courthouse and get the deeds fixed and switched over.

And so, they're starting to understand more and more that, "OK, I see this could be your property"—because there has been a lot of land loss up and down the coast, which is now really, really expensive land, because of heirs' property issues... And I think I might be mistaken, but I think William Barber III may have done some work on that, too...

But yeah, that's a big problem. And it came up during Florence because, frankly, if you weren't the owner of the property you lived in, you couldn't apply for federal aid. First thing you had to do is prove you own the property before the federal government—go figure, before the federal government will give you money to fix a house, they wanna make sure you actually own the house. The person who was on the deed had been dead for 50 years—how do you suddenly fix that, when all of all of the paperwork just got destroyed in the flood?

56:44 R.K.

Yeah.

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56:45 V.C.

So that wasn't really the time to fix it, but that's when it really became apparent that we had a problem in a lot of these communities. And so, since then, we've been trying to go work through a lot of the churches and a lot of community groups, and just kinda educate people and help them to fix some of these problems, so that when the next storm comes, they'll be prepared—better prepared.

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57:08 R.K.

**Yeah, that's important, and hopefully will help, because with climate change, there will eventually be more storms.**

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57:18 V.C.

...It's coming. There're gonna be more storms and they're gonna be a lot stronger. And so, it's coming. It's just a matter of when, and are you prepared—as prepared as you can be.

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57:29 R.K.

**And I also wanted to ask you a bit about future directions of (the) Environmental Justice (Movement), and where you see the movement going—in general, as well as in your work.**

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57:45 V.C.

Well, I'm encouraged that there are a lot of younger people that have noticed it, and are taking charge, and trying to get involved, in the area. It's hard work, because—I'm able to do it because I'm retired, frankly. I'm able to talk to you in the middle of the day because I'm retired. I was able to help a lot of—to do a lot of the work when we were fighting the first landfill. We've also fought a cement factory, we've fought coal ash, we've fought CAFOs.<sup>13</sup> Since Hugo Neu, there's been a list of things in this area that have all involved environmental justice issues, that have been fought,

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<sup>13</sup> Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations

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along more of like a coalition, with all of us joining together, and whoever we thought was the best, take the lead in case we have to go to court—being the lead person, and the rest of us being there to offer support.

The more people are aware, the more we teach people about the environmental injustices and climate injustices of the past, the more we can prepare to a) mitigate and fix the things that have been done wrong, but also prepare for the future, to ensure it doesn't happen again. And so, I'm encouraged that there are more young people that are understanding it and wanting to get involved. But it is difficult because it is time-consuming, and it's costly. I've had to make several trips to EPA headquarters, regional headquarters in Atlanta, on my own dime, and I've had to make at least one trip to D.C., to EPA Headquarters, again on my own dime, and I—thank God I'm in a position to do that, but I realize not everyone is.

So... getting the information out and stopping it before it gets to the point where we have to go up the chain of command, so to speak, to use a military analogy, is probably the best way to fight it. But information, letting people know it exists. I had no clue what environmental justice was about, prior to coming to North Carolina; Had never heard the term, didn't understand it. When I realized what it was, and realized how big a deal it was, then I realized, 'OK, I need to try to do something about this, I guess, since it's been kinda thrown at me.' So—and that's probably the military officer in me: Here's a problem, it's been thrown at you, now go fix it, OK? 'All right.'

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**1:00:04 R.K.**

**You did it. Objective completed.**

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**1:00:06 V.C.**

Well, for that particular case—there's always something else. When I talk to my colleagues at the Coastal Federation, and we're doing a lot of DEI stuff, and a great deal of awareness has happened in the last 13-15 years in the Coastal Federation, where we realize now—I say "we"; if you go to our website, it's there—we realize that every environmental issue probably has an EJ component to it. As environmentalists, we're just looking at, "OK this is"—a good example is PFAS.<sup>14</sup> "OK, PFAS is bad for everybody, we know that, OK? But what about the person who can't afford to buy bottled water? What about the person who can't get that whole-house reverse osmosis water purifier, or reverse osmosis put in, so their kid—who's already getting school lunches

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<sup>14</sup> Perfluoroalkyl and Polyfluoroalkyl Substances (PFAS)

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for free at school, because of their income level—their kid now can't drink the water from the water fountain in the school? Do you have money to buy them that bottled water, to make sure that after they go play outside and are thirsty, that they have water to drink? What about them?"

And so, every environmental issue that we've come across has an EJ component. And I like to call those communities 'the communities of least resistance,' because sometimes they don't think they have a voice, sometimes they don't think anyone's listening to them, or that they don't matter. And it's because for years and years they've been subjugated. And now it's time for people to walk in and say, "Hey, are you okay? Do you need help? What's going on?" And it helps if it's people that look like them to do that, because there's already a sense, rightfully so, of distrust and anger and fear. And so, when people come in and you build that trust and they realize, "Okay, you really are here to help me, and you're not gonna try to take over, you just wanna know what's going on and wanna make sure I'm okay," then you can start building that trust and start working to help that community.

But every single environmental issue, I find if it's affecting a major population, there's a community out there, whether it's the undocumented community or whether it's the Indigenous community or whether it's the poor community—Black, White, or whatever nationality—they have a bigger issue, because they have less resources to begin with, to deal with it.

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**1:02:39 R.K.**

**Yeah, that was really well put. And unfortunately necessitates the need for environmental justice for the future, onward. Well, we've been talking for a while, so I don't wanna take too much more of your time, but I do wanna ask if there's anything else that you'd like to share, or you'd like to talk about?**

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**1:03:04 V.C.**

No, I think we've covered a lot, in about an hour. Thank you for capturing this. When you capture people's words and thoughts, and save them for history, then someone can go back later and go, "Aha! This isn't the first time this has happened," and potentially learn from that history. That's why history is such a wonderful and beautiful thing to study, as opposed to run from, so thank you for what you're doing, in trying to capture people's words and thoughts.

I find in these EJ communities, as I said earlier, sometimes they don't think they have a voice—and sometimes they don't because people tend to forget about them. They're only worried about

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themselves, they're only worried about the big issues, and then they kinda forget that the big issues have people who had less to begin with, and now what do they do? They're busy—

We, (I'm) on the DEQ Secretary's EJ Inequity Board<sup>15</sup>—many times, we were having meetings in the middle of the day, and expecting, wondering why nobody was showing up for public comment. And I said to the Chair, "Well, probably because a person who is in an EJ community works, and you want them to physically show up in Raleigh in the middle of their workday for a three-minute public comment—that's not gonna happen. So, let's try to do it at the end of the day, so at least maybe they take their lunch hour late, and they can then get there, let's try to make it easier for the community." We're gonna, now that Covid seems to be waning—I'm not gonna say it's gone away, but waning—we're gonna hopefully be able to go back into communities and do our meetings so we can make it a little easier for the folks to physically get to us and say whatever it is they want to tell us. I think it's important to hear what people have to say. Sometimes they don't necessarily know how to say it, sometimes they say it so simply and so articulately, it's brilliant. One public comment I'll never forget was in the Acme-Delco area<sup>16</sup>, and it had to do with methyl bromide. And I was sitting next to Deborah Dicks Maxwell, who's the president now of the North Carolina NAACP; she was New Hanover county's president at the time. And this one woman got up, and she said, "We may be poor, but we're not stupid."

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1:05:34 R.K.

**That's powerful.**

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1:05:35 V.C.

Mhm. So, I'll leave you with those thoughts...

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1:05:41 R.K.

**Yeah, and I have a lot to think about, learned a lot from our conversation, and thank you so much for agreeing to take part in our project, and sharing all your story, your words of wisdom. And yeah, thank you so much for your time.**

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1:05:57 V.C.

Thank you.

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1:05:59 R.K.

**I'll be in touch with the transcript. And feel free to reach out with any questions, about the project, or anything at all.**

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1:06:07 V.C.

OK. Thank you, take care, good luck—

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<sup>15</sup> North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality Secretary's Environmental Justice and Equity Advisory Board

<sup>16</sup> Located in southern North Carolina in Columbus County.

**1:06:07 R.K.**

**Thank you. Have a great day—thank you so much.**

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**1:06:13 V.C.**

Goodbye!

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