



In collaboration with
Vernice Miller-Travis

Executive Vice President at Metropolitan Group; Co-founder of We ACT for Environmental Justice

Date: October 25, 2024

Interviewers: Keri Rhodes, Zoe Schruckmayr,
 Bladen Currier, and Caroline Sevier

00:03	Vernice Miller-Travis	...Good morning!
00:05	Bladen Currier	Good morning! Hi, how are you?
00:07	V.MT	I'm good! Thanks for your flexibility!
00:10	B.C.	No problem! We're glad to have you...
00:34	V.MT	Ok, so, just to reiterate, I'm Bladen, and then I'm working with Keri, Zoe, and Caroline. And Zoe and Keri will be asking you the interview questions today, and then Caroline and I will be taking notes, and making sure everything runs smoothly... Ok.
00:36	B.C.	Yeah... and then, again, we just wanted to remind you that this is all on your terms; Whatever questions you wanna answer, don't wanna answer, just let us know. We were hoping this would take around an hour, maybe less. If it—
00:53	V.MT	—Ok, that's good.

00:55	B.C.	Yeah, and that's totally up to your time, and how much you have available to talk.
01:00	V.MT	In other words, it's up to how long my answers are to your questions.
01:05	B.C.	Right... so, however you wanna answer them, that's up to you. We're here and we have the time to talk to you, so we're really excited to.
01:15	V.MT	Alright, thank you Miss Bladen—thank you, to the whole team. I maybe lost my glasses... really? ... And I—
01:27	Zoe Schruckm ayr	Awesome... So, should we get started—
01:29	V.MT	One question: So, one reason that I'm late is that the cleaning folks are here cleaning my house and now they're right upstairs—I'm in the basement and they're right upstairs—so, I can hear the vacuum cleaner; Let me know if you hear it.
01:46	Z.S.	I think we're good. I can't hear anything.
01:48	V.MT	Ok, good! Let's hope it stays like that.
01:52	Z.S.	Awesome. So, should we go ahead and get started? Does that sound good?
01:55	V.MT	We should!
01:56	Z.S.	Awesome—
01:57	V.MT	—We should, we should.

01:59	Z.S.	Ok, so, like we kind of talked about in the pre-interview, we're gonna start with your personal history, if that's alright? And so, I was wondering if you could state your name and briefly introduce yourself.
02:09	V.MT	My name is Vernice Miller-Travis, and I am a longtime advocate, strategist, researcher, activist, in the environmental justice field, and was one of the early progenitors of the field.
02:30	Z.S.	Beautiful, awesome. So, I guess kind of going back to the very beginning, where do you currently consider home, and is this the same place as where you grew up?
02:41	V.MT	Not the same place where I grew up. I grew up in the village of Harlem, in New York City, in Manhattan. Born and raised and educated... there. And for the past 26 years, I've lived in this home, in Prince Georges County, Maryland—which is just east of Washington, D.C., so I live exactly due east from the capital. Straight out east capital, you hit the Maryland line, it becomes Central Avenue, and that's where I live now, and have lived for the past 26 years.
03:20	Z.S.	Beautiful. I guess kind of going off of that, who and what comprised your community, in your childhood.
03:26	V.MT	Solidly African-American. So, when I was growing up in Harlem in the 1960s, it was the largest concentration of people of African descent, outside the continent of Africa—in one geography; In Southern states, they had more Black people, but they had them in rural pockets, and some major urban areas, etc., but in Harlem, we were all in that one space, right? About 350,000 people. On the east side of Harlem, was a historic Latino community—"El Barrio", also part Italian. But my growing up there was during the height of the Civil Rights Movement, the height of the Black Power Movement, the height of the Student Movement, the Anti-Vietnam War Movement; That all was churning as I was growing up in Harlem. It was a... I'd say 75 percent working-class community, low-income, working-class, moderate-income. And then there was an affluent section called Sugar Hill, where the doctors and the lawyers and the professors lived, and it is, it's a bit more economically diverse—a lot more economically diverse now—but also it is no longer a majority People of Color community; Since the 2000 Census, it has not been a majority People of Color community, and there are a lot of White folks who have moved to Harlem—changing a lot about the community. But the place that I grew up in was, as they say, Blackity-Black—everything and everybody was Black. Now, the storeowners were often

		White, but lots of Black storeowners, too. Some major institutions—Harlem Hospital—one of the big New York City hospitals, where both my parents worked and where I was born, was there. Lots of historic churches, civic organizations—just it was a thriving, thriving, thriving place. It wasn't wealthy, by any stretch of the imagination, but it was thriving nonetheless. Oh, and I should say Malcolm X, and his main mosque, was walking distance from where I grew up, Mosque No. 7. So, Reverend Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., one of the first Black members of Congress, in the modern era. He also was the pastor at Abyssinian Baptist Church, which was walking distance from where I lived. So, we had a lot goin' on.
06:07	Z.S.	That sounds like a beautiful community. That makes me happy. So, I guess, kind of going off of that, you briefly mentioned social justice, and I feel like a lot of what you do is in that route; Did you have that interest early on, and what were your interests as a child/teenager?
06:22	V.MT	My interests were: I wanted to go to law school, I wanted to be a lawyer; I wanted to work at one of two places: the Justice Department, or the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, 'cause that's where Thurgood Marshall was, before he became Solicitor General, and then got appointed to the Supreme Court. So, those were my two—and I wanted to work at the Justice Department because 1) they were doing amazing work, but [2] closer to home, a dear friend of mine in high school, Rodney Jones—who was a famous jazz guitarist—his sister, Lynn, was an attorney in the Justice Department in the Civil Rights section when we were in high school, and I remember being in awe of her. I didn't see her that often, but when I did, I was just like, 'Oh my God, she's doing it, she's in the place where they are changing our society as we know it, I wanna, I wanna do what Lynn is doing.' And she was just a formidable, formative person, but also kind, and she—in later years, she worked at the Ford Foundation, and then headed another foundation in Atlanta, and she just always kept in touch with me. She watched my career, because I was doing Civil Rights, and not a lot of my, not a lot of my generation—some, but not a lot—were doing, and wanted to do, and were consumed by the fight for racial justice. 'Cause we were the first generation of—or maybe the second—of integration. So, we were the second group of people—second group of Black women, en masse, to go to Barnard College, where I went to college. And so, our world was different because they had changed it, Lynn's generation had changed it. So, our world was different—was not without contention,

		without struggle, without deep-seated and engrained institutional and systemic racism—but when you lived in a place like Harlem, you could, you could navigate that. Because you were surrounded by people who loved and cared for you, and a community that loved and cared for each other. So it was, it was intense—don’t get me wrong, New York City is one of the most segregated geographies in the United States, but we did not feel like we were missing out on a lot because we had so much, right? We had culture, we had politics, we had civic activity, we had labor activity, we had entertainment, we had the Apollo Theater—nobody had the Apollo but us... So, we were able to navigate in that environment. And, of course, New York, though it was segregated, was not like Mississippi, was not like Arkansas, was not like Alabama, was not like South Carolina, was not like Georgia, was not like Tennessee, so our racial discrimination and segregation in New York was... how can I put this... more... <i>palatable</i>, not as <i>in your face</i>. Don’t get me wrong, we had vicious police brutality and intense poverty, but still, not like it was happenin’ in the Deep South.
10:03	Z.S.	Lynn sounds like an amazing person. I'm curious to know if anybody else, like your family, was very influential to you in your childhood, or like a family friend?
10:13	V.MT	Oh, my goodness, my aunt Evelyn, who just passed away in August of this year (2024). My aunt Evelyn, she was 14, going on 15 when I was born, and she was my mother's middle sister. My mother was the oldest, and she got, I don't know if she volunteered for the assignment, or she was given the assignment, but her assignment was me, and looking out for me, from the time I was an infant, until, until the time she took her last breath in August. She was the person who poured a lot into me. And my Aunt Evelyn was born in 1944, but she was coming of age in the 1960s—the early 1960s—and so the Women's Movement, the Women's Liberation Movement, again, the Black Power movement. My mother used to refer to my Aunt Evelyn as our own personal Flower Child. She really was... she loved Bob Dylan to the day she died, she loved Bob Dylan. And I think Bob Dylan is a great songwriter, but he cannot sing; I sing. So, if you can't carry a note, that sort of puts you into a different, a different space with me, but my Aunt Evelyn loved Bob Dylan. She, she loved him, she loved his words, she loved his message. I mean, that just gives you a sense of sort of who my aunt was. And she moved through the world without any of the opportunities that I had. There was no such thing as an academic scholarship for Black students then, but somehow, my aunt was able to get a bachelor's degree

and a master's degree in Education, and she was a New York City public school teacher for 30 years, in Washington Heights, at George Washington High School. And she was, she was my avatar.

She was, I just watched her move through the world—nothing, nothing kept my aunt from doing what she felt she was put here to do, or what she tried to do. And there were myriad, myriad challenges placed in her way as a young Black woman in New York at the time, but somehow, she found a way to surmount that, and I watched her. I watched her struggle, but not only survive, but thrive and be victorious in so many different ways. And so, she struggled to pay for college, when she went to college. Sometimes she went at night, she worked full-time, but somehow, she still got that BA degree.

And I struggled financially when I was in college. I had an academic scholarship, but because I lived in New York City, they did not, they considered me a commuter, and I refused to be a commuter in college. So, I made myself a, an on-campus student, but it wasn't easy. So, I didn't have money for housing, I didn't have money for food, and I struggled all the way through college. I was food insecure and housing insecure, but I did not really realize that until about, oh, maybe 10 years ago, when it became sort of a topic of conversation, to talk about how students, many students are struggling with all kinds of other things, in addition to trying to get through college, right? And that was the first time when it occurred to me, 'Oh my God, that was my circumstance.' And I just thought it was...

My dad used to say, he used to talk to me all the time about 'delayed gratification,' when I was a child—so that sort of gives you an insight to the kind of conversations I used to have with my dad, and we're talkin' about being an eight-year-old, and a nine-year-old, right? And just planting that seed in my head, that you struggle, sometimes at the front end, you make the investments, you may not have some of the basic things that you need, but you put in at the front end, so that in the middle and the back end, you will have the things that you need. But you do whatever you have to do to go to college and to get a college education, you do whatever you have to do to move through the world, to... get employment in different kinds of places where there might not look—be a lot of Black folk(s). But you do that so that, one, you can open the door for other people coming behind you, but two, so that you can have the life that you want looking ahead. And so that notion of delayed gratification, my father planted that seed really deeply in my psyche, and I... and he was right.

14:56

Z.S.

That's awesome, and I think that that's a really good message, too. So, you briefly mentioned that you're a singer. I'm curious to know about your personal passions. I'm sure social justice and advocacy is part of that, but going off of like, what do you like to do for fun in

15:13	V.MT	your free time? I—one of the reasons that I was late starting this interview is because I went to see live music last night. Jonathan Butler, [an] amazing South African guitarist and vocalist, and I love live music. So, when you all hear people talk about the 60s, it's a, it's a historical period, right, of social transformation, global upheaval... a really sort of fundamental rethinking of the role of women in society, and those—that's all true. But the other thing the 60s was was the most explosive period of culture, theater, music, dance, poetry, literature, from all over the world, right. And my Aunt Evelyn was really into all of that. My mother was really into dance, and so—both formal dance, ballet, jazz, contemporary dance, but also just dancing, right. My mother was a, she was a, she was a semi-professional dancer before she became a nurse. And, but the music, playing—the music, the music, Zoe, the music was off the chain, off the chain, all the time, 24/7, and you just, you couldn't escape it, right, you couldn't escape it. The music was blaring when you were out in the street, right? Somebody was playing music. We did live music, we did block parties, and I'm ashamed to say that, I don't know if you saw this sort of documentary that Quest from¹... oh, what's the brother's name, a drummer and amazing producer, is part of this amazing group in Philadelphia, out of Philadelphia, that, because I wanna recall their name, I can't— Anyway, he did a documentary two or three years ago called <i>The Summer of Soul</i>, about ² this amazing series of concerts, soul music concerts that went on in Marcus Garvey Park³. Marcus Garvey Park was also walking distance from where I lived. Now, I did not know that any of this was happening, and I should, I should put this in there about my growing up: My father was an immigrant to this country from the Bahamas. He and his mother immigrated from the Bahamas to Miami, Florida in the, in about 1919—my dad was born in 1909. And then he moved to New York in the summer of 1929, he moved to Harlem, because he was a brilliant student, had gone to Catholic school all his life, his mother was Haitian, therefore devoutly Catholic. And he was a top student, and when he, when he finished high school, or when he was finishing high school, he knew he was going to college. And so, he applied to St. Augustine College, the only Catholic College in Florida, at the time—might still be the only Catholic College in Florida—and they quickly responded back to him that they did not accept colored students and it really crushed his soul. And I don't think my dad ever quite got over it, because it was such
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¹ Questlove, aka Ahmir K. Thompson, of the hip-hop band The Roots

² Formal full documentary title: *Summer of Soul (...or When the Revolution Could Not Be Televised)*, which debuted in 2021.

³ In central Harlem, between 125th street and 120th.

		a brutal confrontation with racism, right? Had nothing to do with his academic qualifications...he was formidable. And none of that could transcend his brown skin. So, some years later, many people, many folks who lived in the South, Black people who lived in the South, were moving to the North and the Midwest and the West to escape the brutal racism that they were confronted with. And so, a lot of people moved to Harlem. Harlem was like a magnet for people from the South, for people from the Caribbean, for people from Africa. Harlem was a magnet, and it just drew Black people from all over the world. And somebody who had moved to Harlem, who was one of his friends, said to him when they came home one summer, "There's a school in New York, a college, that you could go to for free"—City College of the City University of New York, which, and City College was like the working person's major institution, because it's true, it had open enrollment and accepted everybody. And so, my dad moved to New York, moved to Harlem in the summer of 1929. Now what do you know, Zoe, about 1929?
19:50	Z.S.	Oh, honestly, not much. Please do tell me though—
19:53	V.MT	It's the year, it's the year that the Great Depression began.
19:57	Z.S.	Oh!
19:58	V.MT	And so, my father moved to New York in Au—the summer of 1929—and in October of 1929, the Stock Market crashed, right... But [cuts out] he joined the Army, he did a lot of things, he came back, he worked, and he went to college at night, at City College for eight years, and got a degree in accounting, and went to work in Harlem Hospital as a clerk in 1936, and kept that job until he retired in 1975. Moved up the ranks and became the, sort of the head of the part of the hospital that, that he was a part of. But, yeah, so, the reason I'm telling you that is because every summer of my life growing up, whereas the average Black person would go down South, come to North Carolina, right, and spend the summer with family, their grandparents and other extended family—Georgia, Alabama, wherever their family was from; We went to the Bahamas every summer, my dad and I, every single summer, and we spent the entire summer there, from the Saturday after I got outta school, until the Saturday before I went back to school. My dad and I spent eight weeks in the Bahamas every single summer. So, I can't leave that, that part of my growin' up out, because it's so, it so

		shapes who I am and who I know myself to be, right? I'm someone of... Caribbean descent, of Bahamian descent, specifically. And that means something, right, to be a Caribbean immigrant means something—to be any kind of immigrant means something. And I...I chafe at the current conversation and the current demonization of immigrants, because I know, one, all the White people in this country are immigrants, every single one, every single one, and somehow that conversation seems to miss everyone's thinking, right, but—
22:00	Z.S.	It's crazy—
22:01	V.MT	—All the immigrants, no matter where they came from, right, contributed to making this country what it is today. Now, African Americans came here in bondage, so we didn't <i>exactly</i> come by choice—but though, my dad came by choice, right. And you have a whole generation of people who came here by choice, Black people, from the diaspora, from around the world, because they felt the academic opportunities—a lot of people came to the United States to go to school, right, because they, there was no school, or they couldn't get into schools where they were, or it was the exclusive purview of the... wealthy, and most of these folks were not. People came here to work, people came here to get training, right, doctors from other countries, nurses from other countries, engineers from other countries; City College of the City University of New York, still to this day, graduates more engineers of color than any other university in [the] United States, including all the HBCUs added up together, right? Because it was, that was the purpose of City College, right, to educate all these people who were coming to New York. It wasn't just Black people that were coming to New York, right? Everybody was coming to New York. Jewish immigrants were coming to New York, Irish immigrants, Italian immigrants, Swedish immigrants, everybody came here, Chinese immigrants, and certainly Black people from across the diaspora. So, you know, that's another thing that makes growing up in New York such an amazing thing, because you were exposed to all kinds of people all the time. And the only thing I miss about New York is the food, and the fact that you can get food from all over the world, and the best food from all over the world, you can get that anywhere in New York.
23:46	Z.S.	Yum! And I appreciate you for adding your personal history, and especially the stuff relating to the Bahamas, because this is the beautiful thing about oral history projects—I feel like this creates an avenue for you to talk about yourself that maybe otherwise won't be

24:03

V.MT

put in a three-paragraph biography.

Perfect. And I think I didn't answer one of your questions, Zoe, which was the music part. So, I grew up being surrounded by extraordinary music. However, I also grew up Catholic. And when I was growin' up and in the Catholic church—both sides of my family, my mother's family [and] my dad's family, were Catholic. Everything was in Latin, which is sort of a good thing, right, because—my father spoke Latin and wrote and understood Latin. My mother probably understood a little Latin as well. Me, not so much. So, the theology, a lot of which was transmitted in Latin, didn't really penetrate, right, because I didn't know what they were talkin' about.

But also, the music—now, I know I'm gonna offend a lot of people, I'm just sorry about that, but the music was just God awful, right. It was, it was incantations, it was... it was just not movin' my soul. However, my dad, because we were so deeply Catholic, my father had an aversion to the music that was the dominant sort of spiritual thread in most African American communities, which is gospel music or sacred music, sacred hymns that come from a place and a space, right. My dad used to say, "There'll be none of that shoutin' and screaming in our house," okay. He made one exception, Mahalia Jackson—we could listen to her around Christmas, but other than that, there'd be no gospel music played in our house.

And so, in middle school, I went to the school in the Bronx called Arturo Toscanini Community Junior High School 145, so Arturo Toscanini was a major figure in European and American music, orchestral music, a major orchestra leader, a major musician, just a major person. And so, you go to a school named Arturo Toscanini, it's gonna have a music program, right? It had an amazing music program—an orchestra, a band and a choir, and I always liked to sing, so I joined the chorus, and our chorus teacher, who was this wonderful Jewish man, taught us gospel music.

I had never experienced gospel music, and when I heard it, Zoe, it just grabbed my heart. I'm like, 'where has this music been,' right, 'This... this speaks to me. So, I joined the chorus, I was really good at it, I became a soloist. And then when I went to high school, I went to a, got a scholarship to a private high school in a very affluent community in New York, in the Bronx, and they had no choir. We had musical theater, which I did. I loved musical theater, but I also would bring jazz and gospel, and that's how my friend Rodney Jones and I became friends. Rodney was three classes ahead of me, but he had a jazz band in high school, and I would sing with them sometimes, and that's how I got to meet his sister, Lynn.

But, when I got to college, there was no choir. So, I went to this Ivy League college, an Ivy League university, Barnard College, and then across the street, Columbia University, and they had no gospel choir. And I'm like, 'well, if I'm gonna be here for four years, we have got to have some gospel music.' So, I started and launched a gospel choir. And then, before I graduated, I also got recruited to join a New York City mass choir, which is like a big city-wide... major gospel presence, right, and, so, all my life—well, from sixth grade forward—I have loved gospel music. And, so... but I love R & B, I love—and R & B, of course, is an offshoot of gospel music. I love jazz, also an offshoot of gospel music. I love Black music—I love a lot of music. I also sorta like folk music—well, I like James Taylor, let me put it like that, I love James Taylor.

And that's sort of, when I was in high school, that James Taylor genre was really popular, in addition to a lot of incredible, incredible soul music. And so, I really feel for your generation; Y'all got music, but we had, what we had was like, surely God must be listenin' to these artists, because Aretha Franklin, I mean, come on, James Brown, come on, Earth, Wind & Fire, just.... you name it, and that's what was on the radio.

You turn on the radio, Zoe, and it was an explosion coming out of the radio, right, and you would, you'd sorta, you knew whose show was comin' on at what time, so you had to get from point A to point B so you wouldn't miss it, right? We also had this great television show called *Soul Train*, which brought all these, all these artists—it was like *American Bandstand*, but the Black version, right. And it came on at 11 o'clock on Saturdays, so you had to get up early, do all your chores, so you could be sittin' in front of the TV at 11 o'clock and beg your mother, "Please don't ask me to do anything from 11 to 12." And she's, my mother intimidated me—everybody's mother did, 'cause everybody, I mean, you could hear a pin drop, Zoe, across the country, 'cause everybody was watching *Soul Train* on Saturdays at 11 o'clock, everybody, I mean, everybody, and—no matter where they were, they were watching *Soul Train*.

So... it's an amazing thing to have been born at that moment, right, and that period of time, and come of age during that period of time, in the 60s and the 70s, 'cause everything was changing in our society, socially and politically and culturally. Everything was—and there was also the Black Arts Movement; One last thing, so I'm going to this phenomenal public school in New York, Matthew [A.] Henson elementary school, public school 100 (PS 100)—Matthew Henson was the first Black person to reach the North Pole.

And, we had a wonderful principal, Adele Timpson, who had some really innovative ideas about how to teach Black children. She was the first Black woman principal in the New York City public school system. And so, she went around the city—I didn't find this out until decades later, but she went around the city hand-picking teachers to come and teach at this

		school. Now [the] school had been there forever, it was a very old building, [the] school had been there forever, but she became the principal—I started school in '64, she was already the principal, I don't know when she started—but, she hired this, this art teacher from a high school in the Bronx. And her name was Faith Ringgold. And it turns out, Faith Ringgold would go on to be a famous, famous artist, and one of the leaders of the Black Arts Movement. But she was my art teacher from kindergarten to fifth grade, right. So, I love art. I love art, I love all forms of art, I love color, and I, that all comes to me from Miss Ringgold, right. I mean, she was a formidable arts educator, but she was my art teacher from kindergarten to fifth grade. So, when I say that it was an extraordinary time, it was an extraordinary time to be alive, an extraordinary time.
31:29	Z.S.	That's amazing. Yeah, I find myself going on Pandora and listening to the oldies, like 60s and 70s stations so much, because the music was so much better. Nobody sings about really anything anymore, and it's hard to... get the meaning—
31:39	V.MT	Exactly! Exactly. And so much of it is electronic, right? These people were artists, right, they wrote music, they orchestrated music, they played instruments, they played the piano, and they sang, right? So, I... I like those kind of artists, right, I like people who have dimension to their, to their artistic talent, and can replicate that when they are not in a studio. So that's why I love live music. So that, that's why I went—had to go see Jonathan Butler last night
32:09	Z.S.	That's awesome. I have one more question for you before I pass it over to Keri [Rhodes] to get into our next subject. So you mentioned that you started a gospel choir at Barnard [College]; I'm curious to learn how your college experience shaped you, just because we are college students and, whether that was an overwhelmingly positive experience—especially since you talked about like [how] you were the, I wanna say second class that was like...
32:32	V.MT	We weren't exactly the second class. I would say that 1970—
32:37	Z.S.	Okay—
32:38	V.MT	Was probably...they had a smattering of Black women. Zora Neale

Hurston⁴ was the first Black woman to graduate from my college, but she graduated in 1932 right, so, and there was smattering[s] of Black women that went to Barnard, then. But in terms of having like critical mass in an entering class, I'd say probably the class of '70 was the first class that experienced that. I entered in 1977, so, and our class was 1981.

What a great question, Zoe. So, Columbia University and Barnard College are in the middle of Harlem, on the extreme West Side. You know, the Hudson River is one block over from campus, right, it's right behind us. So, on 116th Street is the main center of the main campus of Columbia University and Barnard College. There's no way you could ever think that you are anywhere else but Harlem. But for some reason, they thought they were in a place called Morningside Heights, which is a neighborhood in Harlem. I lived in, when I moved here, I lived in a neighborhood called Hamilton Heights—'cause Alexander Hamilton's home is in the middle of our community—and it was a neighborhood, but they treated it like it was a separate part of the city, and not connected to Harlem.

And so, for the whole time that I was an undergrad at Barnard and Columbia, I was in a state of constant resentment, because they so clearly rejected the surrounding community. And I would say, "People come from all over the world, literally, to experience our community. And here you are in the middle of the community, and you tell people not to go there, 'it's not safe'"... In freshman orientation—I will never forget this; This is in 1977, before I get my ID right, so this is freshman orientation. They're... sophomores and juniors tryin' to help students understand how to navigate the campus. A lot of people were not from New York City. Maybe a third of the student body was from New York, but everybody else was from everywhere else, so, navigating the New York City subway system, that's a thing, right, and it's not intuitive, you gotta, you really gotta learn that, right?

So, they're tryin' to explain that, and they say the following: "If you should find yourself at 116th Street and Lennox Avenue—that's one subway line, Seventh Avenue, that's a different subway line, Eighth Avenue, another subway line—you are to find the nearest police officer to help you get back into the subway, stand at the token booth, get on the train, go back downtown, to 96th Street, and then take the Number 1 local and come up to 116th Street and Broadway." And so, I'd say, hand goes up, "Wouldn't it be a lot easier just to walk across Morningside Park to get to campus?" And you could hear the audible "Ah, we would never tell our students to walk through Morningside Park!" And I'm like, "Why? By the time they do all of that, go all the way back to 96th Street, wait for another train, come back, they're gonna be late for whatever it is they were trying to do, right—walk through the freakin' park like

⁴ Zora Neale Hurston was an American writer, anthropologist, folklorist, and documentary filmmaker who portrayed racial struggles in the early 20th-century American South.

everybody else does.” Girl, you would think I had said, “Go running through the streets naked.” It was just, the shock on people's faces. It would never occur to them to walk through a community park, would just never occur to them—a famous park at that, right, Morningside Park.

So that was freshman orientation, and that was just the beginning of what would be a series of racist encounters that I had, but mostly where people wholly, they, it's like they were in an oasis, and the oasis—Columbia's campus is not that big, it's a truly urban university, it's not that big. But all around it are all these Black and brown people. How are you gonna have a student body that goes to a university in the most diverse city in the United States of America and tell them to be afraid of the Black and brown people that they live around? How you gonna do that? But that's what they did, and it was unpleasant. It was unpleasant.

What... I liked my classes. I liked my teacher. I especially liked the way Barnard exulted in Zora Neale Hurston, who, I really only got to know her work through a course in Afro-American literature that I took my sophomore year, is when I really got exposed to her. But Barnard, they clearly reveled in her—they did not revel in her when she was a student at Barnard College, however, but they did, decades later. But the Women's Movement was jumping. We had the Barnard Women's Center and it was really, really jumping—we were an all-women's college, right. And how do you navigate—and in a moment when women's liberation, the empowerment of women is front and center. And I'm going to this very progressive all-women's college in New York City. That was really exciting, right.

I never felt any limitations as a woman. But I certainly was able to really tap into my power, and what I could do in this world, because I was at Barnard at that time. Not as celebratory being a woman of color. However, there were not a lot of Black students at Columbia, but there [was] a fair amount, and we were very close, right. So, Barnard had the Barnard Organization of Black Women, which I eventually became the chair of, we had the Charles Hamilton Houston Pre-Law Society at Columbia, which I eventually became the Chair of, we had the Black Students Organization, which was Columbia-wide.

We did all kinds of things. We did events, we did concerts, we did...of course we did parties—great freaking parties. The best parties on campus were thrown by the Black American Law Students Association at Columbia Law School, the BALS chapter there, they had THE best parties. But...we had a subculture, I guess you could say, and the subculture was thriving.

Although, a lot of the students, and they used to piss me off with this, they... received that message about 'be fearful of the surrounding community.' So, they would go downtown, but they wouldn't go uptown,

		right. The better food was uptown, the barber shops and the hair salons were uptown, the clothes [were] uptown, the music was uptown. Everything was just a little bit north of campus, just a little bit north or east of campus, and [the students] largely did not have that experience, because they were taught to be afraid of the surrounding Harlem community.
39:53	Z.S.	That's so interesting to learn. I feel like, I think it's so interesting how so many communities are, surround college campuses, and there's such a different narrative between the two [the school vs. community]. But, I'm gonna pass it off to Keri, and we're gonna get into the environmental justice advocacy section, if that sounds good with you?
40:11	V.MT	Absolutely.
40:12	Z.S. and Keri Rhodes (overlapping)	Yes, thank you— Awesome, thank you so much—
40:15	Keri Rhodes	Thank you, Zoe—
40:17	V.MT	Okay, if all my answers are that long, we will never get through this interview, will we?
40:22	K.R.	No, this has been so interesting just to learn about so far, and like Zoe was saying earlier, stuff that we can't necessarily just learn reading about you online. So, this has been going really well. [But] to get started, I just wanted to ask, and I know you mentioned earlier, growing up in Harlem in the 60s and being surrounded by Civil Rights and passionate about that, but when do you view as the first time that you got involved as an activist, and what inspired you to step into it?
40:49	V.MT	While I was at Columbia, and Barnard at Columbia, I became, I was very politically active, which the dean of our college did not appreciate at all. She was always trying to punish me for being so politically active. And one of the things I got active in was a campaign to free these political prisoners in North Carolina. They were called The Wilmington 10, and they were an assortment of Black ministers, Black students, Black

activists who were trying to register Black folks to vote in Wilmington, North Carolina.

So, Wilmington—so weird not being from North Carolina, I love Wilmington, I've done, I've done a lot of work there, and I really, really love Wilmington. But for Black people, Wilmington was not a safe place. It was a very harsh, harsh, harsh city to grow up in—historically; I don't know if it is as much so contemporarily, but certainly that is the history. And in the 1970s, Wilmington was just a really difficult place for Black folks to live.

So these folks got together, with support from the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice⁵ to send some organizers there to try and register Black folks to vote, and in the course of doing that work, they were arrested and charged with trying to incite a riot, or riots, and they were convicted, and they spent some years in prison. And everybody knew that they were absolutely innocent, and one of the leaders of that movement was a minister from the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice—who was originally from Oxford, North Carolina: Ben Chavis. And I got active in the National Defense Committee, to free these political prisoners. And so, eventually they were exonerated and... released from prison, but I think they spent about four or five years in prison.

And while Ben was in prison, he got a—I think he already had his BA in Chemistry, or BS in Chemistry, but he also got a Masters in Divinity from Duke University, while he was in prison. And I, to this day, Ben and I are still friends, to this day, I keep meaning to ask him, “So did they let you, like, leave prison and go to, go to divinity school and come back at night? How did that work?” But he did get his Masters in Divinity, and when he was let out of prison and finished his masters, he was accepted to Union Theological Seminary in New York.

So, Union Theological is directly across the street from Barnard College, and, and then it is directly across the street from Riverside Church, which is the church that I belonged to for 28 years before I moved here to Maryland. And so, a classmate of mine, who was a class ahead of me, she went to graduate school at UNC Chapel Hill, and she said to me, Ben is in New York now. I was like, “No, he's not!” And she said, “Yes, he is!” I said, “No, he's not!” She said, “He's right there at Union, he's right

⁵ The Commission for Racial Justice of the United Church of Christ initiated two major research projects designed to determine if there was a relationship between the treatment, storage, and disposal of hazardous waste and the racial composition of the areas where these facilities were located. The first study concentrated on commercial hazardous waste facilities; the second on toxic waste sites. These two studies were the first in the United States to consider the issue of locating hazardous waste sites in minority communities, and the ensuing national report was instrumental in bringing the issue of “environmental racism” to the attention of environmentalists, policy makers, and the general public.

across the street, Vernice!” And I, I refused to believe her.

And so, when the semester started, I decided that I was going to comb the streets—so, by, by then, I was living off campus, but off campus was a very short walk from campus—and I was gonna comb the neighborhood looking for Ben Chavis. Like some days I walk Broadway, some days I walk Claremont Avenue, where I lived and where Union Theological and Riverside Church were. Some days I walk on Riverside Drive. These are three streets, like our whole community had three freaking streets, right? But big streets, New York streets, and sure enough, one cold winter day in January, I ran smack into Ben Chavis on the corner of where I live. He lived on the same street, the next block over in graduate housing for students at Union Theological, and we stood there and we talked for... had to be 45 minutes. And when I tell you it was cold, the temperature was not above 20 degrees—and Ben didn’t have on a hat. And so, we’re standing out there talkin’, talkin’, talkin’, talkin’. So, I invite him to come and talk to the Black Students Organization at Columbia. And he does, and he stays in touch with us, and I stay in touch with him.

So, now from that point, finding out more about the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice, I—and at the time, the United Church of Christ was headquartered in New York; It’s now headquartered in Cleveland, Ohio. And so, I would reach out to him every six months, saying, “You know, you need to hire me, because I’m the future of the Civil Rights Movement, right?” And I’m telling you that, Keri, to plan the seed in your minds, if you decide you wanna do something and you have a passion about it, reach out to people, go to where that conversation is, do what you need to do to put yourself in that space, right, and don’t be afraid to put yourself in that space.

So, I just kept badgering him, badgering him, badgering him—I mean like clockwork, every six months, clockwork, right. And about two and a half—maybe more than that, three, four years into this—he says to me one day, in one of our regular calls, “Well, we’re about to start this research project, this special project on toxic injustice, and I don’t know if you’d be interested but why don’t I introduce you to our research director, Charles Lee, and why don’t you come and meet with Charles, and if the two of you hit it off, maybe you can come and help us on this project.”

Now, what did toxic injustice mean? I have no freakin’ idea. I’ve never, I had at that point, had never heard the word toxic and justice or injustice in the same sentence, ever, right. I had no idea what he was talking about, but I knew that I really wanted to do Civil Rights work, and I really wanted to work at the Commission for Racial Justice. So, I go to meet with Charles—Charles, their office at the time was at 105 Madison Avenue, which is like 27th Street and Madison; I was still living near Columbia in that same apartment. And, I go to meet Charles—so, first

47:39	K.R.	thing, I'm assuming that everybody who works in the Civil Rights Division of the United Church of Christ is Black, and I walk in, I meet Charles, Charles is Chinese American, so that took me aback, right? But taught me a valuable lesson, never assume—hold on a second. Can you pause the recording for a second? Yeah, of course...
<i>[Recording stopped]</i>		
47:43	K.R.	Thank you, Bladen. So, you were saying when you first met Charles...
47:48	V.MT	Yeah, so I, you know, I'm assuming Charles is a Black guy, Charles is Chinese-American. And I'm like, "Oh, okay," and that taught me the lesson to never presume that the only people who care about the things that you care about are other Black people, right. There are people of every persuasion and every background who are committed to civil rights and social justice. And so that was a valuable life lesson. And Charles turned out to be this genius of a human being. And he, I don't know what it was, Keri, he saw something in me, and he hired me. And that changed the whole trajectory and course of my life. Everything changed for me, everything. And Charles really, he really appreciated me, he really valued me, he valued what I brought to the work. And I was respons—it was just Charles and I, and I was responsible for a huge amount of the production of that, the report that we wrote, Toxic Waste and Race in [the] United States, which Charles is the principal author of, I'm a contributing author. I did the maps, which are rudimentary, as we didn't have access to GIS at the time—I think only the Department of Defense had access to geographic information systems data at the time, but we didn't have it. So, those maps took me six months to make, and they are <i>so</i> rudimentary, right. But if you... were to do that today... Charles helped to develop something called EJScreen⁶. He works⁷ at [the] EPA, he's Senior Advisor for Environmental Justice at [the] US EPA. But Charles is a pivotal, pivotal thinker, strategist, doer, writer, author, regulator in the environmental justice space, and in my opinion, and this opinion is a very educated opinion, because I was right there at his elbow, Charles thought up in his own brain a lot of the things that would become

⁶ EJ Screen is the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) environmental justice screening and mapping tool that combines environmental and demographic data to identify areas that may have higher environmental burdens and vulnerable populations.

⁷ Charles Lee retired from the EPA in April, after more than 30 years of involvement with the agency, and 3 years in his most recent role.

51:04	K.R.	the launching pad and the foundation of environmental justice. So, toxic waste and race being one of them, right, which, which just kicked in the door to the conversation around the relationship between race and environment, race and hazardous waste, race and exposure to environmental threats. And then Charles came up with this idea, a few years later: We need to bring all these communities together that are dealing with this issue. So that became the first National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, which brought forward the principles of environmental justice. But what put this idea in Charles's head to do this report in the first place was the many, many, many times he was in Warren County at the behest of United Church of Christ ministers, in, at churches in Warren County and parishioners to come and help them fight this PCB landfill that the state of North Carolina was trying to site in the middle of Warren County. So, because Ben is from there—I think Oxford is in Warren County, right? Or it's, it's in a neighboring county... I think so, yeah—
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51:05

V.MT

—So that’s where Ben and his family are from, for generations. And then, the folks at Warren County were just these amazing, amazing assortment of people. And so I was, I had the great privilege to be invited to speak at an event that the EPA Administrator, Michael [S.] Regan⁸, who is from Goldsboro, North Carolina. He did an event sort of commemorating the 40th anniversary of the movement and the struggle and the campaign in Warren County. He did an event to launch the office of, the new program office of Environmental Justice and External Civil Rights at [the] EPA, which Charles is a senior advisor in.

He did that event in Warren County, and it was a big thing, a big to-do, right, and I was invited to speak. And I remember saying in my remarks that, and I quoted this quote from Mark Twain that “the two most important days in your life are the day you were born and the day you found out why,”—and, or you “find out why.” And for me, that was the work in Warren County, all of that work, all of those people, their vision, their struggle, their challenge, opened up a whole new aspect of Civil Rights advocacy, right, and that is the fight against environmental threats that beset people of color disproportionately because of who they are and where they live. And that, it utterly, completely changed my life. I no longer wanted to go to law school—I sorta did, but I went to planning school instead. Because when I looked at the foundation of ‘how did we get here,’ it was land use and zoning. And land use, which in and of itself is embedded and intertwined with racism, in every aspect. And so, you have to understand the field, understand the process and the practice so that you can unpack it and dismantle it, right. So, I went to planning school.

While I’m doing this research with Charles—so that was from June of 1986 to July of 1987, I worked with Charles. It was just one year, right, one year, 13 months, 13 months that changed the course of my life. While I was doing this work with Charles, I met some neighbors who had pulled together a progressive, democratic club—progressive meaning not old boy network, let’s really focus on what people need, let’s elect people to office that represent us, and that understand what we’re going through. So, I resisted, I resisted, I resisted, I finally go to a meeting, I walk into this meeting, in my neighborhood, and they’re talking about the North River Sewage Treatment Plant, and I’m like, “The what?!”

And, if you could see how ginormous this thing is! It’s 10 city blocks long, 10 stories high, it treats 180 million gallons of raw sewage a day, but it was still under construction, when I met them, and they were trying to stop it. But it’s—and the reason that it was being built was to help the city of New York be in compliance with the Clean Water Act.

So, when I was growing up in New York, same period that we talked

⁸ Served as EPA Administrator under President Biden, from 2021 to 2024.

about earlier, the Hudson River, which is this mighty, majestic, extraordinary body of water, was a completely dead ecological zone. There were no fish, there were—we used to have oysters—there was no eels, there were no plankton, there were no grasses, there was nothing living in the Hudson River, the southern part of the Hudson River, the lower Hudson River where we lived. Because, there had been so much pollution and human waste dumped into the river since the founding of the city of New York, right, so that's hundreds of years of contamination, and the Industrial Revolution—you can find it all embedded in the bed of the river, right, it's all right there. In fact, there's a part of Hudson River just north of this area that the whole freakin' part of the river is a Superfund site... adjacent to Tarrytown, New York, from General Motors—that's a whole 'nother story.

So, people were in in this fight to stop the sewage treatment plant, and I joined that effort, and eventually that effort, with my colleagues, my neighbors, would lead to the founding of West Harlem Environmental Action, or WE ACT, now known as WE ACT for Environmental Justice. And last month, we celebrated our 36th anniversary. So again, because I was doing this research, as soon as I heard this conversation in this meeting, I mean, the very night I walked into this meeting, I'm like, 'Oh, my God, this is goin' on in my own community? How could I not know it? And how could I not see something this big as it's being constructed?' And it was being constructed adjacent to my favorite park in New York, the Riverside Park, which, which goes up and down the Hudson River in Manhattan.

And it borders the—you look upon the Hudson River and across to the Palisades, which is sort of a... geographic, a geological formation of cliffs and stone that is in New Jersey, but it's the part that abuts the river, and so, you could see, you know, I studied geology, you can see that at one time it was a land mass, and the water, just coming down from the poles, eventually created this path right through Canada, through upstate New York, and down, and separated New Jersey and New York. But you could see how the water carved this land mass in two right. So, I love that river. My grandmother moved to a town along the river called Nyack, New York in Rockland County, which is the lower Hudson Valley, just 30 miles from Manhattan. But my grandmother lived there, and my aunt, my Aunt Evelyn, who I mentioned, and my uncle, my Uncle Kenny and my Aunt Brenda, my mother's younger siblings, they lived there when I was growing up.

And so, the river is a really important thing in my life. I don't think I, I didn't understand when I was a child how filthy the river was, right. I did not understand that at all. And so, the need to restore the river—which it has been restored, because of that sewage treatment plant. But it was treating 180 million gallons of raw sewage and wastewater a day, and it was designed and built with no odor control devices. 100,000 people live

adjacent to that sewage treatment plant, including my mother and I at the time, right. So, these two things kind of collided, Keri, and again, changed the course of my life, right.

So, I built this 501(c)(3), nonprofit organization, I worked at the Natural Resources Defense Council [NRDC] as their first Director of Environmental Justice. NRDC sued the city of New York for our community. We were the named plaintiffs. WE ACT... “West Harlem Environmental Action and the Natural Resources Defense Council versus David Dinkins and the City of New York.” David Dinkins was the first Black mayor of New York City. I can't, I can't even begin to tell you how many hours we spent mobilizing and working to elect that man mayor. He was also a friend of ours, and he really did a whole lot to try and protect our community from that sewage treatment plant.

So, it just was sort of full circle, and I say, Keri, and as people are listening to this, you may have a different upbringing, you may have different, a different faith journey, or no faith journey, which is perfectly acceptable in our country, right, but for me, this was the work I was meant to do. This was what I was put here to do, and that it was placed in my path like that, right, like big neon signs “This is your work, Vernice, this is your work! Come here!” right. “Come here, do this, plug into this, work with your neighbors, train people, write about this, research about this, produce data, then create policy based on that data—but never forget that the fundamental issue is: why are people of color treated as less than? Why? In every venue, why?” right. And so, that's, that's how I got here.

59:37

K.R.

Yeah, thank you so much for sharing that. That was amazing to hear, and hearing your story of how you got started at the United Church of Christ, and how you kept on reaching out and ran into Ben in the street, that's inspiring for us to hear—A lot of us are graduating soon and trying to find our next steps, so, that's a helpful piece of advice.

Well, off of—on that note, I wanted to ask...how does race show up in your environmental justice work today, and how has your work evolved over time?

1:00:05

V.MT

A lot more data. I like to think that Charles and I were two—and everybody who worked on the report with us, and contributed to it—but we were forerunners, in what would become GIS, GIS work, right. I don't know who else in academia was using it, I don't know, companies like Esri,⁹ that, you know, are one of the big players in the field, I don't know, sort of their origin story. But I know that once we got that data, and the more data we got, and the more sophisticated the data got, the clearer the story became, and the power of maps, right.

I can tell you, the people in Warren County can tell you, the people everywhere, right, the people in Sampson County, North Carolina can tell you, the people in Alamance County can tell you, the folks in eastern North Carolina can tell you about the issue of the hog farms. And we can be as eloquent as we know how to be, right, we can write about it. We are one of the most prolific social movements in the world because we have written and published so much about what this experience has been. But the data is incontrovertible, and the data keeps coming back, telling the same narrative. And you would think that after all these decades, with all this focus on it, that people would try to be a little less overtly racist in some of the local land use determinations that they make. But yeah, no, right.

So, the data and the power of data, the power of maps, the power of geographic information systems, to aggregate a lot of information in one place, in a short period of time. As I said, those very rudimentary maps that appear in “Toxic Waste and Race”, it took me six months to aggregate data from US EPA and Census data so that I could make those maps, right. Now, you can load untold amounts of information, you can program it what you want, you can put in an address, and out will come a huge freakin’ map, with so much data that it may be hard to read the map, right, because there’ll be so many overlying data points on the map.

But that’s the thing that has changed the most and that I am so very happy about. That people used to dismiss our communities outta hand—like we had a mayor, the mayor of New York at the time was a man named Ed Koch; And one day, the *New York Times* wrote an editorial about the odors at the sewage treatment plant. The odors were off the charts, I should say. We had our own sub-climate, we had mosquitos 12 months a year, in this neighborhood in New York City. It does get cold in New York—it’s gotten a lot warmer here in the D.C. area, we don’t get harsh winters like we used to, even when I first moved here, but [in] New York, it still gets cold; Why we got mosquitos 12 months a year, right? Because we had a sub-climate around that sewage treatment plant.

And he would say, when confronted with that story in the *New York Times*, he said, “Those are just a bunch of screaming meanies up there in

⁹ Esri Inc., currently a major player in GIS software, based in New York.

West Harlem. There's no problem." And I'm tellin' you, the odors were so God-awful. People were sick, the rates of asthma were off the charts—and other chronic obstructive pulmonary diseases—but also, the incidence of asthma was off the charts, and the rate of premature death from asthma was the highest in the nation. The rate of exposure to fine particle pollution, PM 2.5, was THE highest in the nation, right. We, but originally, we couldn't tell that full story, Keri, because we didn't have all the data right, and the data wasn't accessible to us.

And so, we're also part of a conversation about open and public access to data, right. That when communities have access to data, one, they can tell a more comprehensive story, but they can also demand more significant changes in policy and decision-making around things that perpetually adversely affect them. But without that data, you can't exactly tell that story. You can say, "My family is sick. My elders are...chronically ill ever since I moved to this community, but when we leave this community and go visit somebody else, or go home to a different environment, say they go back down South, we don't have those issues, but it's when we're here," right.

We found, so we, when we sued the City of New York, we interviewed dozens and dozens and dozens of community residents, to figure out who would be plaintiffs in the lawsuit. And one of the things we found that that we didn't know is for the people who lived on that beautiful, magnificent Riverside Drive, which was once one of the preeminent addresses that you could have in New York City, because you looked right out on the river, right, all of the people who lived along Riverside Drive who were proximate to the sewage treatment plant were waging a battle to try and remove the odor of raw sewage from inside their homes. So, they would send their draperies out to be professionally cleaned. They would send their upholstery out to be professionally cleaned. And no matter what they did, Keri, no matter what they did, they could never remove the overwhelming odor of raw sewage from their homes.

We did not know that, right, so—and these are all brick buildings, right, pre-World War II, extremely well-constructed apartment buildings and homes; The odor was penetrating their home, was penetrating solid concrete and brick, so... But people were coming to public meetings with our state regulatory agency and our city environmental regulatory agency and telling this story, but nobody believed them, nobody believed them, until we started getting this data right. So, we collected data with the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University to tell this story, right. We partnered with the pulmonary medicine clinic at Harlem Hospital to tell this story, and that's when we began to get some traction.

So, the power of data, right, as a tool for social justice, is a really powerful thing, but most people don't have access to that, right, or, know how to use it or know how to tap into it. They just know that they are suffering.

		And so, it's our job to help figure out how they're suffering, what they're suffering from, and how to bring that to an end, how to stop whatever those things are that are disproportionately impacting them. And so that's, that, that is sorta the biggest lesson, is the power of data and the power of a narrative. Now, I'm a pretty powerful storyteller, and I've visited and spent time and worked with communities all over the country, and I try to tell their stories, to recount their stories in a policy-making space, in a public policy-making space, right, whether it's congressional testimony, or work with the Environmental Protection Agency, or the Department of Justice, or the United States Forest Service, or the Fish and Wildlife Service, these are all folks that I currently work with, to tell their story in a way that they could figure out and give them a path. These are the tools that you have available to you, in terms of regulatory power, and statute and law, and now you have to marry that with this data, and use the power that you have to enforce the law to make sure that these people are not continually being, being adversely impacted by environmental threats and harms. And one of the foundational pieces of statute and law is the Civil Rights Act of 1964, right, so I think my biggest contribution has been to marry and integrate the utilization of the Civil Rights Act and environmental regulations as a, as a joint tool to begin to really pull apart, undermine, do away with this pattern and practice of the targeting of communities of color for environmental threats and harms.
1:09:01	K.R.	Wow, thank you so much for sharing that. And I think it was very well said, 'the power of data as a tool for social justice,' and that's just very interesting for us to think about, too, planning our future careers. And also, your role as a storyteller really resonates with me and with this project overall, since that's the intention of this interview. I'll pass it to Zoe for some larger-scale environmental justice advocacy questions.
1:09:29	Z.S.	Yes, sorry, I'm outside. They have study rooms and they have like, 30-minute time slots, and someone took my 10:30, so—
1:09:35	V.MT	I'm sorry!
1:09:36	Z.S.	No, no worries! I just hope you can hear me alright.
1:09:39	V.MT	I can hear you fine.

1:09:40	Z.S.	Perfect! ...So, I think, I think these questions kind of go together: What do you see as the biggest challenge facing environmental justice advocates currently, and what do you think the future of the movement is?
1:09:56	V.MT	The biggest challenge facing environmental justice advocates, currently? And what's the future of the movement?
1:10:05	Z.S.	Yes. Like how do you see it, or maybe just like— <i>(sound is jumbled)</i>
1:10:09	V.MT	Well, I tell you what—one thing, everything changed on Tuesday, everything, right? ¹⁰
1:10:16	Z.S.	Ya! Yes.
1:10:17	V.MT	I don't know how much you know about...[EPA] administer Michael Regan, who was the North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Source—Natural Resources—dean, or secretary, when he got appointed [by Biden] as the EPA Administrator. He has been the most aggressive leader at EPA ever, in terms of advancing environmental justice, in every realm, in every space, in everywhere, in everything that the agency does. He has met this moment head-on, and we have felt a completely different tone and approach from EPA in addressing—identifying and addressing environmental justice than we have ever experienced before. And that is, no doubt, because of the leadership of Mike Regan, but also, the other people who've been appointed to the agency, right, so—and his standing up of this office, the Office of Environmental Justice and External Civil Rights, it was history-making, absolutely history-making. But he didn't just create another program office. He also infused them with new authorities and money. And my, my friend, Dr Adrian Hollis at the national, natural—National Wildlife Federation describes it this way: The amount of grant money that the Office of Environmental Justice used to distribute to EJ groups and researchers and others was, I don't know, let's say it was around \$10, maybe \$20 million a year, which is a small amount of money in the EPA pantheon, but now, they're giving out billions of dollars, billions of dollars to invest in communities. Just one example, about three weeks ago, EPA finalized a new lead and copper rule, and as a result of that new rule, the agency has committed to replacing all lead line—lead service drinking water lines in the country, every one, every one, every one; It's, it's freaking amazing! It's amazing!

¹⁰ Referencing the re-election of Donald Trump, widely considered a major blow to environmental justice progress.

		Now—
1:13:01	Z.S.	That’s incredible, yeah.
1:13:02	V.MT	—We’ve known since the 1960s that lead is a neurotoxin, and any children exposed to lead will be forever harmed, right? We have known that since the 1970s, 60s and 70s. We used to put lead in paint; We stopped that, right. But these lead service drinking lines, right, the reason that they're made of lead is because lead doesn't degrade over time, so, you want your drinking water system, and you want the pipes that deliver drinking water to households, to businesses, to hospitals, you want that to last forever, right, so they made them out of lead. Except they're also transporting lead in the water. Some places like Flint, Michigan, Saginaw, Michigan, other places have had a crisis with lead. But, my point is that these issues have been around for a long time. Secretary, Administrator Regan says, “Why?” right, “We know what the problem is, let's figure out what we're gonna do about it, and then let's put some money behind it, and let's fix it.” It seems so simple, but it has been so complex, and it's been so hard to do. So, in that Project 2025 document, they eventually want to eliminate the Environmental Protection Agency, they certainly want to denude it and take away a lot of its regulatory authority, but the first bullet point under the Environmental Protection Agency in Project 2025 is the elimination of the Office of Environmental Justice and External Civil Rights, right. Same at the Department of Energy: the Office of Energy Justice. And same with...this administration, this [outgoing] President and this Vice President ¹¹have led a government-wide effort to address environmental justice at every agency, not just at the Environmental Protection Agency, and it has been transformational. All of that is gonna go away. So, so, now we’re gonna go back to what we used to be. What happens when you have a national government that doesn't prioritize these issues? You fight. You create instruments at the state level, right, at the local level, you educate people, you run for office, at the local level, so that you can be a part of the decision-making that determines: where do you spend your resources? Where do you spend your tax dollars? Which communities do you focus on, right? And I'm not saying it's gonna be easy, but that's where the effort is gonna shift to, what can you get local and state and tribal government to do, to be more protective of the environmental quality and the public health that some communities have not had great access to, right. How do you, how do you make sure that law, the law is equitably enforced? That's both a part of the Constitution and the Civil Rights Act. Equal protection under the law is a fundamental

¹¹ Outgoing President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris.

		construct of our, of our laws and statutes as a country. But that hasn't happened. That's how we got environmental injustice and environmental racism in the first place. So, now we're going, I think we're going back to hand-to-hand combat, right, and, but we've learned a lot in these decades. We've learned 'run for office!' I tell people all the time, Zoe, "Run, and be on your local planning board. Go to the meetings, because that's where so much of the most important decision-making around what happens in the places that you live takes place." I lived in a community of 100,000 people. I was on my planning board for years in New York. We had 25 members of the planning board; Half were appointed by the city council, and half were appointed by the county executive. If we got 50 people in a meeting, and we met every month, if 50 people turned out in a community of 100,000 people, right, that was a successful meeting. We gotta stop that, right? It's like, it's like what you see happening at school boards and book banning, right. The reason that that's happening is because most of us don't go to school board meetings, right? So, we allowed a group of people to get there that have a particular point of view, and that point of view gets expressed in book bans—which is the most illogical thing I could think of; If you don't want your kids to read the books, they don't have to read the books, why are you tryina' stop my kids from reading the books? Go to your school boards. Go to your planning boards. Vote in local elections, right. Pay attention to who's running for the state legislature. That is particularly true in North Carolina. And thank you, North Carolina, for running the table last Tuesday. Well, except for—
1:18:05	Z.S.	Yes!
1:18:06	V.MT	—Except for that Trump position, but everything else, you all did amazing, right, including a Democratic majority in the state legislature, right. You did everything, and that's what everybody has to do. Now, next year, there will be elections. There will not be a presidential election, but there'll be county races and local races. You've got to pay attention. You've got to pay attention to the systems and the structures that govern your day-to- day existence. And I know it's hard. Everybody's working hard. Everybody's doing everything they can to take care of their families and provide for their families, right. But sometimes, this also is about taking care of your families—showing up on a local planning board, right. And I, that, I should have a whole...I should have merchandise available, because I've talked about this for 30 years, right, or more than 30 years. Go to your planning board meetings, if you wanna know what the future of your community is, that's where the future is being

		determined.
1:19:13	Z.S.	Awesome. And, you know, I, I think that's great that you mentioned that, and acknowledge...the capability that local and grassroots organizations have to actually implement change—
1:19:22	V.MT	—Yes!—
1:29:23	Z.S.	—because I think a lot of people just look at it: “It's too small, it's not worth my time,” like—
1:19:27	V.MT	—Not true!—
1:19:27	Z.S.	—“Why would I go if I won't be able to make a change?” So, I think it's amazing that you mentioned that.
1:19:33	V.MT	And I'm gonna assume in this project that you all are doing, that you interviewed Dollie Burwell ¹² from Warren County...somebody did?
1:19:42	Z.S.	I know she's on the list, I think a group is, yes.
1:19:46	V.MT	So, when Dollie—Dollie was one of the leaders of that movement in Warren County, and—
1:19:52	Z.S.	Right.
1:19:53	V.MT	When she started looking into what was really going on, what she decided to do was run for the Commissioner of Deeds in Warren County, right. So, the Commissioner of Deeds is equivalent to like the Chair of the Planning Board, because in order for you to get a deed, for any parcel of land in Warren Count—or any county—the commissioner has to sign off on that, and the commissioner has to know, what are people planning to do with land in the county, right. So, Dollie did an analysis, and she said, “Where is the most important place to be, so that you know what the future land use plans are for Warren County?” [The answer was] Commissioner of Deeds. So, she ran

¹² Dollie Burwell was one of the primary organizers of the Warren County PBC Protests in 1982 and is often referred to as the Mother (not Grandmother) of the Environmental Justice Movement.

		for, she held that position for years—in addition to being the Chief of Staff for a member of Congress; She did that too, right. In addition to raising her family; She did that too, right. So, you know, sometimes you gotta love the people that you live with enough to sacrifice some of your personal time to be involved civically in ways that are gonna protect people's interests. And it is a sacrifice, but it's worth it. It's absolutely worth it.
1:21:08	Z.S.	That's awesome.
		So, I have to head out for a class, unfortunately, but I know Bladen has a couple more questions that we wanna ask you about societal and kind of like large-scale environmental justice. But I just wanna say thank you so much for taking the time to do it, do this with us—
1:21:21	V.MT	It was my total pleasure, Zoe, my total pleasure.
1:21:21	Z.S.	This has been a—it's been a beautiful wealth of knowledge and I'm very, very, very grateful, so I hope you have a great day—
1:21:30	V.MT	—Thank you—
1:21:30	Z.S.	—And thank you so much for meeting with us—
1:21:31	V.MT	What's your major, Zoe? What's your major?
1:21:35	Z.S.	So I am, yeah, I'm Global Studies, so Global Health and Environment, and then I'm Peace, War and Defense, which is a very unique UNC-Chapel Hill major. So International Security and Intelligence is kind of my focus in that, but I'm leaning towards working more in the public health sector and kind of internationally. So, I'm not entirely sure, but those are my two majors.
1:22:01	V.MT	Wow. Okay, you like... you like the light, dainty stuff, I see... You don't wanna go hardcore, right?
1:22:08	Z.S.	Nope, my nighttime reads are totally the most lighthearted things ever, like terrorists that... environmental degradation here. But I love, it's very interesting to learn about.
1:22:22	V.MT	Best of luck to you, Zoe.

1:22:24	Z.S.	Thank you. It was lovely to meet you, Vernice. Have a great day!
1:22:27	V.MT	You too.
1:22:31	Bladen Currier	Alright, so I think kinda one of my burning questions was something you answered a little bit already, but we wanted to ask you about the role of young people as leaders in the environmental justice movement. How we—
1:22:45	V.MT	—Oh, my goodness, what a great question—
1:22:47	B.C.	—Advice you have, and I know you mentioned...going to these planning meetings, or running when you can, but if you had anything else to add to that conversation, we'd love to hear it.
1:22:56	V.MT	Well, young people...it was a multi-generational movement—is a multi-generational movement, the environmental justice movement. But there is a tendency—I certainly felt it when I first came into the space, which was really through more of a traditional Civil Rights portal—that there were a bunch of men at that table, right. And the women—in fact, it was Dollie Burwell, she used to be a member of the Commission, of the, a commissioner of the Commission for Racial Justice of the United Church of Christ. So, she came to New York for a meeting of the Commission, one—while I was working there—one... day. And she was walking around the office in New York, and she stopped in the middle of the floor, and she turned around, and she put both of her hands on her hips and she said, “Look at us: The women of the United Church of Christ.” And then I looked around and I was like, “Well, gee, there really are only four men who work here, and there are like 30 women,” right. And so, the women were really the ones getting everything done. And we were so used to it, Bladen, we were so used to that dynamic of the men out front and the women being the ones behind the scenes, but yet the ones that are getting everything done. And that really set in my mind and my heart: The men are not the only ones that are comin’ up with ideas. In fact, Dollie, Dollie Burwell is the lead political strategist for the movement in Warren County. Now, you will hear people talk a lot about Ben Chavis. Ben came down and gave a lotta great support. You will hear people talk about Reverend Leon White¹³; Leon’s church was really the

¹³ Reverend Leon White was one of the lead protesters in the 1982 PCB protests in Warren County that launched the Environmental Justice Movement. He was the regional field director for the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice.

sort of fulcrum of this work. But Dollie was the political strategist.

People don't always appreciate that, but they know the men—when you talk about the movement in Warren County, they will cite the names of all kinds of men, but not necessarily the names of the women, right. And that's true for the traditional Civil Rights Movement, it's true for the environmental movement, it's true for most social movement[s]. Now we look at the men, and we leave the women out, even though the women are the ones doing the transformation, the women are the ones doing the work.

And, in the case of Warren County, it was young children. And I don't mean teenagers; I mean elementary school students, who did [the] marching—laying their bodies down in front of those trucks to keep them from opening up that landfill. Children did that, right, and that, that also is a strategy from the Civil Rights Movement. And I don't mean that people said, "Let's put our children in harm's way." I mean that young people said, "This is our fight. This is about our lives, so we have to get engaged," right. Think of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, which really pushed the Civil Rights Movement to be much more aggressive and much more direct in their confrontations with racism, in all its structures in the Deep South. It was students, from Shaw University in Raleigh, right, and other historically Black colleges and universities—the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee really put the Civil Rights Movement on a different trajectory.

So, we know that young people have a power and an insistence and also an inflexibility about what they will and will not tolerate, that is so necessary in any social movement, right? We can get really comfortable as we get older—comfortable meaning, "Okay, you wanna have a million conversations about how this policy should change; Sure," right; "Or, you could just shut it down, right?" Which the young people will do; [Like] "Okay, you all keep having those conversations, we're just goin'a shut this down. That's what we're gonna do." And without that fire, without that energy, without that commitment, I don't know that we would be where we are, Bladen, in the Environmental Justice Movement.

But now, we[ve] got a whole 'nother generation of young people, who are more prepared than any of those of us who have come before them, right. Because, folks got degrees, folks are trained organizers, folks have done organizing in all different kinds of places and spaces. They've done reports, they've done strategy campaigns, and they bring all of that to the table. That's different, right? I never studied anything environmental in college. Why? Because there was not a single class that I could have taken when I was in college—not one, not a single class, right. But now, you can major in Environmental Justice. Hell, you can go to the University of Michigan and get a PhD, and a BA, [and] an MA in Environmental Justice, right. And in many of the historically Black colleges and

		universities, that's happening. The School of Public Health at UNC-Chapel Hill [has] been a forerunner in using and training people in the public health space to contribute directly to the advance of environmental justice. There's just, there's a lot more ways that it can be done. And—but also, you don't need any of that background. Don't...don't for one minute, I hope people don't interpret that what I'm saying is that you need some kind of formal education to be in this effort; You do not. You need to care about the place where you live. You need to care about the place where other people live. You need to care about our natural environment. You need to care about...we're living through the sixth great mass extinction of species on the face of the earth; So much of that is happening right in the United States. You need to care about things other than yourself and what happens in the four walls of where you live. You need to see what's going on outside as being a direct extension to your well-being. And young people tend to understand that viscerally, viscerally. So, we can't, we can't go forward, we can't continue to have a movement without more young people coming into this space and providing leadership and energy—and new ways of thinking and new ways of doing
1:29:18	B.C.	Wow, thank you so much. That's really inspiring to hear, especially after...it's not even been a week post the election results, and I think a lot of us are feeling like, I don't know, worried and stressed, like, "What can we do now?" But, I think we have the passion and we're gonna keep fighting. We're gonna, yeah, we're gonna take all this advice to heart and do everything that we can.
1:29:43	V.MT	Indeed. And don't...don't let anybody deter you from what it is that you wanna do, and from what you know is right, don't let any—and people, will, I'm, I promise you, people are gonna try to divert you, right. [Like say] "Oh, that's not that important", or "There are other things that are"—There's nothing more important than people having access to clean air and clean water. Those are the two most fundamental, rudimentary building blocks of life, right. You don't have that, you don't have anything. So, we gotta keep fighting for that.
1:30:15	B.C.	And we will. We definitely will—
1:30:17	V.MT	—Thank you...Thank you, thank you, thank you.

1:30:20	B.C.	Of course! I think Keri has the last wrap-up of these questions. I think we can talk about this forever, honestly.
1:30:30	V.MT	We definitely could! We definitely could.
1:30:35	Keri Rhodes	Just to close out—and thank you so much for giving us so much of your time, Vernice. I wanted to close up [with] asking if there’s anything else that you wanted to add, anything that we haven’t discussed today that you would like to talk about?
1:30:47	V.MT	Well just a sense of what does the EJ Movement feel like to you? Especially as students who are based in North Carolina. Was it, is it still vibrant? Is it, there were—EJ was everywhere in North Carolina, ‘cause folks there put it on the map, and then it just spread across the state, right, and then it started to spread across the country. But do people still feel that fire?
1:31:16	B.C.	I would say definitely, yes. And maybe it’s because I’m an Environmental Studies student and that’s the people I surround myself with and the classes I’m taking, but I think it’s very present, especially on this campus and our community in the Triangle area of North Carolina, and my hometown Charlotte, I feel like I see a lot. And again, maybe that’s just my involvement, but a lot of the friends that I’ve made, everyone cares, I think, and it’s out there, and I feel, I feel that.
1:31:47	V.MT	Okay. And I will just say, the next four years—hold on a second... <i>[Video cuts out]</i>
1:31:58	B.C.	<i>[Responding to something unrecorded]</i> Right.
1:32:01	K.R.	Let’s see where we left off—oh, I also wanted to answer your question, Vernice. I agree with Bladen’s sentiment. I also feel like because of my majors and interest in school, I might be a bit biased. I will say, not all of my friends knew or know that the EJ Movement really started in North Carolina. And so, in taking this class, we’ve been learning about just the history of the EJ Movement in the United States, and I came home and was telling my roommates about it and they didn’t know about it. So, it’s something that, I think there’s definitely still some work to go—work to do in just spreading awareness, but the vibrancy and the passion of everyone who works

		in this area is definitely still there.
1:32:44	V.MT	Yeah...I love that the spirit is still there. I love it, and when I was, I was there two weeks ago—well twice, actually; I was there for the North Carolina EJ Network’s 25 th anniversary celebration, and then I was there for the Health and Environmental Funders Network meeting, like two weeks later. And both times, both groups did a visit to Warren County, and met with folks there and I think it’s really important that folks get to hear from them: What has changed, what has improved, what fights still have to... be led, but then what can people do to help them, to help all these communities. And that conversation is gonna become much more relevant, and frequent, as we figure out how we’re gonna navigate these next four years.
1:33:35	K.R.	Definitely. Well Vernice, thank you so much for your time today. This—I can’t express enough how amazing this has been, and we’re so grateful about this opportunity to talk to you. And hearing your story, and then also the backdrop of everything we’ve learned in our course has just been such an interesting way to learn more and deepen our understanding of the Environmental Justice Movement, so we just wanted to say thank you so much for your time today... <i>[Closing comments about next steps]</i> But do you have any final questions for us?
1:34:13	V.MT	No. This has been just a fascinating conversation, and again, I always say this at the beginning and one day im gonna learn how to give shorter answers. I really am gonna learn how to do that—I am!
1:34:25	K.R.	No it was—
1:34:25	B.C.	—I love the long answers. I’m, I love details and, I—this is great.
1:34:30	V.MT	Thank you. Thank you all. I’m...I’m thrilled, just thrilled that you are doing this and creating this archive.