

EYES ON THE FUTURE, CONNECTED TO THE PAST: CLIMATE JUSTICE IN NORTHEAST HOUSTON

CLIMATE JUSTICE



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When Huey German-Wilson was a little girl growing up during the 1960s in Houston, she would get a sandwich from Georgie's at the corner of Laura Koppe and Sandra Street. The ham was neatly cut at the meat counter and her sandwich was stacked with her favorite fresh toppings — lettuce, tomato, mayonnaise and pickles. Her dad would send her on field trips with more sandwiches and sodas than she could eat, so she shared her hoagies with her friends who typically anticipated both her excess lunch and her generosity. Her dresses came from Craig's, a boutique in Northline Mall on Crosstimbers Road, and her great-grandfather owned the general store on Peachtree Street. In German-Wilson's Trinity/ Houston Gardens neighborhood, "Everything I wanted and needed, I could buy in my community," she said.

Today, in the Trinity/ Houston Gardens neighborhood, there are no physical reminders of such a history. The businesses that populated German-Wilson's childhood are now closed and new establishments have been formed or storefronts remain vacant. The thunder of the railroad seems ever-present, the nearest big-box grocery store is six miles away, and mattresses pile up in ditches that line the streets where German-Wilson's dad used to hold an

annual Easter egg hunt. What remains is the impact of climate change and the revelations that illustrate how residents are struggling to survive. Houston's Northeast Corridor, which consists, in part, of Trinity/ Houston Gardens, Kashmere Gardens, Denver Harbor, and Fifth Ward are areas crippled by a confluence of environmental factors including climate change, illegal dumping, land and water contamination, industrial facilities, overactive railroads and other legacy issues resulting from environmental racism.



The Coalition for Environment, Equity, and Resilience (CEER) envisions a Northeast Corridor that is equitable, environmentally sustainable and economically strong; where residents have the opportunity to live, work, learn, play, and pray free from environmental hazards.

Climate justice is the movement to achieve climate equity. The fight for climate justice raises ethical and political concerns about who exacerbates climate change and who suffers its immediate, short-term, and long-term impacts. Climate justice calls on those who have benefited from climate change, such as industries and government, to share resources with frontline communities in order to rectify damages and create conditions where negative impacts are not concentrated on marginalized communities.

Zip code is a strong identifier of these communities and predictor of an

individual's health and well-being. CEER uses a combination of data tools, such as the CDC's social vulnerability index (SVI), social determinants of health (SDOH) and the EPA's environmental justice screening to prioritize Houston's Northeast Corridor in efforts to combat environmental injustice. The area's roughly 200,000 mostly black and brown residents are disproportionately affected by the impacts of climate change — like flooding — and are especially vulnerable to repercussions of continued environmental inequity such as policies that permit industrial land use in residential areas.

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Climate equity acknowledges that climate change impacts have a multiplier effect on the existing vulnerabilities of a population. Warmer temperatures exacerbate and magnify conditions like food access, transportation, economic development, and health outcomes related to sea level rise, more frequent and hotter hot days, and more severe hurricanes. A warming planet allows for increased flooding, vector diseases, and heat related illnesses that ripen conditions for pandemics like COVID-19. As northeast Houston goes, so goes the rest of Houston.

In German-Wilson's case, she has been serving on the frontline alongside communities in the Northeast Corridor for more than a decade. A self-described activist and city council contender in 2019, German-Wilson is president of Trinity/Houston Gardens Super neighborhood 48. After Hurricane Harvey, she and her fellow church goers quickly organized the distribution of food and essential goods. Years of being civically engaged taught German-Wilson that despite untoward urgency, it was necessary to collect pertinent demographic information on the people being served. She knew, from her time aggregating illegal dumping data in her neighborhood, that she would have to

have the numbers, like zip code, to prove what her community needed.

As she attended recovery events, she noticed that the same five zip codes in Trinity/Houston Gardens were consistently not appearing on any city or county datasets as communities at greater risk. As she recalls, “When we went to the long term recovery meeting, we realized these communities weren't on nobody's radar.” She continued, “To this day, there are people still living in homes that have never been gutted. They've never gotten any real assistance.”

How that happens in a city where the same neighborhoods populate the top of every vulnerability and risk assessment is what CEER seeks to address especially as Houston constructs its Climate Action Plan (CAP). As CEER is concerned, the plan is not aggressive enough to reach optimal reduction in carbon dioxide emissions, does not set clear timelines for monitoring and reporting, and will not serve residents across the socioeconomic spectrum facing surmounting environmental justice issues. As it is, the city's mitigation efforts will not reach the German-Wilson's of the world who need open and formal processes that inform the public about how the city is prioritizing its investments and how those investments are directly related to harm caused by climate change.

Practicing climate equity requires including community voices, stories, and actions into the decision-making process in order to achieve appropriate and sustainable solutions. A number of communities have adapted to climate change and have developed solutions that go unnoticed. Residents of northeast Houston have developed infrastructure to fill in the gaps caused by government inaction. In the aftermath of a disaster, new nonprofits were born like the Northeast Next Door Redevelopment Council, founded by German-Wilson and others, which focuses on advocacy issues and initiatives that center community needs.

Those closest to the issues often have the best solutions. Community-oriented solutions typically preserve the cultural integrity of their neighborhoods. Communities want to maintain the cultural distinction that naturally comes with being third generation on a neighborhood block, as is German-Wilson's history.

In Trinity/ Houston Gardens, residents have redesigned their property's landscaping to offer nature-based solutions to flooding, such as planting native plants. Residents may not be using the language of climate adaptation, climate mitigation, vector diseases, urban



heat island, but they know how they have seen their neighborhoods change over time, how many more hot days there are each year, or that when it rains a certain amount, they have to find a different way to walk their kids to school. "I need elected officials to listen and bring to our community what people are telling you they want because they know. The people really do know what they want," said German-Wilson. "What I've found is the community wants to live in their house, without flooding...nothing extravagant."

And they know what they do not want.

The legacy of environmental racism means harmful land use is concentrated in the same places that are highly vulnerable to climate change. The disproportionate number of plants and railways in the corridor have contributed to poor air quality, water contamination, and cancer clusters. "We have five concrete batch plants that produce all kinds of dust and rocks. We know from the data that those are not healthy environments for the elderly, children, and people with compromised immune systems...TCEQ keeps allowing them to expand the concrete batch plants in this area. Why do you need six concrete batch plants in less than 20 square miles? Six in a community is unreasonable," said German-Wilson. Concrete production is notorious for air pollution. The particulate matter it emits has been found to cause premature death, asthma attacks, and heart attacks.

For German-Wilson, it is a never-ending fight to pivot and block the many environmental threats hurled at her community and surrounding neighborhoods. "The city of Houston is a metropolis that cannot embrace solving these issues. At what point are we going to get to the ridiculous?" According to German-Wilson and the neighborhood she represents, the absurdity and prevalence of these issues are mounting.

Neighborhoods and the people who seek to uphold them can and should only do so much. The current political system forces the same neighborhoods to find ways to be resilient. CEER's ultimate outcome is systems change where governments are not putting neighborhoods at risk in the first place. It is why CEER and its coalition members hold the city accountable to build authentic relationships and communication pathways between decision makers and the community.

CEER accelerates how people advocate for themselves by navigating learning curves with them according to their authentic needs. CEER hosts trainings on climate justice, climate equity, and climate gentrification to level the community on language and terminology necessary to address the steep educational gap it has witnessed from the public sector. What's at stake is a plan that incorporates climate justice in words and implementation.

CEER members on the climate justice committee are Air Alliance, SEIU-TX, Mi Familia Vota (MVP), Coalition of Community Organizations (COCO), and NAACP. In the case of groups like SEIU, MFV and NAACP, there are national charters that frame a national strategy for climate justice and climate equity. Overall, CEER is guiding organizations toward figuring out how to respond in their own backyards.

For German-Wilson, what that backyard looks like goes back to her memories from childhood. "I'd love to see this community thriving the way it thrived when I was a kid. I want to see our communities be whatever the community wants."

It will be the Huey German-Wilsons of Houston who will decide if Houston gets it right. ■

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