



A Call to Action: 400 Years of Inequality

In recognition of the 400th anniversary of the arrival of more than 20 Africans in Virginia, who were subsequently sold into bondage, Columbia Mailman School of Public Health organized a number of talks and events. The goal to educate and engage our community on how this history continues to shape health inequalities throughout the United States and how public health can be a lever to change the status quo.

The Center for Children's Environmental Health, (CCCEH) Director of Community Outreach and Translation, **Diana Hernandez**, PhD, Assistant Professor of Socio-medical Sciences, and **Peggy Shepard**, Co-Founder and Executive Director of WE ACT for Environmental Justice, long-time partner with CCCEH discussed history, advances and their hopes for Environmental Health. Ms. Shepard recited the Environmental Justice Preamble to highlight the importance of the day's commemoration and its connection to Environmental Health.

WE, THE PEOPLE OF COLOR,

gathered together at this multinational People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, to begin to build a national and international movement of all peoples of color to fight the destruction and taking of our lands and communities, do hereby re-establish our spiritual interdependence to the sacredness of our Mother Earth; to respect and celebrate each of our cultures, languages and beliefs about the natural world and our roles in healing ourselves; to ensure environmental justice; to promote economic alternatives which would contribute to the development of environmentally safe livelihoods; and, to secure our political, economic and cultural liberation that has been denied for over 500 years of colonization and oppression, resulting in the poisoning of our communities and land and the genocide of our peoples, do affirm and adopt these Principles of Environmental Justice...

<https://www.ejnet.org/ej/principles.pdf>

Ms. Shepard reminded us of the 1986 Toxic Waste and Race Study which revealed that communities of color and low income were the primary predictors of where toxic waste is located. Since 1986, there has been some progress. However, she stated, there is still much to do given that still she frequently finds herself as the only woman, and person of color at high-level environmental council meetings.

Dr. Hernandez discussed the long legacy of environmental burden faced by the South Bronx, focusing on areas of Energy, Health, and Housing Justice. She described the importance of large institutions like Columbia University, as an anchor institution that have the important role of being a good neighbor.

In closing, they shared what keeps them hopeful.

1. Young people taking charge and organizing around climate change is more than inspiring.
2. People realizing their power and leveraging it.
3. Pursuing Environmental Health policies despite the recent political rollbacks. The time to push for environmental justice is near.

In recognition of 400 years of inequality, we at the Center for Children's Environmental Health are committed to educating and engaging political leaders and all our communities, especially those marginalized by centuries of institutionalized racism to ensure the health and wellbeing of all children and families.