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## A Personal Commitment to Environmental Justice

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# **A PERSONAL COMMITMENT TO ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE**

**GUY O. WILLIAMS\***

I have been involved in the environmental movement for about five years, and my experience is that the best remedy for a lot of issues we have seen today is a personal commitment. What I wanted to share is a little bit about my experience in the movement and some of the challenges that people of color are faced with, not only as citizens in a poisoned environment, but also as citizens in a really challenging work environment.

My organization, the Environmental Justice Working Group, had its genesis at the First National People of Color Leadership Summit of 1991 (the "Summit"). A lot of you may be familiar with that event. As a part of the Summit, we had a meeting of people of color who worked for mainstream environmental groups, such as Environmental Defense Fund, National Wildlife Federation, National Audubon Society, Sierra Club, and the like. This was also my first year in the movement and it was really surprising to me that we had to have a special summit to bring people together on the one hand, and on the other hand, that there are so few of us in any of those particular organizations.

You may also be aware that there were letters written to what were at that time called the Group of Ten; those mainstream organizations. Letters were written by large networks of activists from the Gulf Coast area, spearheaded by the Gulf Coast Tenants Association, and also by the Southwest Organizing Project. These letters accused these organizations of racism, both in their hiring practices and in their programmatic activities. For me, as a newcomer in a movement and also an employee of one of these organizations, it was a little bit eye-popping.

Earlier today I heard some mention about class action suits and citizens who may not be aware that they are in danger, and it

\* Co-founder and Chair, Environmental Justice Working Group, Washington, D.C.; formerly of the Environmental Defense Fund's Pollution Prevention Alliance Staff, Mr. Williams is well known nationally for his work as an advocate for environmental justice initiatives.

sounded to me that he was putting the burden on those individuals to know if they were in danger.<sup>1</sup> But if you look at some of these types of dangers, they are so insidious. The average person really does not know how much mercury they are drinking; they do not know how many PCBs<sup>2</sup> they have been exposed to; they do not know how much lead is in their backyard; so how can they know for sure? Just because someone walks up and says, "Well, is your property devalued?" is that sufficient? In other words, there are a lot of challenges going on that may not meet the eye right away. What met my eye, though, is that there were very few people of color at any kind of forum that involved major environmental organizations. What I also learned is that there are even less people of color in the decisionmaking levels of those organizations.

We think about remedies. Maybe I was a little bit naïve five years ago, but I would think if I had an environmental problem, I would call on one of these groups to become an ally. Today I would have a different attitude. I know more, I have experienced more, and I see that things just are not what they may appear to be at first. You know, the roots of these organizations go back, many of them, to the early parts of the century when taking over the land and preserving it for fishing, hunting and so forth was important. It is still important to have recreation, but when you look at the genesis of these organizations, of how they are essentially organized for white men and their recreation, there is a lot of growth and maturation that has to go on in those groups to bring them into the 1990's. We find, then, that the makeup includes a very small percentage of minority people, people of color.

As Professor Torres mentioned earlier, the transformation of the decisionmaking culture is critical to making good decisions regarding broadening the range of issues.<sup>3</sup> How can organizations such as these mainstream groups be responsible for protecting the environment equally or fairly for all citizens when all citizens are

<sup>1</sup> See John Carlson, *The Industrial Perspective on Class Action Suits*, 9 ST. JOHN'S J. LEGAL COMMENT. 535 (1994).

<sup>2</sup> See Marc W. Trost, U.S.A.F., *The Regulation of Polychlorinated Biphenyls Under the Toxic Substances Control Act*, 31 A.F. L. REV. 117, 117 (1989). The author discussed the history of PCB production, which occurred primarily between 1929 and 1977. *Id.* Scientific research later revealed tremendous environmental devastation as a result of PCB pollution. *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> See Gerald Torres, *Keynote Address: Changing the Way Government Views Environmental Justice*, 9 ST. JOHN'S J. LEGAL COMMENT. 543 (1994).

nowhere represented equally among their decisionmaking structure?

One question I want to pose to each of you as you prepare to move into these different environmental career paths is, what are you going to do to make a difference? That is basically what I had to decide for myself. When I found out what the playing field really looked like, what was I going to do?

So I decided to make myself a "squeaky wheel" for these issues and then take whatever I could find out and amplify it and make it heard, make it mine, make it visible, and fight for justice in my realm of influence. That is basically what I suggest for you to really mull over yourselves.

Given the conditions that currently exist in people of color communities, I do not ask, "Is it race?" I believe that it is race. Overwhelmingly, the research shows that it is.<sup>4</sup> If you look for mainstream environmental groups to be advocates, I would suggest that they may not be the best place to begin. There is still a lot going on within those groups. They are fermenting; they are evolving. I have heard it said a little bit harshly at some of the other conventions that I have attended, that these organizations are morally bankrupt. Why do people say that? I believe the reason is that there are groups which have a very large impact on media coverage of environmental issues. They bring in a large percentage of philanthropic dollars used for the environmental work, and in many ways they influence and shape legislation that goes before Congress and other bodies. Yet, they clearly are not representative of the people who are most severely impacted by the poisons in our society.

Pat Bryant, who is a leader of the Gulf Coast Tenants Association and one of the co-authors of those earlier letters I mentioned, later wrote, in part, "that fertile ground exists for cooperation between grassroots people and these groups."<sup>5</sup> It is not enough to work on toxics without looking at racism's other facets.

A really eye-opening experience for me was in the fall of 1991. I went to "cancer alley," which is a stretch of the Mississippi River between Baton Rouge and New Orleans, about seventy miles long housing 144 petrochemical plants. We heard the gentleman from

<sup>4</sup> See generally UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST, COMMISSION FOR RACIAL JUSTICE, TOXIC WASTES AND RACE IN THE UNITED STATES, *passim* (1987).

<sup>5</sup> See Pat Bryant, *Toxics and Racial Justice*, 20 Soc. POL'Y 48, 51-52 (Summer 1989).

Louisiana Chemical Association earlier today.<sup>6</sup> I noted he was quick to mention his people make \$40,000 to \$60,000. I noticed that later he was even more quick to brush off the question: "What is the makeup of the people who received this kind of earnings?" I would suggest the reason he brushed it off is because those types of jobs are not the ones being held by people of color in that region, the people bearing the brunt of that poisoning.

One other aspect I want to mention about my trip there, is that the very first stop on this tour of "cancer alley" was a murder site where a young black man had been gunned down by police. I pondered to myself, "Wow, I thought this was an environmental tour." What I quickly came to understand was that the grassroots activists were trying to say to those of us who were from the mainstream groups that it is more than fishing, birds, and bunnies that need to be protected. The whole issue of the environment is much broader than we typically consider it.

It goes back to what I mentioned about Professor Torres's<sup>7</sup> comment on decisionmaking and the whole paradigm for viewing the issues. It is much more. The racism issue involves a lot more than just toxics and clean or dirty air. Ms. Ferris<sup>8</sup> illustrated it earlier. It is a whole different perspective when you look at all the aspects of a person's lifestyle and his availability to get health-care, to work, childcare, and so forth. Unless we are willing to take a stand and look at the whole panorama of experience, how can we truly say we are environmentalists?

In conclusion, I just want to emphasize three points that I believe are really urgent for us to explore; new paradigms of decisionmaking in the environmental process. You have heard a lot of different explanations of how the law and different types of tactics can be helpful. I urge you to think very creatively. Also, we should think about how we invest our resources. That was mentioned earlier, as well. Furthermore, the resources in the community must really reach the community level if they are going to help. Finally, in closing, I ask you to examine your own personal commitment to justice.

<sup>6</sup> See Richard Kleiner, *Quality of Life: Justice Equates Fairness*, 9 ST. JOHN'S J. LEGAL COMMENT. 519 (1994).

<sup>7</sup> See Torres, *supra* note 3, at 549-50.

<sup>8</sup> See Deoehn Ferris, *An Examination of the Superfund Reform Act of 1994*, 9 ST. JOHN'S J. LEGAL COMMENT. 609 (1994).