

Podcast: Environmental Justice: The Past, Present, and Future of the Movement

[Theme music]

Ashley Ahearn (Narrator): You're listening to Environmental Health Chat – a show from the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences that explores the connections between our health and our world.

I'm Ashley Ahearn.

Robert Bullard is known as the father of the environmental justice movement. For more than 40 years he has been connecting the dots between the environment, public health, and systemic racism – putting words and data together to illuminate the environmental component of the social injustices of our time.

But he didn't necessarily choose this career path. He says he was "drafted" for the environmental justice movement back in 1979 by none other than his wife, Linda, who was a young lawyer at the time...

Robert Bullard: She came home one day and said, Bob, I've just sued the state of Texas, the Texas Department of Health. I said "oh!"

AA: Bullard had finished his Ph.D. three years earlier. He and Linda were living in Houston, Texas, and he was teaching at Texas Southern University.

The lawsuit was Bean vs. Southwestern Waste Management Inc. As part of the case, Linda was trying to show that waste facilities were more frequently located in Black communities in Houston.

RB: She said, I need somebody who can find out where all the landfills are and where the garbage dumps and incinerators and waste sites are located in Houston from the beginning until 1978. And she says, I need somebody that can put that on a map and tell who lives around those facilities. I said you need a sociologist. She says, that's what you are right?

AA: Bullard is a sociologist by training – the environment was not a focus for him at the beginning of his career.

RB: Now that's how I got drafted into this. Not knowing what I was getting into, and so, I became a reluctant environmentalist.

AA: But he got to work and enlisted the help of ten of his students.

RB: And I told my students, I said, students, we have a research project. And remember, this is 1979. There was no Google, no GIS, no iPad, iPhone – none of that.

It was all ancient, like a chisel and a hammer – finding data, going to old archives of records, going to city department files, going to the library and looking up old newspaper clippings and old magazines and old records.

AA: They were able to find out where all the waste facilities were located going back to the 1920s. They put pins in the map of Houston and color coded it with magic markers. And they lined those sites up with the demographics of the surrounding communities.

RB: Now that was an aha moment for me. So, from the 1920s up to 1978, 82% of all the garbage dumped in the city was dumped in Black neighborhoods, even though Blacks made up only 25% of the population.

AA: Bullard and Linda ended up losing the case in federal court. He says the judge said they couldn't prove the discrimination was intentional.

That inspired Bullard to devote his career to using science to work towards social change.

RB: I was able to publish articles in peer reviewed journals and establish the fact that what the data showed was not random, that it was statistically significant in terms of research and the scientific method in terms of sociology, at “.00” level, and that you would not get these results just accidentally or randomly. And so, it showed me that there's one thing in terms of proving something in the law court and there's another thing in publishing data and science in journals. And the idea was to what extent can you marry the two in terms of having science and data to impact institutional and structural barriers, that the underlying condition is racism.

AA: But when Bullard reflects on the roots of his work, he points even further back in his personal history. He grew up in a little town called Elba in southern Alabama. His grandmother's house was near a garbage dump and Bullard says he used to ride bikes there and play as a kid. But there was no garbage pickup at his grandmother's house.

He went away to college at Alabama A&M. He graduated one month after Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was shot in Memphis, Tennessee.

RB: And Dr. King went to Memphis, Tennessee on an environmental racism justice issue in Memphis. And he was killed over garbage – sanitation workers fighting for justice, men fighting to be treated as men, fair pay, equal pay, and to be treated with respect. When I started thinking about, you know, that era that I grew up in Alabama, I started to apply that lens to all of my work, whether it was housing, transportation, issues around health, issues around food and water security, and it seemed like everything was coming together as it related to the work that I wanted to do.

AA: Bullard has been a leader in the environmental justice movement for decades. During the Clinton Administration he played an important role in convincing the NIEHS

to turn its attention to research on exposure and health disparities in communities of color.

He was part of the National Environmental Justice Advisory Council – it was an interagency group, but it was missing one key governmental agency – the NIEHS, which was run by Dr. Ken Olden at the time.

RB: We decided to ask the director of NIEHS to go on a tour of Louisiana, cancer alley. And Dr. Olden did that tour, went down to Louisiana and took that tour from Baton Rouge, Alsen, up the Mississippi River all the way down the chemical corridor and ended up in New Orleans. And after he took that tour, he was a changed man, he saw what the communities were talking about. He saw what we were talking about.

AA: The NIEHS has since developed a long track record of supporting research that highlights the connections between exposure to pollutants and public health outcomes in communities of color. At the center of that work is outreach and sharing the results of that work with the communities who made it possible.

Bullard says that's the most important thing – using science to empower people to make change.

RB: And so, I tell my students who want to do this work, I say, you can do your research, you can do your scholarship, your publishing, your writing, but you also can try to apply the research and the findings to help humanity. It's called applied research. Now they got fancy names for it – citizen science, community-based participatory research, research to action – but the old name that I had way back in '79, was kick-ass sociology.

AA: Bullard has written 18 books over the course of his career on topics such as environmental racism, industrial facility siting, climate justice, disasters, and community resilience. And the response to his body of work has not always been rosy. Over the years, he's received hate mail and death threats.

RB: I got letters, you know, nasty letters, rejection letters, saying that you can't say that race is the issue – and we were showing with the data that it was race. I know a lot of people who got out of this movement because of the intimidation, and in some cases got out because it's no sprint, it's a race, but it's more like a marathon relay, you run your 26.2 miles and then you pass the baton to the next generation to run 26.2.

AA: And that next generation of scientists, Bullard says, must look different than his generation does.

RB: We need more people of color, we need more women, we need more young people coming into these areas, because the demographics of this country are changing rapidly. And so, as we plan for that change, we can't just say that we're going to become much more diverse in terms of our work in 2045 and wave a magic wand.

No. By 2045 it is projected that we are going to be a majority people of color. We have to start diversifying our ranks today and not say we can kick the can down the road. We have to invest in early childhood education, we have to invest in all kinds of resources, in our K-12 curricula and then all the way up. And so that has always been my sermon – not in a preachy way– but it's important that we do this, because it's important for our nation to remain competitive, and it's the right thing to do.

AA: Looking ahead, you know, what do you think is on the horizon for environmental health science and justice as it relates, especially to our changing climate,

RB: I think it's important that we understand and that we push out as the dominant paradigm that climate change is here, right now. We're not talking 20 years from now, 50 years from now, we're talking climate change right now. And the communities that are most impacted are the same communities that are disproportionately impacted by environmental degradation, and pollution, and lack of health care, and etc. So, it means that we need to fight for justice and work to make sure that we're not leaving communities of color and poor communities on the other side of the levee, on the other side of the floodgate, or the wall that's protective, or whatever the infrastructure investments that are being put in place to make our communities more climate resilient, we cannot leave those communities behind like we've done in the past. And the racism that occurred 100 years ago in the 1920s, with racial redlining, in terms of not providing infrastructure, not providing trees and green canopy and parks and green space, is making it harder now for communities of color to survive the flooding, to survive the urban heat islands, the places that's hottest in the city, to survive the pollution that is saturating our communities, PM 2.5 and the pollution, to survive the COVID that's being somehow exacerbated by pollution that is concentrated in our communities. We have to connect those dots and place health at the center of all of it. That's why we say environmental justice is about health justice, environmental justice, about climate justice, energy justice, food and water justice, and justice when it comes to racial justice. So, it's one movement. And I think we find a lot of young people, millennials, Gen Xers and younger who outnumber my generation, boomers, who get it. They see those connections. And so that's the kind of intergenerational mobilization that I see happening, I see converging, and I see as a maturation of our larger justice movement. And I'm optimistic and I'm hopeful. And I see a lot of potential, I see a lot of change.

AA: Dr. Bullard, thank you so much for joining me.

RB: My pleasure.

[Exit music comes up]

AA: Robert Bullard is a distinguished professor of urban planning and environmental policy and director of the Bullard Center for Environmental and Climate Justice at Texas Southern University. He currently serves on the White House Environmental Justice Advisory Council and also co-directs the Maternal and Infant Environmental Health Riskscape Research Center, which is funded in part by NIEHS.

I'm Ashley Ahearn. Thanks for listening to Environmental Health Chat.