

Podcast: NIEHS Program Builds Careers and Changes Lives

[Intro 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.

Today we're celebrating an anniversary. Twenty-five years ago, the NIEHS launched the Minority Worker Training Program. Today, it is called the Environmental Career Worker Training Program, and it funds organizations across the country to deliver health, safety, and job-specific training for people from marginalized communities. The goal is to get them into careers in the environmental and construction industries.

Thousands of people have come through the program, in more than 25 states across the U.S. It's not an exaggeration to say it has changed lives.

Sharon Beard: So, we've had individuals who were homeless when they came into the program that are now making over \$100,000 a year.

Ashley Ahearn: Sharon Beard has been running the Environmental Career Worker Training Program since it was first launched back in 1995. Participants are trained in several areas, such as lead and asbestos abatement, hazardous waste removal, and emergency response. They learn construction skills like blueprint reading and carpentry.

But beyond the long list of certifications and hands-on skills, participants also receive guidance in developing life skills training in areas like conflict resolution, teamwork, time management, financial literacy, and others.

Sharon Beard: The life skills are the biggest bonus of this particular program because we expend a lot of money to make sure individuals who don't have those skill sets, making sure they get to work on time, understand how to work within a team structure, that they do that under this program so that they can succeed once they graduate and get a job.

Ashley Ahearn: The goal, Beard says, is to design programs that are tailored to meet the needs of specific communities through partnerships with various stakeholders in those communities.

Sharon Beard: We want to make sure that everybody has a place at the table. So even in the advisory boards for these organizations that we provide funding to, they actually bring in students, employers, people from the community who are leaders in these community-based organizations, schools, counselors. And those people that come in and say, how do we make sure that we're addressing all of the needs of that geographic location. So, if it's a program in the deep south in the Gulf states, they will focus on doing programs and training folks to get jobs in environmental cleanup. Graduates have worked in programs like cleaning up the Gulf oil spill, responding to Hurricane Katrina and Rita.

Ashley Ahearn: But there's another layer to this program, Beard explains. It's about environmental justice. Communities of color in the U.S. are more likely to be located near industrial sites and polluted areas. As a graduate student at Tufts University in the early nineties, Beard took a close look at environmental injustice in one Boston-area community. The Dudley Street neighborhood of Roxbury was, at the time, a primarily Haitian and African American neighborhood.

Sharon Beard: And what happened was a lot of the hazardous waste sites was really being placed in their neighborhood, they had uncontrolled dump sites right beside schools, grocery stores. They had what they call waste transfer stations, where all of the waste that came in from all the cities around Boston, would have all of their stuff come there, and they would dump them in these open, corrugated buildings where you would smell trash and debris for days and then all of that smell would go into the Roxbury community.

Ashley Ahearn: Beard helped design a plan, in collaboration with community members, to do risk assessments at contaminated sites in the Roxbury community in order to develop a strategy for safe redevelopment. She learned that positive change - and economic opportunity - can come when people within a community feel empowered to clean up the places where they live, instead of ceding control - and jobs - to those outside the community.

Sharon Beard: What this program does is we actually train people to clean up their community safely. And that's one of the main goals of this program, is that you live in an area where you might have hazardous waste sites or environmental insults, but what happens is that when the community fights to get those hazards addressed other people from outside come in and clean it up, so they don't even get involved in the economic development that goes on and the cleanup. So what we do is we educate them about what's happening as far as what is environmental justice, why this has happened, and what are some of the issues, and then we also train them so that they can be safe if they want to get a job helping to clean up and remove those environmental insults and help with the rebuilding. So the environment and construction goes hand in hand because they can be involved in the cleanup, and also in the rebuilding and redevelopment of the communities.

Ashley Ahearn: Beard has dedicated her career to empowering people in underserved communities to tackle the environmental injustices they face. And now, 25 years later, more than 13,000 people have come through the program. I want to introduce you to one of them.

Martanaze Hancock was one of the program's very first graduates - back in the mid- nineties. He was 18 years old, with two kids, working as a janitor at a family shelter in the Washington D.C. area when his aunt gave him a flyer describing the program.

Martanaze Hancock: She passed it on to me, and I just figured, you know, do I really want to be pulling trash for the next 5-10 years, or can I take a moment and give this a shot?

Ashley Ahearn: Hancock grew up in housing projects in the D.C. area. For him and his classmates, the program wasn't just an opportunity - it was an eye-opener.

Martanaze Hancock: It was big for us, for a lot of my fellow classmates who attended the programming because for one, you're taking the skills that you learn, you're kind of proud of learning something and

now having somewhat of a career, and being able to provide for your family, because that's what most of us was in it for. And then there was that awakening moment where you're like, man, we grew up in this housing and we had no idea, you know, all of the hazards that we were living with.

Ashley Ahearn: In the program, Hancock learned how to clean up dangerous substances - like lead and asbestos - that were prevalent in the place where he and his family and friends *lived*.

Martanaze Hancock: One of the big things that intrigued me was they were training us for environmental remediation work. So for asbestos abatement, lead abatement, we received certifications for HAZWOPPER, confined space. And at the time, there was a lot of rehab work being done in the low-income housing in the D.C. area. So the goal at that time, I believe it was, the focus was, to get us young folks who needed career skills, needed work, the goal was to have us get certified, get trained, get with reputable companies, and then be a part of the cleanup in our own neighborhoods. And that's what it really turned out to be for me. My first couple of projects that I did out of the training were actually in the neighborhood that I grew up in.

Ashley Ahearn: When he finished the program, Hancock got a good job with the local heat, frost, and insulators union. Later on, he went back to work as the director of the training program from which he graduated – and helped train other young members of his community.

Now he works for a company called UIC Government Services where he manages the health and safety program for over 3,000 employees on several contracts spread throughout the U.S.

But perhaps one of the most important things he gained from the program – more than 20 years ago – was the awareness of what he and his young family had been exposed to in the rundown housing where they were living back then.

Martanaze Hancock: My oldest son was lead poisoned. And the thing was, I didn't really understand what that meant, because the folks who were involved with that, and I'm not bashing them, but they didn't do a really good job of informing the parents on what lead poisoning in a child really means. They talked about lowering the blood lead levels, changing diets, and things like that. But you know, the other things that you experience with that, such as the behavioral problems, the hyperactivity, the reading and learning difficulties, you know, we learned all of that the hard way.

Ashley Ahearn: Hancock says learning about the hazards of lead exposure through the worker training program made him better at his job – but it also made him a more informed parent.

Martanaze Hancock: That's what actually the bulk of my career has been dealing with lead safety, you know, a lot of different disciplines, but that's the one that seems to, you know, keep coming back. So, it's kind of ironic, but yeah, that's, that's what it was for me. So, you know, I look back at it. And I'm like, you know, it's kind of weird how things fall into place. But I'm kind of glad they did this way.

Ashley Ahearn: So, would it be correct to say that participating in the program, and what you were learning about lead exposure actually helped you diagnose your son?

Martanaze Hancock: Absolutely. At the time that I did the program, I was at a period of time where, because my son's exposure actually came from property, rental property, where it just wasn't kept up

very well. And they had older paint, which happened to be lead paint. But going through the training program gave me all the knowledge that I needed, not only to talk to the people that I needed to talk to and talk in detail about things that really mattered that will make a difference for my son. But then also, learning now how to raise my son differently. He learns a little differently, he learns better from one-on-one settings, so it takes some more attention. But all of these things I was learning as I was going through the training program.

Ashley Ahearn: Do you have any final thoughts or things you want listeners to know as this program turns 25 years old, if you can believe it. [laughter] You feeling old yet, Martanaze?

Martanaze Hancock: No, I just like to see the program to continue. They have a huge impact not only in young people's lives as far as giving them skills, giving them certifications and a way to earn a good living, but also to become aware of some of the environmental conditions and dangers that we face, oftentimes in our own communities. So that knowledge goes very far. And I hope they continue to go for another 25 years.

Ashley Ahearn: Well thank you so much for your time Martanaze, it was really great hearing your perspective on this.

Martanaze Hancock: Great, thank you so much

Ashley Ahearn: Martanaze Hancock is one of more than 13,000 graduates of the Environmental Career Worker Training Program. More than 70 percent of those graduates are placed in careers after completing the program.

Thank you to Sharon Beard and Martanaze Hancock for sharing your stories.

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

[Exit music]