

“TRANSFORMING THE NEIGHBORHOOD AND PEOPLE”

AN EDUCATOR PROFILE OF JULIEN TERRELL

Director of Organizing, Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice

Interview conducted by Alex Kudryavtsev on July 25, 2011

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Julien Terrell is the Director of Organizing at Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice (YMPJ) in the South Bronx. Julien grew up in Harlem and spent six years in Buffalo, New York, where he learned about environmental justice issues and also developed an interest in working with communities and younger people. This story recounts his current projects at YMPJ, illustrating his passion for fostering leadership in inner-city youth, and his work helping members of underserved communities to recognize, appreciate, fight for, and steward urban environmental resources.

My name is Julien Terrell. I am a resident of Harlem, New York. I am the Director of Organizing at Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice (YMPJ). YMPJ is a community-based and faith-based organization located in the Bronx River neighborhood of the South-East Bronx. Our work is done primarily on the Bronx River, in Crotona Park, and in West Farms. My role at YMPJ is overseeing youth organizing programs, including environmental justice education, and supervising related community development programs.

I was born and raised on 141st Street and Convent Avenue on the west side of Harlem. Both my mom and dad are African American and Native American, just different percentages. My mom was born in the Bahamas where she got real understanding of hard work. She moved to Alabama when she was young, ended up finishing high school when she was 14, and got accepted to the City College of New York. My dad is from Batavia, a small town 20 minutes outside of Buffalo in western New York. He was in the only Black family in the whole town. My dad ended up coming to New York City for an arts school, and then he and my mom were working at the same place, that's how they met.



My parents realized that they wanted to live in New York City in Harlem where they could connect to the history, which is a really big part of my dad's grounding principles. He felt that Harlem played a big role in the upbringing of Black folk in America, and wanted my twin sister and me to be brought up there. My dad taught us that you have to have a connection to the community. I identified with Harlem, which became a big part of my development.

I think many of my early experiences helped me understand what environmentalism is. My dad would talk to me about the importance of being around trees and stuff like that because that's how he grew up. My mom talked about the importance of just seeing ocean and seeing water around you because that's how she grew up. I found it interesting because I've never seen it. But it was also frustrating that I've never been around it, so it has got to the point where I did not want to hear these stories because it was not what I saw. My sister and I did not grow up that way, we grew up with a lot of concrete and a lot of pollution. I knew that people were trying to preserve trees and build more open space, but I always looked at it as something that was in the country, not something that could happen in the city. Teachers would say, "We need to be more connected to nature," but at the same time I did not see any nature around. Nobody explained to me that people who grow up in poor communities in the cities can care about the environment too, and that we have our own environment in a lot of ways, it is different from natural but still environment.

Then I got into high school and started linking environmental issues with a racial analysis, although I did not know what to call it. As I was getting older I started to notice a lot more what happened around me. My family started to get a lot more pressure as far as rent, and I'd see my mom and my dad talking about rent issues. I noticed that some people who I grew up with are moving down south, and I did not know exactly why. People would say, "Well, it's too expensive up here, and I need to see nature." Those are two big themes that I grew up around – "It's too expensive" and "I need to see nature." I did not really understand it, and actively wanted to do something about it, but I did not know what you could do about it, it was just "I know this is a problem."

At the same time, people in the community started to privatize the use of some facilities. Like the soccer field at Riverbank State Park – it got to the point where I tried to go and play soccer as usual, but I was told, "You can't use the field." I was like, "I'm from this neighborhood, this park is here for us, why can't I use it?" And they were like, "Well, other people have it reserved." And then I would notice that those folks did not look like me. I knew they were not from the neighborhood because at that time there were not any White folks in my neighborhood. Whether they were cool or not, I knew that they were not from here. It brought up anger, but it was a very specific type of anger. It was not to the point "I'm going to fight these people," but I was so angry that I just did not know what to do. There was this feeling, "This is not right and I need to do something about it, I just don't know what to do." That was really frustrating for a while.

I think that some of my environmental experiences were also linked to the wastewater transfer station called the North River Wastewater Treatment Plant on 135th Street and the Hudson River. There was a really big problem with the odor emanating from this plant. We could smell it all the way on Convent Avenue, which is about four blocks up. There was a lot of sewage treated there, and it was really stinking up the neighborhood. And essentially the government wanted to build or reopen another wastewater treatment plant in a more affluent neighborhood in Upper East Side, but those communities rallied together and pushed it back. So the government was like, "Let's just go uptown because those folks don't really care about their environment," which is what they thought. At the same time, the public participation was not mandated. If you said that you were going to do a meeting, then that was all

they needed. It did not matter if you did not tell anybody about the meeting, if you said it was a public meeting, and did it at 3:30 pm when everybody is at work. It would be fine as long as you could prove that you did a meeting. But the opposite happened. We have an organization WE ACT, which used to be “West Harlem Environmental Action,” and today it stands for “We Act for Environmental Justice.” WE ACT did a lot of work organizing on that project to make sure that the facility was not expanded. And around that time a deal was made, “If you guys are going to keep this plant open, not only do you have to cover the parts of the facility that were allowing the odor to come out, but you also need to put money towards some benefit. And that benefit was Riverbank State Park. I did not have a big connection to parks. And I was around eight or nine when this lovely state-of-the art park opened. It was a really, really big deal in the neighborhood. But it was bittersweet because the wastewater treatment plant is beneath the park, and it smelled that way in hot summers.

Every summer until I was nine my dad used to send me up to Buffalo, so I got a chance to be with my family in a different setting and get out of the city. My dad was trying to tell me, “There is nothing for you to do here, I don’t want the cops to get you.” That’s the time when he was intensely talking to me about our people; he was saying, “We are targeted.” You know, there is the whole concept of us being targeted simply because of the color of our skin, of us not having access to park because of the color of our skin. And I would ask, “Dad, how can’t we climb trees?” He would say, “One, because we don’t have a lot of trees, and two, because we are not really allowed to enjoy stuff like that in our neighborhood.”

My relatives in Buffalo did not have a lot of money, but they had big backyards, which really confused me because the only people that I knew who had big backyards were rich White folks. So when I was going to my aunt’s house, and I would see that they had a big backyard, I’d think, “But you guys are not rich,” and they were like, “No, it does not have to be that way.” This is a lot different than New York City. I’d climb their pear tree or their apple tree, and just chill up there. I loved to climb trees. I would be like, “Why can’t I have this down in Harlem?” I would go swimming, and I would be like, “Why can’t I go swimming down there?” My aunt would take us to the field near the farms, and we’d just run around, and I was like, “Why isn’t there open land like that down in Harlem?” So these different questions were coming up. I was sent there for the summer to do all this stuff that I normally would not so I loved it. I really enjoyed going up to Buffalo. I saw White folks every day, but they were just as poor as my family was, and it seemed like we weren’t as divided. My understanding of class grew because of these experiences.

My interest in the environment and the racial/class dynamics grew, but the concept of doing environment work was not exciting because people would just say, “That’s for White folks.” I would hear older people around me say “Oh, that’s bad, that’s not being Black, that’s not being Latino, that’s being White” because that were the only people who did environmental activities in the pictures on TV or in books. I did not know there was such thing as a Black and Latino owned and managed farms because I only would hear about farming in relation to slavery or abused workers from Mexico. The only people that I had seen in movies were White farmers, so we just assumed that that is for White people. So going out of the city really helped open up a lot for me. That experience was not exactly what a lot of my friends got, although many of them also spend time outside of the city. But when I went back home, there was always that initial phase of sadness. I was happy to be home and to see my friends, but I was not happy that I could not climb big trees. Any time I tried to climb a tree, I’d have some park ranger that was, “You are not supposed to do that.” And again, having that same feeling – not knowing the best way to deal with it, not feeling strong enough to even say something about it. It really troubled me.

When I was 12, my dad again sent me away to what I thought was a sports camp. It was organized through the Episcopal Church on the other side of Connecticut. Up there we had a lake, we did boating classes and camped in the woods. We were living out in the woods in tents on platforms elevated above the ground. Tents were big enough to comfortably fit six to eight people. The last year that I was in the camp, there were older kids, like 14-16. We were responsible for cooking our own food, you had to wake up, prepare wood and start a fire. I've been slowly introduced to a lot of different environmental activities. They did not call it "environmental education." We were talking about certain types of pine leaves that burn better, or the fact that there are trees that are green year round – little things relevant to the stuff that we were doing. I thought that it was survival skills, I always enjoyed it, but I did not know that it related to environmental education.

In school I had a couple of cool teachers who helped open things up for me. Other than my parents, my track coach was really my biggest role model when I was in high school. Running track, cross-country – it became my default youth program in a lot of ways. My coach was from Jamaica. I was around him a lot. He talked about being able to wake up and go to the field to cut coconuts and sugar cane. I would be like, "Oh, you actually do that?" I think it really helped to shape the whole concept of looking at somebody who is an expert in stuff that we did not know we could do. In a lot of ways he was somebody I really looked up to, and he also talked to me a lot about the importance of determination. He would say, "If you see something that's not right and you feel that is not right, then most likely that's not right, you have that feeling for a reason." He was really intentional about teaching us how to trust our judgment. When we would go over to the soccer field at Riverbank Park and be disappointed because it's taken, we'd be really angry. But he also took it as an opportunity to ask, "Why do you guys feel so angry about this? Is it because you feel ownership over this park?" And I was like, "Yeah, this is our park. That's not that other people can't use it, but this is a park that our community should be able to use." So he tried to use those experiences as the way to help us learn more about racial, gender and class issues. And specifically for me that's also where the environmental issues came from.

All my science teachers in high school were White, except for my chemistry teacher who was also from the Caribbean. I think all of them were really good at making connections between what we saw outside of the classroom and inside the classroom. Most of them did not use a racial analysis, but they did talk about stuff happening all around, which got me interested in teaching. I had a really good history teacher who helped me understand race and class. So the work that I was doing with him coupled with the science work really helped me build an understanding that there are environmental issues that impact us too, that we have a connection to the environment. I started to understand that some problems in our neighborhood should not be there because we were not asked about it and we did not give approval for it. I think it related to the core concepts of environmental education and environmental justice that I teach today.

In 2001 I went to college at the University of Buffalo. I started college literally a week before 9/11, so that was hard for a ton of reasons. I went to Buffalo because I have a family up there. I did not want to be in New York City, but I did not really want to leave the state. Buffalo was far enough for me to go to where I could be not too close. Originally I went to school as Electrical Engineering major. I did very well my first semester, but I realized that I was going to be in a lab a lot of time working with electrical engineers. I realized that I was not going to work directly with people in communities, which really made me sad. I also started to realize what I wanted to do, maybe not specifically, but how I want to do it. I knew I wanted to be working with people who either cared about what I care about, or are impacted by what I care about. But I had not been able to connect the dots, so when I decided to

change my major it was, “Either I’m going to be a history teacher, or I’m going to do something around the environment.” But I did not know what it was, I did not know about environmental justice at all.

I knew that my core interest was about getting more open space into your neighborhood, involving more people in making decisions about what is going to come into your neighborhood. I did not know that these were environmental topics, I thought that environment is about land aspects, not so much people. I was taking a lot of environmental classes my second semester and my whole sophomore year. I was like, “You know, this is interesting, but this is not what I want. Why am I learning about soil? Why am I learning about rocks or how rocks are made? Why am I learning about salt water?” I thought it was just not interesting. I thought it was not related to history of Black, Latino and Native American people. But I did not know how I could focus on history, while also including the environmental aspect.

I did really bad my first semester in my sophomore year. I lived in a dorm and I was doing a lot of stuff I should not have been doing. It was also due to the fact that I did not really connect to any of the classes other than the Environmental Anthropology class. It was the only class that I passed that semester because it interested me. That’s where I learned about Chernobyl and other environmental problems happening in other countries and about people losing their homes due to climate change. I thought, “There are other people who are impacted by environmental issues. But I don’t wanna just study it. I wanna do something about it.” I identified with anthropology right away, but it was not enough for me. I wanted to study how this is impacting my people, and I also wanted to do something about it with those people. But again, I did not know what that was called.

Getting out of sophomore year, I went to my advisor and asked to take classes that focused on environmental issues but were more relevant to the urban environment and people of color. He suggested that I do an internship either down in the city or back up in Buffalo, and then maybe I would get that perspective. He told me, “Stick with it. You may not see it as relevant, but you also have to understand that a lot of people in your neighborhood that you are from don’t get access to this. This is not information that a lot of people in your position get a chance to learn.” He was a White guy, but he had a really specific racial analysis, especially when it came to Black and Brown students. Our conversations helped bring up a lot of feelings around determination, which my dad and my track coach were telling me about.

At that point my grades just went through the roof, whether it was boring or not. I went from failing every course but one to getting As in every course, literally the semester right after that. I was determined to make the concepts and practices I was learning relevant to how I could use them in communities of color I wanted to be working in after I graduated. So when I started calling people for internships, I tried to explain my interest, and they were like, “We don’t do that. Good luck.” I kept on getting that, and then one person finally was like, “You know, you are talking about environmental justice.” “What?” “You are talking about environmental justice. You are talking about working with people who are impacted by an issue and need to be fighting back. But they are also impacted by that because they are Black or poor.” I was like, “Yesss! I wanna do environmental justice.” Then I ended up linking with a woman named Michelle Moore who works for the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC), which is a statewide environmental regulatory agency. They have a department within their permitting office in New York City. She is the person who coordinates everything on environmental justice in this office and she was my internship supervisor. She also helped me understand that there are a lot of environmental issues that happen in communities of

color that should not be happening. There are a lot of benefits that we don't have access to, and that's not by mistake, that's on purpose.

In DEC I was supposed to call every organization that got funding through Environmental Benefits Fund. Anybody who was impacted by an environmental issue in a neighborhood was given money to either work on a project that provided a benefit to the community or build awareness of the issue in the neighborhood. My job was to check in with each one about how the project was going and how we could help them. I also scheduled the site visits. My boss and I would go over there, and I'd go over there with a shirt and tie, and she was like, "Well, Julien, if somebody came to you from the government with a shirt and tie, would you feel comfortable around them?" "No." And she was like, "Even if you look like them?" And I was like, "Well, no, because they were in a suit." And she was like, "Well, why would you wear a suit and tie then?" That was when she really started helping me understand that I could be myself and still do an effective job. I did not need to come up here with a three-piece suit. If you know you would not trust somebody who is coming to you with the suit, then you should not be doing that. If you are using environmental terminology that you know people are not going to know, then you have to break it down, you need to explain and build their capacity. You have to help them realize that they know more about an issue than they think they know.

When I looked around the DEC office, and a lot of people who were doing that job did not look like people in my neighborhood in Harlem. Michelle did. But others did not. These people who were responsible for permits were really good people and each of them had a role in helping understand how to use environmental analysis to strengthen local campaigns. They helped me understand the importance of knowing how to connect to my people while also having an understanding of the science and environmental review processes in order to better a resource to the community. It has to be somebody from the neighborhood who is taking that leadership. This internship helped me completely change the direction that I was going in my career development. It was cool to do science, to do law, and live in the hood. It was about combining different levels of expertise – you know about science, know about regulations, and know about your people. It really helped me understand what urban environmentalism is and that there are environmental issues that are very specific to city.

I got school credit for this internship. I used to call it "life credit" because what I learned in internship interested me far more than some of what I was learning in college. That internship completely changed my life. I think that working with DEC was the beginning of what I'm doing now. But I also noticed that there are many restrictions in the organization because people were representatives of government. There was only so much they could do, which reminded me of school. I knew that they could not talk about race or class unless it was under a specific instruction. I observed people I respected having problems getting approved to do things that needed to be done. I took many of the lessons learned that summer to school, and started crafting my work on environmental policy and education with a specific concentration on race, class and equity.

During my last year in college I ended up meeting a guy named Joe Gardella, who played a major role in my development. He was a chemistry professor, a really cool White guy from Detroit. He was not based in the community, but he understood that the community needed to be leading whatever effort is happening around an environmental issue. After some initial conversations, he thought it would be best for me to continue working on environmental justice and placed me with a community-based organization called the Toxic Waste Lupus Coalition. Lupus is an autoimmune disease. A whole cluster of people in Buffalo – primarily poor Black folks in East Buffalo

– were found to have lupus, and University of Buffalo was interested to explore whether or not the reason was that these people lived next to contaminated sites. My role was to support this community-based organization in developing outreach materials that explained the problems being caused by the most contaminated of the three sites. I was working closely with the Project Coordinator Judith Anderson who became another role model and mentor for me. I think that the leadership of women in the environmental justice movement is essential. She taught me a lot about leadership and gender dynamics in the professional world, which I hadn't learned much about while studying in college. A lot of times I had other people telling me that women don't make good bosses, and that environmental work is for men, not for women. She really helped me challenge those thoughts, and understand the importance of challenging all forms of oppression and ignorance in environmental work. She was an example of somebody who could navigate through different spaces without compromising her or his values.

I graduated from college in the summer of 2005, and I continued working for the university in the same role I had been during the internship. I graduated in the beginning of August on Friday and started working full time that next Monday. My main job was to support the community-based component of this research project, which was a partnership between the university and the Toxic Waste Lupus Coalition. Although I was a university employee, my work was mostly working with the coalition. I would put together the newsletter and fact sheets, organize the meetings with Judith, conduct all the outreach activities, assist local residents to deal with local environmental issues, and talked about health connections. I used my background around environmental science and environmental health to help them address local problems, which is essentially environmental justice organizing, although I did not know this term. Organizing is identifying an issue that is causing a negative impact on a group of people, and then rallying the people who are directly impacted by that issue to develop and implement a strategy to end it. I feel the role of an organizer is not to tell people what to do, but to help develop that person to be a leader of that project. One of the most important environmental justice principles is that the people who are directly impacted are the ones who need to lead that work. We can teach them how to do outreach, teach them how to do public speaking, how to understand the use of law and policy to support their organizing and create new policy.

I ended up working with several other great folks, and we started up a new organization. I worked with people like Derrick Byrd who was another elder doing organizing work, Janice White who worked with the church that was located across the street from the most contaminated site that we focused on, and David Hahn Baker who was a political strategist and a great leader on environmental justice issues in Buffalo. We formed this organization to continue the work around that contaminated site. We were able to get a plan developed by people and our technical assistance partner in the neighborhood around how they wanted to remediate that site. We ended up using that plan as a frame on how to work with the local DEC office. They accepted our plan, which is one of very few times when a remediation plan developed by the community has been used by the government, which was the victory I had been involved in.

My transition into post college organizing was an interesting time for me because I had been more intentional about deepening my political understanding and many of my friends did not understand the concept of environmental justice, which made it difficult to explain what I was doing. The label of a tree hugger was being given to me, but it was a time that helped me define my role in the movement, and inform those around me about what was happening in Buffalo and back home in the city. My dedication as a young Black environmental educator also got stronger because I knew there needed to be more of us to help make these connections for people in our community. Around that time my mom's health was getting worse due to her lupus, so I decided to move back to the city in the winter of

2006-2007. I went home for a break and talked to my mom about it, and she did not want me to come back. She wanted me to stay up in Buffalo and continue my work. And I was like, “Listen, if my work was about helping folks fight back and you are sick, then I need to be here. I can’t justify doing that somewhere else if my own family needs me at home.” I also thought about what was happening in Harlem at the time, and that I felt conflicted not being close enough to efforts pushing back against gentrification and organizing environmental justice issues in my neighborhood. I had been working in a statewide coalition with WE ACT for Environmental Justice, an environmental justice organization based in Harlem, and became interested in the potential of working with them when I decided to move back to the city. I applied for the position of the Our Housing is Our Health Campaign Coordinator working on environmental health issues that arose from living in poor housing conditions and putting pressure on landlords both directly through organizing and legislatively through the development of public policy to govern best management practices. I got the position and started shortly after I returned.

I worked for WE ACT in Harlem for a little less than two years. I loved working on issues in my neighborhood, like the health problems that come from living with rats, roaches and mold in your apartment, and organizing against local rezoning that would lead to development that was not best for the people living in the community. I was working with people who had asthma and dealt with environmental burdens inside their homes framed around indoor air quality. On a couple occasions I had the opportunity to work with a few interns that served as my introduction into youth work. The first intern I’ve ever had was a young man who grew up in my neighborhood and was my best friend’s younger brother. He assisted our campaign working with me to mobilize community resident against the expansion of Columbia University. That was one of the first major projects that I worked on – looking at land use and gentrification as an environmental issue. That’s an issue that is very personal to me. When you live in a community in which you are working you don’t separate your life and work experiences. That’s a big part of what drives me. A lot of the issues that I work on are the issues that I’m either directly impacted by as well or issues that I have been impacted by. My intern helped put together information packages. We used to give them out at meetings and going from door to door. When I went to meetings he was there with me, whenever we were door knocking he was there door knocking. He was saying, “I did not know this was environmental work.” I was like, “Yeah, it is our environment work, we are informing people about environmental issues that impact us.”

Shortly afterward, there were two more interns from the High School of Environmental Studies that were placed with me to work on the Our Housing is Our Health Campaign. The experience supporting them at this time cemented my interest in working with youth to develop their understanding of environmental justice and organizing. I was developing my own style of doing environmental education, taking all the experiences and all the frustrations that I had, and making sure that that was not the experience that other people had. I was always saying that I fell into environmental work by mistake – not knowing it was environmental, but I had the right people along the way to help guide me, eventually getting to where I am now at. I realized that, “I wanna be that person. I wanna be that person who was gonna help youth connect the dots.” I don’t want folks to have to go half way through their life not realizing that they are impacted by something when it’s right in front of their faces. I wanted to be that connect-the-dots person, and I wanted to do it with youth.

I started talking about it more often, and my coworkers and mentors were really supportive of it. But I did not have the opportunity to do it at WE ACT because they did not have a youth organizing component to their work. I was just supervising internships and temporary projects with high school students, but that was not the main part of my job. Carlos Jusino, who is their GIS specialist, played a big role in that because he used to be a member of WE

ACT's youth group that existed in the past. He said that this type of work could be working with young people, introducing them to environmental work, and help them start their career in environmental fields. Yolande Cadore, my organizing supervisor, was very intentional in my development as an organizer. At one of trainings that she sent me to I met two staff people from Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice (YMPJ). One of them, Flavia De Souza, was working with people living near contaminated sites in the Bronx. I was surprised that people were working on that down in New York City, also doing organizing, working on the science-based piece, and working with youth. Although I knew I wanted to be organizing with youth, I also knew that I did not have any formal experience doing this work other than the opportunities at WE ACT. I figured that if this is the direction I was moving, I needed to be at an organization that had a youth organizing program.

After transitioning out of WE ACT, I took some time off, I applied to a bunch of places in Harlem that did not exactly do environmental work, but I just wanted to work with youth at that point. I also called YMPJ because I had heard that they had a job opening. They asked about my interest, and I was like, "I'm interested in doing environmental justice work with youth and teaching them how to organize around environmental justice issues." They asked me to send them my resume, and in 20 minutes after I sent an email I got a call, "Well, I read the description of what you would like for a job, and we have an opening doing exactly that." I came in and applied for it, and was given the second interview with Alexie Torres-Fleming, the founder of YMPJ. At first it was really scary to me because YMPJ was started out of the Catholic Youth Ministry, but I'm a practicing Buddhist.

When I originally started to work at YMPJ I was the environmental justice organizer. I worked with a group of young people to help develop an analysis of local environmental issues that impacted this community. We have a concrete facility across the street, so a lot of dust is getting across the street inside of people's homes. Some of the youth I worked with lived in Bronx River Houses, which also excited me because it was an additional connection we could make. We talked specifically about the SEQR process, which is the state environmental quality review. Any time a company applies for a permit or wants to expand their facility, they have to go through a review process to show what they are doing is not going to have an environmental impact on people and the area around them. This is exactly what I learned in college, my own internships and at my two previous environmental justice positions. But environmental education is not just about educating folks on the issues at hand, it's also about using interaction with young people as an opportunity for youth development in general.

The first group I worked with at YMPJ was about seven or eight students, who were already in this program that existed before I got here. But a lot of young people joined the program later. In the summer right now we have 55 students who come through the summer youth employment program. I think summer program is really important because it's where we get the largest number of people who are new to social and environmental justice work, and it's where that connection needs to be made in order for people to feel that they want to come back. During the spring it's usually 20-25 students, and fall is about 30-40 students. We work to ensure that the young people from summer choose to stay with the program in fall and spring. I organized a lot of the activities with the first group. At first, it was boring for students because it was not stuff that they usually talked about. You learn about what governs the review process, but you also have to get evidence that we have to get ourselves. So I would go out to teach them about how to monitor air quality, how to describe the nature of a problem, who is impacted and how to explore the geographical details of the neighborhood that make the problem even worse. We would go out and take pictures of the neighborhood with the students, and then discuss what we see.

A challenge for me was to create ways not only to talk about it, but also to practice organizing on a consistent basis. When you are doing environmental education I think it's important to introduce the concepts, but what sticks is the experience of actually doing it. Talking about water quality testing in the classroom is different from actually doing water quality testing on the Bronx River. You understand these concepts better when you actually have done it, and you connect it to your other experiences. Why is water quality testing of the Bronx River important in the first place? If you want people to come to the Bronx River, and you want them enjoy clean water. You make water quality testing relevant to everybody through certain steps.

One of the days that I'm thinking about specifically is the first day that I started to lead the water quality testing. We had to go to the end of the 174th Street Bridge, the blue bridge right off a block from here. At that time it was the only way that we could get down to the waterfront by Starlight Park because Concrete Plant Park had not opened up yet. Steve Oliveira, a previous YMPJ environmental educator, used to take water quality samples with a group of students, and they found that pH was higher than it should have been. They thought that it was the result of the impact of Jenna, the concrete facility. So we decided to continue water testing to be able to link this problem back to Jenna, to prove that it not only impacts the health of people by polluting air, but also impacts the health of the river. So the whole spring 2010 semester we concentrated on taking water quality samples on the river. I think the memorable experience that I had was the first time we did it. It sounded like a great idea, but I did not know how the young people were going to take it. We sat down and I explained the concept to them with the hope that we will be doing the water quality testing that day. We went down there, and we were doing it, and I was amazed just seeing how excited they were about doing different tests. I had already been talking to a couple of them about this stuff this past year, and it was like, "We gotta do this, this is how we can use this process. We need to do an X amount of samples to be able to prove something." I just realized – this is literally an example of sessions where we do community building, organizing and action.

We help students take the concepts that they learn in schools and utilize them in our work. Let's say, the water monitoring can be looked at through a very strict biology or earth science lens when you talk about nitrification or pH levels. When the water is too basic certain set of organisms can't survive – to some of my youth it may sound really boring. They get more interested when you are talking about increasing access to a river, and if our job ultimately is to clean up the river, it can't be just about removing industry from the waterfront so they are not polluting. It also has to do with how to monitor water to see if your work is actually being effective. One of the biggest ways that you can indicate that is looking at plant life and fish. If you have more fish, then you know that the water is in some ways getting cleaner. You also know that pH level affects fish, and if fish can't survive, it means something wrong is happening. So my programs connect an academic theme from high school biology classes to real life in your community.

One of YMPJ's recent environmental justice accomplishments has been the development and opening of Concrete Plant Park. In late 1990s YMPJ found through a community survey that one of the biggest issues for local people was access to open space to hang out and feel comfortable at all times instead of getting arrested by cops on streets. So YMPJ looked to the waterfront where there was a lot of abandoned open space. YMPJ and the community fought against the commercial development of that space, and eventually Congressman José Serrano was able to set aside money for the construction of the park, which transformed the former concrete plant site into the park that provides water access and recreation opportunities.

So when I joined YMPJ one of my roles was to build the presence of local residents in the park and to organize events in the park to make sure that people understood that this is their park and how it can be utilized. When you fight so long to get something created the last thing that you want is people not using it. Providing environmental education activities rooted in environmental justice and local community struggles helped us build connection of students from local schools to the park and the history of the organizing that took place. This summer, for example, we are conducting free community canoeing every Saturday in Concrete Plant Park. We are taking people on the river and giving the context to why it's important, how the park was established and what is the connection to the river. It's lovely to be on the river and see all the trees along waterfront. But then you canoe down the river and see a recycling and garbage facility right on the river. Concrete Plant Park also used to be a concrete manufacturing company on the river, and you understand that this does not happen the further north you go. You have the New York Botanical Garden and the Bronx Zoo, and once you get to Westchester where the demographic, color, and income of the people change, you also notice that the Bronx River looks a lot different. When you get downwards to us you get a lot more industry and the river is a lot dirtier, and that's not by a coincidence, we don't shy away from talking frankly about it. So for us environmental education in communities of color without racial analysis is meaningless.

We are developing young people through interaction with their neighborhoods, through canoeing as a specific practice, and through a narrative about this place. Sometimes we use a script to talk to people in the boats, "Is this the first time that you've been on the Bronx River? Did you know that the Bronx River is here? Why did you choose to come? Do you know that it took ten plus years to get this park? Do you know what combined sewage overflow is?" These trips are conducted by a mix of our staff, our young participants, and people from the neighborhood who have been trained as canoe guides. Again, it has to be people from the community who are leading it.

Another project that I conduct with youth is maintaining the green roof on top of St. Joan of Arc church, a building where our youth program is located. It shows to the community that this technology exists and that it can be done in our communities. But we also know that it's not enough. Our one green roof and two rain gardens around YMPJ are not going to retain all the storm water that causes combined sewage overflow. That's unrealistic. So we say that this is an example of how you can help solve that problem. I think the other part of it is not just showing that green roof exist in the communities of color, but that it can be done *by* a community of color. I think there are some people who do this type of work and look at it mainly as a technical issue – how to install this mechanisms of retaining storm water. For us it's more a community empowerment tool. There is a problem impacting your community, and the roof teaches you about how to address this problem. It's something that we have to be not only knowledgeable about, but *we* need to be doing this work. That causes a big challenge with organizations that work with green roofs and storm water: these organizations should know how to work with communities of color and enable people from these communities to lead these projects. If you don't live in the neighborhood where the Bronx River is at, then your participation should be from the role of a facilitator and assistance provider.

I think we need to develop more innovative ways of addressing environmental justice problems in communities where unemployment and poverty is high. The solutions should be rooted in grassroots principles so we can be more effective in bringing local folks into environmental work and the larger movement. I can't bring in somebody else to do a job in your community because that's not actively developing the understanding and the capacity of the people themselves to work on that issue. If you don't build the capacity and then leave, what is left behind other than that project that you implemented? A community can't maintain a green roof or rainwater garden if nobody knows how

to maintain it and nobody even understands why it's important in the first place. That has been one of the driving motivations that we think constantly about – how do we improve the quality of the Bronx River while also building the capacity of the people in the neighborhood to actively do that? So the goal of promoting environmental justice and stewardship is twofold. It's not just the quality of the river that's important, it's also about the understanding of the people in the community that the river is connected to them and that caring about your local environment is necessary.

You may have a community that is not used to having certain resources, and then all of the sudden you are given information that you have a right to access a river in your community. But you have to inform people that it's our responsibility to take care of that river because it's a part of our home. We also need to be ready to hold any entity that is polluting the river accountable. Sometimes on a Saturday volunteer day you may hear, "Well, I'm not really that interested in participating. I don't have anything else to do, but I'm not really that interested," as opposed to, "This is my river, and I have a responsibility for taking care of this river because I had to fight to get access to this river." The meaning of waking up on a Saturday morning to do some volunteer work will have a different level of connection. It's more of a personal obligation. So even if you don't end up going, just the narrative inside your head around the importance of stewardship is completely changed. I teach our young people that even an empty lot owned by a developer is part of *your* neighborhood, it does not matter who owns it. If a developer gets angry, you hold them accountable and ask, "If you owned this lot for ten years, why is that we had to clean the lot up and not you? For ten years you did absolutely nothing with it." It's building the connection that you have to those spaces in your neighborhood, and feeling that you have a right to these spaces. You connect a little differently to pulling weeds, which becomes more than just the physical act of pulling weeds. It becomes an act of defiance, it becomes an act of ownership, "This is *my* neighborhood. I'm gonna take responsibility for this lot. And if you have a problem with it, then I'm gonna ask you why you did not take care of it if this is your lot."

I'm trying to teach youth in YMPJ about truly understanding your surroundings. I think there are a lot of different ways that you can look at your community, a lot of different lens through which you are looking at it. Like using a camera, you can have a basic lens to see things, but when you strap on that heavy-duty lens at the end of the camera you notice details that you would not have been able to notice with a disposable camera. Using a high-powered Canon is different than using a disposable camera. You may be seeing things using a disposable camera, but your understanding and your analysis of it is a lot deeper if you can notice details using the Canon. I use this analogy about the Bronx... I think that there are many experiences that the young people have that build their connection to the Bronx. But when you are developing a young person's critical thinking and young person's political analysis, I think their understanding of the community becomes more defined, and then you just have a more transformative connection to your neighborhood because you understand your role in that community a lot differently. You understand your relation to other people in the neighborhood, you don't focus on the division, but emphasize the similarities.

The Bronx River is a resource that some don't realize is a resource because of the disconnection from the waterfront due to industry and highways. There are a lot of people who live within a block from the Bronx River, who don't know that there is a river there, including some of our incoming students. This seems crazy. But when you think about it, it makes perfect sense. If you have no reason to go to a river, how would you know that a river is there? If your community is surrounded by highways that prevent you from getting to a river, how would you know that a river is there? If you know that the river is there, but all you see is trash in it, then your appreciation of it is like,

“Well, this is mad dirty, why should I care about it?” Then what is your connection to it? “Well, it’s a dirty river, I don’t really need to be cleaning this up, I don’t use it anyway” – because the lens that you have does not show that it’s a resource. But then you realize the fact that not everybody has access to the river, but everybody deserves access to the river. Programs like YMPJ are for you to understand the history that explains why things are there, why you have highways built through your community, and why they don’t have to continue to be there. When you learn it, *how* you relate to your neighborhood gets so much deeper. And that’s really what we want to provide as part of our environmental education. Stewardship is really important, but you have to connect it to community empowerment, which is an essential part of how we do our environmental education.

Some students from the neighborhood who join YMPJ just come to the program. A lot of folks come to us through the summer youth employment program; they have never been exposed to this work. We involve them in environmental education, and we do it around the stewardship work – how to take care of the Bronx River, what do we do about combined sewage overflow by using a rain barrel in our rain garden system. But a lot of that is also linked to a racial analysis, which is really in the core of environmental justice. We ask students, “How many green roofs have you seen in your neighborhood? How many rain barrels have you seen in the back? Do you even have ability to do a rain garden because we don’t have grass, or farming on a mass scale? Are there any farms in the Bronx?” They are like, “No, because there is probably not a lot of open space, and that space is contaminated.” So you are combining traditional stewardship with a more intentional focus race and class. A lot of this education is also through a workshop format, so we make sure there is a mixture of hands-on activities like the water quality testing and canoeing, as well as learning through discussions. Sometimes I use film to show examples of what we have done in the past, and what other folks have done – to express the importance of being part of communities that are fighting for environmental justice.

I learned some of my teaching approaches from my colleagues, including young people in YMPJ. Shanay Sneed was a youth organizer and now is my co-worker who I supervise. People like her are a big part of who I am now as a participant in the environmental justice movement and also an adult ally. She was really essential in helping me understand how to do environmental education through environmental justice in a way that can be fun and exciting – while using my skills and helping me fine-tune them to get other people involved. So it’s not just about you being excited and passionate. Other people have to be passionate about it as well, and these methods are an art that come with practice and guidance. She really taught me a lot. And Andre Rivera, one of our youth participants, taught me a lot about how to be an effective environmental educator. He is an 18-year-old young man now. He is really passionate about what he wants to do, is a leader, and he provides a model for other youth for how to work with people, and he is a great example of how YMPJ fosters youth development through environmental education. He developed his character, responsibility and maturity, and through his example I learned that environmental education does not have to be separate from youth development; you can use it as a relationship building opportunity that helps support a young person.

I’m very proud of the young people I’m working with at YMPJ, and I have many experiences that I reference. The youth organizers who lead our work, Rasean Robinson, Tyreke Rambert, Lamar Robles and Andre Rivera, have each developed their own styles of doing environmental education for others. It’s like seeing the product of your work over two and a half years, but having them explain issues in the community based on their own understanding. They speak from experiences that we have exposed them to, but based on their understanding and using their own words. I don’t always know if the young people we work with realize how many different stereotypes they prove

wrong – by the fact that you can have a group of young men and young women who a lot of people expect not to do anything with their lives, but you see them in the position of leadership, and you see that level of power that young people have. It is a constant reminder to me of why I do and love this work.

I have enjoyed and grown from my time at YMPJ, and I plan to continue to build up the organizing work around environmental justice with young people. We still have projects that have to be finished, and many residents to engage in our environmental education. I also think a lot about scale, taking some of our smaller projects and developing them so we have a larger impact both on the neighborhood, and throughout the city and country. And it's also about developing young people who will make this work sustainable, who will continue to do this work in the future. The work that I'm doing with the youth here and the gratification that I get from it is like nothing I've ever had. I believe I've been effective in what I'm doing to an extent, but I still look forward to further improve my skills of using environmental education to transform the neighborhood and the people who live in it.