

Kim Williams

April 11, 2023

Summary: Interview with Lambert's Point, Norfolk resident and organizer Kim Williams. The interview starts with Kim's general orientation as a Catholic Worker, then a brief recent history of Lambert's Point and its gentrification by ODU students in the past 10-15 years. The interview goes over the past 10 years of organizing against coal dust in Lambert's Point, making note of contributions from Joe Cook of Sierra Club and Mr. Charles Corbett of New Virginia Majority. The interviewee describes her frustrations with Department of Environmental Quality's Tidewater Air Monitoring Evaluation, her fears around coal dust exposure, and what she loves about living in community at Lambert's Point.

[00:00:00] **Kim Williams:** Well, I'm glad you're doing a, a podcast on, uh, coal dust an' Norfolk Southern, and I hope I can tell you something that's helpful.

[00:00:11] **Adrian:** Yeah, for sure. That's helpful. Yeah. And did we, I was wondering if we had, um, actually met before it's possible. Um, I remember I was at a, um, N-A-A-C-P environmental Justice committee meeting like a year ago, um, here in--

[00:00:34] **Kim Williams:** Oh, okay. Was that at a Baptist church?

[00:00:37] **Adrian:** Yeah.

[00:00:37] **Kim Williams:** Yes. Yes.

[00:00:39] **Adrian:** And Kim Sudderth led, yeah. Yeah. I think we might have talked then.

[00:00:44] **Kim Williams:** I was late that day and I was bringing a neighbor who has since died. Sadly, Mr. Corbett. he was elderly and he, he wasn't doing well, but he really, it mattered to him so much to go and he also was part of New Virginia Majority, and so.

[00:01:02] This, uh, Cover the Coal campaign was really important to him. So I, you know, that day, that morning, my, my brain was mostly on, you know, worried about him. Of course. I'm sorry. Of course. But I do remember there were some good talks. I heard that and Carl. Both were really excellent.

[00:01:22] **Adrian:** I was wondering, was that Mr. Corbett, who had done so much organizing around the coal dust with the Sierra Club?

[00:01:29] **Kim Williams:** Well, that might been Joe Cook.

[00:01:32] **Adrian:** Okay. That's who I was saying.

[00:01:33] **Kim Williams:** Yeah. And he died a couple years ago.

[00:01:35] A couple years ago. He really started the whole campaign off. When he was working with Sierra Club. Yeah.

[00:01:41] **Adrian:** Right.

[00:01:42] **Kim Williams:** Yeah.

[00:01:42] **Adrian:** Okay. Yeah. Yeah. It's hard to lose a community member.

[00:01:49] **Kim Williams:** Yeah. Especially, and our movement is so small as it is.

[00:01:52] (At this point Malcolm arrives and Adrian finishes setting up)

[00:01:52] **Malcolm Jones:** This year's Repair Lab is looking at the coal dust and the impact that it's having in Newport News and Norfolk. The unique thing about living in this area is Norfolk Southern has been there forever, probably longer than the neighborhood. And no one's investigated whether or not this is having an impact on us or any weather, health, weather, environmental, weather, anything.

[00:02:15] **Adrian:** Yeah.

[00:02:16] **Malcolm Jones:** So we're breathing it in.

[00:02:17] We're walking around the area 24 7. Trains are coming by, blowing it to us, but no impact. Or at least they don't know what the impact is because we haven't actually done anything. Um, so this is a great time to do it right now because Norfolk Southern had some derails In different areas. Yeah. So it's bringing some attention to, uh, maybe some regulation issues and problems.

[00:02:40] Um, so we're trying to bring awareness, studying what regulation, regulatory devices can be used to actually measure, um, making sure those devices work properly and different things like that. That's pretty much what we've been trying to do this year. Yeah. Yeah.

[00:02:58] **Kim Williams:** And so you're, you work with the Repair Lab as well? Yes. Now what is the Repair Lab?

[00:03:04] **Adrian:** Yeah, I'll answer that. So the Repair Lab is a group, is a lab within the University of Virginia. And we're inside this in like bigger institute called the Institute of Democracy. (Note - this was true at the time but is no longer.) Um, and what we do is we're a group of scholars, activists, artists who work together to try to understand problems of environmental injustice at the intersection of climate change and racial justice.

[00:03:38] And through that understanding, intervene in those problems to protect the people who are most vulnerable to those, those kinds of issues. So, um, I've been working with them for like a year and a half, and last year I worked with our friend Kim Sudderth on a similar media project around sea level rise and housing. And race in Norfolk. Um, so we looked at the history of the city, um, the history of the NRHA and redlining and the St. Paul's redevelopment and the Ohio Creek project and the Seawall Project to try to understand the economic history and racial history and, and racialized dynamics of projects like those that attempt to intervene and sea level rises, and who they protect and who they might threaten and what can be done.

[00:04:58] **Kim Williams:** Mm-hmm.

[00:04:59] **Adrian:** [00:05:00] So this project is similar, but different.

[00:05:04] **Kim Williams:** Did you turn that first project into a podcast or what, what did you

[00:05:08] **Adrian:** I did. Yeah. It exists.

[00:05:11] **Kim Williams:** I need to listen to it.

[00:05:11] (Break in the audio between pre-interview and interview. Interview begins with Malcolm responding to Kim's previous shares about her life as a Catholic Worker.)

[00:05:11] **Malcolm Jones:** Um, I think that being open to learning about other people and other cultures, and also being open to, uh, making sure, being aware enough to not want to put your money into, uh, things that are gonna harm other people makes you kind of a world advocate, though.

[00:05:28] Thinking about everyone, you're being conscious of everyone. Being conscious of your living conditions and how it's impacting other people and impacting the environment. And then just modeling that behavior to other people and talking to people about it helps create other world advocates, so. I appreciate you and I applaud you for that.

[00:05:44] **Kim Williams:** Oh, thank you. Thanks. So, yeah. But the neighborhood has changed a lot since we've lived here. You know, it's, uh, it's a gentrification, but it's, it's a gentrification of sorts to make this, uh, more of a area where ODU students have wanted, want to live and feel comfortable living. And so it's been a lot of change over the last 34 years.

[00:06:14] **Malcolm Jones:** Yeah. And I see more changes coming, uh, with uh, what's happening over here on Hampton Boulevard. Um, the, was it, Rail yard?

[00:06:22] **Kim Williams:** Right, right. Yeah. We're gonna have a little, uh, they're gonna have a grocery store and, uh, some other businesses, um, yeah, that's up and coming. And people in this neighborhood, long-term residents have advocated for that for a very long time. And it has been a long time coming.

[00:06:46] And, uh, we're at, when we first moved here, I think it was, yeah, 1989. That, that Food Lion was not there. So this place really was a food desert and that was a big victory that for the civic leagues, you know, local activists had, uh, long advocated for that. And we, when we, it just was just came in kind of as we moved into so other, and so there are folks who are very happy to see, uh, I think it's gonna be a LIDL that's coming in here.

[00:07:20] I hope it doesn't hurt the Food Lion cuz I think, you know, I would stay loyal to the Food Lion. It's been a couple other bus, you know, businesses. It was another, I can't even remember-- the Food Lion seems to be the longest term grocery store that was, has been in that spot.

[00:07:36] **Malcolm Jones:** So could you explain a little bit about what a food desert is just in case?

[00:07:39] **Kim Williams:** Well, a food desert where, um, it's difficult because of distance for, for people in a community to buy foods that are healthy, like fresh vegetables, fresh fruits, um, fresh, uh, meats. Food deserts tend to be, they tend to, they are located in areas where people tend to be low income and predominantly people of color in the United States.

[00:08:09] Uh, we have, we do have food deserts here in Norfolk. You know, uh, the, especially down right now, the St. Paul's area with the loss of their grocery store during the pandemic, the height of the pandemic, it closed down. And then they had, uh, the second, the second store in that little strip mall, uh, Family Dollar, I believe it was caught on fire and burned.

[00:08:33] And that evidently was a source, a secondary source of food. And I don't think, I can't, I don't think it's fresh. I've never been to any Family Dollar where they had fresh vegetables or fresh fruits, but, What they did have, they probably had a freezer case, a fridge case, uh, for prepared foods. But that is gone.

[00:08:52] So, and then you have concentrated in that area, a lot of people who don't even have cars, so they, you know, have to get to the grocery store by walking or by taking public transport or calling a taxi. So, you know, just adding to, you know, the amount of money they have to pay to go shopping and get, get what they need to, to feed their, feed their households.

[00:09:19] So Lambert's Point was a neighborhood with those same stressors. More, more so 30 some years ago when I moved here, um, with no close by source of no market to buy fresh foods. And many people here, elderly or, uh, poor just didn't have the means to get there. No cars. And now the neighborhood is changing.

[00:09:50] There are, um, a lot more students moving in and there were new homes that were built since we've been here. The neighborhood was, uh,

[00:10:00] designated a conservation neighborhood, which is, I think, you know, kind of a name is another label for gentrification, which meant that, uh, there, there were loans available to homeowners here to bring their houses up to codes.

[00:10:16] Um, and then, but they were not deals like that for landlords. And so their goal was, "No new construction here in our neighborhood would be multi-family." There were a lot more multi-family house, uh, units when we did, when we did move into the neighborhood. So, and then, and so the deals were not as, uh, obtainable, you know, to, you know, to, to make upgrades to your home.

[00:10:41] And then if you didn't make the upgrades to the, to your home, you the city, I don't, and I don't even remember, I don't know how all of it worked, but, but ultimately you, you, the pressures are that you cannot keep that property. So landlords who were not, who did not bring their houses up to the new codes, they ended up ultimately selling their properties and then those houses disappeared and single family houses.

[00:11:07] The goal was to raise the tax base, I think, and, you know, good, good goal. But as with these single family homes that have been built in Lamberts point, that doesn't mean in the last 20 years, doesn't mean that it's been. An influx of families, of, of working families, uh, who are taking pride in ownership.

[00:11:29] What has happened is you got newer single family homes, but they're now lived in by students. So they're, they're owned by landlords, absentee landlords. Um, and the rooms are, you know, so they're charging a price by the room and students either with, you know, they come from families who can afford to pay or they have loans and, and I get, and the loans will pay for their housing.

[00:11:57] So that makes the market rate. And so now to rent a room in Lambert's Point or an entire house is outta reach for many of the main, the people who were living here 34 years ago when I moved in. And so they are part of the, uh, the pushout that's happening in a lot of neighbors. Neighborhoods in our city.

[00:12:23] So it's kind of, it's, so that's, that's the situation. I, as I see it here,

[00:12:31] **Adrian:** um, could we, could we rewind for a second?

[00:12:33] **Kim Williams:** Yeah, go ahead.

[00:12:34] **Adrian:** And, um, could, could you just introduce yourself?

[00:12:37] **Kim Williams:** Okay. Sorry. Great. Okay. My name is Kim Williams and I have lived in the neighborhood of Lambert Point since 1989. Um, and I have, I've lived here with my husband, Steve Baggerly and we raised two boys who are now young men here in this neighborhood.

[00:13:04] The work that we do is, we are part of the Catholic Worker Movement and we try to help with, uh, people. We, we try to help with local issues of hunger. We run a soup kitchen and we, uh, have a food pantry and we,

um, try to offer assistance as we are able to people who are, are having trouble with, uh, you know, medicines, housing, whatever way we can.

[00:13:33] We do everything by donations. We have a lot of volunteers and we put out a little newsletter called Simplicity. We also though try to espouse nonviolence and we try to, we try to, with our lives, uh, point to things that we feel that contribute to making poverty here in our own community and in all over the planet.

[00:13:58] And then namely, we look at that as a mis- prioritization of the gifts that God gives us for all, all creation, for the uplift of all people and all creation. By mis-prioritizing those resources, whether it be money or great minds or human labor into making war and to making nuclear weapons, and upkeeping nuclear weapons, which can, you know, wipe out all of humanity in a matter of, uh, an afternoon.

[00:14:30] Right now, not a very popular topic, but we feel it's still very relevant.

[00:14:35] **Adrian:** Totally. Yeah. Popularity comes and goes. Yeah. So you were talking about the neighborhood and when you moved in here in 89, you were kind of telling us about how the neighborhood has changed. I mean, I was wondering like, um, if y'all have seen those changes similarly, I know that you're not living here anymore, you're still in the area.

[00:14:56] **Malcolm Jones:** Yeah, I think, um, park Place and Lambert's Point [00:15:00] were making some changes around the same time. So we're seeing, I know Park Place is still making some, uh, radical changes at the moment, but I think you started to see certain parts of the neighborhoods changing at the same time. Cause I think the city typically rotates on like a 10 year plan, so a lot of times you start to see changes every 10 years in different places throughout the city.

[00:15:25] Um, so for me, in Park Place, the Boys and Girls Club closed maybe 10, 15 years ago. Mm-hmm. Um, so that kind of took away an, an avenue where people would play, um, play basketball, do technology related stuff. So that created, for Lambert's Point and for Park Place, a lot of the kids were probably frequently at the Boys and Girls Clubs, so that.

[00:15:49] We went from playing at the Boys and Girls Clubs to now playing at either James Monroe or, uh, Madison playing basketball. So that kind of bought,

probably bought more kids into the neighborhood playing versus going all the way to the, the City Park or to the Boys and Girls Club.

[00:16:07] **Adrian:** And what's the, what's your relationship with your neighbors like?

[00:16:12] **Kim Williams:** Um, I would say, well, definitely with the, the older school neighbors, the ones who've been here, you know, decades that are, you know, still living.

[00:16:25] I, I would say we definitely have a cordial relationship. I try to attend the Civic League monthly. Um, it's. It's not a very active civic league, sadly. But people keep trying.

[00:16:38] **Adrian:** Well, I wanted to, I wanted to ask you about the coal dust.

[00:16:42] Um, when, when did you first notice that?

[00:16:46] **Kim Williams:** Well, So this is the third house I've lived in in the 30 years I've been here. And none of them were new constructions. All of them were, you know, houses that are pretty old. This house is probably a hundred years old. Uh, so each of the three houses, when I moved into them, you know, we had to, well one of 'em had it actually even been boarded up.

[00:17:12] So that one I can remember doing my clean, the, the cleaning that it took to make it kind of habitable, that house had been boarded up on 38th Street and um, it was just, just sweeping. The first initial sleep was a lot of black dust. Yeah. But I mean, we get it cleaned. We were young, we cleaned, we painted and everything.

[00:17:36] But then you notice, you know, like when you open a window in the summer, cuz we are. also in our attempts to live simply, we don't, we try to use the air conditioner as little as possible. And I hope you're not freezing here, but we try to not use the heat too much either. So in the summer we got windows open all the time.

[00:17:56] I think these are memories cause my, my kids are grown now, but, you know, you know, when they're crawling around on the floor, at the end of the day, they always have, you know, in the summer, cuz they're wearing shorts and stuff, you know, they're totally, you know, black on their legs and arm just because, just on the floor, let alone if they play outside.

[00:18:15] , I'm not the, probably the cl- cleanest person, but I mopped a lot, especially when they were little, I mopped the floor a lot, but it was just, uh, it was just, was what it is.

[00:18:26] So it's, I think it might be, uh, you know, it's probably not as bad as the people who live in the coal mining places like, you know, Western Virginia and West Virginia, whatever, where, where, you know, you can read about families who live right there, the workers and their families. So, but now, now there's not even that many workers cause they do the mountaintop removal.

[00:18:49] But, um, back when human beings went underground and did that incredibly dangerous work and they, well they still do do it, but their homes, you know, just the stories of their homes being totally covered with coal dust. Well, it is, it is a version of that here in, in Western Norfolk and probably every place that is close to where the trains go.

[00:19:17] **Adrian:** So how did it make you feel when you saw your kids crawling around and noticed that they were getting really, really dirty with coal dust?

[00:19:28] **Kim Williams:** Yeah. And their toys outside, their bikes and stuff would get totally dusted up. Uh, it was, I felt a stress. I felt a stress to try to always get that stuff, their toys clean, you know, and to not, you know, especially when they're real little and, you know, they put stuff in their mouths or anybody's kid who comes over, you know, still the same stress.

[00:19:51] So that's that kind of stress. And then there was also just the stress of, difficulty sleeping. Because especially in the older houses, now [00:20:00] we have updated windows here, but the older houses with the wooden windows and even these, when the trains going by and sometimes it is just nonstop.

[00:20:10] They rattle, they rattle the windows. It's just constant. And, and, uh, and pieces of furniture will be rattling. So when you're trying to sleep at night, that often still today wakes me up. And we, so we have little things like we have a, if we have a, something that's rattling, we, we take little pieces of cardboard and little, you like a cereal box and fold it and jam it in if there's something that needs to be tightened up.

[00:20:38] But you probably did this in your house. Did you, did you feel the rattling at your house or here?

[00:20:43] **Malcolm:** Yes. So I know you said you've been living here for 30 plus years?

[00:20:46] **Kim Williams:** Yes. In this house, 21 years. But in the neighborhood as a whole, since 1989.

[00:20:52] **Malcolm Jones:** Were you always consciously aware of the impact of coal or did you kind of gradually become aware of it?

[00:20:59] **Kim Williams:** Just becoming more, I didn't start thinking about environmental stuff. I was concerned about in my y- my youth. I was concerned about poverty, I was concerned about war. I didn't, you know, and I think I always knew about environmental stuff, but I wasn't thinking specifically right where I am.

[00:21:19] Um, other than, well, I mean, when you start cleaning up that coal dust, I do start wondering what, what are we breathing and what, what, what's, what are my kids breathing? And, uh, you know, and I would try to talk to people, you know, neighbors and stuff. And, and, and I, and I still feel this today cause I still try to talk to them, you know, and, and then invite them to New Virginia majority meetings and stuff like that.

[00:21:42] That the group that's been organizing here, I think maybe about six years, um, and I just feel like there's a lot of hopelessness. It's like, "Oh, there's nothing you can do, there's nothing you can do." So I would, you know, just little casual conversations, talking neighbors about the coal dust. But, so I kind of adopted, I think that, you know, when you hear there's nothing you can do, nothing you can do, kind of felt like, well, maybe there's, yeah, they're so big, they're so wealthy, Norfolk Southern. Uh, but then New Virginia Majority had these, uh, these organizers and they came around knocking doors.

[00:22:19] So, you know, I can just remember, it was like a Sunday. They caught me at home. It was a Saturday or a Sunday, and, uh, they had their orange t-shirts and they, and, and it was six or seven years ago, and they, they're just young people. "Are you concerned about the coal dust?" I said, "Well, yeah." So they came in and we talked about an hour, about coal dust.

[00:22:40] And so then I realized, okay, they're organizing around this and there's interest and they're, they're connecting, you know, they knew the organizing questions to ask and stuff. And so then I kind of feel like, well, there's some hope and I, you know, if there's gonna be, you know, especially if I'm not gonna be by myself, I'm, I'm gonna go and see what I can do.

[00:23:00] So I started going to their meetings, met other concerned neighbors who wanted to, to take action. And they had already come up with, uh, an idea of how to make things better. One is, can th- this incredibly wealthy corporation could cover their coal cars. Or they could, it seems like, well, from what I've learned with hanging out with New Virginia Majority and listening to people in these meetings, that there's the place where the coal is dumped.

[00:23:28] It comes in on the. It comes in on the, the coal cars. You can watch it, it stops traffic everywhere when it's going over intersections. Um, but they get to the coal pier here and it is being dumped onto, I guess, barges. And when it's at that point of, when it's dumped, there's this huge plume.

[00:23:51] Now, and evidently Norfolk Southern has done things to try to mitigate that. So they started, I think, you know, 25 years ago, a thing of put, hosing it down more with water. And maybe that helps some, but there's still, when that, if you happen to be on the right part of Powhatan or, or even in West Ghent, right when that dump is happening, you can see a very visible black cloud.

[00:24:21] And then, then, You know, that's the stuff that blows. So that stuff going to land somewhere, it lands on our houses. Um, so if they covered that area where they dump, make a little, like a big, you know, place for the train to go, the train cars to go into and, and dump it covered up, that, that would probably help.

[00:24:43] And then when things happen, like, uh, all the news, uh, with this derailment in, in East Palestine, Ohio, and Norfolk Southern is now on the, in the national [00:25:00] news and, uh, and reading about what the, the horrible chemicals spilled there and the horrible way of dealing it with it, burning things off and, and then, and then reading in the news about the stuff inevitably seeping into waterways because waterways are everywhere. Um, it's pretty terrifying. And then this is just in mainstream news, reading about that, you know, that coal, um, the railway workers who wanted to, were talking about going on strike in, back in what, November, December. And some of the things they were, they were wanting to, were planning to go on strike about were these safety measures that evidently Norfolk Southern had been lobbying Congress to make sure they don't get implemented or don't become laws to demand these safety measures for, uh, you know, brakes that can stop more, you know, train with shorter distance-- some kind of special brakes that would be less likely to come on fire. Evidently there's, those brakes are over a hundred year old technology, Safety measures. And that actually, you know, just since that I've learned of these other things of like, you know, Norfolk Southern hadn't been

lobbying to have, uh, fewer staff on a train, like just have the driver and nobody else to see what's going on in the cars. So, you know, that's, that's they, it, it really speaks of an entity that does not care about accidents.

[00:26:47] **Adrian:** Can you tell us about the action in March? Um, March 11?

[00:26:53] **Kim Williams:** Okay. So there's, there are wonderful groups working on all kinds of justice issues. You know, I think it's been happening more all over the country, but it's happening here in Norfolk too. And so there's a group, uh, so I've been involved in volunteering with New Virginia Majority, and they've been, you know, trying to talk to neighbors and, uh, the issue, we would love to see the coal cars covered, or at least the dumping area covered.

[00:27:21] Um, and then there's another group that has become active around here in the last few years called, um, is it Tidewater? Workers Assembly. And they're connected to a, a, some kind of National Workers Assembly. And so they're trying to organize among rail workers. So they have started coming to New Virginia Majority Chap-- Lambert's Point chapter meetings. So I've gotten to meet some of those folks.

[00:27:50] Charles, I've known Charles Brown through, uh, climate justice issues in other venues cuz he's been, he's been, he's worked for other groups too. Um, and so they called for a solidarity action with the railway workers back in March. And that was in response to, uh, people who down actually at Norfolk Southern headquarters uh, who were calling for solidarity actions across the co-- across the country with railway workers. So that's, uh, you know, we, we definitely, we-- we're pro job. We want people to have jobs. We're pro workers. We want people to have safe and decent work to do.

[00:28:35] It's, we just want everybody to be able to live in, in, you know, not worried about whether they're being poisoned by what's going right by their neighborhood or going through their neighborhood. Um, so, you know, when this East Palestine stuff, this, this derailment happened is exposing this total disregard of this huge corporation.

[00:28:57] And it's, I think that's just how they operate. These huge corporations that make so much money off of chemicals make so much money off of this coal extraction. And, you know, we already know coal's not good for the environment, but you know, they're gonna keep eking out as much of a profit as they can until they cannot do it anymore.

[00:29:18] And while it's all happening and they are making their shareholders really happy with, you know, by having a cutting every cost measure they can, that has to do with human safety. You know, people are getting hurt.

[00:29:33] **Adrian:** What would you say the relationship is between what labor unions want and what residents want?

[00:29:43] **Kim Williams:** Hmm. You know, I'm not sure residents here yet at see a relationship, but I think there definitely is one. I mean that the, the workers who are, who wanting, you know, [00:30:00] safety measures and then the railway workers --who the federal government made it so that they couldn't strike-- but they were, you know, wanting sick, paid sick days, wanting, non exhaustive schedules so that they can be fully present in mind when they're doing their work.

[00:30:18] I mean, that's just, that's something everybody should have. And that ultimately makes the rest of us who ha are, you know, even if we not ha, don't have any consciousness of these trains, but they're, they're going right by us. It ke-- keeps us safer too.

[00:30:34] You know, if the workers are worked to the point of exhaustion and they can't take a day off to go see a doctor if they're sick. And if they know that there's safety measures that the company could employ, could use, and they're, they don't, and they're not using them, they, they know they're not safe. And, and the rest of us are not safe either.

[00:30:57] **Adrian:** Right. What, can you tell me more about what it was like to work with Tidewater Workers Assembly and labor unions around the coal dust issue?

[00:31:08] **Kim Williams:** Well, that was a first, uh, effort together. So I mean, it was, I would say, well, that particular action, I felt it was very joyous. It's a good thing to come together with on a, on and stand for justice and to stand for people's right to have a healthy work life and to have a healthy community because I think it is totally possible that we could have these things.

[00:31:40] So it's, it's a joyous thing to be able to, you know, come together with that and, and, you know, New Virginia Majority, I know, I know a little bit more about what the, our, our chapter has been involved in here in Norfolk then cuz Tidewater Workers Assembly, that's kind of new in my consciousness, you know, just saying like the last six months.

[00:32:00] Um, I know they're doing other things with, or with, uh, like city workers and things like that and, you know, I get their newsletters. Um, all very good stuff. New Virginia Majority has been just trying to-- well before Norfolk Southern moved their corporate office, there would be activities kind of focused at their, their headquarters when it was downtown.

[00:32:23] We had things like, uh, Christmas caroling at their door, rewriting the words to the, to carols to kind of educate about coal dust. In fact we re-- we reinitiated that concept this last Christmas time with the (?) chapter, going to the neighborhood Christmas caroling in the neighborhood with an attempt to try to, you know, invite people to our meetings.

[00:32:50] And we, and we rewrote some, uh, some, uh, carols too, like, you know...

[00:32:55] "Coal dust is in the air. Norfolk Southern doesn't care." I can't remember which Christmas song that was. I wish I, I wish I could. They were funny. And they, um, and we just had a good time doing it, you know, it was good that-- and we were all wore like, uh, you know, Christmas sweaters and we knocked-- if, if a house looked like it was, uh, a house with a family in it, especially with, you know, with kids and, or like, if it was decorated, we would, it's when we, we would actually knock and people, and, and families with kids.

[00:33:24] They, they loved it. They loved it. That, that we were singing these songs and, uh, and you know, we were, you know, we were kind of silly and so, and we had literature to share, you know, about coal, dust and, and then invitation to the meeting.

[00:33:37] **Adrian:** Yeah. Can you tell us more about how advocacy has changed since you first got involved?

[00:33:44] Like when those New Virginia Majority folks came in their t-shirts to your door to like the present moment, like what has changed? In your, your approach or the strategies that you've been involved with?

[00:34:01] **Kim Williams:** Well, one thing that's changed is that we have lost some of our elders just since this all started, who were concerned about this movement.

[00:34:10] And that's, that's really hard. Well, Joe Cook of Sierra Club I think was, uh, I think the first person who really... In fact, you know, I knew Joe and I knew he was concerned about coal dust, but I, I didn't, I didn't really make

connections and didn't even know that Sierra Club was working also. There's been a-- so that was before I got involved.

[00:34:33] Sierra Club and Norfolk Southern had been working together, and I remember they had a, a, a press conference down at the end of 38th Street, and I, I think I went to that. So I was just like a, a, just a tagger-on. Sierra Club and Norfolk Southern, I mean, not Norfolk Southern, sorry, New Virginia Majority, New Virginia Majority, but New Virginia majority.

[00:34:54] They have chapter meetings here now, pre pandemic. We have a, a, a senior [00:35:00] citizen, a senior apartments and they have a meeting room. So we had several members that were, that lived there. So they would be able to have the meeting room and we'd have our monthly meetings there.

[00:35:10] And that's where we would plan things like the caroling down at the Norfolk Southern headquarters. I know another day we did-- uh, because one of the pleas at that time had been like, would the head of Norfolk Southern, Mr. Squires, would he meet with us? Would he just meet with us, meet with some of the people who live here and just talk to us and hear our stories, hear our concerns, and you know, and so that's when, like at the end of the caroling, there would be that letter.

[00:35:38] We would like you to meet with us. Like a couple people went in and just to deliver it to the, to their receptionist and said, please give this to Mr. Su, Mr. Squires, cause of course they said he wasn't there. And um, and then we had a day, another day in the summer where we had a, "Where's Mr. Squires?" A lot of creativity, you know, people, they were using kind of the Where's Waldo, uh, theme. It was like a little rally up on the, on the church on 38th Street, Lambert's Point Baptist Church. We had their, their, their big green space. They let us have a little rally and, uh, people spoke about coal dust, but then we, we went around and we had literature about where's James Squires?

[00:36:18] And they had, they had that kind of Where's Waldo picture, but his face on there as like a hidden in a group of people. It was, I thought it was cute. So we just went around and flyer'd the neighborhood and talked to people who were out outside on a Saturday and nice sunny Saturday about coal dust. So we'd done things like that, that tried to raise awareness, but then, you know, Covid hit.

[00:36:39] And so then we had to go down to, to go to Zoom meetings and not a lot of activity. But during that time, uh, some things happened in the government that, and this is before again I got involved, so this is what I've just

learned. So with the advocacy and, uh, clamoring of people in the Southeast Community in Newport News, um, and then, and the New Virginia Majority and organized folks in Sierra Club, folks organizing in Lambert's Point that finally, even though it was like six years into their raising, raising, beginning to raise their voices, the EPA came up with monies to put some special monitors here, air monitors to monitor the coal dust to see what kind of toxins are in them and what levels they might be.

[00:37:41] So this was in 2020, the fall of 2020 that this was, you know, you can find the articles I'm sure the Pilot was covering things. The Daily Press was covering it. So then we had a, a little period where our New Virginia Majority chapter was focused on that. And so, so what they, what the, what the monies says is gonna be a year's study.

[00:38:07] They're gonna put, I think it's either two or three of these big monitors. And then they had like eight [of] these little monitors called Purple Air monitors. And they just tell you if, if there are a certain amount of the dangerous size particles, so it's PM 2.5? I think. They just tell you-- you don't know what it is, you just know if there's a dangerous amount and it's in a very localized area.

[00:38:33] So I, I volunteered to have one on my house. I have one, and then there's a few more in scattered in the neighborhood, but the Purple air monitors are the only thing that have gone online. And so this has been our clamor for a while. Okay. So when D E Q, Department of Environmental Quality is the state level, I guess, handler of these EPA funds and, and the, and the. Sets it all up.

[00:39:00] So they, they've had meetings, they have quarterly meetings, they have, liaisons.

[00:39:06] **Adrian:** What's it like at the meetings? Did you go?

[00:39:09] **Kim Williams:** I, I've been to them. Yeah. I think I've been to all of them that they have. Well, the first one they had -- they were meeting with New Virginia Majority and we were saying, you know, you need to knock on doors and invite people to these meetings, and you definitely need to advertise.

[00:39:23] Well, I don't think they really did knock on doors, but there were flyers that went out. But the meeting, the first meeting was held over at ODU at nighttime, at the Ted Constant Center in one of their big meeting rooms. And it ended up being a really cold and rainy night. It's like hardly anybody went.

[00:39:41] Um, so we, you know, gave them feedback on that, you know, you know, "Can you please just do it locally where people can walk?" So we have this community center. I mean, it was Covid and the community center was closed and stuff, but you know, we've been saying, you know, get a tent and let's have it outside. But that, that's never, that's [00:40:00] never been an option it seems.

[00:40:01] So I think they just never responded that. But, um, so now the last couple of them have happened at the, uh, community center down, down couple blocks on Bowen's Ferry. And, uh, you know, they've been a little better attended, but I really think it is. It's, you know, when we, we have done footwork-- community, New Virginia Majority, uh, volunteers and, uh, organizers, we have gone and, and said, "Please come. Please come. Please come." And that's when there's been the best turnouts for the meetings.

[00:40:36] Those monitors are still not up, not the big, the big ones that will really tell you like the specific kinds of particulate matter they're looking, it's trying to see if there's certain, you know, ones that we know could be from coal and that are very toxic for life.

[00:40:56] Um, so those, those monitors are not up yet. And that's very disconcerting because from what I understand from these meetings that I've attended-- that okay, the study is gonna be a year. Once the mon-- once these monitors are set up, but then it's gonna be a really long time till the data is assessed and The Health Department comes in and looks at the data and -- you know, the Health department is supposed to be tied into this study in some way, although nobody from the Health Department has come to any of the meetings that I've been to. Keep wondering when that's gonna happen. But I, I have not seen anybody from the Health Department yet. But it really sounds like it's going to be like 10 years from when the big monitors are set up that we will really have some answers and, can really be saying, you know, "Okay, look, we've got the proof that we have toxic dust, that we are all breathing here and it's at bad levels and you need to do, you need to do something about it."

[00:42:07] And so Norfolk Southern-- 10 years? There may not even be any coal to, to bring out of the ground anymore, you know. 10, 10 years, Norfolk Southern could be out of business. I don't know. I don't know. And 10 years, the people who have lived here and lived here for decades, lived here for generations. They're gonna be gone.

[00:42:31] And it's like we've already seen, you know, like I was telling you about our, our, our neighbor, uh, Mr. Corbett, who I got to know through this,

this effort. He had activism experience from his younger days. And he, he just had such a, a lack of trust of anything that Norfolk, that, uh, that the, that Norfolk Southern or DEQ would say.

[00:42:54] But I feel like I learned a lot of listening to what I see now, this stuff. But, and he was always saying, you know, "Norfolk Southern is only--"

[00:43:02] Before these, before the EPA came up with this money to set up these monitors, which are not set up yet. Uh, after, you know, going on, what, two and a half going on three years, I think?

[00:43:15] Before that, Norfolk Southern was monitoring itself and he was always, he's the one that educated me on that, Mr. Corbett. Norfolk Southern is monitoring itself and they always say it's fine. So.

[00:43:33] You, but you just wonder, you know, why, why is this taking so long to get these monitors up?

[00:43:41] **Adrian:** How does it feel to hear that from the DEQ about like, how, how long it will take?

[00:43:48] **Kim Williams:** Well, I'm starting to feel like, I understand Mr. Corbett better. I'm starting to become a little suspicious myself. I'm starting to think that there are powerful entities even in these regulatory bodies who maybe don't care. And I wonder if, you know, I would like to know these people when they finish their, the top level careers at the regulatory bodies, where do they go work after that?

[00:44:16] Or cuz you know, you read, I read in terms of other things like, uh, like the methane gas industry, these other polluting industries, that there's a lot of going back and forth between the regulatory industries at the -- and agencies, at the federal level and at state levels. And the corporate, you know, people go and be like consultants for corporations. These corporations like, like the coal companies, like the coal transport companies, like the gas companies, like the oil companies.

[00:44:53] So i'm starting to get a little suspicious that, that, you know, maybe they don't... They don't really [00:45:00] want us to have these up, or they're just, I just wonder if they're dragging their heels.

[00:45:04] I just have to wonder.

[00:45:05] **Malcolm Jones:** Placating.

[00:45:07] **Kim Williams:** Yeah. Yeah. So I feel like, uh, we have, uh, our, our community with our little, uh, community group -- the New Virginia Majority. We're now, yeah. We're, we're keeping our eyes on and we're gonna go to any of these meetings they have, but we're, we're, we're back to our main call is we want them to cover the coal. You know, cause I don't, we don't, I don't, I don't wanna wait around 10 years till they give us data that says it's, it's dangerous. I, I want them to cover the coal now. And I want the people who have lived here a really long time and have been having to power wash their house every, you know, every spring to get the, get the coal dust off it. Or maybe they don't even have the money to do that, but they, so they live with the coal dust, so.

[00:45:53] Who don't open their windows cuz they don't want the coal dust and are, they don't want the risk and they gotta, and they're having a, you know, really high, sky high energy bill in the summertime. You know, that's, those people, they deserve to have clean air. They deserve to have clean air. And it's just, I, they can cover their coal.

[00:46:13] They can cover their coal. So.

[00:46:15] **Malcolm Jones:** You said when you first moved here, you weren't really environmentally conscious. Um, and I know you said that some of the different issues, other issues or concerns or more pressing issues for you at the moment kind of kept you from being consciously aware of that.

[00:46:30] Do you see that as being a problem for a lot of the people in the community?

[00:46:34] **Kim Williams:** It could be. You know, and like I've been talking to some neighbors, you know, who have not come, they who haven't come to civic league or who haven't come to the chapter meeting and I've tried to always-- and I'm, I think I'm a pest to them and I'll, you know, be friendly and I'll just tell 'em, you know, we got these meetings going on and well, we'd love to come hear, you know, and have you-- but then they tell me, you know, "When I come home from work, I am tired." And I know they're tired. And, and, and some of 'em work more than one job. So, you know, I know they're tired. And that's another thing that works against democracy is people having to do two jobs to survive. That's crazy.

[00:47:11] So people, it, it, it works against democracy the way this whole thing is structured.

[00:47:18] **Malcolm Jones:** Yeah. And the reason I asked you is cuz when I was growing up in Park Place, I would live-- the community wasn't all that great. So you worrying about community violence. You're worried about being in poverty. You're worried about getting back and forth to school. My parents were worried about making sure we had, I had five siblings, so making sure we were eating and making sure we had everything we need. So with all of those barriers and all these challenges, it was hard to try to focus on an environmental one.

[00:47:45] Yeah. And kind of take it seriously cuz you had all these, um, physical and tangible things that were coming at you from all these different angles.

[00:47:53] **Kim Williams:** Exactly. And you know, I was thinking about that earlier too, was like my, my involvement with environmental activism-- I wasn't doing, I've been doing some kind of activism, you know, anti-poverty and nuclear weapons, but my involvement with the climate, my expanding my world, that happened after my kids got self-sufficient.

[00:48:13] You know, so. Yeah. That-- kids, kids and work, that's a lot of life. And then if you add a health problem into that-- And you have to navigate the healthcare system and you don't, and if you don't have health insurance, oh my god! So yeah, there's a lot of, lot of stressors on people that you can't be thinking well, uh, you can't be thinking about stopping something that you don't know for sure is killing you right now.

[00:48:38] **Malcolm Jones:** While we're on that note, um, I know we mentioned earlier that there's a water treatment plant. And it's like literally right there beside Norfolk Southern. Do you have any concern about that or do you have any concern about the water?

[00:48:51] **Kim Williams:** You know, I've never even thought about that, so I didn't make those connections, um...

[00:48:58] **Malcolm Jones:** Because I figure if it's raining and you got ponds and you got drainage, those things are going to filter into the water treatment plant.

[00:49:05] **Kim Williams:** That's another thing. I, I wish I knew how that water treatment plant worked. I really don't even know. And, um, no, I know we get these, get these like periodic little postcards and, and the, uh, water company

will say that, you know, "We have all these check pluses, we have the best water."

[00:49:24] So I just take it on faith that, you know, okay, they're telling me the truth. And, um, but, you know, I think it's a good question. And I know something else related to the water company is, is supposed to be happening at, you know, there was a, there was a golf course. And that's closed now.

[00:49:44] And that golf course is over. It's kind of like Mount Trashmore out in Virginia Beach. It was a dump on the edge of our neighborhood, so it was covered over and, and then it was a golf course for a while, but now it's gonna be something, and I don't quite understand what it's gonna be, but something that I [00:50:00] think to help with water quality, but also somehow related to sea level rise.

[00:50:06] So, but that's, uh, you know, that's also the thing like climate and environment combined. I don't think I'm dumb, but it's just a matter of: you know about things in the back of your mind. But I went to a meeting, again, a, a meeting that got me started on being concerned about environment as well.

[00:50:28] Uh, and it was, it was happening in a church in, uh, in Huntersville. And I went, because that's, well, that's so close. I can't not go. And, uh, and, uh, had a, I had a, a cousin, a young cousin, she just finished college and she was an intern with this group, Virginia Organizing. So she told me about it. So I said, well, I can't, I gotta go cause I gotta give her support.

[00:50:52] And, and this is so close, I can't not go. And so it was called, um, A Flood of Voices and it was about sea level rise. Now in my mind, I already know, yeah, we got global warming. It's coming and, and, and we got, and we're gonna have sea level rise. But the, the, the question asked when I walked in the door, as people are gathering in the church, waiting for the program and the speakers to begin, they say, "While you're waiting for us to start, take this index card and write down what ways have you been impacted by sea level rise already?" And I've sat down and I thought, "Oh my God, I have been impacted." And I didn't even realize, and I thought, I have had three cars damaged in floods. So it was like, but I'm so busy, you know, going to work, making sure my kids go to school, do all their things they gotta do, you know, taking care of all the pe- people in my world that I gotta take care of.

[00:51:48] I just wasn't realizing. It's here. It's here right now. So, so yeah. And I think that's a powerful thing about. You know, if we want to care about democracy, it is so much more than than going to vote, you know, just every

four years or hopefully people, if they vote, they go to every, they go vote and everything.

[00:52:12] But it's, it's hard. It's hard to be up on what all the issues are. It's hard to, to, uh, but, but really, we gotta get connected to a group because our one, one voice is not enough. We have to get connected to a group. So, whether, you know, whether it's Sierra Club, whether it's New Virginia Majority, whether it's, you know, some other group, whatever your, your issue that you care about, if you can find a group, the civic league is even, you know, the civic leagues-- we gotta somehow learn to band together and sh-- and share what we know, share what we know, and what we've experienced. And then make the people who are supposed to work for us, the politicians, the the elected people, do what is right for, for us and for our children. You know, it's just, but it's hard.

[00:53:06] **Adrian:** Yes. Yeah. It is.

[00:53:09] Um, I wanted to ask you, just noticing we have maybe like 15 ish left, I wanted to ask you about like health outcomes. Have you experienced any health effects, that you might relate to coal dust or has anybody in your world, have you witnessed that?

[00:53:29] **Kim Williams:** Yeah. You know... In my own family, you know? Yeah. There are things that when, when I read what is uh, could be the outcomes of breathing coal dust in a toxic, at toxic levels, at dangerous levels, you know, we have some other things and, uh, and I just, I just, I don't know. I don't know.

[00:53:53] So like my, uh, my youngest son, he had to use a nebulizer as a, as a kid to, you know, for asthma. Yeah. Regularly. My other son, uh, the older son had chronic, chronic sinus infections as a child. So, you know, I don't know, I don't know if that was from living in an old house with a lot of coal dust seeping in through the cracks. I don't know. And then I now have a, a little heart thing. I have a heart arrhythmia, so I'm, I've read that, you know, that kind of, that could be from. It could be contributed to by toxic stuff that's in coal dust. I don't know. I don't know. I've never, you know, I don't know.

[00:54:39] **Malcolm Jones:** Kinda... it kind of makes you wonder, even with the pandemic and Covid, whether or not people who were already exposed this area with coal dust, and then getting Covid on top of that, if it had any conflicting uh, impact on them. Or made, uh, what probably would've been a minimum [00:55:00] impact of Covid a more serious impact because of your breathing issues from staying in that area.

[00:55:04] **Kim Williams:** Yeah. Yeah, definitely. Definitely. Yeah.

[00:55:09] **Adrian:** Did you know any folks in this area who had Covid?

[00:55:12] **Kim Williams:** Oh yeah. Yeah.

[00:55:13] And I know people who died of Covid and, and very heartbreaking and, you know, I know people in this neighborhood who have died of Covid, but it, you know, it was not out there that that's what happened.

[00:55:26] But I would just hear, you know, through a relative or something that, you know, "Oh, my aunt, she died in her home of Covid." And another, a friend of a friend of mine who lived in Tidewater Gardens, she was one of the early, she had a lot of, she had a lot of the health issues that, you know, made it very dangerous to get Covid and diabetes and she had a kidney transplant and it's like, oh my God. She did not survive it. She-- It's heartbreaking, heartbreaking.

[00:56:00] But now we're back to normal.

[00:56:05] Not really.

[00:56:06] **Malcolm Jones:** So going forward and trying to, I guess, pour something into the younger people, the ODU students, some of the younger kids in the area, uh, what could you talk to them about and concerning activism and kind of carrying the torch. Um, since it may be 10 years before the devices actually get here, you kind of have to start passing the torch and the information to some of the younger generations so they don't drop the torch and kind of drop the ball before you all come, advocacy- wise. What would you talk to them about?

[00:56:36] **Kim Williams:** Yeah. Well, with my own young men, you know, as they were, I, I would just say, you know, I don't care what you do, but you need to do something and you need to think beyond just your own self and your own four walls.

[00:56:55] You've got to think about-- cuz we all, we all affect other people by what we do and what we don't do. We all do that. So it's not like there's no such thing as one man being an island, one person being an island. There's no such thing as, you know, the rugged individual. We all affect each other. And I want to try to affect people for good.

[00:57:20] I don't, you know, I don't, and, and if I'm not careful, I'm afraid I'm going to affect people for bad. People I know and people I don't know. So I've tried to try to impart that to my kids. I don't know.

[00:57:32] But with the, with young people, it is, I've, I've not, I've found it's hard, you know, for the, these kids who are, well, first young people coming in to go to school, they're kind of in a bubble, you know? And just like, you know how we are, we have these silos, just like you're talking about just life when you have parents, job, health issues and that, that, but when you're in school, that's your, that's your world there.

[00:58:03] And you, and you got so many issues there to try to, it's hard to look, but it's, -- the world needs people with brains. The world needs people with heart. We all need it. Society needs, needs that. And so I'm, you know, the invitation is just there.

[00:58:22] Young people, come. Come join us. Young people, I'll come join you.

[00:58:28] If you can invite me in something, I'm gonna come join you. I think in terms of neighboring with ODU though, I think that there are groups that are already, you know, on campus. Like, I'm hoping that there's like environmental groups, there's service minded groups and, and you know, there have been times when we've like connected with them and then you have, you know, get people doing things together, but then the leaders graduate and you have to start over.

[00:58:56] So, but I, but that is, that is my hope. Now Covid is manageable and I'm hoping that somehow these inroads together can be made. But I want, I don't want to know why ODU doesn't have one of those monitors up, and that's not a student's role. That is, that is the powers of ODU. Why don't they have one of these monitors up on the edge of their campus, which is also close to these, these coal things.

[00:59:28] It would be, would be helpful to the community here if they would do that. And for themselves, I would think as well.

[00:59:36] **Malcolm Jones:** Yeah. And I would say being at large, a really big part of the community now and expanding out into the community. You would hope that they would want to take part in being a part of the community and having a voice in the community.

[00:59:49] And serving the people that they're moving in with.

[00:59:53] Understood.

[00:59:53] **Kim Williams:** Yeah. Yeah, definitely.

[00:59:57] But one thing that, [01:00:00] oh, all these stressors and one thing that I think you alluded to is, well, with all these changes that are happening, you know, in the neighborhood and in all the neighborhoods of Norfolk, I would say big stressor is housing and where I'm gonna live.

[01:00:19] And, you know, as, as this becomes an area more and more, uh, you know, friendly and for the student body, there's actually some, you know, some people it's, you know, my-- elders who die and their, their home ends up being sold, and then it gets taken over and becomes a, a property that's students are now living in.

[01:00:42] But there's also, there are people who, you know, they just cannot, they used to live here, but they cannot afford to live here anymore because of this, that how much money can be made by landlords renting to students. And that's another thing that really makes it hard to focus on cons- advocacy for environmental justice.

[01:01:03] It makes it hard . A A A safe place to live and enough food to eat. When those are concerns, that takes precedence over everything that's, you know, and --

[01:01:15] **Malcolm Jones:** Yes, I work with kids, so it's like Maslowe's hierarchy. If we're on the bottom row, if you're dealing with basic needs and security, it's hard for me to get to actual- actualization or beyond actualization to really focus on different issues and topics around.

[01:01:30] Especially when you're trying to figure out if my house is still gonna be here in the next 10 years. Understood.

[01:01:37] **Kim Williams:** Yeah, no, it's, uh- and when I really meditate on too long, I just get really angry. And I think anger motivates a lot of what I do, but I can't, I can't operate out of that, but it is, I get very angry.

[01:01:53] Yeah. That is, and it just seems, cuz it seems to be getting worse. You know, it's not getting better, it's getting worse. But I'll just tell you a happy story. And it was a total shocker. Two weeks ago, somebody left a note on my door, on our door and it says, "This is, this is, uh, Tommy and Teyani. We, we used to play baseball with you. And we came by to say hi." And they left their

number. So I said, "Oh my gosh!" And, uh, we called them and they used to live like the next block over. And when my kids-- so they used to come over. My, my husband would, you know, with our kids, would have wiffle balls, with any kids around, we'd, you know, come play some wiffle ball.

[01:02:36] So just little wiffle ball games. They, they remembered us favorably. I mean, that was, it. Just, you know, wiffle ball and a nice afternoon, fun. And now they, this brother and sister grown, beautiful. They don't live here anymore though, because they, their family can't afford to live here anymore. But, and so I don't think they see themselves as like part of a diaspora, but they are.

[01:03:00] But you know, like one, one sibling was in Portsmouth. One was in in, in, uh, in, uh, Chesapeake now and then, then young woman has her own, uh, little four year old now. And, but I was just so glad they reconnected and I didn't give 'em a coal dust talk right away, but I wanna reconnect with them now, you know, I wanna reconnect with them anyways, just, I was just so excited.

[01:03:23] Cause I thought they had moved to DC but they, they, they were still in the area. Um, and, uh, and I just want to, you know, I'm just, it just made me was so happy to that they reconnected and so I wanna stay connected, but then, that's the kind of folks I think that we need to connect with. People who used to live here and lived here at those vital growing up ages and see how they're doing.

[01:03:47] **Malcolm Jones:** Thank you for your advocacy. Uh, thank you for the things that you're doing in the community soup kitchens, um, just... and the cause of that you're fighting for. Thank you. Whether they feel small for you, your work, they're big and monumental. Yeah. Um, we don't really realize that impacting a few people actually impacts a lot more people.

[01:04:06] So thank you.