

Uneita Scott

April 20th, 2024

Summary: This is a short exchange between Uneita Scott and a news anchor with a local news station. It took place at the The Air We Breathe event which was hosted by EmPowerAll in collaboration with the Repair Lab at Zion Baptist Church in Newport News. Ms Scott volunteered the following anecdote about her sister's health struggles during a roundtable discussion of the impacts of coal dust, and during a break in the event programming, the news anchor approached Ms Scott to go on the record with the story. Ms Scott also consented to be recorded by the Repair Lab for this recounting. [00:00:00]

Uneita Scott: I'm from Virginia. I lived in Newport News since I was about six years old.

News Anchor: Tell me about your upbringing. You grew up with a younger sister? Older sister?

Uneita Scott: My older sister, Erica McClain, um, Oliver at the time. We lived in Dickerson Court, 540 E 19th Street to be exact. And we would, we were inundated with coal. We would play and see coal on the windowsills and just watch, take the shower head, brush it off, um, played outside.

It was nothing for us to see coal all on the ground. Our mother would fuss because our feet when we would come in would be dark, black. Um, just what, we didn't have the education to know with one another that we were actually living in playing on danger, breathing in the toxins daily. Um, even we noticed that the birds and the bees went away at a certain point.

So as a result, my sister had her lung amputated. Because when the doctors, she has her medical records to prove so, but when the doctors, um, discovered what was wrong with her because she got really sick, she had the lung, her diagnosis was a coal miner's lung. So they had to amputate it for her to have a healthy life.

So that was a result of living in the community inundated with coal.

News Anchor: And she was 14 years old?

Uneita Scott: 14 years old. And the doctors verbatim said that she has a lung of a 30 year old coal person that worked in the coal mines.

News Anchor: What about you, did you have to be tested at all?

Uneita Scott: I did but you know, I have asthma. She and I both have asthma. Mine is situational. And um, she has to have an asthma pump. She has to have regular breathing treatment. So her's is a little bit more severe than mine.

News Anchor: She's kept up with this her entire life.

Uneita Scott: Yes, had surgery, multiple surgeries, deviated septums. The doctors even told her, her quality of life would be better if she lived in a drier climate, such as Arizona. Move that way west. Desert, more desert.

News Anchor: So it's impacted her life, growing up.

Uneita Scott: Oh absolutely. She could never, she, she had to have, um, she couldn't do gym in school because of her breathing was always belabored. We grew up, she had to have a special diet because anything that triggered a breathing situation, she had to. So she struggled with her, with the lung being amputated, yes.

News Anchor: Do you think that this situation flies under the radar for cities outside of Newport News and that are not living near it?

Uneita Scott: Absolutely. Again, like, um, if you don't know, you don't know.

And education is key and information. So my mother, she didn't know how to fight or what to do or what type of medical situation she could get to assist her. She just did the systematic, go to the doctor, get your medicine. So, as a result, she, my sister suffered.

News Anchor: One of my last questions for you, um, what's the earliest memory of you being exposed to the coal?

Uneita Scott: Uh, probably about 8 years old. Looking back, I'm 53 now. Looking back, just sitting in the middle of, sitting on the ground outside as a kid playing, just sitting in coal. That's my earliest memory.

News Anchor: And just for my writing purposes, when did your family notice that something was wrong with your sister?

Uneita Scott: Um, it was in the summer and she actually, we were outside playing and she passed out.

She, she started breathing heavy and she went in and told my mom and we took, my mom took her to the hospital. EMS had to come pick her up and that's when we discovered that she was really, really sick. She was really sick.