Anonymous Testimony

April 20th, 2024

Summary: *This is a short interview with an anonymous attendee of an event at Zion Baptist Church in East End Newport News called "The Air We Breathe," co-sponsored by the Repair Lab, EmPowerAll and Zion Baptist Church. The interviewee describes the origins of his skepticism about the efficacy of the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). He tells an anecdote about community defense from toxic dumping in his hometown in Southwest Virginia. He talks about dumping practices and their effects on Black residents including cancer, diabetes, lung disease and heart disease.*

Note: Because this recording was made informally during a break in a public event, there are several instances of background voices interrupting the interview. This file has been lightly edited to minimize interruptions.

Adrian: [00:00:00] So what, what have you noticed about how the EPA interacts with this neighborhood?

Anonymous: It's for the industrial revolution. It's not for today where industry is regulated to a certain extent because you do have companies able to pull from those old laws, not the adjustments that were made to, um, you know, the laws and procedures. They can always go back.

One of the things about the EPA is that, you know, the question comes up how... how high is the level of integrity in the EPA? Because it's mighty funny when certain types of industries or certain types of areas that the industry wants to go in, everything's okay. But when you turn around and you want to build something in the middle of a middle class neighborhood that is mixed, you know, the [00:01:00] problem comes up.

So, like I said, I went to, uh, I looked at the coal thing here. I've looked at this for years. Because I have a very close friend of mine who's never smoked, never drank, never did anything but had lung cancer. Because of the free radicals. And if you go to the shipyard, you will find a lot of people who have lung cancer and it's, you know, and the doctors always say, it's from free radicals.

The time I spent in Southwest Virginia an' Roanoke, as an account executive for a company, I used to see this and talk to the people with black lung. Lung cancer. Emphysema. Wasn't due to just smoking. You had the same thing that

you had people who had never smoked in their life. And they were coming down with emphysema. And it was attributed to, you know, the coal that's [00:02:00] in the air.

Where I grew up in southwest Virginia-- small town that went through an economic boom and then it crashed in the 80's and 90's. It was the dumping. Um. Where they chose to dump in the Black neighborhoods.

But they used to go into the black neighborhoods and I found that to be true in several areas coming from Bristol. You're looking at the, you know, the Galax community. Is looking at Roanoke until Roanoke was a boomtown.

You look at, you know, my hometown, that was...dumpin'. Now, I don't want to go too far, because, uh, it was no-- I mean, we, as kids, hangin' out one night, and all of a sudden --there's a dead end street. We always noticed why all this trash and stuff was [00:03:00] always in this ravine. And we were all hangin' out at the end of this road.

All of a sudden we see dump trucks coming down the road. And when we got out there, of course, the dump trucks was driven by Caucasian men. And the first thing they said is, "Y'all don't belong down here. You need to leave."

But we had older teenagers in the group. Because I was from one of those neighborhoods where the older ones talked to the young ones.

And we were also taught by, um, you know, activists. And the first thing we said was, "No, no, no, no, no. You don't live here. We do. So what we're going to do is we're going to stay here and we're going to go get Mr. So and so, Reverend So and so, and Mr. So and so. And *then* you can dump." [00:04:00]

And all of a sudden you saw all the trucks turn around. And they went down. What did they do? They went down this particular road. Took a left and went down this other road that was a Black community. Because they had already been contracted. By other companies to dispose of this and their only way of disposing of it was dumping.

Same thing happened when I was out in Richlands, Bloomfield, Tazewell Bristol, go further southwest of Bristol, Max Meadows. If you come back this way, I mean, every, every little town that industry moved in-- because they moved from up north. The EPA didn't protect 'em. The regulations didn't protect 'em.

The only time it [00:05:00] protected them was when those companies actually went out of business. And another company started to come in. Then the residents said, "Wait a minute, wait a minute." You have areas of pollution in Southwest Virginia, uh, West Virginia, and the very east corner of Kentucky, Tennessee, Ohio, that are polluted. The water tables are polluted, the aquifers are polluted, to a certain extent, because there was so much dumping going on.

Adrian: Do you know, or like, do you remember... maybe even from like that time that you remember seeing the trucks come in and you called like some of your community members, like, do you remember those adults interacting with the government or with the EPA or the DEQ in any way?

Anonymous: [00:06:00] Well, so you have to understand, back then, um, we were, you know, the people who we were dealin' with are political actors.

The plan still remains the same.

Same as when. You know, and believe me, I can only use this, you know, use this individual's name because it became prevalent. But when Trump came into office, his favorite thing to do-- we learned about the education that the elite had and that, and that, um, elite education was always deflect, deflect, deny. But maintain the course. So the Black community is always deflected.

And to this particular, you know, uh, issue or this particular issue back in the sixties and seventies [00:07:00] and also eighties. It was always deflected.

Adrian: If people in your community were like, "Illegal dumping is going on here and it's affecting us." If they brought that to like a government entity, do you feel like that would be like denied and deflected?

Anonymous: Well, the companies that were responsible for it were so removed from actual, uh, criminal acts. Because they would always contract other people up in their organization. 'We need to get rid of X amount of tons of this product.' Or, 'We need to get rid of this X amount of trash. So where are we going to put it?'

Well, I know, you know, 'My brother in law, we can set him up with some dump trucks. They're not affiliated with the company. Okay, and he can handle it.' And when you're [00:08:00] five degrees from, you know, five degrees of separation from the people who are making the issue versus the people who are trying to solve the issue in a legal way. When you get to that point, they're-- the people who are actually doing it are, they're protected. You know, they're,

they're cushioned. I have no, the easiest thing they can say, 'I have no knowledge of.' Once again, deflect, deflect, deny.

Okay, I'm going to deflect the, you know, the African American community into civil rights. Um, you know, into issues of drugs, issues of this. I'm never going to speak economically of them. Because they would always say, 'You should be happy you got jobs.' Which was actually put fear.

I was fortunate because, uh, these companies, I lived in the community that we had a community activists live right beside us [00:09:00] that used to tell us, 'Hey, look, they can say that, but they still need your labor. They still need that.'

I can even remember growin' up and there was a community activist that uh, went out and got a government grant to build computer chips in my hometown that as soon as he got that government grant and started making inroads into, uh, building his business that would have employed, you know, maybe anywhere from 500 to a thousand people, good payin' jobs. A couple of weeks later, he was found murdered and he had 5, 000 in his pocket. And the reason why they did not take the money was because they wanted to send a message. [00:10:00]

See, it's easy to come in my neighborhoods, unlike yours, and threaten residents. And you threaten, you threaten them, first of all, with economic hardships. You threaten them with lack of law enforcement. You threaten them with lack of public services, and then you actually come in and make physical threats.

I was able to be a part of a community that was close knit. My sister told me about how, see my parents would always take us when they went to vote. Didn't matter. They took us. Even when there was a threat that somebody, you know, actually, uh, individuals who did not want us to vote would come and disrupt voting. Well, my older sister told me about the time that they tried to do that. But our voting [00:11:00] precinct was in the heart of the West End. They had to turn down a certain road and go down two miles. And they got to that road, took that right. And we got about a half a mile down the road, the road was blocked.

And when they tried to turn around, the road was blocked. And they were given two options: stay and feel the repercussions of coming into this neighborhood; or, walk out. They walked out.

That was the only way we were able-- because I never came up with, you know, the issues that other Black communities face, especially in southwest Virginia, especially in the other, you know, rural communities. Because it was the

strength of our communities. But see there were certain things going on, like I said, deflect, [00:12:00] deflect, deny. Deny, deny, deflect. Nobody ever addressed it.

So I didn't know whether or not they had addressed it because it was so many other needs goin' on. With that, same just like here, level, you know, within the Newport News Community, we touched on the base of the levels of asthma. Black lung. You know, just pancreatic cancer. Diabetes runs rampant in the whole Hampton Roads area because of the way we eat. But, in my area, it was cancer. You know, all forms of cancer. Pancreatic cancer. Prostate cancer. You know, shoot, what they used to all call blood cancer. You know, lung cancer. Because all of this [00:13:00] dumping.

We actually had a a company in the middle of the Black neighborhood that-- the way they disposed of their petroleum byproducts, they dug a hole. And the hole was probably about a hundred feet down and they poured antifreeze, oil, whatever, into that hole Now during the 80s, when they passed the Superfund Act, that was one of the areas when that company, uh, you know when that company finally went out of business-- Well, they moved, they moved their headquarters and they were bought out.

Um, to develop that area, they had to actually come in and, you know, dig down until they hit. But it was too late then because, over years, all those products had went into the water table. So, any aquifers that people were pulling from, you were pulling from that.

[00:14:00] I just-- (stutters) you know, (little laugh) it's just, it's frustrating.

Adrian: Yes.

Anonymous: Um, you-- we know who done things. It's just that, when-- when you start to change, and that was the, that was my initial reaction because, the first thing I heard when they used that law in Arizona for abortion-- the first thing the first thing that came to my mind when we were touchin' base on this-- how old are laws with the EPA as far as governing coal?

Because when you talk about coal, you got to talk about the railroad. You talk about the railroad. You got to talk about the supply chain.

Adrian: Right, yeah. And it all goes together and we're going to get into it here in just a second, but I [00:15:00] appreciate you asking.