

Yugonda Sample-Jones

30 June 2023

Producer Adrian Wood meets with Yugonda Sample-Jones on Jefferson Avenue and 14th Street, on the site of the in-construction Choice Neighborhood Initiative community complex in the East End of Newport News. In this recording, the interviewee describes her experience working with the CNI, her experiences with coal dust, and her hopes for solutions. She engages several passerby during the outdoors walking interview.

Note: There is audio disruption around minute 12:30-17:00. This interview recording continues in the separate files for Mr. Smiley and then Millie Taylor / Raymond Wazeeradin. [00:00:00]

Adrian: Can you tell me where we're standing?

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Okay, so this is Jefferson Avenue, um, between 16th and 12th Street right here.

Adrian: Mm-hmm.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Um, actually that's 14th Street right there. And it's in front of the construction site for Ridley, the new Ridley. Actually, this is the construction site for the, um, school that's coming up, the early childhood school.

Adrian: Okay. Yeah. So there's a lot of, I see a lot of construction there.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Yes, yes, yes.

Adrian: There's like many, many blocks, many large blocks of construction.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: So originally on Ridley site it was two hundred and fifty- fifty six homes.

Adrian: Okay.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: It's gonna be replaced with 28 houses along Ivy Avenue. We're gonna have a school here, which is really good because the school is providing a pipeline cuz we need early childhood educators.

Adrian: Yeah.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Also teachers, period. So, um, at night, Virginia Peninsula Community College is going to um, be in the school and they're going to put people in a pipeline with Newport News Public Schools, so, or Head Start. So they'll be able to become teachers in the Head Start after they finish their courses.

Adrian: That's great.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: So having more stuff that's in the community, the connectivity piece is important because we are in a community where a lot of people don't have cars.

Adrian: Yeah.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Yeah. Which is kind of crazy cuz we got traffic jams everywhere.

Adrian: I know.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: But I know these people don't live in our community.

Adrian: It's like all the cars, but nobody lives here.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Exactly.

Adrian: Yeah.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: But we get all the emissions, gas emissions,, all that stuff.

Adrian: One second, I'm gonna grab one more thing for my car.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Sure.

Adrian: So what was here before the construction started?

Yugonda Sample-Jones: It was 256 houses. It's called Ridley Circle. Um, it was Ridley Circle and uh, it was a public housing site. It was actually a old

military site, um, hou- housing and it was torn down, um, because of the just awful state that it was in.

When I would go door to door, it was literally children that were living in apartments that had mold that was taller than they were. And these are like six or seven year olds. Mold just climbing up the wall and they're living, they're like, it's okay. And I'm like, this isn't how you're supposed to be living. This isn't healthy living.

Adrian: Yeah.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: So when the Choice Neighborhood Initiative came along, It spoke to me because I'm like, we don't know a lot of stuff. Like it's so many programs out here. It's opportunities. And I remember right here, cuz there was houses right here.

There was a lady that lived right on the corner. Her credit score was 815.

Adrian: Oh my god!

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Didn't, I didn't even know it goes that high.

Adrian: I didn't either.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: And she was paying full rent for Ridley circle, but no one ever came to talk to her about home ownership or how to even just build some generational wealth for your family. I'm like, what? Her children lived in Ridley circle.

Her grandchildren, actually her grandchild was the first one in the family to go to college. So it's beautiful. But you know, it just shows for lack of knowledge, our people perish. Yeah,

Adrian: totally.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Yeah.

Adrian: So do you think you might, we might like take a walk?

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Sure.

Adrian: We can walk around?

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Which way you wanna walk?

Adrian: Um, it, you, this is your place, you know, I'm following you.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Okay, let's walk this way, so, and if you wanna cross, well you don't, are you taking pictures? You wanna take pictures?

you look over here, um, we've actually done a groundbreaking for this, S23 Holdings is coming here.

Adrian: Mm-hmm.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: They promised about 300 jobs to the community, and they're a fabrication business that works in partnership with the shipyard, this is the meat of the Choice Neighborhood Initiative right here.

If we were to walk down here on 12th Street where you see those bushes that we're gonna have a seafood market there, looking to bring in like, um, a high-end seafood restaurant and then also have the opportunity to have a commissary kitchen because we have a lot of people that have in-home catering services and they need a commissary kitchen to stop being a gypsy business and be a legitimate business.

Adrian: Yeah, that makes sense.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Exactly.

Adrian: That makes sense.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: So we wanna have the opportunity for them to be able to have the space and grow their businesses.

Adrian: Totally. So the, I'm gonna snap a photo right here real quick.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: The great thing about this project is that we, um, we have the opportunity to really drive what our community looks like.[00:05:00]

Adrian: Can I get a photo of you?

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Sure.

Adrian: Just second. Let me go like that. Yay.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: (laughs) I be so nervous taking picture.

Adrian: Oh my gosh. You look really beautiful.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Thank you.

Adrian: I love your bright colors today.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Thank you.

Adrian: Yeah.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: You gotta brighten it up. Show 'em the sun a little bit.

Adrian: Yeah, it's summer. Right?

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Exactly.

Adrian: So you, so you were saying like with the Choice Neighborhood Initiative that you were able to have a lot of voice in the things that, the decisions that were made.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Absolutely. It, it--

Adrian: What was that process like?

Yugonda Sample-Jones: At first, it was, it was really fun. At first we had got the planning grant.

Adrian: Mm-hmm.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: So the planning grant was really showing that we deserve the implementation grant. It was so much community involvement. We had popups where we were doing different activities with families outside, um, and in Ridley circle, and then also at other parts of the neighborhood. Because the Choice Neighborhood Initiative goes from the waterfront over to Marshall, over to the interstate and then up to 36th Street.

Oh, it's like--

yeah. So it goes where Piggly Wiggly and everything is,

it's like most of the Southeast community?

No, not really. Because it's only over the Marshall.

Oh, okay.

Yeah.

Adrian: So it's a little narrow strip-

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Exactly.

Adrian: -that goes to north to south.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Exactly. And it's the main strip that you can see.

Adrian: That's true.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: So, so, uh, the reason why we have like Piggly Wiggly, the, the, um, Brooks Crossing is because in order for us to qualify for this grant, we had to show that the, well, not we, but the city or the Housing Authority had to show that they actually invested in the community.

Adrian: Okay.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: So with those two developments and also the new, um, renovations that they did at Marshall Courts apartments, they were able to use that to kind of leverage and say, Hey, we were doing this, we need the grant.

Adrian: Yeah.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: So that's why everybody was engaged at first.

Adrian: Mm-hmm.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Um, we had pop-ups with the kids. Even if you look on 25th and Madison

Adrian: mm-hmm.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: There's artwork on the fence and that was a part of the CNI grant, so.

Adrian: That's cool..

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Yeah. At the beginning it was really cool because it was so much engagement. It was so much involvement. People were excited. I was excited because I was the youngest person at the table, like for real at the beginning.

And I was like, I didn't believe it. I stayed at the table cuz I was like, I don't believe that they're gonna give you this money based off of what the community says. Like I, but they proved me wrong, you know, which is a good thing. But just really driving that table has been, it's been beautiful and disastrous sometimes.

Adrian: Yeah.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: We learn how to maneuver through government. Um, I see how our conversations are just us showing up as our true selves and speaking our truths at the table, have really made this city pause on certain projects and think about how they're doing it.

Hey, how you doing? So he has a nonprofit we used to walk the streets at, um, across there, Overtown.

Adrian: Okay.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: And just hand out soup and stuff to the community. He'll pop up and do clothes and everything. And that's what I'm about, like we need love. We more, need more love. We can have all the programs and resources, but nobody is going to do anything if, or take advantage of 'em if they don't feel like it's for them.

Adrian: Yeah.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: You know? So you have to come approach situations with love, love your neighbor. I know that's like a Bible verse or something. You gotta love you people. Yeah. And to get them to wanna take advantage of the home ownership and financial literacy.

Because if I come to people and be like, yo, you need to take this budgeting class. Oh, look at me like I'm crazy. But if I say, baby, look. You know, you can have a little bit more money if you just tweak a little bit of things and let, let me give you a tool to do that, A budgeting book. It changed people's lives.

Adrian: Yeah.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: You know, so just making sure that information is accessible to everyone.

Adrian: For sure.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Yeah. You were talking about, how was the process?

Adrian: Yeah.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: And it, it was very frustrating at first, and it wasn't because of the city or HUD; it was because we have a many elders that are very passionate, but maybe not educated on what's actually happening now. Um, the, the, our younger generation, they'll look at 'em and be like, 'oh Lord, they just don't make no sense. The pants are hanging down' and all this stuff. And I'm like, these children are very smart. Like they can work a cell phone out of the womb almost, you know, like they're incredibly smart, but they need us, the ones that are elders, the ones that have wisdom [00:10:00] to be, have the patience to teach them and hold their hand.

So what I have found is that I have really became a bridge in between those that are older than me and those that are younger than me, and then connected them with resources, opportunity, whatever it takes to just change the mindset, because that's what it is. We have to change the mindset of people to truly revitalize the community.

Adrian: Yeah.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: That and the Choice Neighborhood initiative, the piece that they have in there about people and making sure that the people are connected is so key. It's so important because if that doesn't happen, then we have a lot of what we have now, where people aren't ready to come back. They haven't done any mental changes, personal changes, financial changes to be able to even afford a new community.

Adrian: Yeah,

Yugonda Sample-Jones: yeah,

Adrian: yeah. Mm. Um, yeah. I mean, do you think --

(car horn)

Yugonda Sample-Jones: It's real busy through here.

Adrian: Yeah. I don't know. What, what do you think? I mean, should we,

Yugonda Sample-Jones: It's sad because I asked the city about three years ago to put up a bar just like what they have at, um, Ocean View.

Adrian: Yeah.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Uh, across Willowby Spit, that bar that they have to stop people.

Adrian: Yeah.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Why can't we put it here? Why are we polluting our earth? We already have to combat the coal terminal.

Adrian: Yeah.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Like, oh my goodness. I, I think I had told you,

Adrian: Yeah.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: The other day when it was really hot and the wind was going before that big storm came in-

Adrian: Uh huh,

Yugonda Sample-Jones: -it was just a cloud of black that was coming over. Me and my husband were coming over the, uh, the bridge, the Marymount Bridge, and we just saw a cloud of black. And I was looking, I was like, okay, are the sprinklers on? They weren't! So who was regulating that?

Adrian: Yeah.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Like who can we call in our city to say, 'Yo, they need to turn the sprinklers on?' Cuz we already have asthma, we already have strokes. This is Stroke Alley. Every, like, we have to do better. And I, I, to me, the solution is connect, educating people with ways to be able to change what they're passionate about.

Adrian: Yeah.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: I'm passionate about the environment. I'm passionate about housing. I'm passionate about making sure people have the resources that they need to be their greater selves. And I've been able to do all of that work through the Choice Neighborhood Initiative, you know, and it is really, it, it's been a blessing, but definitely a learning experience. Yeah.

Adrian: Tell me more about the coal dust.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Oh, so that's been here longer than a lot of people. But it's here and it's like, it's just here. We can't do anything about it. But our houses have black dust on, I could go to my house now and it be black soot just on my house and it's like, if it's there, then we know we're breathing it in! And it's always been there.

My child never had breathing problems until we moved to Newport News. And my oldest, my son was in middle school and he had to start using a nebulizer and I was like, what's going on?

Like, I don't understand. And that's a part of, cuz at that time I was just doing like community cleanups and stuff, but then that's when I really started paying attention to the water quality, the um, the air quality. Um, and I was like, yo, we have to do something. I did research and when I ran for office, I saw a lot of different tools that were used, or methods that were used in different countries, but why aren't we doing it here?

So that's been kind of motivating to me, to get things done politically is a headache. So I have to find a way to empower people to, to drive those decision making tables for us. We have to like, just imagine all of us, every really, oh well really resident, but downtown resident filled, city hall, and we're talking about one issue on this coal terminal.

We have to make them move on something because I'm sure when the new houses come and the \$400,000 houses come and stuff, they're gonna do something about that terminal then. So why not make sure the sprinklers are on

now? Why not make sure we're doing everything we can to protect people from that? It's definitely an eyesore, I don't know where it came from, who owns it, whatever. They say he does a lot of stuff in the community, but I haven't seen it, you know, so what are we really doing?

Adrian: Do you have like, uh, other friends and family who also have had to deal with respiratory stuff?

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Oh God, yes. The Southeast Care Coalition, they had stats and numbers on people, um, that are affected by asthma. They actually had a asthma clown that was getting a lot of traction because it's a clown. He's walking in our parades and stuff and it's like, 'yo, what you doing? I'm talking about air quality,' you know? And people were like, 'yo, what's this?' The Southeast Care Coalition they actually had, would take groups of young people and they would test the water and stuff. And [00:15:00] that's how we found out that the sewage plant over there was leaking and they really fought to make that happen, to make it fit- defensive. They get, they got their federal reports and everything, but stuff like that takes a lot of work. It takes dedication. You have to know what you're looking at.

So that's why when you know I came to seeing you, I was like, y'all are so important. Cause you can be the catalyst of change in our community.
(unintelligible) We need something done about this coal terminal,
(unintelligible) she's putting the air quality monitors on people's houses. I had her speak to a couple of my groups 'cause (unintelligible) all of our elders to pay attention. (unintelligible) We need more people talking about this issue. More (unintelligible) 500,00 houses, (unintelligible) thousand houses?

Adrian: What's going on with that?

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Oh my goodness.

We just had an online auction for abandoned properties, the same properties that we could get for like 5,000 dollars last year now are going for like 50, 60,000 dollars. It was the point in Newport, downtown Newport News that you couldn't, you wouldn't buy a house for over 100,000 dollars. It was a house that sold, it was further in the grid.

'Cause downtown Newport News in the grid. It's farther in the grid, but the house sold for like 450,000 dollars. Like downtown Newport News. This is a spot to be and that's why we have to get these stories out. Because we don't

want people to sell their grandmother's houses, we want them to keep their land if they can.

And we know it's difficult cause we have, uh, I actually have an older man, he lived on Ivy Avenue. He had to sell his house. Um, our tax assessments went up so high by the double digits for the past four years. He couldn't afford to live in a house that he worked all his life to pay for. So he moved to Jersey with his daughter. And I'm like, that sucks. Well, he was such a awesome old man. Like he fed the kids at the bus stop and stuff and now he's gone because he couldn't afford to live here.

So are we a city that is like, yeah, we wanna bring in young people and stuff and have them working and everything, but are we taking care of our elders? Are we taking care of the people that's been in Newport News for all their life? Are we just running people out? That's things that I need us to look at.

So when I had that argument, cause. When I complained, I complained to the people that could do something. So I went to Philip Jones, our mayor, and he was a, he actually listened to me. And I was really surprised in the work session when he suggested he, he actually asked the city manager to go back and look at the real estate, assess- assessments and find a way that we can bring it down and, and new budget they did, they brought it down. I think it was like about 10%. Don't quote me, but I think so.

But at least that's something. That's more than what we've had in a very long time. Some a, a government that will listen to us. So, um, I'm excited about our new city council and what they're, they're doing. But I am appreciative of our past council and the things that they have set up.

Like, our city manager went after the CNI grant. She didn't have to do that, but she did. And that was a way for me to come in, you know, cuz at first I wasn't worried about all of this stuff. I was worried about working, and taking care of my ,family until again, my son got on that nebulizer and he was like, okay, what's going on?

What's going on?

Adrian: Well, so how do you see, like,

Yugonda Sample-Jones: we could walk, I know it's,

Adrian: Yeah, sure. Um, how do you see the new houses and like newcomers into the, into the neighborhood, like interacting with the coal dust problems?

Yugonda Sample-Jones: I don't. I see them probably working with council to change what's happening, really showing up at city council meetings.

The same momentum that areas like Hilton have with the advocacy. When there's something that's coming to their community, all of 'em show up. That's what we have to have downtown Newport News because there's so many projects that are going on at one time.

Like even here in this one corner, 16th and Jefferson, we have the school that's going there. It's gonna be a park in the middle, like the city's 38th park. We're gonna have the apartments here. It's gonna be like a community center, um, underneath. On the other side is gonna be houses. There's gonna be another part down here. It's a lot of projects going on.

Adrian: Yeah.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: So just paying attention to what's going on can be difficult.

Um, one thing that we are doing that has blossomed out of Choice [00:20:00] Neighborhood Initiative is a Citizens Advisory Committee.

Adrian: Oh, cool.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: So with the Citizens Advisory Committee, it's actually written into the grant. Initially, the city and housing were supposed to come to us whenever any projects happen. Um, that has been a, you know, kind of shaky road cuz certain things come to us and certain things don't.

Uh, so building the Citizens Advisory Committee to a point that we are a self-standing civic lead. Not tied to the CNI grant, not tied to the city, but a civic lead, that is, has political power, that can be a force for the community. I don't see, we have Dr. Cherry with the, um, the Merchant's Association and I actually talked to her about joining forces with the CNI grant, since we have the momentum and people are seeing things coming up and people are asking questions like, well, what kind of businesses can we get in here?

We have to work with organizations like hers that are established that may be like a older population with the energy that we have with the CNI grant. Combine that, and we're a force!

Ya know, in my mind, I think of Voltron. I'm a eighties kid, so I think of Voltron. I'm like, yo, that's what we doing. Everybody coming together and then we're gonna protect our community. But, um, it, it takes time to build things like that and to build relationships that people can trust each other to be able to move on something like that. So I'm excited about that partnership.

She told me let her get through Juneteenth first, so I'm gonna give her about a week. Then I'm coming at her, 'hey, let's get it done!'. Cuz it takes that type of, like, you, you have to stay persistent with it. You have to call people, 'Hey, how you doing? What's going on? You wanna get engaged?' Especially key people like Dr. Cherry cuz she is a force in our community.

Yeah.

Adrian: On kind of a more personal level, what are some of the things that you've had to deal, to do to like deal with the coal dust?

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Oh my goodness. Um, definitely advocate. I read more on coal dust than I would prefer to.

Um, but just power-washing my house a lot. Making sure that when the air qual- I had, I started paying attention to air quality reports cuz I'd never did that before.

It's like why? But I had to start paying attention to that. And then also advocating for, um, little things. So like there's a company that, you see this light post here?

Adrian: Yeah.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: They can actually put a air monitor on a light post and it will send, um, on a light post, and it will send the readings on a daily basis to a department in the city or whoever they choose.

Why don't we have those? Especially right here across from the coal terminal?

Adrian: Yeah.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Those are the things that we have to fight for. Cuz we have to be able to take care of ourselves. You know, that, I know it's a lot of political and stuff that goes with that, but you can't do it at the risk of the health of your residents.

Adrian: Mm-hmm.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: So putting tools that would help us monitor, so we can even know what's going on with the air quality. Why wasn't the sprinklers on that hot day and the black cloud was going over the community, those type of accountability. So keeping our, our elected officials educated and accountable is, is uh, something that I really had to, focus on talking to them and having conversations about this. John Eley-

Adrian: Yeah. What have those conversations been like?

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Uh, well, they have the same, like, I spoke with John Eley, uh, Councilman John Eley a few months ago, and his issues are the same. He lives right down here on Roanoke and even Roanoke, Roanoke is like four streets up.

He has coal dust on his house. So it's like, yo, how far is it really going? And I've even heard people in Hilton say that they have coal dust on their house. So that's half of Newport news that we're really affecting.

So why aren't we bringing attention to it? I'm not saying I had the answers to fix it, but at least do something, you know, talk to the Sierra Club, talk to the people who do this for a living that know environmental work.

We had a, um, we did a cleanup, the cleanup the bay day.

Adrian: Mm-hmm.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: We cleaned up King, uh, Pickett's Beach down here. We had, actually had a sturgeon, an extinct sturgeon that washed up. So to me, in my mind, it's like, okay, we're even more valuable. So what is anybody?

You had the, the merchant, the Marines had to come get it. The Army Corps. Uh, uh, excuse me. The Army engineers.

Adrian: Yeah. Yeah.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Let's see if I can get the picture.

Adrian: Whoa. I was just reading about sturgeons last night.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Really?

Adrian: Yeah. They're like really majestic.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Mm. When I tell you,

Adrian: They're like as big as a shark.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Exactly.

Adrian: They're big.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: It was so big. And I [00:25:00] thought it was a shark, but I went poking at it and it's bone structure. It was like bones all the way down. It was so cool.

Adrian: Yeah.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: And I was like, this is downtown Newport News?

Adrian: Yeah. It's an important place.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: I think a lot of our issue here and why people aren't fighting like people in Hilton is because, I mean, it's all over the United States, right? People not knowing who they are, not being connected or grounded to anything, so they don't know what or who to fight.

I have to show you this fish. Yeah.

Adrian: Whoaaa!

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Yep. They had to come. We couldn't even move it. They had to come and move.

Adrian: That is so cool.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: (to passerby) Hey boo! Yes ma'am! (to Adrian) Yeah, that was right there.

Adrian: Wow.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: I'll send you that picture so you can have it.

Adrian: That's so cool. Yeah, definitely do. That's the coolest thing ever.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: And, I was like, oh my goodness. Right here in Newport News?

Adrian: Yeah. That's super cool.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: But I mean, we have so many old stories, just like Hampton. They, I see how Hampton, they embrace their heritage. Like they, they have those hard conversations about what Hampton was before, whereas Newport News has that same history. It's the same waterfront.

Like the first slaves probably walked this land. Even the, the Army soldiers, um, was it World War I? They used to walk right through victory, um, the victory arch that's across town.

Adrian: Oh?

Yugonda Sample-Jones: They would walk through that and I think over in this area, or maybe might be where the coal terminal is, but where they used to burn the World War One shoes.

Oh, because Mr. Ernest, um, he used to chair over the Hampton, no, the African American Historical Society. And he talks about how they used to go over there and steal the boots. They had some boots from the soldiers before they destroyed them. So this, it had, we have so much history here, and I just feel like if we paid attention to that, really empower people with the history and the knowledge of what was here before then--

(to passerby) How you doing? Doing good, good.

(to Adrian) Then we will be able to really change mindsets because then people will be grounded, and they will want to take care of their community. They will ask questions about why is this coal here? Why are all these cars coming in our

community and then they're gone. We don't even have a store that they can at least spend some money and build our economic base. Something! They don't, they just ride right through.

Adrian: Mm-hmm.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: But it poverty pimps.

Adrian: Mm. Have you had conversations on like this state level with the grant representatives about um, the coal dust or other issues in the community?

Yugonda Sample-Jones: I did when they talked to me.

Adrian: Oh.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: But once you start speaking out against certain stuff and you speak truth and facts, everybody don't like you that much, you know?

So if they talk to me, I will. I have, when I have their ears--

Adrian: How did it go?

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Same old, same old. Nothing's done. I'm to the point now with politics, I know I ran for office and stuff, but I'm just like, I really hope that that will be a way to change what's happening, bring some attention. But politics, it, it's not healing what's happening.

And I have to look at it like the system was never meant for us. So how can we expect to fix a system that was never meant for us? So how can we get the knowledge ourselves and then drive the politicians? Cuz ultimately what they're worried about is their votes. So how can either, if you stand on this issue and have a Black presence, like a force that says, 'Stand on this issue of why our children have asthma in our community or we're gonna vote you out.'

That's what needs to be done and I haven't seen a force like that happen here at all. Look at the, well, I guess that's from the construction, that's the dust.

Adrian: Yeah. I see that.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: For the poor people that live on 14th Street, they just catching all of it. Not that like, when we tore this down, it was so many rats and

stuff. Oh my goodness! It was rats going all over the community. People on Lassiter court. They had to actually put boxes outside on the street to catch them, because there was so many rats and stuff.

I'm like, it, it, I don't know cuz I'm someone that's very spiritual and I'm granted, it's just like, it feels like we're at a catalyst, but there's so much unearthing that needs to be done to just really get things right with Newport News. This is something that's not gonna be, the coal terminal isn't going to [00:30:00] leave us within the next five, six years.

You know, it's not like they gonna pick up all the coal and we be good and we can use it as a park. It's gonna be damaging for generations and generations. One thing I'm asking is let's go ahead and do the work to start building momentum to change it. Just have a conversation.

Adrian: If you could talk to the head of the coal terminal

Yugonda Sample-Jones: mm-hmm.

Adrian: What would you say?

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Why you killing my children?

Why are you creating so many, like, is your profit really worth this? Can you at least have a meeting with our community that , and talk about ways that we can heal? If you're helping the community, are you giving money to the asthma pumps and stuff? What are you doing? I, I want him to understand that his business, where he is making money, is endangering the health of people, where they live, in their homes.

This is our houses that we're talking about. And coal dust invades our houses. So how would you feel if someone or something was invading your house? You don't want it there, but it's there, and you have to deal with it. And that adds to feelings of oppression. Like, 'Oh, I can't do anything' because-- you know, the truth is we really can't. But continue to have conversations like this and bring awareness and then hopefully we'll get a curtain or something.

Adrian: Mm-hmm.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: I, I even read in Germany, I believe they put a big steel curtain up to stop the coal from going to the neighboring community.

Adrian: There are things like that. So there's this thing called a wind fence.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Yeah.

Adrian: That's similar, it's kind of like this big mesh thing.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Yeah.

Adrian: It's like a very, very fine mesh

Yugonda Sample-Jones: uhuh.

Adrian: And it catches a lot of like the bigger particles.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: So why aren't they talking to you?! Like you can give them -- (laughing)

Adrian: No, yeah, they actually looked into getting one in like 2011.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Okay.

Adrian: And then they were like, 'oh, it's... we looked into it.'

Yugonda Sample-Jones: But nothing ever happened.

Adrian: It was like too expensive. Um, but this is actually, between this and Kinder Morgan, and Lambert's Point in Norfolk.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Mm-hmm.

Adrian: It's like actually the biggest coal export operation in the US.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Wow.

Adrian: The second, second biggest is Baltimore .

Yugonda Sample-Jones: In the poorest community in Newport News. The most disenfranchised community. Does that make any sense? Wait, they had to of known what they're doing to the people that can't help themselves. They can't get their self out of this situation.

(to pedestrian) Hey, how y'all doing? Y'all in school?

Ya'll look like ...

Pedestrian: (unintelligible)

Adrian: (laughter)

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Awww! Y'all live down here?

Pedestrian: Mm-hmm.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: How long have y'all lived down here?

Pedestrian: We just moved here.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Oh really?

Pedestrian: We from Hampton.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Hampton?

Pedestrian: Yeah.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Okay. Well, we're talking about the coal terminal over there. Y'all ever paid attention to it? No? Okay. All right.

Pedestrian: The bus goes right there, but I don't really like go over there.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Mm-hmm. Ok. Cool. Yeah, that's why I was telling-- this is Adrian.

Adrian: Hey, I'm recording right now for a story.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Yeah.

Adrian: Yeah.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Just trying to see if people actually know that it's over there. What can we do? Cuz it's affecting our air quality. We have higher

numbers of asthma and stuff in our community because of the dust that comes off of it.

Pedestrian: So my mom, like, she also lives over here too. She's just like, 'why it foggy?' Just like, I don't know. Everybody blamed it on Canada. Meanwhile it's them. Okay, cool. I didn't even know that, thank you.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: (laughing) Everybody blamed it on Canada. I know.

Pedestrian: I was like, if it's no orange, I don't think it's them.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Exactly. Yeah.

Pedestrian: And that was just like, okay, that thank you. I'll let her know.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Between that and the, and the traffic. We gotta do better by our environment.

All right. Well y'all be easy. Take care. It's nice meeting y'all. If y'all not busy come out to um, you know where Anderson Park is on 16th Street?

Pedestrian: No, we can look it up.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Yeah, go. It, it is right before you get to the park, by the water. Mm-hmm. Come out there tomorrow. We having a basketball tournament. We gonna have hot dogs all kinds of stuff. DJ. It's gonna be fun. Y'all take care.

So like, you think most people don't pay it any attention.

Adrian: Yeah, totally. That's true for a lot of the folks I've spoken to, they're like, 'I never really thought about it.'

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Mm-hmm.

Adrian: It's just part of life.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Yeah.

Adrian: Um, what have your interactions been like with the DEQ study with, with Ms. Holmes?

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Yes. So I haven't really gotten a lot of information back from it, uh, of how it was doing.

Adrian: Mm-hmm.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: But, um, I trust Ms. Holmes because it's crazy. It's a small world. Ms. Holmes's dad was actually my science teacher on the Eastern Shore.

Adrian: Get out.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Yeah. So I was like, you're Mr. Holmes's daughter? I loved him. I was like a total geek. I love [00:35:00] science and history.

Adrian: That's so cool.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: But he, um, he was one of my best teachers, and that's his daughter. And she's here in Newport News. I'm like, yo, okay. So that's why I trust that she's doing the right thing. I have seen, I really appreciate that they're having community meetings. Like she's had a lot of community meetings and giving people the opportunity. People might not come, but at least you're doing the work of giving people the opportunity.

She was very creative and her engagement, she had signs that were on the corner and saying, 'Hey, study, this is-- meet here.; Real easy to read.

Adrian: Mm-hmm.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: She took pointers. She wasn't her coming into our community being like the great savior. But it was like, "How can I help you and empower you to be able to get the data that is needed to go to your elected officials and say, 'This is what's happening. I need change.' "

So partners like that are so important because I don't know how to go get the data, like the people that are affected, we don't know what we're looking at when we look at all these spreadsheets and stuff. But if we have people that can articulate that in a way that we can actually understand and then go to council, or the city manager and say, 'We need x many dollars put into a steel mesh curtain,' you can't deny that. These are the people that you're, that's their tax money, you know?

Adrian: Mm-hmm.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: They want this done with their tax money. Make it happen! That's what I'm about. So, yeah. Um, but even this traffic will stay like this. It's a Friday, so it will stay like this till about four,

Adrian: Holiday weekend, yeah..

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Five o'clock. Yeah. It's terrible. It it, and it's every day. My daughter used to work at the shipyard, and I would have to pick her up and it would literally, for the 50th Street bridge to come home, which is usually like a three minute drive, it would take me 20 minutes to get home.

Adrian: Oh my God.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Yeah.

Adrian: That's like a, that's a huge difference.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Mm-hmm. Yeah. So one thing that's interesting is this land here is where Harbor Homes and Dickerson Court was, I think Harbor Homes was over here. Dickerson Court was over there. And um, I'm not sure if it was HUD or whatever study came, it was like, okay, people can't live there anymore because of the coal terminal dust.

Adrian: Really?

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Yeah.

Adrian: They were demolished because of the coal dust?

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Yeah. And people can't live here anymore. We had to go through that when we did a garden down here. So we had to go through this soil testing and everything to see it. Cuz we knew that the land over here was supposedly contaminated because the coal dust.

So then with zoning --you pay attention to zoning. So they couldn't zone this for housing anymore. So now it's light industrial and that's how S 23 holders is coming. We did have indieDwell that was coming over here, but now Virginia Peninsula Community College is building a maritime technical school right there behind the Moton.

Adrian: Okay, that makes sense.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Yeah.

Adrian: So what is S 23?

Yugonda Sample-Jones: S 23 holders is that company that I told you partners with the shipyard.

Adrian: Okay.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: And does the fabrication work

Adrian: Okay.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: For the shipyard. So industrial work, and he promised that he's gonna bring 300 jobs from the community. Um, he's actually building a school, which is really impressive.

Adrian: Oh.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: So I'm not sure if the school's gonna be on this grounds or offsite, but he's building a school to teach people about the fabrication business, welding. If we need more opportunities like that, like we have New Horizons that is over rent. Like their waiting list is crazy long. Every year they have ninth graders that's on the waiting list now.

Adrian: Wow.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: But they can only attend 11th and 12th grade. So we need more schools like community colleges that are paying attention to those trades, because that's where people can get the skills and get into the job workforce.

Adrian: Mm-hmm.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Like my children both ended up in a shipyard cuz they didn't want to go to college, but it was a point that they were making more money than me, at one point. You know, so why not have -- and if they wanna learn a trade, my, my, it gave my son the time to really figure out what he wanted to do. He got a certificate in, on welding, but he wanted to go into nursing, so he did his time at the shipyard, but then he's in nursing school and he's in Richmond, you know, so he,

Adrian: That's amazing. I can tell you're really proud of him.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: I'm proud of all my children. I have a 14 year old, she started her own business. She went to a Achieveable dream and it was only because of the information that I was receiving at that time. I was, just talking about it. So she started her own hair business at 14 and now she's 19 and she brings in more money than me and her daddy every year.

Adrian: With her, with her business?

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Yeah, with her business. She's able to,

Adrian: That's extraordinary.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Yeah. She has a, um, a, a mentee that she's mentoring to do the same thing, because we do have to teach people how. We're not gatekeepers. We gotta teach people how to get there. And it's just, that's the generational bonds that I'm trying to break.

Like just people holding onto [00:40:00] information, learning how to, and my, my, my oldest daughter and my baby girl, they still live with me because I said 'Before you leave this house, you're going to own a home. You're gonna understand what it is to be a good citizen. Understand what it means to pay taxes, understand what it means to advocate for something that isn't right in your community.' That's things that they're not really taught in school.

So I remember in school you always have like those recycling clubs and stuff like that, but they don't ever go into detail about stuff like this, air quality. But just imagine if we plant that seed in our children early, they'll be the ones that's up there fussing us in general assemblies and everything.

They have the energy to keep it up. If they, it will happen, changes will happen. We just have to stay on it cuz money, money speaks. And I'm sure it's gonna be a lot of money for a mesh cloth and everything, but it's needed. Look at the price that we pay, I think is needed.

Adrian: Do you know anybody who works there?

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Who?

Adrian: At the--

Yugonda Sample-Jones: I did, but not anymore. Not anymore. I don't know anybody.

Adrian: Did they-- they like, quit or moved?

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Moved away.

Adrian: Moved away?

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Adrian: I would really love to speak with somebody who works there like a, you know, regular day-worker,

Yugonda Sample-Jones: I can try to find somebody, I'll ask some questions there.

Adrian: If you know anybody, um, you know, and who's willing to speak with me. I would love to hear more. I just, it's a little, I, I just haven't been able to find anyone, which is a little weird because I've spoken with, I don't know, a fair, a fair amount of folks around.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Yeah. And they say that he hires people from the community, but I don't,

Adrian: I just wonder how many people actually work there. Like how many jobs it actually is.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: I have no idea. Well, I guess the sprinkler person isn't there. (laughing)

Adrian: Oh my God. (laughing)

Yugonda Sample-Jones: But look at how close, I didn't realize like how close it actually is.

Adrian: We're looking at a pile of coal that's like,

Yugonda Sample-Jones: mm-hmm.

Adrian: What, like 500 feet away?

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Yeah. And then if, just imagine the train come and that's kicking up dust and all that stuff.

Adrian: Yeah.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: We just breathing in all kinds of particles, on top of the sewer and everything. You think people wanna do something cuz City Hall's right there. Like, come on.

Adrian: Oh, is that City Hall right there?

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Uhhuh. Is that City Hall? That might be the uh, um, the building that Bobby Scott is in. But I know they got a good view of this from City Hall.

Some places in City Hall you can see all the way to Hampton. So just imagine if you could see that far. I'm sure a air particle is just floating in the wind and going all the way to Hampton.

Adrian: Yeah.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: You know?

Adrian: Yeah, totally.

Um, yeah, I think I spoke with one lady who lives on, in Hampton, right on the edge.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Mm-hmm.

Adrian: who was dealing with the same thing.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Oh like, west community?

Adrian: Mm-hmm.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: That makes sense. That makes sense. Because with us, right up this way, oh my lord, that's, we gotta deal with stuff like this all the time. That is just people inpatient. He's probably a resident here. He's like, 'oh, there's traffic' and fussing. I see.

Adrian: Totally. The road rage.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Exactly.

Adrian: Yeah.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: But even, look, look, you know, they don't live in our community, but they're routing through all their gas emissions just polluting our air.

Adrian: Yeah. Dang.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: It'd be nice if the people really like understand investing in this community. People live here.

Adrian: Yeah. Well, um, did you wanna walk around anymore?

Yugonda Sample-Jones: We can, um, walk around. Yeah.

These buildings right here. Um, I know the city was actually offering to buy them for like in the millions.

Adrian: Oh wow.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Yeah. For real.

Adrian: That little one level concrete...

Yugonda Sample-Jones: mm-hmm.

Adrian: ...windowless.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: And the one over there that's not updated.

Adrian: I guess that's a church.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Yeah.

Adrian: Wow.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: It's a outreach place.

Adrian: Okay.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: So with this, I believe we have a hundred foot buffer that is gonna be for retail

Adrian: uhhuh.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: So my hope would be that the people that are polluting our community maybe will at least stop and spend money with the stores that are here as they're driving.

Adrian: That makes sense.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Yeah.

Adrian: Yeah. At least give them a way to like--

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Hey, it's people that live here. Stop and see what the community's about.

Adrian: Yeah.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Um, we have our flag poles that they never put flags in. I feel like all this goes to like the engagement, like the pride that people have in their community.

Adrian: Yeah.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: We can, um,

Adrian: Should we cross?

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Yeah,

Adrian: We can cross, or this way?

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Oh, we can, yeah. So right here was actually a, um, that's where I was, it was a [00:45:00] community center.

Adrian: Okay.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: And that's where I would have all the classes, the (unintelligible) that's where I would have all the, um, like financial literacy and budgeting classes and stuff.

Adrian: Okay.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Yeah.

Adrian: And that got torn down...?

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Of course, for the project.

Adrian: Oh.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Well, when we're talking about like the People Piece

Adrian: mm-hmm.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: We operated out of that building.

Adrian: Yeah.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: It was important to have something on site that people can access because they didn't have cars. But even with that, it could have worked so much better if we had the right people in place. So with the Choice Neighborhood Initiative, we started off with One People leading, they weren't doing what they were supposed to, so the city had to drop them and hire somebody else. And so who, the only people that's affected is the people that's supposed to get the services.

Adrian: Yeah.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: And the timeline on the CNI Grant never stopped. That's five years.

Adrian: Hmm. Is there, do you have somewhere you're headed after this, or just home?

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Just home. Mm-hmm.

Adrian: Cool. Well, I, I would love to like walk you part of the way there.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Sure. Okay.

Adrian: Yeah. Or at least, you know,

Yugonda Sample-Jones: I wanna see if I could find some people --

Adrian: Wherever you're headed.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: --You could talk to.

Adrian: Yeah. I mean that would be great,

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Maybe I'll go see if Mr. Smiley is out here. It used to be houses all through here. Was the projects all through here.

Adrian: Yeah. So when did those get taken down?

Yugonda Sample-Jones: Oh goodness. It's been about a good 15 years now.

Adrian: Woah.

Yugonda Sample-Jones: And like the House of Prayer. It's a nice church, but they don't, do anything. One thing, um, where we have the community garden, the pastor there, pastor Tremaine Johnson. He has what's called the Coalition of Concerned Clergy. And what we're trying to do with them is like, build momentum to be able to be this voice that we need, that the, you know, mayor or something can come through and say-- lemme see if he's in here.

Adrian: Sure.