Advocating for Our Communities

By: Barbara E. Brown, Chairperson

On Saturday, June 18th the Eastern Queens Alliance hosted a three-hour Community Café which was a neighborhood conversation about environmental justice, injustice and racism in Southeast Queens. Our guest speaker was Professor Rebecca Bratspies*, Law Professor and Director of the Center for Urban Environmental Reform** of the City University of New York.

At the café we examined the definitions of the terms environmental justice, environmental injustice and environmental racism, and discussed how these terms apply to our communities in Southeast Queens. We discussed environmental problems, indeed, environmental health issues, that we experience on a daily basis such as flooding in our streets and homes, the saturation of Southeast Queens with waste transfer stations, the noise and air pollution from JFK Airport that impact the health of our residents, the placement of cell towers in our communities, etc. We also started the conversation about what we as members of the Southeast Queens communities, can do about these problems. We asked: How can we advocate for our communities?

Essential Questions raised: Do we take a position that you can’t fight city hall? Do we just accept that these types of problems are here to stay, so why waste one’s time? Or, do we acknowledge that, yes, these environmental issues exist, and that we, as communities can, and must, work to achieve mitigation and amelioration for the serious issues that impact the very health of Southeast Queens’ residents?

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About the Eastern Queens Alliance, Inc.

The Eastern Queens Alliance (EQA) is a coalition of civic associations that joined forces in 1989 to address problems, issues and concerns that defied boundaries and plagued all or most of our communities. We know that it is working together that we have the strength to confront the issues, negotiate viable solutions, and whenever necessary, agitate to bring pressure to bear to achieve our goals. We are a proactive organization, striving to be ever vigilant to prevent problems before they become entrenched. In doing so, we collectively enlist the aid of elected officials, as well as all of the government and private agencies who are charged with the responsibility and/or have the resources to assist us.
Prof. Bratspies was able to give the participants keen insight into the kinds of steps it is important to take in seeking resolution and redress. It was made clear that we need to know the regulatory and legal requirements with which governmental agencies must comply as they site and maintain facilities, launch and implement projects, and as they make changes that impact the communities in which they operate. It was made clear that suing is a last resort, that there are many other steps that one can and should take before mounting a lawsuit. In fact, taking the necessary preliminary steps will possibly make it easier to win a lawsuit.

So what was the take away from this Community Café? It was that we must closely look at each of the environmental problems we notice in our neighborhood and be ready, willing and able to attack them.

- We must become knowledgeable about the true environmental impacts to which we are being exposed. Questions to ask: Why is this a problem? Who and how is it hurting? Why is it in our community as opposed to others? Does the agency(s) in charge acknowledge that there is a problem? Are they exhausting all possible resources to analyze, address and solve the problem or are they just ignoring community complaints? Are they truly involving our community in its resolution? Are our elected officials working with us to help the community address the issue?

- We must strategize and devise a plan to address the problems in our communities that we perceive as instances of environmental injustice and/or environmental racism.

- And, we must have the persistence to stay the course, to work towards resolution, to keep the pressure on the powers-that-be to remove or solve the problem. Very often we fade away without resolution. Don’t let the powers-that-be “wait us out” so they can move forward.

**Lesson Learned: We must advocate for our communities if we are to have truly sustainable communities in Southeast Queens!**

*Rebecca Bratspies* is a Professor of Law at the CUNY School of Law and the founding director of the CUNY Center for Urban Environmental Reform. She has published widely on regulatory policy—with a focus on environmental democracy, regulating new technologies, and corporate responsibility. Her recent scholarship explores questions of urban sustainability, and the intersection of human rights and environmental regulation. She is a scholar with the Center for Progressive Reform, the Environmental Law Collective and has served as an appointed member of the ABA Standing Committee on Environmental Law, a member of the Executive Committee of the American Association of Law Schools Section on the Environment, and an advisor to the Consultative Group on Agricultural Research.

**The Center for Urban Environmental Reform (CUER) is a Social Justice Initiative of the City University of New York School of Law. CUER was founded on the belief that environmental justice is a critical aspect of social justice and that communities are entitled to participate fully and meaningfully in environmental decisions that affect them.**
Black Americans are 79% more likely than whites to live in neighborhoods where industrial facilities, waste disposal, sewage treatment plants, landfills, and hazardous waste facilities are located. These facilities create serious health issues for the residents in these communities. In general, poor and minority communities face and bear the environmental burdens of others’ energy, waste and product needs. A study on race justice found that three out of the five largest hazardous waste materials sites are located in poor black communities. Three out of five blacks and Latinos live near toxic waste sites or facilities that produce large amounts of pollution. Decision makers and court rulings have created a level of uncertainty as to whether there is a course of action to address the issue of discrimination for poor and minority communities that face heavier burdens of environmental impacts because these decisions were made from environmental racism.

There is a price that affluent and predominantly white communities do not have to pay in order to have energy, products and places to dump their trash. These white communities do not have to pay the unspoken costs for such luxuries, however, as a majority of the people of color and often low-income people do. These communities are the ones that bear the cost of everyone’s need for waste disposal, industrial uses, sewage treatment and chemical plants. The communities who fight against such facilities being placed in their neighborhoods are the very same ones that ignore or do not care where they will go. These privileged communities benefit and maintain two systematic injustices: environmental discrimination and environmental racism.

Environmental discrimination is defined as the disproportionate impacts of environmental hazards on majority and poor communities, negative impacts of environmental processes, a differential rate of cleanup of environmental hazards in these poor minority communities and the negative impacts of environmental policies.

Environmental racism is racial discrimination through or in environmental policy-making, enforcement of regulations and laws, and the deliberate targeting of communities of color for toxic waste and industrial facilities. It includes the following areas of discrimination: environmental policy-making, enforcement of regulations and statutes, siting of toxic waste disposal facilities in minority communities and exclusion of these communities from environmental activism groups, decision-making processes, and regulatory bodies.

Decisions Based on Environmental Racism

It has been stated, “The heart of the environmental racism argument is that it is institutionalized within our society…” Most people get a similar picture in their heads when someone mentions environmentalism or the environmental movement, i.e., people protesting to save a forest, an animal or cleaner air; people who drive hybrids or walk or ride their bicycles everywhere and, of course, recycle and eat organic foods. Those are some of the images many people have of what the environmental movement is all about. It is no secret that the environmental movement adopted many of its tactics from the civil rights movement. However, the irony of the environmental movement is that it has magnified environmental racism and discrimination.

The consequences of a relatively innocent, perhaps naïve movement, “are prone to racism.” Communities yelling and protesting NIMBY fail to either think or not care that if it doesn’t go in their backyards, it will go in someone’s backyard who doesn’t have the political power to influence--typically a minority and/or poor community. The mainstream environmental movement at its birth consisted of white, middle and upper class educated citizens. Because of its very homogenous nature their interests can be limited, reflecting the concerns of white, middle and upper class citizens who have money and a different set of priorities. This is not to blame them, but to state that they fought for issues that reflect their narrow concerns and perspectives, and “targeted protection or enhancements of certain natural resources and environmental values.” Traditionally environmental protection laws focused on three broad policy categories: pollution amelioration, hazardous waste and risk management, and resource protection and conservation. This is because these were the causes of many of the environmental groups that emerged at the time, ultimately reflecting the interest of white affluent people. As an obvious result, current environmental laws reflect this very specific group’s interests. Many of these groups meant well, but were ignorant (possibly did not care) about the concerns of the minority and low-income neighborhoods. This ongoing homogeneity of environmental policy leadership continues to stand as a barrier.
Selma Came to Southeast Queens!

By Gloria Boyce-Charles

On February 25, 2016, Selma came to Southeast Queens in the person of civil rights activist and author, Lynda Blackmon Lowery. Ms. Lowery’s appearance was sponsored by the Eastern Queens Alliance.

The day began with a visit to the Susan B Anthony Middle School in Hollis, where 120 students met with Ms. Lowery, author of Turning 15 on the Road to Freedom, to hear about her experiences as a young activist, fighting for the voting rights of black Americans in the 1960’s.

That evening, Ms. Lowery was one of several featured speakers at a Town Hall meeting, held at St. Peter’s Lutheran Church in Springfield Gardens. The theme for the Town Hall was “Advocating for our Communities.” Ms. Lowery was among a panel of speakers that included several of our esteemed community leaders, including Barbara E. Brown, Chairperson of the Eastern Queens Alliance, Reverend Philip Craig, Pastor of The Greater Springfield Community Church and Michael Duncan, Proprietor of Jamaica Breeze Restaurant.

Throughout her presentations, Ms. Lowery described the horrors of Bloody Sunday, March 7, 1965, when she was among the six hundred demonstrators, young and old, who were beaten back by state police who used billy clubs and tear gas to deter a peaceful march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge. The march was in response to the fatal shooting of Jimmie Lee Jackson at the hands of an Alabama state trooper, as a result of his participation in a peaceful voting rights march, just a few weeks earlier. On Bloody Sunday, the world saw televised newscasts of sanctioned brutality against peaceful demonstrators as they marched for their basic civil right to vote.

Because of Ms. Lowery’s participation in that and numerous other voting rights marches, she was jailed nine times before reaching the age of fifteen. “We children had to be the ones to march, because if the adults did it, they would lose their jobs.”

During both appearances that day, Ms. Lowery stood as living testimony to the determination and persistence of a unified African-American community that prevailed over seemingly insurmountable odds to secure the voting rights of black Americans. She reminded us that all is still not well in America. She appealed to us to work together to continue to advocate for and safeguard our hard-won rights, and to build and sustain safe and healthy communities for ourselves and our loved ones.

In this important election year, let us pay honor and tribute to Ms. Lowery and to all of the courageous souls, living and dead, who put our civil rights above their own comfort and safety. Let us live by their examples of vigilant community action. And very importantly, rain or shine, sleet or snow, let us all exercise one of our most basic American civil rights. Let us get out and vote!

2016 is an extremely important election year! You must vote whether you’re 18 or 118. You can’t sit this one out! To Register...

Registering by Mail—Voter Registration forms with prepaid postage are available at the Board of Elections, libraries, post offices, most New York City Government agencies, and the League of Women Voters of the City of New York. If you would like a registration form mailed to you, call the Board of Elections at 1-866-VOTE-NYC. (Write on the form only with pen with blue or black ink. Be sure to sign the form.)

Mail: Mail form to: Board of Elections in the City of New York, 32 Broadway, 7 Fl, New York, NY 10004-1609

Registering in Person—Go to any of the Board of Elections offices throughout the five Boroughs Monday through Friday 9:00AM to 5:00PM: In Queens, go to: 118-35 Queens Boulevard, Forest Hills, NY 11375

Registering Online—If you have a New York State driver’s license or DMV-issued non-driver’s identification card you can use New York’s MyDMV service to register to vote online.
Sustainable Initiatives Can Change the Way We Live

By Sylvana Bohrt

One of the most important things you can do to be sustainable is promote initiatives that advocate for proper housing and land use. The design we choose or that has been chosen for our communities including our houses, schools, communities, recreation areas, transportation systems, commercial zones, and overall infrastructure can have positive or negative effects on our health and behavior. The siting of manufacturing zones and facilities like airports in our communities also impact our health and quality of life. Furthermore, those who live in communities with extreme population densities and substandard or inadequate housing may also find themselves living in conditions that lead to poor health. The populations most affected are women, children and the elderly. Living in more sustainable communities, such as those that incorporate a lot of green space, leads to an increased quality of life, thus better health for community residents.

Civic organizations, block associations and other community groups play a critical role in the commitment for sustainability, and we as a society can provide the rethinking needed to address the challenges of urban land use. This includes the necessity to live in a non-chemical, non-toxic soil, air and water environment. Otherwise, should we fail in the attempt to have sustainable lands; we will see a growing trend of further environmental degradation leading to food shortages, decreased access to healthy foods, increased homelessness, poorer health, economic instability and even more environmental injustice.

A decent standard of living is not only a requirement but also a vital necessity to have a plentiful quality of life. It is important that this notion be promoted and instilled in our children, because they are the future stewards and protectors of the environment. Programs such as the Eastern Queens Alliance’s Environmental Science Education Project programs help us in this fight. Students learn about Idlewild Park and how it helps our community become more resilient and sustainable, and how its protection is related to proper land use.

SOME OF NYC’S DEPT. OF CITY PLANNING’S KEY SUSTAINABILITY STRATEGIES

• Adopted in 2008, the Street Tree Planting - Text Amendment requires street tree planting for all new developments and major enlargements citywide, which will result in approximately 10,000 new street trees per year.
• In 2008, Zoning Amendments to Enhance Yards and Open Space were adopted to prevent excessive paving of front yards by encouraging landscaping and planting in yards throughout the city.
• Green Standards for Parking Lots was adopted in 2007 and requires commercial and community facility parking lots to apply design regulations for landscaping, perimeter screening of the lots as well as requirements for canopy trees in planting islands within the lots.
• PLACES: Neighborhood Planning Studies are comprehensive studies that examine and address key land use and zoning issues in a variety of neighborhoods, but also take a broader look at current and future community needs to identify a wide range of strategies and investments that accompany the land use and zoning changes and support neighborhood-specific growth and vitality.
Today the black gold that lies beneath the earth’s surface is the oil that fuels the world. Economies are reliant upon access to that black gold. Young people have a source of gold within them that must be tapped into also. When we think of tapping the well, we are saying that we must drill deep into young people to unleash all of the hidden talents that are inside of them. We must draw out young people’s ability to be creative. We must cultivate their abilities to transform commerce, and to make meaningful contributions to our world; We must cultivate in them the ability to see things in this world that others just can’t see. If we dig deep into young people and we begin to draw out of them their own voices, draw out of them their own creative forces, draw out of them the assets that they possess, they can and will make a difference.

We as community activists and leaders must commit to significantly impacting the lives of disengaged youth in communities where poverty is a fact of everyday life. According to Opportunity Nation, the personal and collective costs of youth disconnection are steep. They tell us that young adults who are not in school or working cost taxpayers $93 billion annually and $1.6 trillion over their lifetimes in lost revenues and increased social services. They highlight the myriad of reasons for youth disconnection — societal, familial, financial, educational, and personal.

Engaging young people to envision themselves as entrepreneurs, leaders, and world changers requires that we provide experiences for them, which help them, develop greater self-awareness, self-motivation, and independent living skills to navigate opportunities. Our young people will greatly benefit from substantial relationships that come from interested and successful mentors to learn from the stories of those who have transcended through challenges. I challenge you to be a part of a young person’s journey to finding the treasure inside of them. If you tap the well you may unleash the power that will one day fuel the world.

Mentoring Makes a Difference

“Our hidden agenda is to help you succeed”

Vision Statement
Plusser will be the leading networking group for aspiring and established entrepreneurs, and business professionals.

Mission Statement
To transform our culture by creating a world where entrepreneurship and economic development are celebrated and where young people dream of becoming self-dependent and self-reliant leaders.

Business Overview
Plusser is a networking group, founded by six friends from Queens, NY, whose mission is to equip aspiring and established entrepreneurs with the business skills and insights, tools, resources, and peer networks necessary to start and grow successful businesses. Plusser offers transformational networking events and workshops designed to inspire the next generation of young entrepreneurs. By introducing individuals to the concept of entrepreneurial mindset and providing hands on training, active participants build creative capacity, entrepreneurial confidence, and learn effective tools to build new ventures. While we thrive on being an open source for personal and professional development we aspire to inspire, educate and empower community members while supporting growing connections. This strategy allows us to remain innovative, by leveraging the expertise that external resources possess while enhancing each individual’s vision and purpose.
Meet Our Staff

Our Environmental Specialist/Coordinator

Cheri Neal

Cheri received her B.A. in Environmental Studies from Pace University in 2012, she then continued her education by receiving a dual degree from the University of South Carolina with a J.D. from South Carolina School of Law and a Master’s in Earth and Environmental Resource Management in 2015. She has spent most of her academic career focusing on Environmental law, resource conservation and environmental education.

Our Instructors

Jane Chan

Jane received her B.A in Environmental Studies from St. John’s University and then continued her education at Columbia University where she received her Master’s in Climate Studies. Jane’s ultimate career goal is to work for an environmental government agency and develop environmental education programs for educators. She would also like to train future educators on how to communicate the sciences to the general public especially the younger generations.

Meghan Martin

Meghan received her B.A in Environmental Studies from Stonybrook University. She is currently working toward a Masters in Applied Environmental Geo Science at Queens College. Meghan’s aspires to work as a Professor in a college, with the government, or doing international policy.

The Eastern Queens Alliance Offers:

- In school environmental science workshops throughout the school year.
- After school and summer Science-in-the-Park programs.
- Tutoring and Science project assistance.
- College prep series.
- Recreational activities and tours of Idlewild Park Preserve
- Community meetings, events, cafes and advocacy forums and events on community issues and problems that cut across boundaries and impact our quality of life.
Put October 1st on Your Calendar! Support Our Honorees!

We hope you will plan to attend our ninth annual Idlewild Wetland and Wildlife Benefit and Awards Ceremony. If you are not able to attend, we hope that you will consider making a monetary contribution to support this very special event.

This gala event is not only designed to raise funds to support our initiatives in the Idlewild Park Preserve, a 325 acre Forever Wild ecological jewel in Southeastern Queens, but is designed to pay tribute to those who have made and continue to make significant contributions maintaining and improving the quality of life in our communities. Come out on support our honorees!

To reserve your seat, go to: