News
EarthBeat



A woman in Minneapolis looks at a memorial for George Floyd June 14, 2020. Floyd died in Minneapolis May 25 after a white police officer pressed his knee into Floyd's neck for more than eight minutes in an arrest over a counterfeit $20 bill. (CNS/Reuters/Eric Miller)

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In many ways, Maleta Kimmons defines her neighborhood by what it lacks.

Several houses near her home remain vacant. Last week, she had to drive seven miles just to buy groceries. And two weeks ago, at the height of the Minneapolis protests sparked by the killing of George Floyd by a police officer on May 25, looters broke into the only pharmacy in the area, forcing the store to close and leaving many in the neighborhood without easy access to life-saving medication like insulin or inhalers for asthma.



Kimmons, who prefers to go by the name Queen, said what her neighborhood doesn't lack is pollution. Near North, where Queen lives, is one of several neighborhoods that make up north Minneapolis, an area that is predominately Black and is surrounded by a large number of polluting facilities and infrastructure, including roofing manufacturers, a trash incinerator, a metal recycling plant and several major interstate highways.

The ZIP code that covers much of north Minneapolis has the highest hospitalization rates for asthma in Minnesota, according to Minnesota Public Radio. It's also home to the highest rates of lead poisoning among children in the city.

Add the ongoing coronavirus pandemic on top of these factors, and her neighborhood is in a "horrific" situation, said Queen, who is Black.

"Where are you going to get an asthma pump when Walgreens is closed?" she said. "I know a lot of people that have asthma, particularly in North."

Queen moved to Minnesota from Chicago in 1974 at the age of 10, first living in what used to be St. Paul's Rondo neighborhood—a once thriving African American hub before it was cut in half by the construction of Interstate 94 in the late '50s. Her family, she said, was "looking for a better life, where there would be more resources, education, housing."

Eventually, Queen's family moved to south Minneapolis. But in the 1990s, she said, the area became gentrified and too expensive, so she left for the city's cheaper north side.

Queen attributes the issues that north Minneapolis faces today—the vacant homes, the poor access to medicine and food, the proximity to industrial pollution—to a lack of Black ownership and the political power that accompanies wealth. "Right now, over in North, you can't name 10 Black businesses—they ain't there," she said. "If you don't own anything, you're not changing nothing."

In 2018, the median household income in Queen's neighborhood was about $39,000, compared to the state average of more than $70,300.

As protests raged across much of south Minneapolis, destroying several blocks of Lake Street—another historic city business corridor—Queen helped rally residents on the north side to protect the few Black-owned stores that do exist along Broadway Avenue from more looting. (Much of the looting came from out-of-towners, Queen said.)

The destruction she witnessed reminded her of the stories she had heard of the 1967 riots, which also destroyed parts of north Minneapolis. And it reminded her of seeing her first limousine in 1974 outside of a black-owned pool hall in St. Paul.

She remembers her Black neighbors inside the stretched-out sedan, a symbol of wealth, celebrating in their "loud colors," their button-up shirts and their hard shoes. She remembers just years later, many of the Black-owned businesses shuttering their doors along Rondo's Selby Avenue—today, an upscale food co-op stands where the pool hall used to be.

"You've got to have ownership," Queen said. "It's race, class, money and politics. That is the narrative. That is the story."

St. John the Baptist Parish, Louisiana: "We've Already Been Written Off"

Reserve, Louisiana, had an agrarian economy when Robert Taylor was born. His parents worked at a local sugar refinery. "I'm a lifelong resident," he said. "I was born here in 1940, so I've seen some changes." When he was a boy, he said, "I could just walk out my house and go out my backyard and I was in a sugarcane field."

By the time he was a young man, the petrochemical industry was moving in. He bought a plot of land on the edge of town and built a home, finished by the time his fourth child was born, he said. "I went and got my wife from the hospital and brought her with our child to our new home."

Around the same time, he said, DuPont began operating a new chemical plant less than a thousand yards from the home.

St. John the Baptist Parish, which includes Reserve, lies within Louisiana's Cancer Alley," a stretch along the Mississippi River between Baton Rouge and New Orleans that is cluttered with petrochemical development and the pollution it brings. The Enviornmental Protection Agency's National Air Toxics Assessment, which uses emissions estimates to model health risks, estimates that the risk of developing cancer in Reserve is 50 times the national average, and that the five census tracts with the highest risk are all in the area.

But as Taylor watched the development spring up around him, he didn't know any of that. All he knew was that a lot of people seemed to be getting sick. Several family members have died of cancer, he said, while his wife is a cancer survivor. It wasn't until four years ago that Taylor began to connect what he saw with the industry that had developed around him.

"I came home one night and my wife was so sick, and the odor was so horrible coming from the plant, that I called 911," he said. "And the emergency personnel, they were taken aback by the odor. Of course, all of them was white, none of them lived in the community I lived in," he said. Almost two-thirds of Reserve's residents are black.

It never occurred to him that other parts of the parish didn't have it as bad. And soon after that incident, the EPA arrived and began monitoring for a chemical, chloroprene, that is used in the nearby plant and is considered by the agency to be a

"likely carcinogen."

"I got the first results of the monitoring, it scared the heck out of me," he said. When the EPA found high levels of the chemical in the air near a school, "that's really what sparked the people to join me and we formed this Concerned Citizens of St. John."

His group has been trying ever since to get Denka Corporation, which bought the plant from DuPont in 2015, to limit emissions. Denka did not reply to requests for comment from InsideClimate News, but a company website says it has voluntarily reduced emissions and that "there is no evidence to suggest Denka's operations are harmful to local residents."

Taylor's wife now lives in California, to be away from the pollution. Some of his children have moved out of the parish, too. His great-granddaughter was born recently nearby, "and she has no future here," he said.

But he feels trapped with his home. Beyond the low value of the property, Taylor said, he wouldn't feel right selling to another family, only to have them live with the same burden.

"We've already been written off. We're walking dead people," he said. "We've been sacrificed."

Bears Ears National Monument, Utah: Trump Ended Tribal Governance

Alfred Lomahquahu helped build the five-tribe coalition that proposed the Bears Ears National Monument in southeastern Utah.

The land might seem remote, but the struggle against racial and environmental injustice has been no different for the indigenous people of the Southwest than for those protesting on the streets of the world's cities.

"People are actually getting united," said Lomahquahu, a Hopi. "That's the main thing that the government is afraid of, that's why they don't want these protests going on."



Bears Ears National Monument. (Wikimedia Commons/ Mike McGlew)

The coalition's work focused on protecting red rock canyons and pinion-dotted desert containing hundreds of thousands of archaeological sites and areas of deep cultural significance to the Hopi Nation, Zuni Tribe, Navajo Nation, Ute Indian Tribe and Ute Mountain Utes.

"We started speaking with Obama on a one-to-one, government-to-government basis," said Lomahquahu, now community administrator in the Hopi village of Baqavi in northern Arizona. "Part of our strategy was that we were going to work side by side with [the U.S. Bureau of Land Management] and all these other government entities as part of the planning for the whole monument."

The Obama administration embraced the idea, establishing and empowering a Bears Ears Commission when it created the monument. Lomahquahu was the commission's co-chair until it was abolished when the Trump administration

downsized the monument by 85 percent not quite a year later.

Trump administration officials rebuffed commissioners and other monument supporters, he said. "But we already knew at that point that everything that we achieved was going to go down the drain—and for every other minority too."

Yet, the experience also showed the tribes, which have historically been at odds with one another, the power of working together, he added. And, later, conservation groups, professional societies, recreation groups and even large companies like Patagonia joined the tribes' campaign to protect the land from mining and pollution.

"Some people are going to use their privilege in order to help others that aren't privileged," Lomahquhu said. "I think that's something that you really need to look at now … Some people are privileged more than others and willing to use that privilege to help everyone get back on their feet."

New uranium mining, coal-fired power and oil and gas development in the region are other threats that the Four Corners region has faced. More recently, Indian Country communities have united against Covid-19.

"We're just waiting for Trump to leave office," Lomahquhu said, "so we can get back in there and regroup again and bring all entities back together."

The Rockaways, Queens, N.Y.: Young Leaders of Color Building Resilient Communities

Milan Taylor was 21 when he founded the Rockaway Youth Task Force in 2011, to sponsor community clean-ups and encourage voter registration in this outlying neighborhood on a barrier island in Queens.

A year later, after Hurricane Sandy left homes four- to 10-feet underwater and knocked out power for days, Taylor found himself helping to lead rescue and relief efforts in a neighborhood that was 60 percent African American and Hispanic and the poverty line was 20 percent higher than the state average.



An ariel view of Rockaway, Queens. (Wikimedia Commons/Jorfer)

He mobilized hundreds of volunteers in a widespread effort to assess the needs and deliver food and medications to hundreds of home-bound community members, including elderly and disabled residents. As they meticulously canvassed high-rise apartment buildings, the major relief organizations and the NYPD seemed strangely missing in action.

"Sandy gave us the exposure that [the Rockaway Youth Task Force] needed to grow," said Taylor, now 31 and the group's executive director.

And a good thing that is, with climate scientists predicting sea level rise of at least a foot by 2050, which will make the Rockaways more prone to climate change-fueled flooding and storm surges than they already are.

"What we're trying to accomplish as an organization is to build more resilient communities," Taylor said, "We want to be there, whether it's a disaster brought about by climate change or even human disasters"—a reference to the ongoing protests for racial justice and an end to police violence.

Taylor said that it is important for the task force, made up largely of young people of color, to be "led by our own constituency, meaning that those who are directly impacted decide which direction and which campaigns we take on as an organization."

Despite being told after Sandy that his organization couldn't grow, he said, "We're still here … still doing work, still helping our communities, and still training the next generation of leaders."

He noted that one former RYTF organizer, Khaleel Anderson, is now running for the New York State Assembly.

In the future, Taylor said, he hopes the broader climate movement embraces his work with the task force, which recognizes how race, gender and socioeconomic factors contribute to environmental injustice. "The conversation of Black lives mattering isn't just limited to police violence," Taylor said. "It also extends to climate justice."

Los Angeles: Latino Children in Boyle Heights Play in Lead-Contaminated Soil

Idalmis Vaquero sees such joy in the exuberance of a neighborhood boy named R.J.

The six-year-old runs to her to show off his newest feat—a backflip—on the dusty patch of grass outside of their aging apartment complex owned by the Los Angeles Housing Authority.

Yet there is a dark contradiction between the glee of this boy and the reality of life in the shadow of a lead recycling plant that has poisoned the ground that dirties R.J.'s bare feet.

The boy, like so many other children and families living in this neighborhood, is exposed every day to the high concentrations of lead that have contaminated this mostly Latino community just southeast of downtown Los Angeles.

The Exide Technologies recycling plant and its predecessors emitted lead, arsenic and other dangerous pollutants, leaving homes, apartments, schools, parks and day care centers with dangerously high levels of lead contaminated soil.

Vaquero, 26, a third-year student at the University of California, Los Angeles School of Law, grew up in public housing in the Boyle Heights neighborhood, where she still lives and where her parents settled after emigrating from Mexico nearly 30 years ago.

There has been little change in her neighborhood since she was a child. Factories, smoke stacks and exhaust-belching diesel trucks define the community more than grassy parks and welcoming recreation centers.

So she worries about the future of R.J. and other children.

"Living here will have an impact on the quality of life for the rest of their lives," she said. "It makes me mad that our lives are not considered equal when it comes to addressing environmental hardships."

As many as 250,000 residents, mostly working-class Latinos, face a chronic health hazard from exposure to airborne lead and arsenic that subsequently settled into the soil from the recycling plant, according to a 2013 health risk assessment by the South Coast Air Quality Management District.

Lead contamination has been found in children growing up in neighborhoods surrounding the now-shuttered Exide battery plant, a USC study found. Lead is a neurotoxin, and there is no level that is considered safe in humans.

The 15-acre recycling facility operated in the industrial city of Vernon for decades with minimal regulatory oversight. It churned out poisonous pollution around the clock seven days a week as the lead from 25,000 old car batteries was melted down every day for use in producing new batteries.

The facility received more than 100 environmental violations for such things as lead and acid leaks and maintaining an overflowing pond of toxic sludge.

The Exide plant was shut down in 2015 by the U.S. Department of Justice, which also ordered the company to pay $50 million to clean up the site and nearby neighborhoods. The state later pledged $75 million for the ongoing cleanup, which is being overseen by the California Department of Toxic Substances Control.

The cleanup has been painfully slow, which Vaquero takes as yet another signal that her neighborhood and neighbors are just a forgotten footnote in a city defined by the glitz of Hollywood and Beverly Hills.

Vaquero majored in environmental studies at Wellesley College in Massachusetts, where she made the decision to stand up for her community and others like hers.

She described the environmental injustices in her community in a 2016 thesis:

"The health of these communities need to be prioritized and protected from any more pollution from Exide and other environmental injustices," she wrote. "The community's power and resilience will prevail and environmental justice will be served to Southeast Los Angeles."

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