



coming the class clown. I tried fighting and arguing with those who bullied me, but this only seemed to encourage some to try to provoke me further. I also tried becoming the teacher's pet and excelling in my schoolwork to show that I was just as good as my classmates. Nothing seemed to work, and I became frustrated and depressed by the time I reached nine years old.

In my first year attending a more diverse high school, which was only 90 percent White, I woke up one day— as if struck by lightning— and decided that I would change my life. I decided that it doesn't matter what others think of me, I will do what makes me happy and stop trying to please everyone else or to be what I thought that they wanted me to be. I decided that it was too emotionally draining to be angry or to try to conform to unattainable expectations. I decided that I would create the life that I wanted. I decided that I would not judge others and would not worry about how they judged me, because I could never satisfy everyone. I decided that just because something was a rule or a norm didn't make it right. I decided to defy social norms by rotating among the cliques that ate together in the cafeteria. One day I would eat with the jocks, the next with the thespians, the druggies, the intellectuals, the elites, the Black students, the nerds, and so on. However, I still disdained those who spouted racial slurs and jokes, and I knew that I was always being watched, always being judged, and always at risk of upsetting White people for little or no reason, which could get me in trouble or put me in danger.

To my surprise, despite or because I stopped trying to please everyone, I became popular, particularly among students who did not fit in. I found that others wanted the same things that I did, and although life is unfair, together we could change the unfair institutions and make them more just. I started organizing students to oppose perceived injustices. I joined the student council and restarted the Black Student Union during my Freshman year and continued being active in these and several other organizations over the course of my matriculation there. I was surprised that, in my Senior year, my classmates created a special Student Council officer's position for me to serve as a platform to organize students to address injustices.

I had decided that I wanted to go into medicine from a very young age as a way to help others and to challenge myself academically. I was accepted into a six-year medical school upon graduation from high school, and continued my student activism there in Kansas City, Missouri, through the student council and the Student National Medical Association (which represents African American medical students), and by participating in medical school policy-making bodies, such as the admission committee. Because my youthful experiences led to various levels of success and appreciation from others, I decided that I wanted to focus my life on changing policy, fighting racism, and pursuing social justice. I tried to figure out how to combine this with a career in medicine. One day, one of my profes-

sors advised me to explore Preventive Medicine and Public Health as a specialty. He helped me to locate Dr. Richard Biery, the Director of the Kansas City Health Department and one of only five public health–trained physicians in the 1.5 million-person Kansas City metropolitan area. I arranged a meeting with Dr. Biery, who taught me that the philosophical basis of science is to find truth; the philosophical basis of medicine is to apply science to health; and the philosophical basis of public health is to apply social justice to medicine.

After he explained that to me, I was hooked. I decided I wanted to go into public health as a career.

I studied public health and completed my medical residency in Preventive Medicine. I entered the field and practiced public health in senior positions at the Kansas City, Missouri, and later, Hartford, Connecticut, health departments. Through this experience, I found that although social justice is the philosophical basis of public health, this is not how things work in reality. I found that there are many constraints on public health practitioners—namely, political constraints—particularly if you lead a health department. Health departments are sometimes described as the fourth-most political department in local government, after police, fire, and public works.

There were political pressures from a variety of constituencies, including City administration, state, and local elected officials, the three employee unions in our department, regulated businesses, health care organizations, community activists, and the media. We were often in the local news. Some of the issues that were highlighted in the media included: protests of cutbacks in child health programs; measles, tuberculosis, and sexually transmitted infection outbreaks; immunization campaigns to stop measles; needle exchange programs to combat HIV; closing popular restaurants that failed inspections; protests that claimed the family planning program somehow promotes sexual activity and abortions; and removing families from apartments where children have been lead poisoned.

In addition to these normal public health issues, we also encountered a number of extraordinary activities. These included drug charges against employees, embezzlement, arson investigations, and several fatalities of employees and their families, including a mass murder-suicide. This was a stressful four years, indeed.

Yes, I went into public health, but once there, I learned how stressful and political it can be and how many limitations there are on what you can do (although these vary from place to place around the country and according to the level of government—local, state, federal—in which you serve). Because of political limitations, it is not easy to be a witnessing professional or to promote change in public health.

**O**ne concern I observed that calls for witnessing professionals is that the people who need the resources the most are not necessarily the ones who get them, even though philosophically that should be the case. Often-

times the people who complain the most— those with the most political power and money— are prioritized for getting resources and services. For example, although we know that cancer rates and toxic exposures are higher in low-income communities, and even higher in communities of color, the state health department unit that investigates cancer clusters spends most of its time investigating whether there are cancer clusters in suburban and rural communities; they seldom find any. Why focus on these communities? Because suburban and rural residents are more likely to complain and to engage powerful interests to support their complaints. The lesson I learned from this is that the people who wield the most power and influence are those who represent business interests or those who work in advocacy groups that engage politicians and voters. In addition, powerful political interests often operate to create state policies that disadvantage urban interests. One example of this is how waste disposal is regionalized in Connecticut and concentrated in the cities with the highest percentages of People of Color.

Although Hartford is the state capital of the wealthiest state, it is among the lowest-income cities with over one hundred thousand people in the United States. It is 80 percent African American and Latino. In the 1990s, when I was health director, Hartford had the largest landfill in the state, and it was poorly managed.

It also had the largest trash incinerator in the state, which took trash from over seventy municipalities in three states to burn in Hartford. It was the fifth-largest trash-to-energy incinerator in the country, by capacity. Incineration produces toxic gases, which include nickel and phthalates that are associated with asthma. Hartford had the highest asthma hospitalization rate in Connecticut.

The landfill and trash-to-energy incinerator were both run by a quasi-governmental agency controlled by the Governor. Their Board was composed of current and former elected officials and was chaired by the Governor's Chief of Staff. It had state legislators as employees and contracted with companies of major political donors. It was supposed to be regulated by the state environmental agency, but when they tried to do so, the legislature enacted laws that exempted the quasi-governmental agency from the regulations. The landfill created odors that were so strong that on several occasions they made employees in the nearby Hartford Public Works garage so sick that they had to close their operations. Actions by community groups were able to exert enough pressure to get the facility to meet environmental standards. Although the landfill eventually closed, the trash-to-energy facility is currently in discussions to be gutted and rebuilt in the same location, perhaps with a larger capacity than it currently has to become one of the three largest facilities in the United States.

Another example that I observed as Hartford Health Director of how politi-

ties with the lowest incomes and highest percentages of People of Color. These communities were the most densely populated portions of the state with the most air pollution and the highest rates of pollution-induced asthma hospitalizations and deaths. These communities were home to the state's largest existing power plants that already produced more electricity than these cities needed, and yet were the site for proposed new and expanded power production. This electricity was needed because of the growing wealthy suburbs with larger and larger mansions that needed to be air-conditioned in the summertime. Wealthy suburban-

This experience motivated me to start an environmental justice organization in 1998. At that time, environmental justice was a new concept. People didn't know what environmental justice was. They did not know that communities of color bear a disproportionate share of environmental hazards and suffer the health consequences from exposure to those environmental hazards. So I founded the Connecticut Coalition for Environmental Justice and was able to educate the public about the links between environment and health and the disproportionate burden of exposure to environmental hazards on African Americans, Latinos, and

- We were able to get the trash-to-energy incinerator to reduce air pollution.
- We were able to get the state environmental agency to deny an air permit for an electric power station in New Haven, based on environmental justice impacts, for the first time in its history.
- We were able to pass a state environmental justice law, which is still one of the strongest community notification laws in the country.

And, most important, we were able to build a multiracial organization led by grassroots People of Color and low-income people who became community leaders and engaged citizens. Most of our leaders said that they had never voted before joining our organization because they didn't know how or why, and, although this was not our intention, we started swaying elections in Hartford and New Haven. In both cities, they elected the first Green Party candidates in their history when the Democrats and Republicans opposed our agenda. The New Haven Mayor's Chief of Staff told me that part of his duties was to determine our agenda so that the city could co-opt it. At one point, we were getting at least one state law passed per year. As we trained community residents to speak about their experience and needs at public hearings and in meetings with elected officials, they observed what officials were or were not doing to support these community efforts. The issues that our group decided to focus on proved to be of concern to much of the community. As our members talked to their relatives, friends, and neighbors, they told them about what was occurring and how elected officials were respond-

The movement to address climate change was an easy transition for environmental justice groups: we were used to trying to fight sources of air toxics that posed existential threats that killed many of our neighbors, friends, and families. We defined the environment as where we live and understand how our health is affected by that environment. Our concerns about how laws are commonly manipulated against our communities were often ignored by the larger climate organizations and health organizations whose members did not face the same threats. For example, the big environmental groups supported cap-and-trade policies to reduce greenhouse gas. Our experience in Connecticut was that when we finally won pollution reductions from our trash-to-energy facility in Hartford, the city with the greatest percentage of People of Color in the state, the facility operator was allowed to trade pollution credits with the trash-to-energy facility in Bridgeport, the city with the second-largest percentage of People of Color, so that they did not have to reduce their pollution there. To add insult to injury, they then bragged that the EPA says that they are so clean that they can sell air pollution credits— even though they were, by far, the largest polluter in Hartford.

So when the large environmental organizations tried to promote cap-and-trade legislation in Congress, environmental justice organizations sided with Republicans to oppose it. The legislation did not pass. The approach that environmental justice organizations favored, carbon tax and dividend, has since become much more popular.

It was clear that the people who contributed least to climate change were the most affected, both on a national level— as evidenced by who was left behind during Hurricane Katrina— as well as on an international level, with small island nations being ravaged by hurricanes and existentially threatened by sea level rise. Yet their views and experiences are often not taken into account in policy development. When they are not invited to the decision-making tables, the policy solutions tend not to benefit those who are suffering the most and are often less likely to be successfully implemented. The most effective policy seeks and incorporates the knowledge of those who are most impacted. The “experts” don’t know that many people will not get on an evacuation bus without their pets and without knowing where it is going. They don’t know that children sneak through the holes in the fence and play on the contaminated site, which their mothers, who have been kept in the dark about its dangers, think is safer than playing in the streets. They don’t know that even though there are two roads shown on the map that can be used for emergency evacuation, one is a dirt road that is overgrown with weeds and blocked by barricades, and the other crosses the railroad tracks that are often blocked by trains.

**I** have tried to make a career out of addressing the areas of most need at the intersection of health and anti-racism. This took me away from the traditional doctor-patient medical care, and even from traditional public health and



community medicine. Since I had selected such an unconventional career path, I thought that I would be disdained by organized medicine.

In 2008, I attended a national convention of the National Medical Association (NMA), which represents the interests of African American physicians and their patients. I knew their history of fighting racism, which was part of the impetus for their founding in 1895, when African American physicians were excluded from the American Medical Association (AMA), limiting their training and practice oppor-

grants and became a consultant to environmental justice organizations nationally as well as to the NMA. I started training a lot of physicians on environment and health, how to counsel their patients, how to speak out in public, and how to speak



of the indefensible death of George Floyd at the hands of police. This awakening is not only to criminal justice policies and practices, but also to health policies, with the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, to environmental policies, to climate policies, and throughout the institutions that govern our lives. As a witnessing professional, I invite you to join me and seize this moment to deepen our understanding of this parallel universe of injustice, and what is required to dismantle it. We need every voice.

---

Mark A. Mitchell

