

Speaking Up and Speaking Out: Youth Voices on Environmental Justice

A discussion with two young Black men to hear their voices and concerns about justice. C.R is a sophomore attending an urban university in the Midwest and J.R is a junior attending an urban high school in the Midwest

What does justice mean to you?

C.R : Justice is a joke; it's a money and power game. The more influence you have, the more a just system will be in your favor. It means that whoever is wrong or right in the eyes of the law, of somebody else's eyes or dang near in the eyes of God can and will be seen as innocent with enough connections, money, time in a subject, or overall influence. I know it's a warped way of viewing it but I've never seen a just society outside of New Zealand, and that's a stretch.

J.R : Justice is fairness and the people should get what they deserve both good and bad. But who determines what's fair? That's the question. If you do crime then you should be punished no matter who you are.

What a young people's concerns about the future?

C.R : I'd say in terms of concerns, it's the environmental and economic situation that's been going downhill since before your generation. Since I was a kid I've heard that global warming will get to an irreversible point by 2050 and a large part of the planet will be practically uninhabitable because

of the heat and the rising sea levels (like most of California just being gone and stuff) and the prices of housing and living expenses increasing without pay increasing equally.

Most people in my generation are firmly convinced that because of large companies like the oil barons there won't be much when we "grow up" and cause of student debt or low paying jobs actually buying and paying off houses is not going to be available in our lifetime, myself included.

J.R : We are all gonna die because the generation before us are wasting everything. There's a food shortage and with no food we die. People are destroying the environment which is causing climate change and we die.

What needs to change to address environmental injustices, inequities, and inequalities?

C.R : The only major way of changing it is by doing what Europe is working on, which is going green completely or using safer forms of energy. Have the multi-billion, dollar energy and automotive industry put their profits towards renewable energy before the decade is over and going away from oil

and coal completely, or by a significantly smaller margin than where we are right now.

J.R : Our planet is dying. Our society has to change and care about people. It doesn't seem like it is getting better and it will only get better when people change.

Closing Comments?

C.R : I guess our generations are very nihilistic but for pretty real reasons. Young people are on the same page about what is happening and many are so unhappy. The standard of leadership has really dropped. Our society is morally decaying, our kids will have very little to enjoy from communal life. We cannot afford the life our parents lived.

J.R : It's just not getting better. We need good leaders to make decisions and to lead people in the right way. That doesn't seem like it's gonna happen any time soon.

Reflecting on These Youth Voices

It's obvious that our youth are angry about the lack of concern in protecting life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for all people. Rightfully so. Adults have made decisions that have caused so many problems. If we are going to solve problems we must include youth voice and really take the time to listen to them and understand their stories, hopes, and dreams. We, as adults, must hear youth voices and concerns without making judgements or assumptions of right or wrong.

In listening to these two young Black males about their concern about environmental injustices I realize that we cannot just put a Band-Aid on the climate justice problems because the bleeding

problems are beyond a Band-Aid. We are in a state of emergency. In emergency life or death situations, we need a tourniquet that is used to apply pressure that will stop the bleeding. Therefore, collectively, we must put pressure on decision-makers and legislators to demand a focus on ensuring the wellbeing of all people, the sustainability of the land, and equitable access to education, economic stability, and meaningful employment, so that all people, not just the wealthy elite, will benefit from a healthy livelihood. The vicious cycle of living hand to mouth must be stopped. This erosion of soil and our souls must be stopped. The only solution is to embrace life and protect the earth with life-sustaining solutions. Collaboration of the youth and the elders to share knowledge from the past and experiences of the present to create policies and practices that protect everyone from toxic environments.

Climate justice is everyone's responsibility.

Everyone must have a passion for preserving life by reducing our carbon footprints. Together, we must find solutions to save our planet and save ourselves. We must have a commitment to protect future generations. Making preventative healthy decisions must start now if we want to create a cleaner and healthier environment. Demanding leaders who are passionate about changing policies and practices to stop abuse, harm, and destruction of our environment must become our mission in life. The oppression on marginalized, underserved populations in a capitalistic economy must stop. We must stop focusing on consumption by relying on greener solutions that save lives, make changes, and ensure hope for a better tomorrow.