Building a Movement – Sidedoor S9, Ep 9

Lizzie Peabody: This is Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. I'm Lizzie Peabody.

Lizzie: It was late summer of 1982 when a caravan of nearly a dozen dump trucks headed for the farmlands of northern North Carolina. These trucks may have expected to roll right into Warren County unnoticed—but that wasn't the case.

*[**ARCHIVE CLIP, protester:** We will not allow Warren County to become a dump site!]*

Lizzie: When the state of North Carolina decided to dump ten thousand truckloads of dirt in a Warren County landfill, the people who lived there turned up in droves to protest.

*[**ARCHIVE CLIP, protesters:** [singing] "Ain't no stopping us now ...']*

Lizzie: See, the dirt in these trucks wasn't just dirt. It was contaminated with polychlorinated biphenyls—or PCBs, a chemical believed to cause cancer.

*[**ARCHIVE CLIP, protester:** I don't want this stuff throwed in my water.]*

*[**ARCHIVE CLIP, protester:** We're marching ;cause we do not want this to affect our future!]*

***Rachel Seidman:** The government had announced that PCBs were toxic.*

Lizzie: Rachel Seidman is a curator at the Smithsonian's Anacostia Community Museum.

***Rachel Seidman:** I think the state government assumed that poor Black people in Warren County would not make a fuss about these toxins being dumped in their backyards. But they were wrong.*

*[**NEWS CLIP:** The State Highway Patrol began moving in on the marchers as they approached the entrance to the state landfill. The signs and chants of the protesters made clear their opposition to having the toxic chemical buried in their county.]*

***Vernice Miller-Travis:** There had been no public meetings, there had been no public hearings. There wasn't even so much as a flier. They just got word that this was happening, and they didn't know what to do.*

Lizzie: Vernice Miller-Travis is an environmental justice advocate. She says that while most of the people who lived in Warren County were Black and didn't have a lot of money or political power, they weren't the easy target the government had assumed. Many in the area had lived through the recent Civil Rights Movement.

Vernice Miller-Travis: *And they just started doing old school civil rights tactics and organizing.*

Lizzie: *So what did that look like?*

Vernice Miller-Travis: *Demonstrations in the street. Trying to stop the trucks from coming in to even make the landfill, right?*

*[**ARCHIVE CLIP, police officer:** If you do not cease this unlawful act you will be arrested.]*

Vernice Miller-Travis: *And one of the last things they did was a demonstration with children, where children—and I mean children, like elementary school children—laid their bodies down on the roads to keep these trucks from coming in. There's some wonderful pictures, historical pictures of these children laying their bodies across the road. And they're fearless.*

[MUSIC]

*[**ARCHIVE CLIP, police officer:** Come on, let's move.]*

*[**NEWS CLIP:** One protester jumped in front of the first truck and was quickly hustled away. In all, 10 trucks arrived for the first dumping.]*

Lizzie: The people in Warren County were protesting for their lives. They managed to hold off the trucks for six weeks. More than 500 people were arrested. And in the end ...

Rachel Seidman: *They lost that fight, but they birthed the environmental justice movement.*

Lizzie: This time on Sidedoor, we trace the origins of a movement, from the farmlands of North Carolina to a gathering in Washington, DC, nearly a decade later. How did underfunded and politically marginalized communities scattered across America come together to build the environmental justice movement that exists today? That's coming up after the break.

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Lizzie: When the citizens of Warren County turned out to protest in 1982, Charles Lee was there.

Lizzie: *Did you hold a sign? Did you lie down in the road?*

Charles Lee: *No. No, I did not. I mean, I wasn't arrested or participate in the protest like that.*

Lizzie: Charles was there on official duty. He was a labor organizer working for a nonprofit at the time. His focus was on workplace health and safety for Black and Latino workers.

Charles Lee: *A small group of us thought it was important to go and show solidarity with the protesters.*

Lizzie: But when he was there, he saw something he hadn't seen before: civil rights activism combining with environmental activism.

Charles Lee: *I would point to Warren County as the place where I really saw the potential for transformative change.*

[MUSIC]

Lizzie: Think about all the things that make your life easier everyday: the chemicals that keep food from sticking to your pan, the trash that disappears every week or the fresh vegetables at your neighborhood market that you don't have to grow yourself in your yard.

Lizzie: All these conveniences of modern life come with a cost—an environmental cost. Those non-stick chemicals may leech into a river near the factory, or the trash incinerator could spew noxious smoke onto nearby homes. Or pesticides could cause health problems for people working in the fields.

Lizzie: Charles had a hunch that these environmental costs weren't being paid equally by all Americans. In fact, it seemed like just a few communities were bearing the brunt of the burden.

Charles Lee: *You know, the first thing I did was to do a lot of research on where pollution was taking place.*

Lizzie: Charles came across a report from the Government Accountability Office that was published the year after the Warren County protests. It was just a small study, but it looked at four hazardous waste landfills in the Southeastern part of the US. And it asked the question: what's the racial makeup of the communities where toxic landfills are located?

Charles Lee: *And they found that three out of the four landfills were located in predominantly African-American counties.*

Lizzie: This was evidence to support his hunch, but Charles wanted more data, a bigger study.

Charles Lee: *The way to really put this on the map was to replicate that study on a national basis.*

Lizzie: In the mid-1980s, Charles got funding to study where America's toxic landfills were located. But this was an ambitious project, and he was going to need an ambitious person to help him out.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie: Meanwhile, Vernice Miller-Travis was studying political science in New York City. She planned to devote her life to the fight for civil rights. In fact, she'd been at it since she was little. She remembers a story when she was just four years old, back in her home of Harlem, 1963. She saw her dad leaving the house.

Vernice Miller-Travis: *He comes out with this bag. And he's, you know, headed to the door. And, you know, I stopped him in his path and I'm like, "Where are you going?" He says, "I'm going down to Washington for this demonstration." And I said, okay, "Wait right there." And I had this little suitcase that was for my doll babies. So I went and got the biggest one, and I started putting stuff in it so I could go. So he says, "Where are you going?" I said, "I'm going with you."*

Lizzie: Vernice didn't go to the March on Washington. I mean, she *was* four. But even at that young age, she vowed not to miss out again. She got involved in the Black Power movement in high school, and when she graduated from college in New York, she started placing regular phone calls to a prominent civil rights lawyer named Ben Chavis.

Vernice Miller-Travis: *For four years, I called him every six months and asked him to please hire me. I might have even said this out loud, "Y'all are getting old, and you need some young blood. And I promise you I am the future of the Civil Rights Movement." And he would laugh.*

Lizzie: But after four years of calls, Ben was like ...

Vernice Miller-Travis: *"Well, we're getting ready to do this special project on toxic injustice. Why don't you come and meet with our research director, Charles Lee? And if you two hit it off, maybe you can help us with this project.*

Lizzie: Vernice never intended to get involved with environmental issues. She wanted to be a civil rights lawyer. But she was intrigued by Charles' project. "Toxic injustice," what did that even mean? So she went to meet Charles.

Vernice Miller-Travis: *So I assumed Charles Lee is Black because I assume that everybody*

who's working on civil rights for Black people are Black people. Wasn't I shocked to find out that Charles was Chinese-American.

Lizzie: They hit it off immediately.

Vernice Miller-Travis: *Thank God.*

Lizzie: And got to work.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie: They started working on their study in 1985, and it asked this question: was the location of toxic waste dumps across America random or part of a pattern? To figure this out, they wanted to look at a couple things.

Vernice Miller-Travis: *First of all, where are all the hazardous waste sites in the United States located?*

Lizzie: Secondly, what's the racial makeup of the people who live in the same zip code as these toxic waste sites?

Vernice Miller-Travis: *So, you know, there was a hunch that there might be a racial dynamic to this. Of course, then again, there might not be, but the only way you're gonna know is if you look at it.*

Lizzie: Charles and Vernice layered maps of the toxic sites over maps of residential communities, looking at their demographic makeup, taking into account more than 100 different variables from the level of education in each community to the per-capita income, home ownership levels, average age.

Vernice Miller-Travis: *High school graduation rates, college, further graduate study, et cetera, et cetera. All of that.*

Lizzie: When they finished their research, a clear pattern emerged.

Charles Lee: *Communities with hazardous waste sites had twice the percentage of people of color as those that didn't.*

Lizzie: Their report found that more than education level, home ownership, class or income ...

Vernice Miller-Travis: *Race is the most statistically significant indicator in where hazardous waste sites are located. That's the headline. We did not imagine that the degree of statistical significance was gonna be so strong.*

Lizzie: Three out of five Black and Hispanic Americans lived in communities near these toxic waste sites. So did millions of Asian and Pacific Islanders and Native Americans. The report didn't look at why heavy industry and toxic waste sites are placed here, but there were some thoughts.

[MUSIC]

Rachel Seidman: *People make decisions about where to put this stuff just the way they did when they built that dump in Warren County.*

Lizzie: The Smithsonian's Rachel Seidman again.

Rachel Seidman: *They make assumptions about where can I get away with this? Where am I most likely to be able to find a place to put something that nobody wants in their backyard?*

Lizzie: A legacy of racist policies in America has created racially homogenous communities, like redlining that restricted where Black Americans could buy homes. Or the establishment of Native American reservations. Heavy industry then got clumped into these communities because the people who lived there didn't have the political power to push back.

Rachel Seidman: *People without access to strong representation in government and without deep pockets are vulnerable to this kind of imposition on them.*

Lizzie: Vernice and Charles published their study in 1987 and called it "Toxic Wastes and Race In the United States." National media picked it up and ran with it. Vernice called her grandmother to tell her what they'd found.

Vernice Miller-Travis: *This was her first question: "So how much did y'all spend on that study?" And I said, "I don't know, grandma. I'm not responsible for the money. $150-250,000?" She says, "You spent a quarter of a million dollars to tell you something that every Black person in America knows to be true."*

Lizzie: And Vernice was like, "Okay, fair point. But from a public policy point of view ..."

Vernice Miller-Travis: *You can have all the lived experience in the world, but until there are peer-reviewed studies that can replicate those conditions again and again, it's like it didn't happen.*

Lizzie: But now Vernice and Charles had the cold hard data to show it was happening.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie: The report dropped like a rock in a lake, the ripples reaching every corner of America.

Charles Lee: *After 1987 when the report came out, I started getting all these calls from people across the country.*

Lizzie: They echoed what Vernice's grandmother said. They knew this was happening, but they never had any proof. The report gave them data to take to their city council, public planning committee or even senator. It also gave them a glimpse of how many other communities were fighting the same battles. See, in the mid '80s, there was no national network of environmental justice organizations. It was a patchwork of mostly small, local groups going toe-to-toe with big industry.

Rachel Seidman: *I read about one woman who, you know, was literally doing bake sales to try to take on this factory.*

Lizzie: Rachel Seidman says these groups were overwhelmingly led by women because they tended to be the first to notice when something was wrong.

Rachel Seidman: *Women are the ones who are taking care of people when they get sick. And they're talking to their neighbors. They're noticing that it's not just their child who's sick, or their cousin who got cancer. And they start to say, "What is going on?"*

Lizzie: Now if you're thinking, "Hold on. There were plenty of environmental groups at this time: the Sierra Club, the National Audubon Society, the Natural Resources Defense Council. Why weren't they helping out?"

Rachel Seidman: *They were doing really important work, but they were focused on conserving natural space, on protecting endangered species, making sure that the oceans are clean.*

Lizzie: And the leaders of the most powerful environmentalist groups at the time were almost all white.

Rachel Seidman: *These white organizations assumed that people of color were not interested in the environment.*

Lizzie: Vernice says people of color *did* care about the environment, but environmentalists had too narrow a definition of "environment"—sometimes overlooking people entirely. But that started to change after the 1987 study on race and toxic waste.

Vernice Miller-Travis: *We began to sort of reframe the whole concept of environmentalism is that the environment is where you live, where you work, where you play, where you recreate, where you worship. The environment is everything and everywhere.*

Lizzie: *It's not just the birds and the bees.*

Vernice Miller-Travis: *It's not just the birds and the bees. It's not just the endangered species, it's also the endangered human species.*

[MUSIC]

Lizzie: In 1990, dozens of activists—including Charles Lee— sent a letter to the National Wildlife Federation calling on them to change their definition of the environment to include the "endangered human species." But that top-down approach to change could take years, and maybe never lead to solutions. Meanwhile, people were literally dying from pollution. What activists really wanted was to build a grassroots movement from the ground up.

Charles Lee: *And the best way to do that is to bring people together to showcase the kind of work that was going on and to learn from each other.*

Lizzie: Gathering people together from all corners of the country and showcasing their collective knowledge? This called for a summit. But what would happen when hundreds of energized and outspoken environmental justice activists gathered in the nation's capital? We'll have more on that after the break.

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Lizzie: All right, not to brag, but everyone knows the best place for a national summit is the nation's capital. And that's where the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit was set to take place in October 1991.

Rachel Seidman: *This took place at the Washington Court Hotel in downtown Washington, DC. It was a Black-owned hotel at the time.*

Lizzie: Rachel Seidman has spent the last few years researching the summit for a new exhibit she's curating at the Smithsonian's Anacostia Community Museum. It's called "To Live and Breathe: Women and the Environmental Justice Movement in Washington, DC." She says the purpose of the summit was simple.

Rachel Seidman: *To bring all these groups together, all these groups that had been focused in these kind of hyper-local campaigns around the country to sit together, learn about each other's*

fights, learn about what each organization was grappling with.

Lizzie: It would be a meeting of the minds. A chance to find out what kind of organizing was happening in other parts of the country.

Rachel Seidman: *And to come up with a strategy for how to make progress in the future.*

Lizzie: That was the goal. And by the day of the conference, 300 registrations had come in. But to be totally honest, Charles Lee—who'd helped organize the summit—really didn't know who would show up—or how it would go.

[MUSIC]

Charles Lee: *I said that, you know, if we had gotten 300 communities together, that would be a real success.*

Lizzie: But when the doors to the grand ballroom opened that Thursday in October ...

Rachel Seidman: *It's already hundreds of people there. And there's people behind us and there's people still to come.*

Lizzie: By this time, Vernice Miller-Travis had started her own organization back in her home of New York. It was called West Harlem Environmental Action, or WE ACT. And her group had been fighting a sewage treatment plant spewing fumes into her community. She says at the time, they were feeling really isolated in their battle, totally outgunned. So back in that ballroom ...

Vernice Miller-Travis: *I can never tell this story without crying. Never. 'Cause it just was so—it was so—altering of my reality. We thought we were alone. And when we get to the summit, we realize we're not.*

Charles Lee: *1,100 people showed up.*

Lizzie: *1,100?*

Charles Lee: *Yeah.*

Lizzie: *That's almost four times as many as you expected.*

Charles Lee: *I mean, I don't think people at that time realized how big of an issue this is.*

[MUSIC]

Lizzie: The summit was packed with three days of speakers. People from around the country shared stories of the challenges they faced with seemingly zero power to fight back.

*[**ARCHIVE CLIP, speaker:** We have taken it to the Western Courts. We have been thrown out.]*

Lizzie: And just a heads up, this 30-year-old audio recorded in a loud conference room is a little bit hard to make out.

*[**ARCHIVE CLIP, speaker:** Native Hawaiians are wards of the state and the federal government, and therefore, native Hawaiians are not allowed standing to sue in the federal courts to protect our trust lands and assets.]*

*[**ARCHIVE CLIP, speaker:** I have lupus. My husband has bladder cancer. My son has a rare form of muscular dystrophy. My first grandchild was born dead. My aunt died of cancer. That's four generations.]*

*[**ARCHIVE CLIP, speaker:** The oil spill is not over yet. The small birds like sandpipers that hangs around the shore, we haven't seen them back since the oil spill.]*

*[**ARCHIVE CLIP, speaker:** I live in a housing complex that was built on a landfill. Our area has been a dumping ground for 153 years.]*

*[**ARCHIVE CLIP, speaker:** Come Sunday morning, there's gonna be a new environmental movement in the United States of America. And so we are not organizing an anti-white movement, we are organizing an anti-injustice movement.]*

Lizzie: Rachel Seidman says one of the most powerful moments ...

Rachel Seidman: *Was this speech that Dana Alston gave.*

Lizzie: Dana Alston was an environmental justice advocate, and one of the organizers of the summit.

*[**ARCHIVE CLIP, Dana Alston:** It's not just ancient forests. That's important. It's just not saving the whales. That's important. And saving other endangered species. That's important. We understand the life cycle and the connectedness of life. Well, our communities and our people are endangered species too. [audience applauds]]*

***Rachel Seidman:** She spoke on a day when they had called together leaders from those big 10 environmental organizations.*

*[**ARCHIVE CLIP, Dana Alston:** We refuse a paternalistic relationship. [audience applauds] We are not interested in a parent-child relationship. [audience cheers]]*

***Rachel Seidman:** She also called out some of these big 10 environmental organizations and leaders by name and told them exactly what they were doing wrong.*

***Lizzie:** Wow, that's a bold move!*

***Rachel Seidman:** It is a bold move.*

*[**ARCHIVE CLIP, Dana Alston:** Your organizations may be or may not be older than ours. Your organizations definitely have more money than us. [audience laughs] But if we are to form—if you are to form a partnership with us, it will be as equals and nothing else but equals. [audience applauds]]*

Lizzie: Attendees came for the speeches but stayed for something bigger, something foundational to the movement. On the last day of the summit, everyone would adopt a set of principles that would guide the environmental justice movement going forward. They just needed to write a set of principles that 1,100 people could agree on. Easy, right?

[MUSIC]

***Vernice Miller-Travis:** You have no freaking idea what a challenge it was, because everybody who came to the conference was like me, highly opinionated.*

***Lizzie:** [laughs]*

***Vernice Miller-Travis:** There were no wallflowers at this conference. Not one.*

Lizzie: Every night when the speeches were done and everyone was exhausted and just wanted to go pass out, Vernice and a group of others would get together and hammer out these principles, draft after draft.

Rachel Seidman: *They sat in those hotel rooms for hours and hours and hours hashing this out.*

Lizzie: Vernice remembers telling people ...

Vernice Miller-Travis: *Y'all don't have to correct every word. We can come back and revisit it. Well, I so distinctly remember a woman named Leah Wise. And Leah stood up and Leah said, "No, we're not. We're not doing this again."*

Lizzie: *[laughs]*

Vernice Miller-Travis: *Right?*

Lizzie: *We got one shot.*

Vernice Miller-Travis: *We have to make sure this document says what we want it to say because it's gonna have to live for a long time.*

Lizzie: In the end, they wound up with 17 principles.

Lizzie: *They were sort of identifying the universal traits or truths of environmental justice.*

Rachel Seidman: *Yes. In all of its breadth and complexity.*

Lizzie: Ranging from environmental pollutants to genocide, self determination for Native Americans.

Rachel Seidman: *Things that I think mainstream environmentalists would've said, "What?"*

Lizzie: The summit attendees adopted the 17 principles of environmental justice on the final day. Afterwards, everyone returned to their communities energized, excited, no longer feeling alone.

Rachel Seidman: *I believe that the 1991 summit was a massive turning point. It was an incredible inflection point for the environmental justice movement.*

Lizzie: In the vaults of the Smithsonian's Anacostia Community Museum, you can see physical directories of environmental organizations, which are essentially like contact lists.

Rachel Seidman: *In the years after the summit, you can literally see the number of these environmental justice organizations growing because there's more and more and more in these directories.*

Lizzie: People outside the movement took notice as well. Just a year later, President George H.W. Bush created what has today become the Office of Environmental Justice at the Environmental Protection Agency. And 30 years later, with renewed calls for racial justice, one of President Biden's first acts of office was to make environmental justice a top priority for the federal government.

Vernice Miller-Travis: *Who does that? Who does that on their first freaking afternoon in office? Who does that?*

Charles Lee: *What you're seeing now is the first inkling on a scale that's commensurate with the problem of trying to really solve the problem of environmental injustice.*

[MUSIC]

Lizzie: The Warren County protests in 1982 brought civil rights activism to the fight against environmental inequities. The 1987 report, "Toxic Wastes and Race in the US" set the stage for a national environmental justice movement. And the 1991 summit launched it.

Lizzie: 30 years later, the 17 principles hashed out at the summit are still the defining ideals guiding the movement today. And activists like Charles Lee, who were once fighting the government to acknowledge environmental injustices, are now working for the government and advising the president.

Lizzie: This isn't the end of the fight by any means. A recent study found that Black Americans are 75 percent more likely to live near a hazardous waste facility than the average American. Still, Vernice can't believe how much progress has been made since the protests in Warren County 40 years ago. Just this past spring, she watched the president sign an executive order committing tens of millions of dollars to environmental justice—an unprecedented amount of money. And she couldn't help but feel at least a moment of victory.

*[**ARCHIVE CLIP, President Joe Biden:** Executive order revitalizing our nation's commitment to environmental justice for all.]*

Vernice Miller-Travis: *I was sitting three rows from where the president was standing at the podium. And I noticed that right in front of him are almost every secretary of every agency in the federal government. They looked so genuinely happy.*

Lizzie: *[laughs]*

Vernice Miller-Travis: *We were so happy. Oh my God, Lizzie, I've not had a day like that. At the White House in the Rose Garden with the president, and people are walking around with silver trays handing out lemonade. What? How did this happen?*

Lizzie: *That's a far cry from the ...*

Vernice Miller-Travis: *Girl! It's such a far cry, Lizzy. It's such a far freaking cry. None of this could I have imagined.*

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Lizzie: You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX.

Lizzie: To read the 17 principles of environmental justice, and to get links to the reports and studies we mentioned in this episode, or to watch a short film on the 1991 First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, check out our newsletter. You can subscribe at SI.edu/sidedoor.

Lizzie: If you're in the DC area, check out the new exhibit, "To Live and Breathe: Women and Environmental Justice in Washington, DC." It's part of the Smithsonian's Center for Environmental Justice at the Anacostia Community Museum.

Lizzie: For help with this episode, we want to thank Vernice Miller-Travis, Charles Lee and Rachel Seidman. Additional thanks to Charles' Lee's former employer, the United Church of Christ, for providing audio of the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit.

Lizzie: For more Sidedoor stories about environmental justice, check out our episode about the only African-American riverkeeper in the country. It's called "The Riverkeeper."

Lizzie: Our podcast is produced by James Morrison and me, Lizzie Peabody. Our associate producer is Nathalie Boyd. Executive producer is Ann Conanan. Our editorial team is Jess Sadeq and Sharon Bryant.

Lizzie: Tami O'Neill writes our newsletter. Episode artwork is by Dave Leonard. Fact checking by Adam Bisno. Extra support comes from PRX. Our show is mixed by Tarek Fouda. Our theme song and episode music are by Breakmaster Cylinder.

Lizzie: If you have a pitch for us, send us an email at Sidedoor (@) si.edu. And if you want to sponsor our show, please email sponsorship (@) prx.org.

Lizzie: I'm your host, Lizzie Peabody. Thanks for listening.

Vernice Miller-Travis: *32 years those principles have stood, and they are the foundation of the environmental justice movement. Now I desperately wish I could go back and revisit them, and you know why?*

Lizzie: *Why?*

Vernice Miller-Travis: *Because there's some bad grammar in some of those principles.*

Lizzie: *[laughs]*

Vernice Miller-Travis: *I don't wanna change the content. I just wanna change the verb tense in some places, right? That's all I wanna do. And they're like "No!"*

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