

Final Report

My final two weeks at WE ACT were very busy. We held our Toxins and Treasures tour of West Harlem for the City College Medical School pipeline program, conducted Healthy Homes focus groups for Washington Heights and East Harlem, began drafting the final Healthy Homes Report, networked at a faith leaders lunch, attended a meeting of the Coalition for Asthma Free Housing (CAFH), and held a community movie night next to Riverbank State Park.

The Toxins and Treasures tour went smoothly, with Joanna and I leading one group and David and another intern leading the second group. In total we had about 25 participants from all over NYC, many from environmental justice (EJ) communities in the Bronx and Queens. During the tour we stopped by Riverbank State Park and discussed the EJ history of the North River Wastewater Treatment Plant that lies underneath the park. WE ACT resisted the citing of the North River Wastewater Treatment Plant in Harlem. They ultimately lacked the political capital to stop its construction, but the legal charges WE ACT and others leveled against the city led to settlements including the Riverbank State Park and the implementation of technology to reduce noxious fumes produced in the wastewater treatment process from blowing into Harlem. We also stopped by the West Harlem Piers Park - formerly an abandoned parking lot – that WE ACT was active in repurposing in the early 2000s. Throughout the tour Joanna and I focused our discussion on doctors who have made their work political by advocating for EJ communities.

Our Healthy Homes focus groups for Washington Heights and East Harlem were both small, but yielded valuable information. After the first focus group in West Harlem, we shifted our goals for the focus groups. We wanted to learn about the barriers that community-based organizations (CBOs) face in trying to eliminate long-standing environmental health hazards in Northern Manhattan. In the Washington heights focus group, a member of the Northern Manhattan Improvement Coalition (NMIC) talked in detail about weatherization, a technique for rendering households more durable in the face of harsh environmental conditions. This includes increasing the insulation of households to retain heat in the wintertime and keep buildings cool in the summer, as well as sealing the building from water leaks that allow mold to grow and physical holes that allow insects and rodents to enter. One issue the NMIC faces in implementing weatherization is that the lifestyles of some residents counteract the benefits of the NMIC's improvements. For example, the clutter in a hoarder's household provides safe spaces for cockroaches and mold, rendering weatherization nearly ineffective. The NMIC can explain the benefits of a clean apartment, but it would take a psychologist to truly alter the behavior of a hoarder. Another more generalizable discussion point of the NMIC representative was his frustration with the non-profit industrial complex that leads to internecine competition amongst organizations working for a common goal. In his view, a better system would provide funding for a coalition working towards a common goal, which could then subdivide resources as needed. The East Harlem focus group included a representative from the NY Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, who shared a great deal about government programs aimed at reducing health disparities in NYC. In particular, the Delivery System and Reform Incentive Program (DSRIP) is a cooperation

between hospitals, government agencies and CBOs aimed at reducing costs on the Medicaid program by cutting down on unnecessary emergency room visits. It remains to be seen whether or not the program will succeed in its goals, but the relationships it is fostering will improve health care in Northern Manhattan.

As part of the outreach efforts for future focus groups, a full-time WE ACT employee and I attended a Micah Faith Leaders lunch at a church in Harlem. The meeting is a regular convening of religious leaders from the area to discuss political, economic and social issues in NY. The diversity of faiths impressed me. A Buddhist monk led us in a meditation to begin the meeting. Rabbis and preachers spoke of immigration reform, the danger of the political climate in this country and the need to raise the minimum wage to \$20. It was a beautiful convergence of faiths around a common goal, a place of understanding where people with completely different religious beliefs united around a shared commitment to protecting human rights.

The CAFH meeting was markedly tense. The coalition has been trying to pass Intro 385B for closing in on one year now. In the eyes of coalition members (including WE ACT), the city agencies have been purposefully delaying further progress on the bill. The representative of a city councilwoman who has been working closely with the coalition on the bill defended her on the grounds of the slowness of the political process. But the CAFH is pressing councilwoman Rosie Mendez and city agencies to get the bill passed by this fall, lest it be forgotten amid city elections. Thus the CAFH delivered a date on which the city agencies must return a satisfactory version of the bill or else they will make the bill and the proceedings (including the administration's unwillingness to act) public. During elections this threat holds real power. I will be interested to follow the progress of the bill this fall.

At the end of my time at WE ACT, I had some informative discussions with the associate director of WE ACT. He gave me advice on law school, how one can use law to challenge the status quo instead of maintaining it, and where I might study abroad given my interests. The director, associate director and my supervisor invited me back to WE ACT if I am interested in the future. Should I settle in NYC for a few years, the director would be interested in having me on as a paid staff-member.

My time at WE ACT has been educational on many levels. Spending time in NYC grappling with issues of race, class, ability, gender and sexuality has led to an unconventional NY experience, but in the end a rewarding one. I have learned a great deal that I will apply to future work at the intersection of environmentalism, anti-racism and anti-oppression.