Don’t have slides today. So thank you everyone for being in person, thanks for those people online. Today, this is my break period. I’ll turn to Elizabeth Yeampierre as our first speaker this semester. Elizabeth is a co-chair of the Climate Justice Alliance, a national frontline led organization and executive director of UPROSE, Brooklyn’s oldest Latino community based organization. And Elizabeth was the first Latina chair of the US EPA, opening speaker for the first White House council on the Environment Quality Forum, Environment Justice in the Obama administration. And she has been in pictured in many of the news, and received awards. For example, the New York Times pictured her as originally paving the path to climate justice.
She was also named by Politico as the 100 most influential people in climate policy.

Also featured, involved as one of the certain climate warriors in the world.

Now all across list of the features of rising, so many others.

So it’s our great to welcome Elizabeth to give the talk on climate justice.

Online solutions in a midst of disruptions.

So without further me, Elizabeth, present.

Thank you.

My God, those bios are always so uncomfortable, because then it’s like so much pressure.

Because everything that we do comes out of the work of the collective.

You know, we’re a movement group.

And so every accomplishment, everything from transforming the landscape to tapping legislation comes from being in deep consultation with each other in community and across the country.

So everybody, thank you so much for having me here today.

I was asked to talk about public health and to talk about frontline responses to where we are right now.

And when I was getting ready for this conversation,
it was really hard to determine how to approach this.

And really, that’s why I put on my glasses, so I can see your faces, so I can feel your energy, so I can understand your vibe in terms of where you are.

Where we are in this moment when it comes to climate change and racial justice, or the lack there of this country.

And we are in a very, very bad place, because today, the Supreme Court in the United States overturned the so-called Chevron doctrine in a six to three ruling.

It is again demonstrating its allegiance to big business, rather than the frontline.

The ruling reverses one of the most important judicial precedents that have guided federal regulation for the past 40 years, that enabled government agencies’ interpretation of a law and statute to stand when reasonable.

This ruling will make it even easier for polluting industries to use the courts to block new pollution regulations from going into effect.

It also opens up thousands of judicial decisions, sustaining government agencies’ rulemaking,
like the EPA, for example, or adjudication as reasonable to now be challenged.

For me, these are incremental acts of violence against our survival. That’s how I feel.

And people think that that’s rhetoric. So I wanna talk to you a little bit, because this is a university setting, and you are students, about where we’re right now. At this moment, we are seeing a lot of money on the table. The IRA money, money from Bezos, from Gates Fund. There is tons and tons of money on the table, some of that money supposedly for frontline communities, for the infrastructure projects and the work that we have that will literally get us to adjust transition. But it is not coming to us. And what we’re seeing right now isn’t just the threat of the big greens, the big organizations that are multimillion dollar organizations that have historically gotten the lion share of the funding to determine what policy is, and how it’s going to affect those of us on the frontline. We’re also seeing universities play a role of becoming the new big greens.
So they’re getting $50 million at a clip, and determining who are the leaders in our communities, what are the priorities.

And they’re serving as interveners, coming into our communities. I can give you an example. There was a moment where NYU got a $900,000 grant to come into our community to replicate the work that we were doing, and then wanted to pick my brain for a thousand dollars, right? So that we would provide them with access to our brain trust that would basically populate their proposal so that they could get funded. That top down extractive approach is going to kill us. And I’m gonna use words like killing us because that’s where we are right now. I am a descendant of extraction, and my body is riddled with all of the health disparities that exist from being born, and raised in an EJ community and worked in an EJ community. And for you as students, what is your role? I wanna talk about that because honestly, every single year, UPPOSE, the New York City Environmental Justice Alliance,
the Climate Justice Alliance, it is inundated with calls and emails from students who want to interview us for their thesis. And what you don’t do, this is what you don’t do.

You call because you have a dream. You came into these institutions with a dream, and you see us as the opportunity to populate that body of information that you need so that you can manifest your individual capitalist, paternal, patriarchal dream.

What you should be doing, if you are concerned about climate justice, if you are concerned about using your privilege to elevate and to support the frontline, what you should be doing is asking, how can I use access to data, research, all of the things that I have access to right now, to advance a local climate justice agenda. And that becomes your thesis.

We’re willing to talk to you if you talk to us about that. But we’re no longer talking to students who are contacting us because they have their individual dream, and they wanna lead. And they’re using the rhetoric of a movement when their culture or practice
is inconsistent with those values. And so the students that get to work with us, that get to be part of this leaderful, matriarchal, intergenerational frontline led movement, are the ones who ask the question, how can we serve? How can we help? And how can I have access to these resources? That means that you are not only an ally, it means you are pro-Black. It means that you’re anti-racist, that you are really thinking critically about and understanding, recognizing that those of us on the ground have the solutions, we understand policy, infrastructure, community building, land use, that we, despite what people think because of how we look, and where we’re from, are a bunch of badasses that are literally transforming the landscape. And we are. And I say that because everything across the country from the CLCPA in New York state, that is a piece of legislation. The Community Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act, I forget how to say it because government changed the title,
is a piece of legislation that has made it possible, for example, for DC, the Department of Environmental Conservation to stop two power plants. And so that legislation, that land language that comes from all of us. Working with each other in a way that is strategic. Talking about one person leading. We’re talking about how we can be leaderful because being leaderful is how we’re gonna be able to win. So the threats for us are enormous. They are, we’re talking about not just big universities and big greens, we’re talking about corporations, fossil fuel companies, government. <v>Chris, CJA.</v> Sorry, that’s the Climate Justice Alliance. Never leave me alone. Okay, I’m sorry about that. Yeah, sorry. But the Climate Justice Alliance, by the way, 10 years ago, we founded it 10 years ago to be sort of the center of gravity in the climate movement. There were a lot of big organizations that were leading on climate. And the voice of the frontline wasn’t central.
We weren’t being consulted.

Our work was being supplanted, our work was being duplicated. Everything was being replicated.

And so we needed to have an organization that was gonna hold that space where we would be able to shape and influence.

And so we decided that we were gonna fight the bad, build the good, change the rules, right? And move the money.

And move the money literally from organizations that have always had the majority of it, to the frontline, so that we can invest.

And remember, we look very different across the country.

What it looks like in West Virginia is very different than what it looks like in Brooklyn, that is densely populated.

And we don’t have site control over our buildings.

It looks very different than Indian country, very different from the northwest, of Puerto Rico, or the Gulf South.

So the solutions are really different.

And so these big organizations and agencies that get so much of the funding come up with cookie cutter approaches, don’t work on the ground.

They don’t work on the block,
they don’t work in the neighborhood because the solutions have to be very different. In a community like ours, where we look at it block by block, in one block, you can have section eight housing. On another block, you can have auto salvaging shops that need to be made climate adaptable so that their chemicals don’t become projectiles in the face of an extreme weather event. It looks very different. So I wanna share that with you because we are, when you think about who we are and you’re saying, well, people of African or Black and indigenous ancestry have all these health disparities because they are living in the midst of toxic exposure, and it is exacerbating their health, making it more difficult. You don’t think about us in terms of the continuum of time. That we are the descendants of enslavement and colonialism. And so there has never been a time going back, back, back, back that we have not been exposed
to not having the best food,
the best healthcare,
that we have not been surrounded
by petrochemical industries
that we have not had to deal with
the high stress that comes with trying to survive,
put food on the table, and raise our children.
That shows up as a health disparity.
And so you need to look at it within that context.
The other thing that I want you to think about is
I want you to think about data,
and the collection of data.
Right now, you see the Bezos fund,
and all these funds wanna lead with data,
and the collection of data.
The way that data is collected right now is deeply flawed
doesn’t tell the story of our people, right?
There is a very big difference between Puerto Rican,
a Mexican, and a Dominican, right?
We show up differently in terms of
our entire profile in terms of our history.
And so when you put Latinos all together in one category,
and you call it Hispanic.
By the way, Hispanic includes people from Spain,
all kinds of people, people with Spanish surname, right?
It doesn’t tell the story, and what it does is it washes out the impact that different communities are facing. Socioeconomically, environmentally. It doesn’t tell the story, and when you don’t tell the story, what it means is less resources, less interventions, so that we can get to a place of health. The Asian community, there are vast differences. Enormous, right? If you look at a place like Hawaii, you’ve got Japanese people who are doing really well when it comes to the health profile. And then you’ve got the indigenous people of Hawaii who are not. And when you put them in one category, what it means is that they’re not getting the attention and the resources that they deserve. Black folks. And that’s a whole lot of us, right? I wanna say that because there’s a difference between African Americans, people from the Caribbean, people who are coming from Africa, right? From the motherland. And so the details really matter if you really want to address root causes,
how they land in our bodies. And those terms were created so that we could be managed, right? Literally differences wiped out.

So if you’re European, you could be French, you could be Italian, you could be Greek, you could be all those things. But if you’re us, you become a Hispanic. I don’t know what that is. And so you erase our blackness, our indigeneity. And then for Latinos, not all Latinos are people of color. There are so many differences. They come sometimes here with privilege. And so they don’t have the same disparities as some of us. So how do you change that? I charge you for changing that. As your charge, you need to be able to change it, so that we are addressing how a legacy of extraction lands in our bodies. And you get people who have health disparities and are now faced with climate change, right? So we know quite a few things. We know fossil fuel companies and governmental power plants, landfills, highways, incinerators, and other toxic infrastructure in our communities.
We know that our communities sacrifice zones, right?
And that right now you’re seeing the climate movement talk about false solutions like green hydrogen and carbon sequestration, and turning our communities to sacrifice zones.
Our solutions are not the same. They’re hyper local.
We know that even before Covid, about 250,000 people in our communities die because of air pollution.
And we don’t know what that looks like now.
So you combine all of the health disparities that we take, that we are exposed to extreme policing, incarceration, under employment, poor educational opportunities, displacement, daily overt racism, the lack of healthy food and transit options. And it’s not surprising that our communities are the ones that are suffering individually and collectively from mental health issues.
I’m surprised that it has never been documented to the extent how this history has impacted us.
And our ability to cope every single day.
So our priorities,
I’m gonna talk fast, ’cause we got a lot of solutions.
So our priorities are to address four things across the country and hyper locally.

Renewable energy with community ownership at its center, drinkable water, food sovereignty, and wellness.

Those are the four things that our communities have told us are real, our real priorities.

We see ourselves as people who staff the community. We don’t see ourselves as people who are making decisions on behalf of our communities.

You know, we were the ones who had, were very fortunate to go to school, thank God for affirmative action, or I wouldn’t be here talking to you right now.

We can have the skills that make it possible for families that have two or three jobs, and two or three children, so that we can staff them.

While they’re taking care of their lives.

And making sure that community events are generational.

There’s always food, childcare, and translation, and that we’re available to meet with them when it’s convenient for them.

We see this not as a job.
And this is important for those of you that are Gen Z, who are talking about grassroots organizations and talking to us about nine to five, self-love and self-care. Self-care is the language of colonialism. This country was built on the needs of the individual. We talk about collective care. And for us, this is not a job. This is a calling. If it is a Saturday afternoon and I’m exhausted, and there’s a possibility that some legislation is gonna benefit my people is impacted, I take that call. I do that work, because that’s in the interest of justice, regardless of whether I’m tired, regardless of whether I’m getting paid. Because if I don’t do that, I’m not honoring my ancestors who gave up their life, who put their lives on the line, who spilled blood, so that I would have rights right now. For them, it wasn’t a nine to five, it was a calling. It’s what you do when you’re a movement builder. That work ethic, that culture of practice is radically different than what you see at the big greens.
than what you see at big organizations. And it’s now because it’s being learned in LinkedIn, being applied to the grassroots and it’s killing our organizations. So if you come to our organizations and you wanna make demands about, I only wanna work four days a week, I’m telling you injustice is not nine to five, and neither is climate change. We’re gonna need to be leaderful, and we’re gonna need to be engaged in collective care, if we’re gonna survive, and we’re gonna not burn out during this process. So I wanna put that because when you guys get interviewed, you say you’re about that life, and then when you come in, you’re like, hey, but you know, and I’m like, oh no. This is not happening. So, and it’s not just us, it’s literally a complaint in leadership across the country about a new generation that is emerging with demands of the grassroots that we can’t accommodate. What it means is that the leadership is gonna burn out and we’re not gonna be able to hold the line.
We’re talking about climate change. It is disruptive, it’s unpredictable, and it is happening. And so we need people that are warriors, right?

And who think about this work in a very different way.

So I wanna share that with you. So what are we doing?

What are we doing in our communities?

We are working to protect, repair, invest, and transform.

In Sunset Park, we’ve got the grit. I’ll tell you a little bit about Sunset Park.

It’s in Brooklyn. It’s a community of 132,000 people.

It is located in the largest significant maritime industrial area in New York City.

It is an industrial sector that has a legacy harm in our communities. Toxic exposure, fossil fuel.

We have everything from the Gowanus Expressway that has 130,000 cars, 13,000 trucks going through there every day, to solid waste management plants, three peaker plants, the Gowanus, the Narrows, and the Joseph Seymour.

And what have we done in response?

In terms of organizing,
we’ve created coalitions like Glass Mile to take care of all of those Amazon trucks and get some regulation that will make sure that they are not going through the most vulnerable neighborhoods. That we’re reducing emissions, that they’re using technology. We created the Peak Coalition as a way of decommissioning peakers, and replacing them with battery storage. When we fought Industry City for seven years, Industry City is a company that owns an enormous part of our industrial sector at Sunset Park. And they wanted to take the industrial sector and turn it into a destination location for the privileged with high tech. And we thought, well, you know, this is a sector that has been harming us for years. What is a sector that is doing green manufacturing, that is working towards an adaptation, mitigation, and resilience look like? How do we bring the jobs? How do we make sure that we don’t follow the market, but we create the market here. And so in order to fight Industry City, we were told that we would lose because literally it was like
David and three Goliaths, it was that kind of fight. The sector, Industry City had spent an enormous amount of money in our community, dropped it in the pockets of CBOs and churches all over to do an enter and around us. They had five public relations firms. And then there was UPROSE. UPROSE would be told we were gonna lose. And we needed to figure out how do we bring movement into the space. But it wasn’t enough to fight against something. We needed to lead with a vision. Everything. You know, when you think about health, you’re thinking about it in a very, it’s very siloed. And we need to break out of those silos and start thinking about infrastructure, and thinking about what people’s needs are going to be 30 years from now. The fact that the environment right now is creating disease at a level that is neck breaking, right? So we put together the grit. It came out of 12 years of community-based planning. It includes a just transition worker waterfront exchange.
a just transition worker resource center
An industrial microgrid.
We are getting ready to launch the first community on solar in Sunset Park.
We have mapped 20 rooftops for community solar.
It’s a plan for the decarbonization of this industrial waterfront community.
A small business decarbonization pilot, and a zero emission distribution hub so that we can move away from Glass Mile.
All of those pieces have a lot of different pieces in them,
and they all have a price set.
One is $145 million, the just transition worker center,
which would take about 10 years, $25 million.
So why am I sharing that with you?
Because those are big ticket items that are not just aspirational,
they are operational.
And we made sure that we were passing the kind of legislation that would give it teeth.
That would give us access to the resources necessary so we can operationalize.
But then what are we doing?
We’re competing with Columbia,
with NYU, with Fordham, with all of these people who saw the opportunity that was created by the grassroots, right? And have helicoptered into our community so that they can engage in empire building. What we’re trying to engage in community building. And literally, decarbonize the neighborhood. Highly sophisticated. We build strategic partnerships with a number of people so we don’t have to know everything. And since you’re at Yale, let me just say this, you don’t have to know everything. You need to understand, I mean, you have been expected to know a lot, which is why you’re here. Big ups to you for that. But understand that collectively, we know a lot. And so that when working in an organization, it’s important to recognize what you don’t know, and develop the relationships with people who come in from a place of building just relationships, so that we can strategically address these big items. Everything from trying to figure out how do we finance community on solar, and pre-development costs. Those are things that for a while,
we didn’t know anything about. But we identified people who could provide us with that. And that’s gonna be your role. Your role is to provide us with the technical support so that we can operationalize it. Yale’s been really cool. And I wanna say that on the real, because we work with a lot of institutions that we’ve been like, okay, no. All right, so it’s surprising and refreshing that we have for the last few years worked with a number of departments or a number of schools at Yale that have provided us with the support so that we can move as quickly as we have. So we have several fellows from Yale. And that says that something is happening at this institution, where you’re really sort of checking in on yourself, and your professors are checking and thinking about how are we going to be the most impactful. Not sort of like thinking about, you know, sort of this community. that is talking about ideas and influencing. We influence, we come up with the ideas, we come up with the recommendations.
You’re the ones who are gonna be able to provide us with the support that we need, so that we can manifest those. So I had a long list of, but I wanna open up for questions and answers. A long list of all the health disparities that we have. Hyper-local problems with air monitoring, and how it’s done, and how it should be done. But I kind of feel like I just really wanna break it up for questions, because I think that’s where the richness of the conversation takes place. And I really hope that I’ve given you sort of a broad view of understanding the challenges that we’re having locally. You will end up working in a lot of places that are engaged in contemporary missionary head. You know, super saviors. We don’t want people like that. We don’t wanna work with you if that’s who you are. We don’t think that you know more about anything than we do. We don’t think you care more than we do. We are looking for people who are partners, who wanna work with us in a way that shows that you’re committed to a different culture of practice.
Because that’s what climate change is demanding from us.

This sort of top down, patriarchal way of thinking about power is unacceptable to us, and we’re not suffering from insecurity.

You will go into some communities where they will defer to you, and they will give up power because you came in, and you give the impression of having the skills and the understanding that maybe people who don’t have a formal education don’t have.

You know, my grandmother didn’t know how to read or write. My mother had a very limited education. I’m the first one out with college education in my family.

And I can tell you that my mother and my grandmother were absolutely brilliant. And that when I am in community and I am listening with all, all my senses to people in the community, that they know what they want, and they know the solutions.

And my responsibility is to facilitate that, to elevate that voice, and to make sure that we are honoring what they’re telling us even when we don’t agree.

And I’m gonna give you one example of when we didn’t agree.
We, on 3rd Avenue, if you know Sunset Park or Brooklyn.

How many of you know Brooklyn?

Right, you know, 3rd Avenue, and you know how you’ve got the Gowanus and you’ve got all those industrial spots.

Where there’s a over,

so many children in the neighborhood, and not enough schools.

So our former councilman wanted to put a school in 3rd Avenue.

And we said, but if you put the children under the highway, in the industrial zone,

they’re going to be running in their backyards, breathing hard,

while all those emissions, socks, knocks, all of it,

is going to be dumped into their little lungs, right?

And so the Department of Education said to us, well

of course we’re gonna clean up the brownfield that the school’s gonna be built on.

And we said, but you can’t control the adjacent brownfields.

And you can’t,

you don’t have any control over the adjacent brownfields,

you don’t own that property.

And there are chemicals there from before

there was even an EPA,
that when dislodged, are carcinogens upon contact.
So you can’t, you shouldn’t put the school there.
But because the council member was somebody
that the community loved, they supported him.
The school got built there.
I said, I would never send my little child to that school.
Did we protest the parents?
No, we did not.
We gave them the information we wanted.
We gave them enough so that they could make an informed decision.
But there are people, and once they made that decision,
they were stuck with that decision,
and it broke our hearts.
But it wasn’t our place to supplant leadership,
or to tell them what to do.
It was our place to provide them with all the information
that they needed,
so that they could make an informed decision.
So you’re going to be in spaces where that’s going,
where your heart, everything is gonna be telling you,
this is so wrong, right?
But you need to honor what people are saying.
They were desperate for schools.
And so that decision led to us fighting
for upland schools,
upland buying properties like hot sheet hotels,
and turning them into schools.
Letting people know this is a storm surge song.
We’re gonna be dying from extreme heat.
Literally, that is what’s going to kill us.
And if you wanna know more about that,
the New York City Environmental Justice Alliance
is preparing a report,
and has been doing an enormous amount of work on this.
So I’ll stop and I’ll open it to questions.
And I’ll put on my glasses so I can see you.
So yeah, so it’s a lot that we’re doing locally,
that’s just Sunset Park.
And it looks different everywhere,
all over the United States.
This is exciting.
What we’re doing is viable.
It is operational, and it has a price,
we need to move the money,
so that we are investing in local communities,
particularly around adaptation, mitigation, resilience.
And because you are in the school of public health,
really important that you break out of those silos
and you’re working with people who are in the law school
that are working on land use
and planning and zoning, that you are thinking outside of the box because this, the way that we are trained sometimes is very limited, and climate change is not that. It is not limited. So thank you.

Yes, so I think we collect a lot questions from students. They’re very interested in a lot of the work you do. So now we have 20 minutes, which is very rare for the presenter to ask all the questions, especially what we don’t know. Especially what, for all the things. So now, floor’s open.

You commented on a new household solar power initiative in Sunset Park. And of course this is a source of great frustration, all of us that we have so many roofs, industrial roofs that are flat and vast that you can just imagine solar panels on, and household roofs that many of them face the sun in a very agreeable way. So could you comment on some of your successes and challenges in launching this initiative?
A lot of challenges.

This is the rooftop of the Brooklyn Army Terminal. It's owned by the New York City Economic Development Corporation, which is a quasi public corporation in New York.

It's the first time that they partner with a frontline group like ours. And there have been a lot of challenges, just in financing and contracting a lot of things that we didn't know and we learned along the way.

But through the relationship with them, we are getting them to do a study on green manufacturing, and other kinds of things that can happen along the industrial waterfront.

So that one started out, the idea was that it was going to be a cooperative, and that did not work out.

So now it's a community owned initiative, where the investments will be in community led projects.

And they look different in different places. So we've mapped, for example, the MTA, the Jackie Gleason Bus Depot, which is enormous in Sunset Park.

And then we've met with Industry City, which is surprising
because we drove them crazy for seven years.
And we said, we want your rooftops,
we want your parking lots
for community owned solar canopies.
And what we’d like, because your private business is
to make your rooftop a source of renewable energy
for small businesses that have been devastated by Covid.
We lost so many of them in Sunset Park.
So that small businesses,
mom and pop shops have access
to renewable energy at a reduced cost in their homes.
We’ve met with Liberty View,
we’ve met with NYU Langone.
St. Michael’s, OLPH, churches.
They look different, right?
So we’re not looking at homes
because site control is a problem in New York City.
So where, if you’re in Buffalo,
you’re working with PUSH, they own the property.
they have control of the rooftops.
It’s a little easier for them.
But in New York City, there’s no site control.
You can have a landlord that owns the building
for five years and then passes on
ownership to somebody else.
So we’re looking at a long history,
deep roots, own the property, and then we develop contracts that make it possible for us to have access to them. For a while there, I was looking at how we can own airspace. We had the law school and it was a crazy question and request. They told me it was crazy, but they researched it anyway, so that we could have air rights. And we could literally use our rooftops as eminent domain.

I'm still haven't given up on that idea. So there's a lot. It takes time, it takes a lot longer than I had expected. And this one, I think we're ready to launch in the fall of this year. We captured the learnings, the mistakes, all of the things that we did well. We did that with the fight against Industry City so that other communities can hit the ground running with that. What we learned was that the organizing we had been doing for years benefited us. And it wasn’t just organizing on the ground, but you know, when I was talking about
how the climate justice movement is talking about moving the money,
we’ve also been organizing in philanthropy and trying to get people who are in philanthropy to be on the inside talking about how our communities benefit from moving the money. How our communities benefit at all levels, right?
And so when we needed the resources, we started getting those resources to make sure that we can operationalize that.
Had this been over 10 years ago when we weren’t part of a national climate justice movement, we would’ve been in a very different place.
What's happening locally is that every local community is benefiting from the national movement.
So the national agenda is being defined, what is happening on the ground, which is very different from how it happened before,
which was grassroots, right?
We saw that with the Green New Deal.
When the Green New Deal came out, we had to have a meeting with AOC, and we needed to tell them, listen, this is being dictated by groups like Sunrise and others,
who are not based in community,
who are not accountable to community
with an agenda that they’re creating
regardless of community,
and are not working with us in a way
that honors racial justice
or the Jemez Principles.
And it has to reflect a just transition
and the thinking of the frontline all over the
country.
We were able to do that,
and we were able to change the culture of
practice
of a lot of institutions
because time is of the essence
and we need to build those partnerships.
So I guess the shorter way of saying that is
that everything that we’re doing locally comes out
of the collective vision that is not just local,
but is also part of a national movement.
It’s movement work.
But it’s not easy.
We’re trying to figure out how do we get
drinkable water in people?
How are we making sure that there’s infra-
structure
put on the rooftops.
Organizing block to block,
identifying one organizer per block
that becomes sort of your block captain, your
leader,
the person who determines whether or not they’re going to be your first responder.
And I jokingly for years have said that busybody on the block, the one who organizes the block party, who knows what your business, who you’re hooking up with, that’s your organizer.
They know whether you are on a respirator, whether you’re on dialysis, they know.
And so the idea of organizing block to block is also a way of strengthening social cohesion, because that’s the way that we’re gonna survive.
And you could do that around projects.
Like one block can build an anaerobic digester, another one can paint all the rooftops white.
So there’s a lot of interventions,
and renewable energy is just one of them.
But it’s the sexiest,
it’s the one that people talk about the most.
But we need to think about food sovereignty.
We’re on an industrial waterfront, and it has the possibility of being a place where there’s food distribution,
where we can connect with upstate farmers that are economically depressed,
to bring the food to us through refrigerated gardens.
Not only will it strengthen social cohesion between downstate and upstate,
but between poor white folks and people of color in New York City. And that’s necessary because they get the benefit of our tax dollars. But when they make legislative choices, they’re not thinking about our interests. They’re based on race. And so we need to figure out how we use these interventions as a way of connecting communities so that we’re ready for these things. So we are making tons of mistakes. And here’s the thing about mistakes. I wanna share this because this is true. White folks get to experiment and make mistakes all the freaking time. We have to excel all the time. Everyone treats us differently when we fail. You could be someone who comes from privilege, and they’re just like, well, they were trying out idea. With us, it’s not the same. Funders treat us differently. Everyone treats us differently when we fail. And so there’s a lot of pressure on us to succeed, not just because of how we’re perceived
because of racism, but also because the lives of our people are literally on the line. And so we have to succeed. So I wanna share that with you because when I say that we’re available to share the learning and the mistakes, it can be the thing that defines us, you know? Yes. Yes. <v Student>Thank you for speaking.</v> I’m really interested in what you’re saying about younger applicants and students who interview you that are idealistic, and maybe romantic about how they perceive EJ, and seemingly never ending list of to-do tasks for you and your organization. And they come in and it’s actually, oh, too much work. Maybe I want a four day week, like you said. How do you personally balance knowing that that list exists and also pursuing that collective community care you were talking about you were talking about what gives you hope? Well, we have honest conversations, saying this is not a nine to five organization. So we’re real honest.
Also, we think that if people are engaged in collective care, we will be able to take care of each other. And we also assess people’s energy. Like, we don’t want people to burn out. There’s always food, there’s always dogs in the office. Like literally, it really is like that. There’s music, there’s joy. We have a lot of events that are really just about embracing joy, right? But we’re honest about what the work demands, and then we try to get a sense of whether that’s the place, not every place is for you, right? Maybe our organization is not for everybody. Maybe you need to go work for an NRDC or God forbid, an EDF, right? But not every place. And so the idea, and then the other thing is that the challenges that come, often come when it’s a woman of color in leadership. So you hire people who are more likely to hire, and we’re seeing this across the country, to challenge and make the lives of women of color and leadership. What I mean saying women of color, are people of Black and indigenous ancestry.
And that could be anything.

Black and indigenous means Colombian, Mexican,

you know, Honduran, right?

Puerto Rican, right?

So I just wanna say that

because I think there is,

people don’t really understand

how we think about those terms.

And it’s more likely that leadership burns out

and is leaving because they can’t take the pain

of coming from the frontline,

having a vision

and having people challenge them

just because they think they can.

But when there’s a white man in leadership,

no one challenges them.

They let it go, they complain on the side,

they out for drinks and they complain,

but they do the work.

It’s very different.

So I’m being honest about the challenges

that we’re going through.

So I’m just saying that in terms of an invitation,

if you’re coming into our organizations,

we take care of each other.

We look out for each other, we get paid.

I bust my butt raising funds so that people get paid well.
Worked really hard to make sure that the health insurance is the best that there is on the market. That you know, that we are engaged deeply in collective care. So the organization has to be a place where children are welcome, where all people of different kinds of abilities, where we are sancocho. A little bit of this and that and awesome, right? But there is a very, there’s something that’s happening to this particular generation, and I don’t know, I don’t even know. You all look Gen Z, I dunno where you’re getting your marching orders from, like LinkedIn. And that’s corporate culture, that you’re literally toxic corporate culture is really influencing how you think about the workspace across the board. And it doesn’t apply to grassroots organizations that if you think and are supposed to be accurate in justice, you shouldn’t have to be worried about that. Right? People talk about the nonprofit industrial complex,
and that’s not grassroots, frontline led organizations,
but it’s the kind of rhetoric that makes you sound like
you know what you’re talking about.
And so you come in ready to fight inside
instead of rolling up your sleeves
and doing the work outside.
And that is really taking out a lot of organizations.
I don’t know if I’ve answered your question.
I hope that you have.
<v>Thank you.</v> I think I hope that I have,<v>
but I’m really willing to have uncomfortable conversations.
I think that that’s how I show respect,
and that’s how I make it clear about,
as someone who’s in a leadership role
and runs an organization, what I expect from people.
And people not keeping their word,
like saying, you know,
you go through the interview process
and you say, this is what we need.
And they’re like, okay, okay. ’cause they want the job,
and then they come in like, well,
what I really want is like.
That’s self, that’s self.
Even when you think about
intergenerational and youth-led,
this country has issues when it comes to age, right?
So you got young people trying to push older people out,
older people trying to hold onto power.
And power has to be intergenerational.
We need to be able to work with each other across the continuum of age.
We learn, we build, and we have power when it’s intergenerational.
So young people and everything,
that’s sort of how we romanticize and fetishize
youth leadership,
is really extractive, competitive, patriarchal.
It’s, I wanna run to the front, I want shine,
I need this, I’m ambitious, and you’re in my way.
And then older people holding on for dear life.
Intergenerational power
that comes from the Global South
is not like that.
When you are building an intergenerational movement
and power, clearly you may have skills that I don’t have.
And those are important, and they’re really important,
and I’m gonna recognize that those are important,
and understand what the deficits are of my generation,
because of the time that I grew up in.
I will not be able to be an impactful, powerful leader if I am not part of an intergenerational movement. I am learning from you constantly, and I hope that out of humility, you were learning from me as well. So those tensions that are part, that are literally part of an Anglo-American construct, they’re uniquely part of the United States, hurt institutions because you’ve got young people coming with knowing nothing than what they learned in the classroom, trying to push older people out, right? Knowing nothing, no humility. This is work that requires tremendous humility, because it is complex, and a lot of what we’re doing has never been done before. And then older people holding on for freaking dear life and not knowing that there’s really room for all of us, that we can be matriarchal and we can be leaderful. There really is room for all of us. And that this moment is demanding that we all be in play with each other. So those are some of the tensions that are appearing in the workspace at a grassroots level.
And I think that these conversations are absolutely necessary.

Si. 

Well, thank you so much. This sounds like really impressive and really interesting work.

I was wondering, I obviously don’t know your space and the geography of the space, but with the solar canopies you were talking about, is there any, or like, how are you guys ensuring that? Or is there any risk of like flood zones or how are you ensuring that it’s sustainable for --

Over time?

Yeah, over time.

So we have a geographer on staff, and we work with a number of people. We work with a company called Working Power.

They’re pretty amazing.

You should look them up.

And they look at the infrastructure, they look at the space and they determine whether,

what is being proposed to be built there,

will it withstand over time.

On the industrial sector,

you know, there are all these parking lots.

And so, you know, there’s an opportunity for solar panels,
1168 00:44:41.850 --> 00:44:43.500 for solar canopies there.
1169 00:44:43.500 --> 00:44:45.390 And then of course there’s our rooftops.
1170 00:44:45.390 --> 00:44:47.040 And then we’re thinking about our backyards
1171 00:44:47.040 --> 00:44:49.323 for like bioswales for growing food.
1172 00:44:50.460 --> 00:44:53.490 And the neighborhood has literally, if you
1173 00:44:53.490 --> 00:44:55.110 if you go online and you read the grid,
1174 00:44:55.110 --> 00:44:58.680 has been mapped for all of these different
1175 00:44:58.680 --> 00:45:00.450 But we work with people who understand
1176 00:45:00.450 --> 00:45:02.760 how the infrastructure works,
1177 00:45:02.760 --> 00:45:03.960 how it’s going to be impacted
1178 00:45:03.960 --> 00:45:05.943 by extreme wind and heat.
1179 00:45:05.943 --> 00:45:08.179 I don’t know those things.
1180 00:45:08.179 --> 00:45:09.060 I have to be a generalist,
1181 00:45:09.060 --> 00:45:11.580 I have to know a little bit about everything,
1182 00:45:11.580 --> 00:45:14.943 But luckily I work with a lot of experts in
1183 00:45:14.943 --> 00:45:17.970 But those are really good questions and
1184 00:45:17.970 --> 00:45:20.880 We did a project where we reached out to
1185 00:45:20.880 --> 00:45:23.160 90 auto salvaging shops
1186 00:45:23.160 --> 00:45:24.840 to make them climate adaptable,
1187 00:45:24.840 --> 00:45:26.700 because they fly below the radar
1188 00:45:26.700 --> 00:45:28.530 and because a lot of environmentalists
1189 00:45:28.530 --> 00:45:30.030 wanna take them out of business.
1190 00:45:30.030 --> 00:45:32.700 But these are mom and pop shops that are,
1191 00:45:32.700 --> 00:45:35.040 they’re fixing cars in our neighborhood.
1192 00:45:35.040 --> 00:45:37.505 But in their businesses, they’re using chemicals
1193 00:45:37.505 --> 00:45:42.210 that present the possibility of toxic exposure,
that can become projectiles.

And so we created an app for that.

We created a comic strip to educate them because we assume that if we create, put together a body of literature in Spanish or in another language that they can read. Sometimes people can’t read, right? Regardless of the language.

So we created video content.

It was multidimensional information so that they can access it in a different way.

And then we raised the resources so that we could retrofit their business.

So that they could know where the chemicals are, what would happen upon,

what they needed to do to protect themselves so that there wouldn’t be any spillage.

and it wouldn’t impact the adjacent.

you know, their neighbors.

So those are the kinds of things that we need to be thinking about.

Really looking hyper-local at what people need and providing them with the resources.

You know, we’re coming from a climate justice perspective.

and so we weren’t gonna say throw them out,

close them down, shut them down.

We wanna make sure that people thrive economically,
but that they get the resources that they need to thrive.

And because these are small businesses,

we needed to meet with them like at five in the morning.

late at night.

They work 24-7, right?

So there’s a lot of different things that you can do

with a lot of different sectors,

so that they’re ready for climate change,

and they’re incorporating protections.

When I first met with one of those auto salvaging shops,

they had antifreeze on the ground,

and there was a little girl running around barefoot.

And I said to the guy, companero,

do you know that that’s a carcinogen?

And that she’s walking around barefoot?

And the guy almost started crying.

He didn’t know.

All he knew how to do was fix cars.

And so what was I supposed to do?

Criminalize him, report him to DC?

Right?

That’s not what we do.

We let him know because his family was working

in that business, and they were being exposed.

These are the things that you need
do to protect yourself.
And if there’s extreme heat, this is what’s gonna happen with these chemicals.

And if there’s extreme wind, this is what’s gonna happen.

You don’t have any ventilation in this space. You need to use this kind of protective gear.

If you’re talking about public health, and you care about creating wealth, community power, making sure people thrive so that they don’t have to deal with the stress of poverty generation to generation,

you need to be thinking about how do you support these kinds of businesses without judging them, and coming from your place of privilege and imposing your, and having interventions that will actually work for them.

And those are the things that we do. Thanks Elizabeth.

I think we can only take one final question from online.

One of the audience asking, minority children are some of the most vulnerable affected by the environmental disparities.

Do you have any other advice on whether it is more effective
for us to focus research and other efforts that you mentioned, especially on children, that continue working with their broader at risk communities as whole? So first I’d say that we are not minorities, that anywhere in the world, we’re a global majority. And I don’t like the word minority, because it disempowers us, makes us feel small and insignificant. And we’re heading towards a world of climate apartheid. So I wanna make it clear that we are the descendants of extraction, of colonialism, and enslavement, and we are the majority in the world. There are a lot of initiatives. You know, EPA has a lot of federal advisory councils that focus on children. There’s a lot of work that is being done across, because we’re intergenerational. We look at what does that mean for our children in terms of toxic exposure when they’re in utero, you’re living under a highway. And that means that our children are going to be
more susceptible to asthma of respiratory disease,
learning disabilities, all kinds of things that are a result
of sort of the legacy of toxic exposure.
So there’s a lot of work being done across the country,
and in different parts of the world
that focuses specifically on children.
And I think I would encourage you to think about that.
I would also encourage you to, while you’re doing that,
to also create popular education tools
so that parents have access to the kind of information
that they need about where they live, their space,
what they’re eating, what they’re drinking,
and how to protect the bodies.
Women, how to protect their bodies.
But there’s an enormous amount of information,
and we know how climate change
is going to affect children and women.
So, yeah.
I hope I answered all of your questions.
It’s a lot.
You know, I’ve been doing this work for a minute,
with a lot of different people
who are just really holding it down.
I would encourage you to look at
the Climate Justice Alliance website.
We have created all of the frameworks, all of the tools so that you don’t have to reinvent the wheel, or you don’t have to extract our thinking and use the redefine, adjust, transition, redefine climate justice or environmental justice. We have definitions for all those things. And so what we want is for you to use the body of work that we have created so that it shapes and informs how you move forward in this area.

I wanna congratulate you for your interest in this. And I wanna say thank you for, we need you, we need to be leaderful, and intergenerational. And you need to figure out, you need to follow the Jemez principles for democratic organizing. And be comfortable with being led by the frontline. Honestly, it’s time. It is our communities that are suffering because of the legacy of extraction, because of decisions that have been made, and are being made even today by the Supreme Court that are killing our people. And so yeah, just lean into that and be comfortable with your vulnerabilities. It really is about decolonizing your education.
We’ve all been conditioned to think that we know everything and we don’t. And that’s okay. I mean, knowing everybody and being comfortable being part of a collective, intergenerational, leaderful model that is matriarchal, is the only way that we’re be able to address these resources.

(Elizabeth speaking in foreign language)

Student>Thank you.</v>

Instructor>Thank you everyone for coming.</v>

Thank you also, the online audience. The lecture is recorded, it will be posted online.

(indistinct)

Like she said, we need everyone, and especially.

Thank you, everybody. Thank you also, the online audience.

The lecture is recorded, it will be posted online.

(indistinct)