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Gerry Boyle  
*Colby College*

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## For Marginalized Communities, a Need for Environmental Justice

Mykela Patton '22

By Gerry Boyle

Mykela Patton works for Communities for a Better Environment, a statewide organization in California that has an office in her home city of East Oakland, which, she says, “historically has a lot of discriminatory zoning practices and a lot of industry that has just been rubber-stamped into the community with little or no community input or look at collective harms.”

In what Patton calls “the reckoning year,” that history is changing, and the Colby junior is in the thick of it.

The law that is helping marginalized communities in California, including the one where Patton lives, is Assembly Bill (AB) 617, signed into law in 2017.

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—Mykela Patton '22

It requires that the state take action to reduce toxic emissions and pollutants in disadvantaged communities.

Studying remotely this past semester, Patton is part of the effort, working through an internship with Communities for a Better Environment as it moves toward implementing AB 617's goals city by city, neighborhood by neighborhood. “It can be shutting down some of this industry, rerouting trucks, and looking at those zoning laws and city codes that allow for certain things to go in certain neighborhoods,” Patton said.

She's looking at air quality and zoning laws and also gathering community input that will be part of a new emissions reduction plan, an effort made more complicated by the pandemic. But as Patton talks about having to do some of the work virtually, it's like she hasn't missed a step in her drive for environmental justice.

Her awareness began as a child when her mother, determined that her children enjoy time outdoors, drove them to the nearest park—in an adjoining city. At Skyline High School, she joined the Green Energy Academy and was introduced to environmental science and the environmental

movement. An internship with a local nonprofit, the Rose Foundation for Communities and the Environment, followed.

“That's where I first felt my connection to the environmental movement,” Patton said. “I really felt my place in understanding, as a low-income Black woman, the disparities that we deal with in my community and the fact that this is not the reality and lived experience for a lot of other people.”

At Colby, the Questbridge scholar immediately began amassing training and tools for what she describes as the fight for equality and the shift to a just transition. “Anything like climate justice, anything environmental justice related—I'm taking it,” she said. And, yes, there's a relentlessness to Patton's recitation of the knowledge and opportunities she's availed herself of in just two and a half years.

Environmental science and biology. Human health as it relates to the environment. Global climate policy, which showed her that the same dynamic she grew up with in East Oakland was working on a grand scale in the global South, where climate change disproportionately affects people of color and low-income people. Early on during that course, she went to the instructor, Assistant

Professor of Environmental Studies Stacy-ann Robinson, to introduce herself and explain how the work could fit into Patton's climate justice goals.

Robinson took note. “I think she can make a tremendous contribution to, for example, a grassroots movement in the Bay Area,” she said. “Something nationally isn't out of reach for her.”

Which makes the tools essential.

Another course in environmental justice taught Patton about the beginnings of the movement, including the milestone protests against a toxic-waste landfill in Warren County, N.C., by Black residents in the 1970s. The protests didn't block the waste dump but resulted in a study that showed Black Americans and people of color are four times more likely than whites to live near hazardous waste sites.

This was no surprise to Patton, who recalled a school trip to the neighboring city of Richmond, where a community was marginalized not only by poverty but also by the fact that their homes were located just a hundred feet from an oil refinery. In Oakland, there is a pattern of locating schools primarily attended by students of color on land

that is contaminated by lead or carcinogens.

How could that happen? Patten is working to deconstruct the actions that made this environmental discrimination possible. “I think this is my calling, understanding the bureaucracy, and the history, and the legislation that is behind this because zoning laws and past legislation are heavily tied to the way cities are set up now.”

She learned more about this process in a course called Suburban Politics that looked at how cities are created and evolve, in the process keeping marginalized communities closest to environmental threats. That was coupled with an internship at the environmental law firm Shute, Mihaly & Weinberger in San Francisco, where she worked on a project that added an environmental justice section to Oakland’s master plan. She was also involved in a project in Hunter’s Point in San Francisco, an area with toxic waste contamination—and a community that is predominantly Black.

Patton noted that she has deep respect for residents who have lived through environmental injustice and feels privileged to hear and document their stories. “I don’t like calling myself an

activist because I see people in the community—they know what’s going on. They may not know what particulate matter is and why it triggers asthma, but they know when their kid is having an asthma attack and they have to go to the E.R. every two weeks.”

She looks for ways to tell those stories better, such as a course in spatial analysis, another way to illustrate environmental inequality when speaking to policy makers. At Colby, she has listened to and sometimes met master storytellers in the movement: author and cultural geographer Carolyn Finney, poet Camille Dungy.

Law school or graduate work in policy may be in her future, but in the meantime, Patton is leaving no opportunity unturned. “I understand that education is a privilege and not a privilege that anyone in my family has had to this level,” Patton said.

It’s a privilege that she is intent on turning into real and lasting impact.

“I think folks are finally beginning to understand that we have to move toward a just transition focusing on folks who historically have been left out of the conversation,” she said, “making sure their voices are heard.”



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