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The renewed environmental justice movement is bringing in millions for Texas Southern University

Brittany Britto, Staff writer

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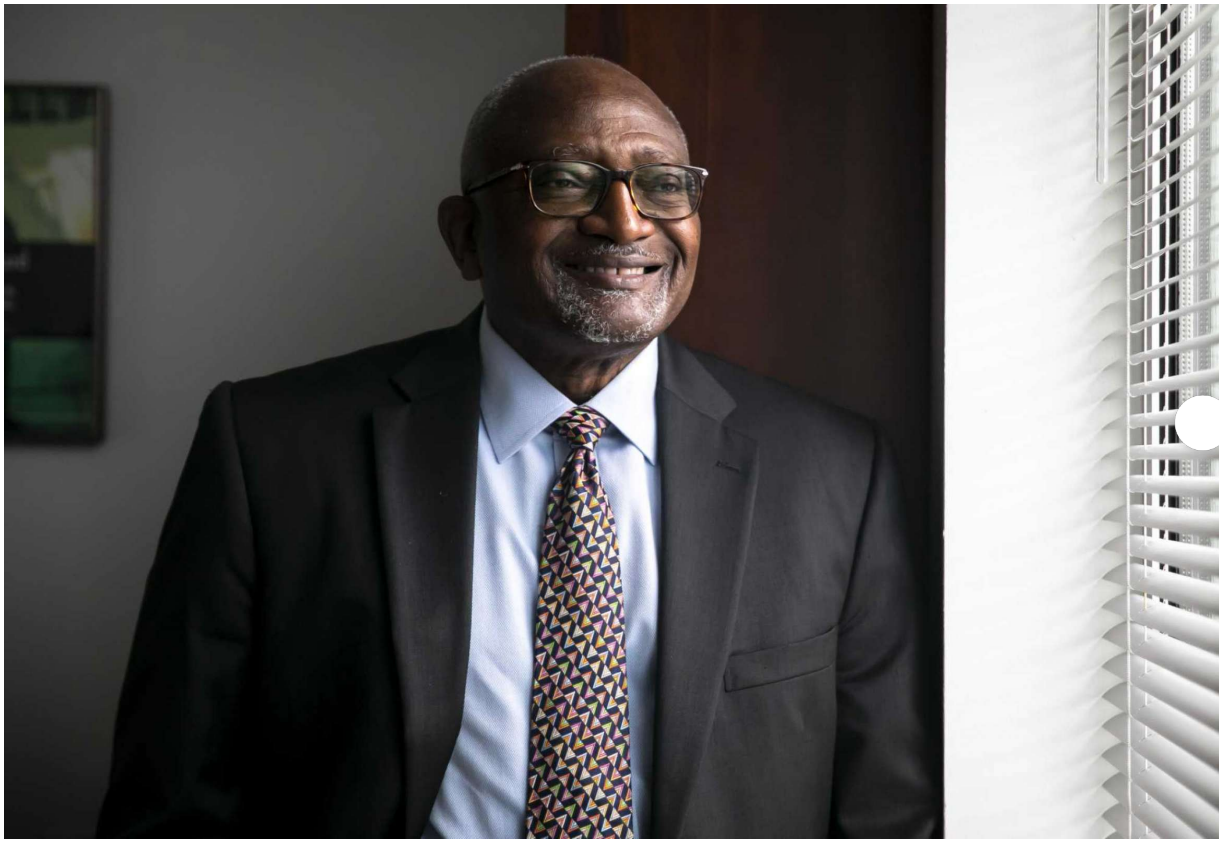

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Dr. Robert D. Bullard, widely considered as the "father of environmental justice," in his office at Texas Southern University in Houston on Friday, Oct. 2021. Dr. Bullard has received grants both last year and this year to establish the Robert D. Bullard Center for Environmental and Climate Justice at T

Annie Mulligan, Houston Chronicle / Contributor

Forty years ago, there was no clear blueprint for environmental justice.

While digging into the injustices that wreaked havoc on Houston's communities of color, Texas Southern University scholar Robert Bullard became the pioneer. Now, widely regarded as "the father of environmental justice," Bullard, 74, has seen the movement evolve into a force to be reckoned with.

"Most Americans do not live in a flood plain. Most Americans don't live where a highway might have torn through and disrupted their lives. Most American kids don't go to a school across from a chemical plant, but there are many communities where that is a reality," Bullard said.

Growing awareness of how marginalized communities have been left behind is a chance for the environmental justice movement to be propelled – a chance to "assist and support those communities that have historically not gotten a fair share of investments, whether it's affordable housing or infrastructure, such as flooding or disaster infrastructure," he said, adding that the time is now.

"We don't have 40 years. We might have two decades to get it right," he said. "This is probably the first time in many decades that I've seen this level of urgency."

The Biden administration appointed Bullard to the Environmental Justice Advisory Council in March. The council offers input on how to address current and historic environmental injustices. Bullard will also contribute to the president's Justice40 initiative to tackle climate change. The goal, according to a White House briefing, is to deliver to disadvantaged communities at least 40

percent of the overall benefits from federal investments in climate and clean energy.

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The new efforts are rooted in Bullard's decades of work in social, racial and climate justice.

"Some of these same organizations and same institutions were running from racial justice back then," Bullard said. "Now they're calling us and saying they'd like to give (millions)."

Texas Southern, the historically Black university in Houston, has been on the receiving end of that interest.

TSU got $1.25 million from the Houston Endowment last year to establish the Robert D. Bullard Center for Environmental and Climate Justice. The center also received $250,000 from J.P. Morgan Chase this year and another $4 million from the Bezos Earth Fund, a $10 billion initiative launched by Amazon founder Jeff Bezos to fight climate change.

The change in tides and growing interest in environmental and racial justice – particularly as converging threats including COVID-19 threaten communities of

color – has been refreshing, Bullard said.

"You have to be fearless to do this work. In some cases, it can be very intimidating," he said citing environmental justice activists across the U.S. who have faced threats and lawsuits from major companies and entities. And in other countries, he said, such work can get you killed.

But, "I'm not tired," he said.

A startling awakening

Three years out of graduate school in 1979, Bullard's environmental justice journey began when his wife, former lawyer Linda McKeever Bullard proposed what would be his first case. She was suing the city and the Texas Department of Health in federal court for considering a permit for a sanitary landfill in Northeast Houston. She needed someone to do a study to assess where the city's landfills and dumps were located.

Bullard, who at the time focused on housing and segregation, jumped on it, analyzing the locations of the sites and incinerators from the 1920s through 1978.

What he found was startling.

Around 82 percent of the city's trash was dumped into Houston's Black neighborhoods despite Black people making up 25 percent of the population. All five of the city-owned landfills were also in predominately Black neighborhoods, as were six out of the eight incinerators and 75 percent of the city's privately-owned landfills.

"You look at those facts, and you think, if this is not discrimination, I don't know what is," Bullard said. "In a city that does not have zoning, you would not expect this to happen randomly."

But the couple lost the case. In 1985, a judge ruled that the study did not show discrimination. For Bullard, the ruling was confirmation that despite providing hard facts and data to prove discriminatory patterns, it wasn't enough to confront racist policies and practices built into the system.

"I decided that this is something exploring and worth documenting, worth fighting for," Bullard said.

In the ensuing years, he wrote 18 books – including "Invisible Houston" and "Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class and Environmental Quailty" – that connect environmental issues to health, housing, energy and water security. And, he said, Houston still has major environmental issues in communities of color.

Half of the refineries in Houston are located in communities of color, as are much of Harris County's landfills. Flooding is a persistent threat, and complaints about delayed trash pickups in such neighborhoods have been a struggle for decades.

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But there's more awareness of Houston's struggles with environmental equity, which in many ways, are simply a microcosm of what's happening throughout the country, Bullard said.

Disproportionate air pollution

People of color in the United States are exposed to disproportionately high levels of ambient fine particulate air pollution– known as PM 2.5 – which is "the largest environmental cause of human mortality," according to a study published in the Science Advances journal in April.

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That same air pollutant is disproportionately inhaled by Black and brown Americans who bear a "pollution burden," researchers wrote in a 2019 study published in the journal of the National Academy of Sciences.

Poor air quality can trigger asthma and other respiratory conditions. Communities of color and those identified as low-income are also less likely to experience the many health benefits of parks and public green spaces because there are fewer in their respective neighborhoods.

Prominent areas with more affluence – most often being majority-white communities – have received more funding and attention which translates into solid infrastructure, additional protection against flooding, and investments in green space.

"For a long time, the investments that have been made have followed a pattern that has not served low-income communities and communities of color," Bullard said.

Passing the baton

As a part of Justice40, Bullard will help the White House tackle infrastructure, including roads, bridges, dams, parks and water systems, while also tackling policies and programs that tend to favor more affluent communities at the expense of low-wealth communities.

The goal, Bullard said, is to direct money to communities in the greatest need.

Building on his decades of research, he'll also lead TSU's environmental justice center in efforts to study and address disaster response, the burden and effects of pollution, and other environmental issues that affect health, housing, transportation, water and energy in communities of color and low-income areas in Southern states.

The center, which will tap into a consortium of historically black colleges and universities in Gulf states, will offer communities technical experience on environmental justice issues, and provide advice on producing competitive funding proposals.

Bullard said he wants to see health and climate resilience built into community infrastructure.

"The course for justice is not a sprint. It's more like a marathon or a relay race," he said. "You pass the baton to the next generation, and you hope there's a smooth pass off. At the same time, you don't leave that next generation to run the race by itself."

Sometimes the change is slow, Bullard said, but "we're starting to make a headway in turning this ship mid-ocean."

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Written By
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Reach Brittany on

Brittany Britto is the features enterprise reporter at the Houston Chronicle, reporting in-depth stories focused on marginalized communities, underrepresented neighborhoods, histories and sub-cultures in and around the Houston area. She'll work to amplify fascinating and untold stories in one of the most diverse cities in the country and dig into what it means to be a Houstonian.

Previously, she covered higher education at the Chronicle and did a five-part series on HBCUs in Texas.

She worked as a general assignment features blogger and reporter for The Baltimore Sun for three years writing about arts, entertainment, local notables, and culture.

She has been recognized for her cultural coverage by the Society for Features Journalism. In 2018, she was named a Penny Bender Fuchs Diversity Fellow for the national features organization and won four awards - a tie for the most won in one year in recent SFJ history -- for her diverse portfolio and noteworthy features on Baltimore's distinct culture.

Brittany is a two-time graduate of the University of Maryland, College Park, with a master's in multiplatform journalism and a bachelor's in English.

Send your tips and stories to brittany.britto@chron.com, and follow her on Twitter to keep up with the latest.

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