



Sustainability for Black Communities

Illai Kenney

Georgia/Washington D.C.

From a very young age Illai Kenney understood the connection between sustainability and her identity as a Black woman. Her mother, Felicia Davis, was working in the sustainability field: she would often bring home magazines from work with articles about global warming and climate change. Illai was intrigued, and she was always curious to learn more—and find ways she could get involved to help remedy the situation. But at school, when she read her science textbooks, she didn't find much about these issues.

Illai was troubled. She knew that Black communities like hers are the most negatively impacted by global warming and climate change. And as a young person, she was outraged that the planet, and her right to a healthy, sustainable future, was being ruined by decisions made by an older generation disconnected from her reality. "We are the ones who are going to be the most impacted by the decisions being made today," she said. "But what recourse do we children have? We can't vote. We can't run for office." Thinking back on it now, years later, she says, "It was a daunting realization to come to."

So, at age 12, Illai and her friends created the nonprofit organization, Georgia Kids Against Pollution (KAP), to do something about it. She wanted to be a bridge between her friends and those who were engaged with more visible social issues, like gun violence and voting rights, than with environmental activism.

Illai had grown up around community organizing, and had seen how protesting can help people get their voices heard. "I had a knack for finding common ground. And I did a lot of organizing," she says. Still, she needed a little guidance. "So we went to the adults in our lives, who helped us flesh out our ideas, and prepare us for some of the challenges we would meet with KAP. The environment was affecting us, giving young kids in our neighborhood asthma. These things were affecting us, but we really didn't understand," she says. "Things like carbon dioxide, sulfur dioxide, and mercury, were being put out into the air by power plants and major pollutants. They cause smog; they cause global warming; they cause acid rain, which in turn affects us. These power plants dump pollutants into low-income areas." And she added, "Somebody needs to let the people who live there know that yes, you do have a choice; you aren't forced to live with this stuff. And you can make a difference if you want to."

In 2003, when she was just 13 years old, Illai led the first KAP protest, held outside of the Southern Company, a gas and utility corporation based in Georgia. "Our demonstration actually made it into the shareholders report," she says proudly. "This gigantic corporation actually heard our concerns about alternative energy. At the time, I didn't realize it was such an effective action." She smiles, and adds, "I started small. And I still haven't let up in the fight."

That same year, Illai received the prestigious Brower Youth Award, which is given each year to six youth environmental leaders across the country. "Despite the struggles of organizing, that really gave me validation," she says. The following year, Illai joined her mother at the U.N. Conference on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa. She was eager to learn about how people around the world were being affected by environmental issues, and what they were doing to find solutions. "At the conference, I saw firsthand how communities of color face the same issues wherever we are on the planet; economic issues, social justice issues, environmental issues." She adds, "Environmental issues are often the last ones to be talked about."

The visibility from the Brower Youth Award led to a nonprofit organization, Corporate Accountability International, reaching out to Illai when she was 16. They wanted to partner with her on some advocacy work at a Coca Cola international shareholder's meeting. Illai spoke on behalf of farmers in India who were having their local groundwater supplies devastated by the company. She asked a roomful of shareholders what they planned to do when young people refused to buy Coca-Cola due to their abusive water practices in India. Shortly thereafter organizers succeeded in getting Coca Cola to shut down two of the most predatory plants in India, which were impoverishing local communities. "Getting involved with shareholder advocacy opened up a new world of ways to engage civically," she says. "Today it's a common tactic, but back then, there wasn't much conversation around this sort of engagement."

When it was time for college, Illai chose Howard University, her mother's alma mater, in Washington D.C. as the place she wanted to further her studies in communications. While at Howard, she interned with the university's Office of Sustainability. That's when she discovered the gaping holes in support for sustainable development among Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), especially around tech, solar energy, and green education issues. "The expertise that a lot of universities take for granted—HBCUs just don't have access to that," she says. So she set about changing that too, step by step, as she always had.

As a project manager in the Office of Sustainability Illai helped support projects like the installation of solar panels on buildings at Howard; green energy retrofits around the campus; the formation of a full-scale recycling program; and an organic garden with a composting program. Each of these projects was a huge step toward creating a more sustainable university. However, each project was also a standalone project. This awareness challenged Illai to think about bigger questions concerning the nature of longer-term sustainable growth.

In partnership with her mother, Illai cofounded the HBCU Green Fund, to create a capital infrastructure for long-term sustainable growth projects to generate money for HBCUs. Their strategy is to support projects that reduce energy and water usage on HBCU campuses - which creates financial savings, which are then reinvested into more sustainable projects and infrastructure. Illai hopes that it will also inspire a whole new generation of African American students to appreciate the value of green living.

In all of her successes, Illai is always quick to recognize the tremendous legacy she inherited from her family, who were among the most forward-thinking environmentalists, at a time when such thinking was in its infancy. "My great-grandmother was the greatest conservationist and communicator," she says. "She mastered so many of the strategies that are just now becoming common—recycling, urban agriculture, living simply, investing wisely—and also, the power of proactive community engagement."

Illai's mother, Felicia Davis, continues to be a leading voice for advancing sustainability in the HBCU community and beyond. At the United Negro College Fund, she has created impactful projects like the Building Green Initiative, which has helped Black, Hispanic-serving, and tribal colleges move toward a more sustainable future. In the early 2000s, Felicia carried on her family's legacy when she started a network of eco-cyber centers in rural Ghana, South Africa, and Senegal. She has also used technology to create powerful cultural exchanges and environmental stewardship programs, through projects like beach and village cleanups.

This dynamic mother and daughter duo are frequent spokespersons who represent communities of color at predominantly white conferences like Project Drawdown. They also ensure that they are not the only Black voices in white spaces by securing funding for other Black leaders to join them. "While there's a legacy that runs down from my great-grandmother, to my mother, to me, that sense of stewardship is not only for my family, or my community alone. It should extend out globally in our actions, far beyond ourselves and our own communities."

For youth who want to pursue a path in sustainability, Illai has some practical advice. "What I tend to tell young people is that every day, we all make choices. And the worlds we create are a reflection of the choices we make." Responsible choices create responsible individuals - and ultimately, this creates responsible communities.

Illai wants young people to understand how their actions can reach far beyond wherever they started. In her eyes, it's important to be informed about what you want to pursue as a youth, because knowledge leads to better choices, and better choices lead to empowerment. By educating yourself as much as possible, you are also creating a person that is resilient. This is important, especially for Black youth and communities of color, in a time when we are constantly

surrounded by overwhelming amounts of conflicting information, and we face the constant existential threats from police brutality and structural racism. In these trying times, we need more youth and adult leaders to make space for those who are most impacted by these issues.

Illai, ever the practical leader, says that she could give us a long story, or a big lesson, to try to get the legacy of sustainability that her family has embodied across to others. But to put it quite simply, for those of us who want to make the world a better place, she says, “When you know better you are obligated to do better.”

As you enter positions of trust and power, dream a little before you think.

Toni Morrison

Call to Action: Support Illai’s work to create an equitable, environmental infrastructure, with green endowments for Historically Black Colleges and Universities. <https://hbcugreenfund.org/> .

Stone Soup Leadership Institute
www.stonesoupleadership.org
www.soup4youngworld.com