



Generation Green
Destiny Hodges
Washington, DC

Not too far down the street from where Destiny Hodges's grandmother lives in Demopolis, Alabama, there is a paper mill. As a child, Destiny would see the smoke rising from the factory towers in long white columns. It gave the air around her a funny smell. She would cover her nose, hold her breath, and wonder where that stench was coming from.

"I looked into it, and I found out that there's all kinds of carbon monoxide and stuff in there that everyone in the community is breathing," she says. "I think about the health of the people who live around there. It's just terrible." This left a lasting impression on her, that would one day lead her to a life-changing career decision.

Destiny Hodges has been a writer for as long as she can remember. She started by writing poetry, but when she went to middle school, she found a new passion: journalism. Every Friday in her last class period, her peers led a live broadcast. Destiny would watch the small monitor molded to the wall of the school's studio, and watch the video stream. "And I was like—I want to do that!" Destiny said. "So I became the producer, and then an anchor, and reporter on the show. I loved it all."

It was an exciting beginning for Destiny's career in journalism. Then, when she was ready for high school, her family moved to Tuscaloosa, Alabama. Destiny joined the school's newspaper, the *Northridge Reporter*, and was quickly promoted to news editor. She wrote about issues of identity and race, as well as her high school's sports teams and musicals. Then one day in May of 2016 she was forced to leave her high school—and her beloved newspaper. She pleaded with the administration to let her stay; she was happy there, and she was an integral member of the news team. "They just pushed the black kids, for the most part, back to the other side of the river," Destiny says. "What's happening in Tuscaloosa is, they are resegregating schools. And they're redlining."

Destiny was assigned to Brown High School, a predominantly black school. Although she was promised that her new school would start a journalism program, Destiny soon found out what that really meant. "The teacher who was supposed to teach it was informed that I would handle the newspaper. She never had any journalism experience, never taught journalism," Destiny said. "That's the day I found out I was going to really have to start from scratch."

In order to get the newspaper going, Destiny invited students from her old school's newspaper to give talks to students at her new school who wanted to be involved. And she captured what she had learned in writing for the *Northridge Reporter* in Power Point presentations and worksheets so she could share it with students at her new school. It was hard work, but it paid off: there were some good writers, and some students had a good feeling for design. But most of all, the students appreciated having the chance to see their own stories featured in their own newspaper.

"I've always said that everybody has a story to tell," Destiny says. "I'm a giver. I'm an empath. This wasn't about me; it was about providing people with the opportunity to explore a new career path."

Many students in her high school came from difficult backgrounds, and there was no real outlet for them, no one to tell their stories to. "The education system in general is not meant for black students," Destiny says. "It's not designed for us, or by us."

Destiny had also realized there was a lack of reporting on environmental stories, like the stench emanating from the paper mill by her grandmother's house. She had always been fascinated by environmental stories, and she watched National Geographic's *Animal Planet* show almost every day. She knew a little bit about climate change, but now she started to wonder who were the people that were being the most affected. And where were their voices? "They don't even talk about people like me," she says. "Usually, we're impacted first and most by everything."

It was then that she discovered her passion for covering issues of environmental justice. She wanted to tell the stories of those communities that were impacted first, and worst, by climate change. "I made it my mission to do whatever I could to use media as a form of narrative organizing," she says. "To share the stories of people from marginalized communities who were being impacted by environmental inequity."

Environmental issues are often reported on as a matter of protecting the natural environment. For Destiny, that is short sighted, and incomplete. "We need to broaden our awareness and look at how our health is being impacted by environmental factors like clean air and water," she says. "When we talk about natural disasters, like Hurricane Katrina, we need to think about who lives in those regions, and who is being impacted the worst; it is primarily people of color."

The even greater injustice is that although people of color are disproportionately affected by climate change, they have historically been excluded from the environmental movement, Destiny says. So when she entered Howard University, a historically black institution in Washington D.C., to study journalism and environmental studies, she was on a mission.

Right then, all around the world, climate strikes were happening. People everywhere were expressing their concerns. Destiny closely followed the fires in the Amazon on social media, and she felt so bad for the Indigenous people of color who were on the front lines of this disaster, breathing toxic fumes, while also losing their homes and their loved ones.

"I could see that at Howard, people weren't necessarily connecting the dots to the larger picture," she says. "And I was like, you know what? We need a climate strike here."

She started by designing a flyer. Then she set up a social media site, shared it in a couple of groups, and urged people to sign up. "People responded, and they were actually really curious about it," she says.

On the Howard campus, there were a lot of misgivings about the school's sustainability policies. There was an Office for Sustainability for a while, but no one ever heard anything coming out of there. "Of course, protesting at the national level or at your local government is important," Destiny says. "But we wanted to do it on campus because that's where we knew we could make an impact firsthand."

The protest didn't go quite as planned: one week before students took to the streets, the administration invited Destiny and her fellow students to a meeting. They had developed an impressive 50-page document detailing their demands. The University's administration sat down with them and listened to what they had to say. It became clear that it wasn't a lack of will; it was actually a lack of resources, and not enough communication that had caused the students to have a negative perception of their university's commitment to sustainability.

But realizing solutions for more sustainability on campus isn't always easy.

"There's a lot of things that are considered the norm in sustainability for other campuses," Destiny says. "However, with the financial burdens placed on historically black colleges and universities, it's not easy to do."

With two other students that Destiny met at the protests on campus, she founded the Howard University Student Sustainability Committee. They were able to facilitate conversations about sustainability on campus, and came up with a number of proposals. "We came up with ideas for improved recycling in residence halls, and ways of enriching the entire university curriculum with environmentalism and sustainability," she said. They got in touch with different departments in the university to discuss and plan environmentally friendly projects. They also created a database of scholarships and internships focused on environmental and sustainability issues, gave presentations about climate justice, and organized community cleanups. "We got to where we are by speaking up for what we believe in and standing together."

As she continued to engage with her community on the issues of sustainability and climate change, Destiny realized that there weren't many young black environmental activists, and those who were out there hardly knew each other. That is why she decided to start her own nongovernmental organization, Generation Green.

“The purpose is to build a network to uplift us so that people can share resources with each other, and help each other out.” Generation Green is planning urban gardening projects, designing sustainable fashion, and planning an international exchange program to give students the opportunity to connect with activists in other parts of the world.

“If our students are mostly low-income students, and our communities are impacted first, and the worst, by environmental inequity, then why aren't we encouraging them to go into this field and create innovative solutions to help our communities?” she says. “Engaging and implementing effective solutions can't happen without the knowledge, wisdom, understanding, and expertise of those who have experienced it, or who are going through it.”

From time to time Destiny remembers how she used to ask her mom what caused that horrible smell when they would drive by the paper mill close to her grandmother's house. “I don't know,” her mom would say. “Whatever byproduct of the paper that they're making.”

Soon, with journalists like Destiny reporting to their communities on the frontlines of climate change, everyone will know the answers to these questions. Then, Destiny's Generation Green will *do* something about it!

It really boils down to this: that all life is interrelated. We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny.

Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Call to Action: Approach climate change issues as multifaceted social, economic, and generational and search for holistic solutions. Learn more about Destiny's ventures: www.gen-green.org

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