## Climate Activists urge Small and Big Actions to Address Environmental Change

## Hannah Joy Shareef Data News Weekly Contributor

Climate change and environmental degradation have become an existential problem for communities, advocates said, yet the topic of climate change is overlooked because people still remain uninformed. Citizens automatically think that when the weather is too cold or too hot, it is a normal environmental occurrence. Residents, activists, and young people participated in climate change awareness activities from hosting a community forum on Sept. 16, 2019, to joining in on the global climate strike on Sept. 20th. South African Activist Desmond D'Sa spoke in solidarity with New Orleans activists on changing the narrative about debates on the environment as part of a Justice & Beyond Climate Change Forum at Café Istanbul.

"I want change, even if the people around me don't want it for themselves," said D'sa 2014 Goldman Environmental Prize Winner, who worked with residents of South Durban to shut down a toxic waste dump in his home country.

"The late 80s and early 90s, I came from an oppressive system. I love to fight for human rights and justice, but the 90s opened my eyes and shaped my thinking that the worse challenges and the worse systems we are facing is a system that is big on making a few people rich," said D'Sa, who lived through South Africa's apartheid.

He shared how the very systems that make some people rich, also make many sick, and their communities toxic. Over-time, industries that harm the environment also harm the well-being of poorer or working-class communities who either suffer the health or climatic impacts of air and environmental pollution.

"When you see people coughing out of nowhere when walking outside that is the climate changing and the senses of the human body reacting to it," D'Sa shared of his experience working in communities in South Africa. "Pollution kills, I know this because my brother



Young residents join in on the national climate strike on Sept. 20 at St. Charles and Napoleon (photos courtesy Justice and Beyond).

had cancer and my daughters and grand-daughters have chronic asthma and I know many people that were healthy in my community who died because of the air being polluted and toxic," D'Sa said.

The effects of climate change and pollution is something that activists in the city shared they were also working to educate citizens on. Hotter temperatures mean more extreme events, particularly since the year 2000, said Attorney Faye Matthews who facilitated the panel of young activists at the forum. Scientists have recorded 2016 as being one of the hottest years in recent history. The impacts of this are connected to summer flooding's in the city, Matthews noted.

"Hurricane Katrina has battered Louisiana. Every time the water floods on a regular day in New Orleans, it feels as though we relive the moment in 2005 when people lost their lives, homes, and cultural identity," Matthews said.

She argued that education on the small steps ordinary citizens can take to combat such problems is the start of protecting vulnerable communities. "Every day the people of New Orleans try to gain their sanity back but fail to do so because of lack of knowledge, communication skills, and accountability. People don't realize we are the problem, but we can fix the problem if we work together," Matthews said.

At the meeting held at Cafe Istanbul, young activists shared their concerns regarding climate change along with their personal contributions to save the climate and how they are making other people in the community aware of the toxicity of their communities. They repeated the third-grade lesson to "reuse, reduce and recycle" as being basic steps all residents of all ages can use to minimize pollution. Residents also shared why it was important for all citizens to do their part for future generations.

"I'm 65 years old and I'm experiencing health issues in my lungs and I ain't never been a smoker. I know it's the air," said Ben Simpson, a resident, and former schoolteacher, who attended the forum. "The humidity in New Orleans doesn't make no sense and how it floods from the rain on certain days of the week. As old as I am, I want to help. There is still work to be done. I miss sitting outside and watching my grandchildren catch the bus to school and I miss watching second lines throughout the year. I miss experiencing the culture of New Orleans," Simpson said, adding that climate change affects the quality of life.

The activists noted that climate change vigilance starts with each neighbor educating their streets, blocks, and entire communities.

"To give people their life back," D'Sa said, "start by telling your neighbors, friends, sisters, or brothers.... because when you reach someone then you can teach them the road to making our environment better."

