



Jason P. | “Environmental Injustice, Medical Debt, and How to Defend Human Dignity”

Hello everyone, my name is Jason Portillo, I am a high school senior attending Don Bosco Cristo Rey living in the Hyattsville, Maryland community within Prince George’s County. I come here today to speak to the effects of Environmental Injustice, Medical Debt, and How to Defend Human Dignity.

Take a drive through any major metropolitan area in America, and you will move across several invisible borders that dictate the health and longevity of human life. On one side of the country, children play in parks surrounded by rich and lush greenery, drink clean water, and breathe crisp, clean air --factors which support their physical development and put them in positions to live long and healthy futures. Yet, not even ten minutes down the road, perhaps even just across a highway; reality shifts dramatically for the worse.

Even for someone like me, a high schooler living in Hyattsville, Maryland, I’ve seen the effects of these disparities every day. I notice how much the environment changes depending on where you go in the county. North in Hyattsville, you can take a walk through town or sit in nice green parks without thinking much about what you’re breathing in. Yet, moving more south down Route 381 to areas like Brandywine or Aquasco, the landscape changes significantly. Out there, residents live in direct proximity to major power facilities like Chalk Point. It’s a clear reminder that even within the county, the air quality people face isn’t equal.

Now take Brandywine, a historically Black community right here in Prince George’s County. Imagine living in a town where state regulators have systematically permitted for four major fossil fuel power plants, an extensive gravel mining operation, and heavy industrial waste infrastructure, all within just miles of your home. Now while some people may be reading about these issues in news headlines or even just hearing about them for the first time, Brandywine residents are actively living with these issues in their lungs and in their daily lives.



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While the constant diesel exhaust that spews from vehicles driving along Route 301 is already a health hazard, the Maryland Department of the Environment report on regional coal ash sites show that unlined coal ash dumps that contain heavy metals like arsenic, lead, and mercury are constant dangers for these residents. These poisonous byproducts risk seeping directly into the ground, poisoning the groundwater and rivers that feed into the broader Chesapeake Bay watershed.

This blatant accumulation of environmental hazards led Earthjustice, a nonprofit public-interest law organization, to file a federal civil rights complaint under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The complaint documented how state agencies often approve industrial air and waste permits in Black and low-income neighborhoods, like those across Prince George’s County, while simultaneously protecting the wealthier, predominantly white communities from those very same toxic industrial burdens.

Local leaders have refused to stay silent while their community is converted into a dumping site for large industries. Kamita Gray, president of the Brandywine/TB Southern Region Neighborhood Coalition, captured the severity of the crisis and the mistreatment of their local community: “For us, it’s environmental racism. It’s environmental slavery. It’s environmental terrorism... This isn’t just an environmental issue. This is a health issue. This all goes to quality of life. We’ve become this sacrifice zone.”

For generations, families have moved across countries and states in pursuit of the American Dream—the very promise that hard work and homeownership will secure a prosperous future for themselves and their children. But for families in Curtis Bay, Eagle Harbor, Lothian, and Brandywine, that promise has been shattered.



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While homeownership is historically how generational wealth is built, zoning boards and lawmakers often cluster toxic industries in marginalized neighborhoods, which depresses property value. This creates an economic trap, designed to keep residents from ever escaping. The resulting depreciation of home equity leaves residents unable to afford to sell their homes and move away, forcing them to remain trapped in place and endure the continuous toll of the polluted air surrounding them.

Even worse, the promise of the American Dream is broken within their very bodies. Fine particulate matter, chemical emissions, and toxic industrial dust floods the local atmosphere, leading to elevated rates of severe asthma, cardiovascular issues, and chronic respiratory illnesses. According to the Maryland Department of Health’s Asthma Control Program, Black residents in Maryland suffer from asthma-related emergency room visits nearly 4 times more often than white residents. Across Prince George’s County, pediatric asthma hospitalization rates consistently exceed state averages, with communities like Brandywine bearing the heaviest burden of all.

Consider what these issues look like on a human scale.

Imagine a young child waking up at 2 in the morning, gasping for air from a sudden asthma attack brought on by high atmospheric levels of particulate pollution. Since systemic underinvestment has left communities like Brandywine without any local 24-hour emergency rooms or pediatric clinics, it requires families to race 20-30 minutes down the highway to regional hospitals like Medstar Health in neighboring towns frantically for care.

In this panicked drive in the middle of the night, the fear for their child’s life is paired with the financial dread that is soon to follow. A single trip to the emergency room easily results in thousands of dollars worth of bills for triage, oxygen administration, and nebulizer treatments.



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Instead of saving for a child’s college fund or being able to build an emergency fund, the foundations of generational wealth, these working-class families are forced to divert their income toward paying off medical debt simply because of where they happen to live. Financially, they are penalized for medical emergencies caused by the very air surrounding their homes. In no world can a family even dream of upward mobility when every breath of polluted air might generate a new medical bill.

This is the self-perpetuating crisis caused by environmental injustice: a destructive feedback loop that refuses to stop. Location leads to toxic exposure; toxic exposure leads to chronic sickness; and chronic sickness leads to overwhelming debt, one that doesn’t allow them to leave. It is a system that traps families physically and economically, punishing them for merely trying to keep their children alive.

The American Dream was never meant to be a luxury amenity reserved for those fortunate enough to live in an affluent, unpolluted zip code. It was initially conceived as a universal promise rooted in the ideas of equal opportunity and the fundamental dignity of the human person. True human dignity does not and cannot exist in a society where a person’s geographic location—which is completely outside of their control in most cases--determines their health, length of life, and the financial debt that will crush their dreams.

Catholic Social Teaching calls us to honor two essential pillars among its principles: the Life and Dignity of the Human Person and Care for God’s Creation. These principles remind us that clean air, clean potable water, and unpolluted land are basic prerequisites for human life rather than privileges. When we allow low-income communities and communities of color to become dumping grounds for waste and harmful chemicals, we fail morally on both ends. We dishonor the dignity of human life, and we abandon our duty of care over the environment.



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Leaders like Sargent Shriver championed the philosophy of practical idealism, or the idea that moral compassion without structured action is completely devoid of actual use. That is to say, you can be as optimistic as you want, but your actions need to be real and structured to actually help society.

To honor these ideals today, we can defend the dignity of the human person far beyond just knowing that others face issues and feeling sympathetic for them. We must break the cycle where government neglect and failures to create regulation properly create systemic sickness. A testimony delivered to the Maryland General Assembly emphasizes that practical idealism calls us to dismantle the hazards that poison our communities and enforce federal civil rights protections against discriminatory land-use decisions. This way, we can strip away the predatory system that is structured to penalize families simply trying to survive.

Let us all advocate for a society where no child’s health or future is decided by a highway line, where zip codes don’t have to determine lifespan, and where every human is afforded the dignity they deserve.