Reflective Essay:
Environmental Justice in South Baltimore: the intersectionality of poverty, race, and environment

After taking an environmental health class at the University of Maryland, I was inspired to document the economic, social, and health inequities at play in South Baltimore that result from the significant environmental pollution found in South Baltimore. I decided that the most appropriate way of portraying my research was in the form of a documentary, where I could give a platform to the residents of South Baltimore who are being directly affected by the pollution in their communities. I spent about a month conducting research (much of which was in part through my environmental health class, ENST233) and then another month filming, followed by two months of post-production.

My primary means of research was through in person interviews with both residents of Curtis Bay, Brooklyn, and other South Baltimore neighborhoods. In total I interviewed 10 residents, hoping to gain a better understanding of how their lives had been personally impacted by the pollution, and what they thought should be done to help the community. I asked them all a series of qualitative questions, ranging from if they or anyone in their household had been impacted by asthma or cancer, what they think of the impact the pollution is having on the community, and who the culprits are, among other questions. I was both surprised to discover that every single resident I interviewed suffered from either cancer, breathing issues, or both. In addition to this, I interviewed three key community organizations that were playing roles in helping the community. The first organization, City of Refuge, was a local church that also ran a food bank for the community. I spoke with founder Pastor Billy Humphries to gain a better understanding of how the community was being impacted economically and the historical context that led to the current situation. Next, I spoke with The Well, an organization founded to empower local women and domestic abuse survivors by running beekeeping workshops and selling cosmetic products from the honey produced. I spoke with administrative manager Alison Guy to learn more about how women were impacted by the pollution in the community. I learned how organizations such as The Well can play significant roles in giving women education and vocational training so that they can become financially independent. Finally, I spoke with director of the Baltimore Compost Collective and Filbert St. Gardens, Marvin Hayes, who showed me how he was using environmental education and community gardening to create hope in a community otherwise filled with blight.

I relied mostly on these interviews for my primary research. Following the interview stage, I conducted an analysis of formal scientific research conducted in the area to back up the claims that had been made by the residents. I used the library's various databases to access these papers and analyzed over 12 academic papers throughout my project. I also utilized governmental data made available by the EPA, such as the EPA Environmental Justice Screening Tool, to map out point sources of pollution in the area. In addition to this I used several government data tools, such as Census data but also annual reports from the Maryland Department of health to learn more about demographic information and data such as asthma hospitalization rates, and how they differ among races.

Finally, I was fortunate enough to conduct an interview with Environmental Justice expert and University of Maryland researcher Dr. Sacoby Wilson, who had done research on south Baltimore in the past. Dr. Wilson was very helpful in providing new perspectives on my research as well as pointing me to other papers that I gained access to through the UMD library databases.

My final project resulted in a 12m long documentary that sought to define environmental justice using South Baltimore as a case study. After speaking with both expert researchers in the field as well as residents and community organizations, I discovered that the two private-run trash incinerators in the community as well as the landfill were the main contributors to the health inequities in the area. I could not have produced this documentary without the extensive research capabilities afforded to me by the University of Maryland Library system and am very fortunate to have had these resources with me as I researched a project I was very passionate about.