



Bunyan I. Bryant (1935-Present)

Professor Emeritus

**University of Michigan, School of Natural Resources
and Environment**

"A strong support system makes the difference in how one runs the race. It determines if one will be a sprinter or a long-distance runner." Bunyan Bryant, 2005.

Overview

Dr. Bunyan Bryant was instrumental in establishing the School's Environmental Justice Program that focuses on the differential impact of environmental contaminants on people of color and low-income communities. Dr. Bunyan founded and directed the Environmental Justice Initiative for research and retrieval/dissemination conferences and policy briefings. He also played a critical role in the development and implementation of the Environmental Justice Certificate Program, and researched and created conferences that include both a domestic and international foci, particularly on climate justice. Some of his selected publications are below:

- Bryant, B. (Ed.). 2010. Thunder at Michigan and in the Heartland. Book to be published.
- Bryant, B. and Hockman, E. 2005. A Brief Comparison of the Civil Rights Movement and the Environmental Justice Movement. In Pellow, D. and Brulle, R. (Eds.) Power, Justice, and the Environment. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Bryant, B. and Callewaert, J. 2003. Why Is Understanding Urban Ecosystems Important to Environmental Justice? In Berkowitz, A.R., Nilon, C.H., and Hollweg, K.S. (Eds.) Understanding Urban Ecosystems. New York: Springer.
- Bryant, B. 2003. History and Issues of the Environmental Justice Movement. In Visgilio, G. and Whitelaw, D. (Eds.) Our Backyard: A Quest for Environmental Justice. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Early Life and Education

Bunyan Bryant was born on March 6, 1935 to Bunyan and Christalee Bryant in Little Rock, Arkansas. At the age of eighteen, Bryant moved with his family to Flint, Michigan. In his childhood and teenage years, the role models Bryant encountered led him to limit his aspirations.

After graduating from Flint Northern High School, Bryant obtained a position at General Motors Plant Six. The work was tough with early mornings, long hours and an accident-prone environment. However, as Bryant began meeting more people from the Detroit area, his interests and goals broadened. Bryant's mother always valued education highly and this value, along with the influence of his friends, led him to enroll at Eastern Michigan University. He earned his bachelor's degree in 1958. He went on to complete a Master's of Social Work at the University of Michigan in 1965. He also got a doctorate in education from the University of Michigan in 1970.

Career

Bryant was also an assistant project director at the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research (ISR) from 1968-1979. Much of his work at ISR focused on the Civil Rights Movement and providing intervention, mediation, and negotiation in racial conflicts within schools and educational arenas. He was also active in the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE) as a process consultant. However, a series of events unfolded that led Bryant to the School of Natural Resources (later renamed School of Natural Resources and Environment – SNRE).

The Institute for Social Research was undergoing a priority shift in terms of the funding provided to projects. At the same time, SNRE was undergoing an organizational and curricular change. While Bryant was working at ISR, he received a call from an SNRE professor, William Stapp, encouraging him to consider a position at the school. Stapp was familiar with Bryant's work in the civil rights, negotiations, education, and group process. He thought that these would complement the ecology curriculum quite well. Thus, Bryant found himself as an assistant professor of Natural Resources at SNRE.

The year was 1972 and social issues were just emerging within the traditional ecology and forestry curricula. By lobbying others and developing a strong support network, Bryant and his colleagues were able to succeed in putting in place an Environmental Advocacy curricular track at the school. Bryant emphasizes the important role that Jim Crowfoot, Bill Stapp, and students played in this success. Together they built a strong learning community that included student-led workshops, retreats and dinners. Bryant was able to progress throughout his career – which includes 34 years at the University of Michigan – by being dedicated to his work and earning the respect of others.

In addition to teaching in SNRE, Bryant has also been involved in hosting workshops regarding racism and race relations for the University of Michigan's Medical School and the School of Social Work. He is also active with a host of community groups working to increase capacity in minority areas.

In addition to the support of his immediate colleagues, Bryant looked to several mentors for guidance. Bryant names Mark Chesler, Ron Lippitt and Miles Horton as being important figures in his career. These mentors provided perspective and feedback on issues related to consulting, writing and pedagogy. While Bryant does not mentor others in the formal sense, he actively serves as a resource for students in SNRE.

He is often unaware of his impact on others until he receives a letter or postcard in the mail from a former student or acquaintance thanking him for his support and guidance. Thus, in his everyday activities as a professor, he is able to shape and mentor students.

Highlights

Bryant's career has been full of many accomplishments. However, he is most proud of helping to develop the Environmental Justice Program at SNRE and of his creation of the Environmental Justice Initiative (also in SNRE). The Environmental Justice program has attained the status of one of the major programs in the school. SNRE's Environmental Justice Program – the first in the country to offer a full slate of environmental justice courses and specializations leading to bachelors, masters and doctoral degrees in environmental justice – serves as a model for similar programs. The Environmental Justice Initiative is able to provide information, resources and support to environmental justice organizations and communities in need of help.

Bryant has also gained a national reputation for his scholarly work and environmental justice activism. He and colleague Paul Mohai played important roles in the early environmental justice movement by organizing a seminal conference on "Race and the Incidence of Environmental Hazards" at SNRE in 1990. Bryant and Mohai were also active in the Michigan Coalition – a group of conferees who formed an advisory group to the Environmental Protection Agency and worked with the agency on developing early environmental justice guidelines. The Michigan Coalition also helped to organize the First National People of Color Summit. Bryant and Mohai also collaborated to publish an edited volume containing the papers from the conference that was published in 1992. The book, *Race and the Incidence of Environmental Hazards*, is an important volume in early environmental justice writings. Since then Bryant has sat on numerous local, state and national environmental justice committees. He has also published many articles and book chapters on the topic.

Bryant acknowledges that environmental justice work and research has not always been fully supported. However, he has continued to work in the field because he believes it is important for minorities to be able to have access to all resources and to protect their communities. Bryant has received many awards including the Outstanding Alumni Award from his high school in Flint and the Arthur F. Thurnau Professorship at the University for Outstanding Teaching and Work with Undergraduates.

Advice to Young Professionals

When asked what advice he would give to individuals interested in a career in the environmental field, Bryant replied, "It is hard to facilitate change. One should be careful to pick his/her battles. It is also important to build a strong support system. A strong support system makes the difference in how one runs the race. It determines if one will be a sprinter or a long-distance runner."

For More Information

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This interview was conducted in 2015.