

Environmental Justice Panel Reflection Essay

On Thursday, March 27, I went to an environmental justice event with 5 guest speakers at Utah Valley University from 11:30-1pm. The speakers were Turner Bitton, Judy Ou, Ofa Matagi, Wisam Khudair, and Jay Rock. Turner is the development director of HEAL Utah and involved in housing policies, Judy does medical research with correlations of cancer survivors and air pollution, and Ofa is the Executive Director of UPIHC. Wisam is a public policy professional and Jay is an indigenous environmental advocate and artist. The event was organized by UVU's Center for Social Impact, and the host was McKay Jones, a UVU student. This type of event was a perfect example of what the SEL model can accomplish when students are given opportunities and leadership roles.



Full view of all the quest speakers at the panel

The event was set up for the host to ask questions to the panel and they would then respond. At the end, we had time for 2 audience questions. The main talking points were bridging the gap between scientific knowledge/data and communicating that to the people in a way they understand. So it must be culturally appropriate. Building genuine relationships and looking at people holistically is one of the key aspects of advocating for environmental justice. Another question discussed was how do we make it feasible for people to participate when they have a lot of other worries. Oftentimes, people are too busy or don't feel like it makes a difference to participate in civic matters.



Closer-up image of Judy Ou talking

This was a great experience because I learned a lot from these professionals. Environmental justice is something I care deeply about, so it was amazing to hear perspectives of people from several different sectors. I enjoyed how they ended with trying to bring hope to us, as college students, and with the current political state of the US, it can feel pretty daunting at times. However, they told us there are many people fighting for our rights and our future. We are not powerless and we just need to start with working within our communities and social spheres to start making changes. I feel grateful to have been empowered by and learn more about environmental justice challenges from these 5 wonderful people.

-Savannah Niemann, UVU student