

## Thriving Through Oil

By Rifah Islam and Luke Risher

Americans live a life of comfort, convenience and consumption. Cars, heating, stoves and so many more utilities have become a part of our daily lives. All of these amenities have one thing in common; oil. Since we are so reliant on these products and resources, our demand for oil increases every single day. Despite the convenience, we have to pay the price.

Time and time again, research has shown that the oil industry has negative effects on both the environment and us as well. The process of creating useable oil from the ground is extremely toxic and comes with its own set of risks. Just in the scouting process for areas where drilling and fracking will occur, the ecosystem is disturbed. While extracting oil, chemicals and toxins are spread throughout the area, often entering the water supply. Oil itself is toxic to virtually all lifeforms, so the presence of it at all creates disruptions in the environment. Add in oil leaks and pipe explosions and we can see the problematic impact of our oil usage. In the largest oil spill recorded, over 4.2 million barrels of oil were spilled into the sea. With over 200,000 miles of oil pipelines in the U.S, the stakes are high. Some of the health impacts include headaches, respiratory issues, and even cancer. This kind of damage cannot be reversed. We have seen the dangerous consequences of America's reliance on oil, now what can we do next?



*PES Philadelphia Refinery*

Like most cities in the country, Philadelphia also suffers from a high concentration of environmental hazards. Philadelphia has the largest Refinery on the East Coast, which heavily impacts the population. The Philadelphia Energy Solutions Refinery makes up to 72% of the air pollution in the city. There are toxins ranging from ammonia, hydrogen cyanide, benzene, and sulfuric acid. The childhood asthma rate in Philadelphia is 2-3 times higher than the national average, making it an even more dangerous

environment for them. Whether you have asthma or not, this is an issue that affects everyone.

The facts say it all. The Refinery has many negative impacts for the residents of Philadelphia and also other people across the country. However, there are many different organizations and activists working to bring change to the issues. Through research and interviews we explored models of resistance and learned about how different organizations are working to build a more sustainable future. We interviewed Alexa Ross, a representative of Philly Thrive and Vernell Marshall, a resident who lives extremely close to the refinery. These are people who have been impacted by this issue and are doing their part to change the environment in Philadelphia. We also reached out to the Refinery itself, but it declined to have any comment.



*Right to Breathe Campaign Protest*

Philly Thrive is one of the most prominent sustainable energy advocates in the city. They promote ways to bring change to the current energy industries in Philadelphia. Alexa, a founder of the organization, helped create Philly Thrive in the winter of 2015. She along with a group of other social activists advocated against the expansion of the refinery. Earlier last year, they won that fight and through that process they became the organization they are today. In Philly Thrive's own words "We oppose Philadelphia becoming a toxic fossil fuel "energy hub" - we need a transition to an

economy that serves people and planet. We envision a just transition to climate jobs, clean energy, and healthy communities." Through programs like their Right to Breathe campaign, the team works towards making the city more sustainable by moving towards renewable energy.

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Philly Thrive has realized that the first step to change is to educate the community and city. Without this crucial step, no one can move forward. In order to spread more awareness, Philly Thrive plans and hosts many events both inside their building and outside in the community. The BBQ in which Alexa and Vernell met was one such event. On a warm and sunny summer day with burgers on the grill and conversation in the air, more and more information was spread about the dangers that threatened the community. This opened many eyes, including Vernell's, which was exactly the goal of the event. Vernell is a resident of a neighborhood bordering the refinery, where she was raised and currently lives. She has three kids, two of whom attend their community schools. Vernell and her family see the refinery every single day, but to them, it was only a building that happened to release some "steam". Nothing more, nothing less. When Vernell learned more about the refinery, she was shocked. She could not believe that she wasn't aware of the dangers that the refinery posed for her, her family and neighbors. Similar to Vernell, very few community members really knew what the refinery was and what was happening behind the gates. "[The refinery is] dangerous and a lot of [misconceptions] is just a lack of education. When I talk to people, they say 'oh I think that's just steam...', not knowing that it is toxins and polluted air..." says Vernell. Even her children don't learn about the refinery and its effects in school. They are totally uninformed. Vernell immediately joined the organization. Through info sessions, community events and protests she

has become a meaningful contributor to the organization, and integral part of the little community they have made for themselves. Vernell now does outreach and education throughout her community.

In order to spread information to the community, there needs to be a sense of trust within each other. It's hard to listen to such intense information from someone you don't relate to or you believe doesn't understand you. As a justice organization dealing with people who have historically been oppressed and disenfranchised, Philly Thrive has to deal with many race and class dynamics as part of their work. The primarily low income, African American community has been most affected and it has brought up some tension within the community about outreach. This is why people like Vernell are such key members of the Philly Thrive team. Vernell says "If a white person comes knocking on your door and they tell you about something, the first thing, not me, but our people are going to look at and think is 'what are you talking about, you want money, or what's my debit card number' and they're really just trying to give you facts on your health. With me being in the community I feel like I have a little more of a way in because I can sit with them in their environment and talk to them." Vernell is a point of connection between Philly Thrive and the community. Without this relationship, it would be impossible for the organization to build the platform it needs to resist the environmental injustice.

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neighborhoods.”**

More than anything, Philly Thrive wants to amplify the voice of the community. In her own words Vernell says, "Our voices matter and nobody else wants to come and inform people in Wilson Park about the dangers of where they live at, we want to be real, because of the color of people's skin." She has a point. Throughout the country there are similar correlations in race and class demographics affected. For example, in California 92% of the residents who live within a mile of oil developments are people of color. These dynamics play a large role in both the treatment of the neighborhood and the response of the movement. "They only put the refineries in low income impoverished black neighborhoods." Vernell points out. "You know the people who own these companies, they don't live anywhere near them." If the owners themselves don't see the "steam" and accidental fires attached to the refinery, how can they ever understand the reality of what some are faced with? Their communities have much cleaner and healthy air, a difference that Vernell can feel whenever she leaves her community. We all deserve that quality of air, without any discrimination based on race, class, economic status, etc.

Even if all community members got involved with Philly Thrive, if all news channels began



*PES Philadelphia Refinery*

reporting this story, if we were all able to implement more energy saving techniques into our own lives, this will not be an easy fight. The reason is simple; money. The 137 billion dollar oil industry is much bigger than just Philadelphia, or the United States for that matter. It's a global game in which everyone wants to win. A

few small scale movements will not necessarily change the entire system, but it is a start. While we do need to participate in local organizations and movements, we need to keep the bigger picture in mind as well. Who we elect into office, no matter what the position, has an impact on this issue. Today, climate change is no longer a priority for our country. With President Trump now in office, the references to climate change and the plan of action have now vanished from the official website. Now more than ever it is time fight back against the new administration. "It's time for us to join in ways that we never before to defend our community and each other. So I think that will be a powerful moment of hope... I think projecting a vision of what we want instead of just resisting Trump is one key." says Alexa. In an event on the day of the inauguration, many organizations and citizens came together to proclaim the "People's Inauguration", putting forth the issue that impacted many oppressed communities. Vernell was one of the speakers and raised the issues of environmental racism and injustice to an energetic and engaged crowd. When the energy for the Right to Breathe campaign connects with others, it builds an even larger and stronger movement.

Even with all of the obstacles in their way, Philly Thrive has never given up. They are a



*Right to Breathe Campaign Protest*

strong network giving their all to fight this tough battle, and this is clearly represented in their actions. The direct actions they done include pinning hundreds of sticky notes saying why people oppose the refinery onto the meeting door where decision makers were discussing the expansion plans, stopping dozens of delivery trucks in their tracks by blocking the road with only a handful of

people, and gathering hundreds of folks from across the city to take part in a large scale action against the refinery. Philly Thrive has upped the intensity and creativity of their action which maximizes their impacted. The inspiration for the sticky note action was described by Alexa as “We have told you again and again the thousand reasons why oil expansion doesn’t make sense. That’s the idea behind the sticky notes... It’s like a big visual symbol like here’s a reminder.” The road blocking action was a 48 hour response to a fire. “I saw one of our Thrive members who lives in Vernell’s neighborhood post ‘fire at the refinery’ ...like what caused the fire? What are people exposed to who live around the refinery when the fire is happening? We need information! You [refinery] don’t just get to get away with that...It was like a month after Trump got elected and I was having so many feelings of discouragement and despair and just wanting to like let it rip.” This sort of powerful action ultimately helped stop the expansion. Alexa summarizes her take away, “I think one thing that story showed me is that we’re building up our relationships and our capacity to have each other’s backs to step in and act.” The Philly Thrive network is new but strong and ready to take on the large battle for the future of energy in Philadelphia and the world.

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This is only the beginning. Philly Thrive has just passed its first birthday this December. There is so much more to do and space to grow and flourish. You can help out too! If you’re a Philly local, join the Philly Thrive group. Through different sessions and trainings, even you can become an expert on this topic and a changemaker in your community. You can sign up to be put on a mailing list through their website. Call and write to your local politicians about your thoughts and concerns on climate change and urge them to stand at the forefront of this issue. Also, keep a close watch on the current administration and any new laws and regulations being passed about climate change. These are just a few ways you can contribute to the cause. As young high school students getting ready to become engaged members of a global society, this issue remains high on our priority list. Without clean air to breathe, no one can live healthy, safe and happy lives. We all deserve this air, without any discrimination. That’s why we stand by Philly Thrive, activists like Alexa and Vernell and so many others working to create change in our communities and beyond. We hope that you too, will stand by us and work towards giving everyone the right to breathe.

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