Congratulations to our Star of the Month for November 2020, Krithika Pennathur from the School of Public Health! Krithika was recently selected by the APHA Environmental Caucus for the Student Poster Achievement Award and Excellence in the Environmental Justice section for her project, “Environmental Justice Programming Series: A Conversation in Hopkins Health-Affiliated Schools” and presented her project at the 2020 APHA annual expo last month. We spoke with Krithika about her project and what environmental justice means to her.

First, congratulations on your award from APHA! Can you share a little bit about your project?

Thank you so much! This past year I served as a social justice programming assistant for SOURCE. I had the opportunity to design an environmental justice education series. The series included a panel and a specific model of workshops I developed while in undergrad at The University of Pittsburgh, called a sustainability circle. The panel featured community-based organizations, students, and faculty working in environmental justice spaces, while the circle showcased several interactive workshops on various sustainability topics. The circle not only introduced participants different aspects of sustainability and its related disciplines, but focused on critical reflection and activating change. A unique aspect of the circle was the training facilitators received, which involved a flexible content creating process that resulted in workshops as a collaborative learning space with participants.

My presentation for APHA showcased the success of these strategies in a conceptual model for developing this series. I advocated for this collaborative learning model to be adopted in academic and community spaces. This programming is centered on critical reflection and is rooted intentionally in social justice frameworks, such as critical race theory, Indigenous and decolonized perspectives, and intersectionality.

For me, the most rewarding aspect of this work was the resulting learning space, where people learned together and alongside each other, and we’re able to develop a collaborative learning space to ask crucial questions about the sustainability movement and our own involvement. It is necessary and important to me personally to highlight the local voices in this movement to Hopkins affiliates, and to create spaces for people to directly learn from BIPOC that have been systematically marginalized and silenced in mainstream environmental justice movements.

How did you become interested in, and passionate about, environmental justice?

At Pitt, one of my best friends and I co-founded the Planned Parenthood Generation Action chapter. We received a “green club” sustainability certification with Pitt’s sustainability office and as an intersectional feminist and social justice club, we were an “untraditional” club in that setting. Most of the clubs focused on traditional ideas of sustainability, like issues of climate change and advocating for green spaces on campus. Through my organizing with our club, I educated others as to why reproductive justice is environmental justice, and I learned firsthand the importance of intersectionality and social sustainability to environmental sustainability. Specifically, the 3 P’s of sustainability—people, planet, and profit was a framework I actively used to explain our work. One of our major projects, which is still ongoing, was the distribution of reusable and environmentally friendly menstrual products to individuals on campus. This project was at the intersection of economic justice, reproductive justice, and environmental justice. Through this project, our club has actively impacted multiple students and still continues to do so.

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Why is environmental justice such an important issue for communities here in Baltimore?

As someone who didn’t grow up in Baltimore, it was important for me to be actively invested in learning from the Baltimore community about local issues. I’ve learned that environmental injustice in Baltimore is an issue that has spanned generations, and many voices are systemically ignored in favor of corporate voices. I’ve learned here is a lack of policy, action, and much needed change for many communities. As public health practitioners in a privileged academic space wanting to affect change, it is important to work with community leaders and organizers. We must listen and prioritize their voices in the fight for environmental justice.

What efforts are currently underway either on campus or in Baltimore communities which students can get involved with?

There are many ways to get involved in Baltimore! Recently, I found out that there is a sustainability leadership council through JHSPH that focuses on environmental sustainability. In the city, check out Green and Healthy Homes, Blue Water Campaign, and the Baltimore Food Policy Initiative.

Additionally, MICA Center for Creativity has showcased and produced amazing art on environmental justice. SOURCE’s community representative, Glenn Ross, organizes “toxic tours” of Baltimore neighborhoods highlighting local Baltimore environmental issues. There are also several student activists and faculty members creating intersectional work at JHSPH. When I mention intersectionality, I especially think it’s important to note that issues of racial justice, immigrant justice, LGBTQ+ justice, reproductive justice, worker’s justice, and so many more domains of justice are forms of sustainability. Therefore, there are a lot of amazing places and people that are doing work to positively affect change in our sustainability. I would also recommend those interested in this subject to read and watch documentaries made by Black and Indigenous peoples, to understand the theoretical foundations of this work and to actively listen to lived experience.

What are you up to these days? Any more projects/papers that you are working on? We’d love to highlight what you’re working on now and what we can expect to hear from you down the road!

I am currently in Philadelphia for my field placement as a social insurance specialist with the Social Security Administration. I am also finishing my last year of my MSPH degree with a public health informatics certificate. On campus, I recently got involved with the Gender Based Violence Journal Club at JHSPH and still continue to be involved with SOURCE through the governing board and critical reflection leaders program. Aside from that, I am working getting my APHA presentation into publication format and drafting a legislative memo for NARAL Pro-Choice MD on crisis pregnancy centers. I am also excited to join my community in Philadelphia by volunteering with community-based organizations that work in the areas of racial justice, LGBTQ+ justice, and environmental justice.

Thank you Krithika for all that you do in being such a strong advocate and champion for environmental justice, and for bringing this focus to Johns Hopkins!