

Composting, beach clean-up efforts tackle environmental issues



Juniors Ana Sofia Miró and Elan Grossman collect trash along the Galveston shoreline.
PHOTO COURTESY OF Marci Bahr

By Afraaz Malick

In response to the ongoing climate crisis, students have become active leaders in protecting and caring for the environment.

Freshman Hammad Younas was astounded by the sheer amount of waste produced on campus, so he partnered with sophomores Lia Symer and Lucia Varma to start a student composting project.

When trash is taken to landfills, it is continually compressed. As bacteria break down the waste, they produce methane, a greenhouse gas.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency, municipal solid waste landfills are the third-largest source of methane emissions in the United States. In 2019, these emissions were equivalent to greenhouse gas emissions from 21.6 million passenger vehicles or the carbon dioxide emissions from nearly 12.0 million homes.

“There’s a direct effect of reducing our carbon footprint,” Younas said, “and it will encourage our community to learn more about ways they can help our environment and to learn more about climate change.”

On May 12, the group’s first round of composting took place. It was later picked up by Moonshot Composting, the same company that collects campus food waste.

Younas says that their project is “a stepping stone to a long series of projects that we can undergo to make our school more environmentally friendly,” and he encourages others to research how they can make a difference.

The project will expand next year, adding multiple bins and volunteers across campus.

CLEANING UP GALVESTON

In 2018, Environment Texas ranked six Galveston beaches as some of the most unsafe places to swim in the state.

To make an impact outside of the SJS community, Mia Masterson, Katharine Stepanian and Grace Perrin, all juniors, led a community service project designed to clean up the west end of the island. They wanted to keep the beach clean and set an example for others to clean up after themselves.

On March 27, 18 SJS volunteers cleaned up trash along the shoreline.

They noticed that not many people were venturing into the water, even though it was a nice day. They saw a lot of trash, and not far away, they observed food trucks selling items that would soon become plastic waste.

“At first, it was hard to see any trash because of the shells and other debris from the ocean,” Masterson said. “But once you started looking, it was everywhere.”

The group hopes that their project can serve as a starting point for St. John’s students to understand the magnitude of the litter that is produced by our community.

“Students should make an effort to throw away everything, even if the trash can is out of the way,” Perrin said. “Every little thing goes a long way because it helps you practice better habits and strive to better the way we treat the environment.”



ILLUSTRATION BY Max Stith

'Invisible' communities poisoned by rampant industrial pollution

By Indrani Maitra

Jalen Bradley was sitting at home when he felt a “sort of vibration” followed by a deafening boom. A short time later, he could hear the sounds of sirens from emergency vehicles.

A chemical facility of the K-Solv Group, a corporation that specializes in environmental disaster response, released more than 40 volatile contaminants into the air in surrounding communities. The industrial fire forced authorities to issue a shelter-in-place order on April 7 that lasted four hours.

Bradley could see the billowing plume of black smoke creep across the sky from his home in Northshore. Still, the sophomore felt nothing but “mild annoyance.”

“It happens so much that we’ve all become desensitized,” he said.

During the fire, Bradley felt “trapped,” even though Harris County Pollution Control dispatched a mobile air monitoring team. He said that local government entities and the petrochemical industry should do more to protect air quality in Houston.

“It felt like the petrochemical company didn’t have a plan,” Bradley said. “It’s really disappointing. I don’t understand why these plants don’t do a better job protecting the environment.”

The fire was neither unforeseen nor an anomaly — the petrochemical industry has a history of industrial violations, particularly with regard to environmental safety. In 2015 and 2016, the same K-Solv facility was fined by the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality for violating the Clean Air Act and failing to disclose the emission of toxic chemicals into surrounding neighborhoods.

Such industrial facilities dominate the landscape Bradley drives through on his 45-minute commute to school.

Meanwhile, in Bellaire, junior Thalie Waters always sees the “pretty side of oil.”

Racism isn’t a moral failure.
It’s a systemic issue.

IRENE VÁZQUEZ

“Considering where I live and normally go, I rarely ever see the refineries or the smoke or the factories, even though I am very aware of them,” Waters said.

The stark dichotomy between the lush green lawns and soot-coated streets stems from a history of deliberate policy decisions.

Houston’s massive infrastructure upholds its reputation as the stronghold of American oil — every day, the 10 refineries dotting the Houston metro area process nearly three billion barrels of crude oil, according to Energy Capital. But underlying Houston’s status as an industrial juggernaut is a tortured legacy of environmental racism, defined as the disproportionate impact of environmental hazards on people of color.

Harrison Humphreys, Transportation Policy Advocate with Air Alliance Houston, described environmental racism as “one of the most insidious and flagrant forms of discrimination.”

“All you have to do is look at a map of Houston, and you can see how deliberate the placement of these waste facilities and garbage dumps is,” Humphreys said.

These urban disparities — where refineries, chemical plants, sewage treatment facilities, highways and hazardous waste sites are intentionally placed near low-income neighborhoods of color — exacerbate existing structural inequities in Black and brown communities.

“Racism isn’t a moral failure,” said Irene Vázquez (’17), a recent Yale graduate and former editor-in-chief of the Review who has reported on equitable development in Houston’s Third Ward for the Texas Observer. “It’s a systemic issue, and environmental racism is jarring proof.”

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DEAN DAVIS

Back in 1979, a study of the distribution of industrial waste sites throughout Houston found that 14 of the city’s 17 hazardous facilities — accounting for over 80 percent of the city’s waste — were built in historically Black and brown neighborhoods. Little has changed over the past 40 years. According to a study published by the National Academy of Sciences, Black Americans are exposed to 21 % more pollution even though they produce 23 % less pollution than the average household.

Sophomore Dean Davis lives in Kashmere Gardens, a historically Black community in Northeast Houston. As a child, Davis’s personal oasis was an abandoned railroad yard near his home. While all his friends were at the beach, Davis would go down to the railroad yard and relax with a book.

“It wasn’t too dangerous,” Davis said. “It was kind of a cool spot to hang out.”

One day in Dec. 2019, as he prepared to head out to the railroad site, his father told him he was no longer allowed to go there. His father had recently learned that Union Pacific, the company that owned the site, was poisoning his community with the preservative creosote, a carcinogenic chemical. Clusters of rare cancers festered for decades across his community.

Reports from the Texas Department of State Health Services found that elevated levels of leukemia, as well as lung, esophagus, liver and kidney cancers, occurred in the surrounding communities.

The data also revealed that Union Pacific had been dumping toxic pollutants into Kashmere Gardens for decades, yet Davis and his neighbors only found out at that December press conference that the railroad was causing cancer in their community.

“It was just all so crushing,” Davis said. “I don’t know how to describe the feeling of betrayal.”

Throughout his childhood, every breath Davis took had been tainted with toxic vapors, but what is particularly concerning for Davis is the knowledge that many of his classmates may one day be employed in the industry that has knowingly damaged his neighborhood for so long.

“I feel awful knowing that some of my friends are going to end up working at these companies that are harming my community,” Davis said. “We’re invisible.”