



Sustainability for Black Communities

Illai Kenney, HBCU Green Fund,
Atlanta

☀ Call to Action

Support Illai's work to create an equitable, environmental infrastructure, with green endowments for Historically Black Colleges & Universities. hbcugreenfund.org

☀ Values

- Committed
- Determined
- Self-Confident
- Leader
- Social Justice
- Environmentalist

☀ Lessons Learned

Illai's family gave her the gift of a passion for activism, and the strength of character to pursue change.

Our choices play a large role in creating the world we live in. Making responsible choices is the way to create a better world.

People of all ages, backgrounds, and ethnicities can contribute to make the world a better, more sustainable place.

A good leader sees this, and finds ways to inspire and encourage everyone to play their part.

If you want to pursue a goal, you must first educate yourself. Accurate, relevant information will allow you to make better choices, and these choices will empower you.

From her mother's work in sustainability issues, even as a child Illai Kenney understood that marginalized communities like hers are very often the communities most negatively impacted by issues like global warming and climate change.

And as a kid, she felt it was unfair that she didn't have a say in the matter. "We are the ones who are going to be most impacted by the decisions being made. But what recourse do we have? We can't vote. We can't lobby. It was a daunting realization to come to," she says. That the planet, and her right to a healthy, sustainable future, could be ruined because of the decisions of a generation disconnected from her own, was disempowering. So, in 2003, at the age of 12, she decided to form the nonprofit Georgia Kids Against Pollution.

This journey toward a more sustainable world culminated with the founding of the HBCU Green Fund – a fund that supports projects that reduce energy and water usage at Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

☀ Language Arts

Write an essay about why poor communities of color are more affected by climate change than wealthier ones. How does economic status and race affect someone's access to basic needs, such as clean water, clean air, and quality food? In your opinion, what can be done to correct this problem?

Write the script of an imaginary conversation between a young environmental activist and members of the board of directors of an energy corporation (natural gas, nuclear energy, coal power, or oil). During the conversation the activist tries to convince the executives to adopt more environmentally friendly practices. As you write your script, ask yourself: How could the activist convince

them? What should he or she focus on? How can young people make their voices heard, and be taken seriously, in a corporate setting?

A big part of Illai's activism was inspired by her mother and grandmother. Write a narrative essay in which you reflect on a member of your family, a teacher, or a friend whose presence in your life has inspired you to fight for a goal that would benefit not only you but those around you.

STEM Activities

Compare the asthma rates of states with a history of lower air quality to those in states with higher air quality, and construct a bar graph comparing the data. Calculate the center (median, mean) and spread (interquartile range, standard deviation) of two or more different data sets.

- [Air Quality Tracker](#)¹
- [CDC Asthma Data](#)²

Invisible air pollutants make the air dangerous for people to breathe, causing respiratory illnesses such as asthma.

Some engineers make it their specialty to design vehicles, machines, and manufacturing plants that emit as few pollutants as possible. [In this activity](#)³, students will learn about the major types of air pollutants and how they affect our health; conduct a simple invisible air pollutant test; explain how pollutants from the air can affect water and plant growth; and describe how engineers are addressing the problem of invisible air pollution.

Have students brainstorm a list of uses of water in the school or at home, and design a data collection plan to find how much water is being used. Then, using a spreadsheet with the collected data, have them create graphs to show the results.

Ask them to research scientific resources that estimate the amount of water used for different activities (showering, drinking from water fountains, etc.), and compare these estimates with the data they have collected. Then have them research water-flow control devices and estimate the total investment needed to install these devices in the school or at home; and the total water savings (in both gallons and costs) that could be realized by using them in one year.

- **Using the water usage data collected,** ask students to identify and carry out relevant calculations to support the development of a water conservation plan for their school or home (e.g., average amount of water used per student/person, and by the entire school/household over a certain time period).
- **Compare the students' water usage data** to water usage in island nations like the Seychelles.

Sustainability Innovations

Illai and Felicia have become models for their community through their voices, and their projects, which are making a difference for everyone. In addition to environmental goals, sustainability is concerned with eliminating racism, and empowering all. [YWCA Los Angeles](#)⁴ is one of the leading organizations in Southern California that is targeting the elimination of racism, and the empowerment of women. They operate empowerment centers throughout the city to help with the development of their programs, which address issues of child development, sexual assault, and domestic violence, among many others.

Illai is one of many strong Black women who are taking charge of creating a better future. For example, Jacqueline Patterson, the director of the NAACP's Environmental Climate and Justice Program, has helped to shed a light on the disproportionate issues facing Black females. She founded the NAACP's [Power to the People](#)⁵ campaign, targeting the high energy costs for Black Americans, and the disproportionate exposure to coal plants of African American children.

Illai founded Georgia Kids Against Pollution at a young age; many other students today have the same passion for activism. Hannah Testa is an environmental activist who at a young age founded [Hannah4Change⁶](#), which is focused on addressing the plastic pollution crisis in the U.S.

Sustainability Career Pathways

Sustainability Director at a university or school. Most colleges and universities, and even some high schools, now have a sustainability director, who helps to coordinate sustainability activities throughout the different departments--from maintenance and transportation to energy production, and even classroom curricula. They also often serve as liaison to the city or town the university is in, helping to address surrounding environmental issues and ensuring that the university is a good environmental steward. Does this job--heavy on management, leadership, and coordination--sound good to you? [Learn more here⁷](#).

Corporate Sustainability Officer. Companies tend to prioritize growth, even at the expense of the environment—and thus their own long-term well-being, as well as society's. Unfortunately, corporate cultures are slow to change. But change has started. Many companies now have a corporate sustainability officer to help drive change from within. This is an opportunity to improve the environmental effects of the world's most influential entities. Want to learn how? [Read here⁸](#). Or read a personal account [here⁹](#).

Green Fund Manager. With billions of dollars being invested in companies, where that money goes shapes the future of business. Do we invest in oil companies, or renewable energy companies? In downtown real estate, or in suburban malls? Working with a socially responsible investment firm, or with a university or foundation as an asset manager can be a great way to help develop the sustainable business sector. Here is a brief introduction to the many jobs in the [field¹⁰](#).

1 <https://www.epa.gov/outdoor-air-quality-data/air-data-daily-air-quality-tracker>

2 <https://www.cdc.gov/asthma/nhis/default.htm>

3 https://www.teachengineering.org/activities/view/cub_air_lesson03_activity1

4 <https://ywcagla.org/advocacy/>

5 <https://www.greenamerica.org/climate-change-100-reasons-hope/power-people-fueling-revolution-energy-justice>

6 <https://www.hannah4change.org/>

7 <https://www.studyinternational.com/news/jobs-of-the-future-how-do-i-become-a-sustainability-manager/>

8 <https://www.careerexplorer.com/careers/sustainability-officer/>

9 <https://impakter.com/choosing-the-harder-path-the-journey-towards-a-job-in-corporate-sustainability/>

10 http://finanzasostenibile.it/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/13-04-2017_FBicciato_ProfessioniSRL_SdR.pdf

