

CONSERVATION **MATTERS**

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BUILDING COMMUNITIES THAT THRIVE

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Building Communities That Thrive

A conversation with Dr. Thea James



In the United States, your zip code is a powerful predictor of how long you live. For someone in Newton, Massachusetts, life expectancy extends well into the 90s. But drive just an hour south to New Bedford, and you'll find it drops to an average of just 68 years old.

It's tempting to boil down good health solely to factors like medical care, healthy food, and exercise. However, these things alone don't explain that 25-plus year gap between these two communities. Many other dynamics contribute to the difference there and in neighborhoods throughout New England. Historic policies like redlining and racial segregation, along with substandard housing, air pollution, crumbling infrastructure, and lack of access to jobs, healthy food, and green space all play a role.

Perhaps no one understands the interplay of these factors better than those who work in healthcare. Dr. Thea James, who serves as Boston Medical Center's Associate Chief Medical Officer, Vice President of Mission, and Director of the Violence Prevention Program, began her career at the hospital nearly 30 years ago. In her work, she sees firsthand how the places where you live, work, and

play impact health – both physically and mentally. As a member of CLF's Board of Trustees and co-chair of the CLF Ventures Board, Dr. James advises the organization on its work to create healthier neighborhoods and economic opportunities through its Healthy Neighborhoods Equity Fund. Boston Medical Center is an institutional investor in the Fund.

We recently checked in with Dr. James to understand how the Center is dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic and to hear from her about the work still to be done to create healthier, more thriving, and more equitable neighborhoods for all.

This transcript has been edited for clarity.

What prompted you to choose emergency medicine as your specialty?

I never actually entertained other specialties. I liked the notion of not knowing what's coming next. I also recognized that people show up to the emergency room with all forms of emotions: fear, angst, sadness, depression, sometimes just anger. And, as a provider, I would have the opportunity to shift that person's perspective by just being there, hearing where

they're coming from, and sort of walking them to a better place.

Nobody listens to patients, really. Doctors listen for what they're taught to listen for – the disease and what's going on with the disease. You've got a bellyache and the doctor will ask, "Okay, when did it start? Does eating make it worse? What makes it feel better?" But your bellyache could be due to you not having enough food, or you're in a domestic violence situation, or you have something else going on. So, that's what drew me to emergency medicine – listening beyond the script and wanting to shift a person's perspective.

How does where you live affect your health?

When you think about the way that communities across America have been created and segregated – long, long ago, with great intentionality, I might add – people of color have wound up in neighborhoods that are risky from an environmental perspective. They're either close to power plants or living in places where there's pollution in the air or there's something in the water like in Flint, Michigan. Even something as basic as not having a

lot of tree coverage has an effect, because that means there's more heat there.

These communities don't have the things they need to create a healthy, thriving community or even a thriving economy within a community. One of the greatest impacts of that historic segregation is economic. By not having access to wealth-building pathways like home ownership – which was denied to Black communities starting in the 1930s through redlining, at the same time the government created public housing – essentially two socioeconomic populations were created and that remains fixed to this day.

All the statistics show that people who have lower incomes and lower educational attainment – they have worse health status. The data also show that their children do, too, because the children are just beneficiaries of what resources the parents have.

When you look at COVID-19, for example, and the high rates of occurrence and death, it correlates with all those cities that were behind the red lines. When people are living in those kinds of conditions and under those circumstances, they can't even prioritize health because they're busy trying to survive. They will address survival first, and then health will come second, if at all.

What do we, as a society, need to do to create healthier neighborhoods?

We need to prioritize thriving. Ask yourself: What does it require for a person to thrive? Why am I thriving? We need to look at this from a systemic perspective: What are the underlying systems that enable me to thrive, but make it impossible for other people. People who are not thriving – that's not natural. It's not biologic or in their DNA. It's not like a disease. This is man-made stuff.

Changing that is going to involve policy, because a lot of the systemic barriers and systemic racism that have occurred were

driven by policies. So, we have to undo those things.

And, I think history is really important. Because, if you don't understand the history of how we got here, there's no way you could ever know how to undo all of this. That requires intentionality. The most common thing people will come up with to do is the thing they've always done. And that's not enough. We don't want to inadvertently recreate the same type of systemic barriers. To change the situation, you have to add something else onto that,

We need to prioritize thriving. Ask yourself: Why am I thriving? What are the underlying systems that enable me to thrive but make it impossible for other people?

and that has to be something that prevents people from getting into that situation in the first place.

How does a program like the Healthy Neighborhoods Equity Fund help?

This program lives the notion of conservation. It really walks the walk, especially when you create something like a Healthy Neighborhoods Equity Fund way before "equity" was the word of the day. And,

then, you put guardrails on it by setting up a healthy impact scale to make sure it's 100% pure through and through – those impact scale measures are rooted in equity. Even if you're a housing developer, you have to meet these measures. That is pure and true and a model for everybody. It's not that hard – I just feel like it's not that hard for people to shift. The only thing that stops them from shifting is their mind.

What gives you hope?

I am hopeful because, right now, we've gotten a bit of a boost this year with this insight, this new awakening to systemic injustice. But it cannot be a flash in the pan. This is going to be a long haul, but it's okay. We have to recognize that and have intentionality around it. My greatest fear, and, I'll tell you, it's the greatest fear of every person of color I know, is that the country will just go back to business as usual. You fear it because we can't imagine that anybody is interested in changing the situation.

If this was all theoretical to me, I might not have the hope that I have. But I've seen proof of concept. I've seen this happen. Here at Boston Medical Center, I've seen these kids in our violence intervention program go from someone without hope to maybe they get their GED, then to a kid who has a college degree and, in many cases, a graduate degree after that. It just says to me that these things are changeable and it's within our grasp. ♦

THE HEALTHY NEIGHBORHOODS EQUITY FUND | clf.org/hnef

OF THE PROJECTS FUNDED TO DATE:

100% HAVE COMMUNITY SUPPORT | **0.2** MILES AVERAGE TO ACCESS GREEN SPACE

4 MINUTE AVERAGE WALK TO PUBLIC TRANSIT | **586** MIXED-INCOME HOMES CREATED

449,390 JOB WITHIN A 45-MINUTE COMMUTE | **100%** TRANSFORMED VACANT OR UNDERUSED PROPERTIES

The **Healthy Neighborhoods Equity Fund**, a project led by CLF and the Massachusetts Housing Investment Corporation, brings new sources of capital to real-estate projects that can catalyze the creation of healthy neighborhoods. It prioritizes projects based on a unique HealthScore – more than 50 qualitative and quantitative measures designed to determine whether projects have potential to improve health and well-being in the community, while ensuring investment decisions are made with community engagement and participation.



cutting climate-damaging emissions

BY BETHANY
KWOKA

THE PROBLEM

From worsening storms flooding our communities to extreme heat harming our health, New England is already feeling the effects of climate change.

Some neighborhoods – low-income, Black, and immigrant communities, in particular – are bearing the brunt of these impacts. Years of racist policies have forced them onto the front lines of the climate crisis, while silencing their voices when it comes to making decisions for their communities.

This is unacceptable. Local governments must step up to lower the emissions that cause climate change and keep all of our communities safe. Only by cutting emissions to zero before 2050 – and giving everyone a voice in creating an equitable transition to a green economy – can we avoid the worst consequences of this crisis.

CLF IN ACTION

CLF is working to pass enforceable climate laws in every New England state.

In 2008, we pushed Massachusetts to adopt one of the country's first climate laws – the Global Warming Solutions Act. This law requires the state to lower its polluting emissions to at least 80% below 1990 levels before 2050.

Just last year, we successfully advocated for Maine to pass its own climate law, which

will encourage the growth of the state's clean energy economy, while mandating aggressive cuts in emissions.

Vermont has now followed, passing a Global Warming Solutions Act after successful advocacy by CLF and our partners. The law turns the state's climate goals into enforceable targets, charting a course for the Green Mountain State to lower its emissions, while supporting both urban and rural communities.

PROGRESS

The climate crisis has worsened since 2008, so CLF and our partners are pushing Massachusetts to update its Global Warming Solutions Act. Known as the 2050 Roadmap Bill, this update mandates interim emissions cuts by 2030 and 2040 to ensure timely progress. It also gives decision-making power back to historically marginalized communities, allowing people in those neighborhoods the opportunity to weigh in on newly proposed projects. (In January 2020, Governor Baker also changed the Commonwealth's 2050 target to net-zero emissions – a critical update.)

In Maine, a Climate Council spent the past year collecting recommendations from various working groups on how to best lower emissions, while growing the economy and benefiting Mainers statewide. The Council's plan for reaching the state's

mandated emissions targets was sent to Governor Mills in early December.

Having just passed its climate law, Vermont is now establishing its own Climate Council. This group will work with state agencies, legislators, and individual Vermonters to lay out an action plan to meet the emissions targets required by the law and build climate-resilient communities.

NEXT STEPS

Passing these laws is not enough. States must implement them, improve them as needed, and ensure all New Englanders benefit from the transition to a clean economy.

In Massachusetts, this means passing the 2050 Roadmap Bill. In Maine, we must finish designing the Maine Climate Action Plan and put it to work helping our communities. And, in Vermont, we must encourage the new Climate Council to incorporate diverse voices and solutions that benefit all residents and bolster a low-carbon economy into its plan.

We also must move forward the rest of New England. Connecticut passed a Global Warming Solutions Act in 2008, but Rhode Island and New Hampshire lag behind their neighbors. These states must commit to lowering emissions and protecting families and businesses. Every state in the region must work towards this common goal. ♦



PHOTO: JEN LIAL PHOTOGRAPHY

WHY WE GIVE

The Ramos Family

Bristol, RI | Members since 2020

For Adam, Tracy, Max, and Lily Ramos, philanthropy is a family affair. Each month they decide on a theme, then gather with their prepared lists of organizations and reasons that the family should support them.

After each family member presents their list, they vote. In addition to their monthly theme, they consider how their donation is used at the organization and if there is a true local impact.

The Ramos family recently joined CLF after one of these family roundtables. What stood out most for them in choosing CLF? The organization is about more than just activism; it's real action.

Adam is an attorney and knows CLF from a professional standpoint. He's inspired by the detailed level of thought, strategy, and passion behind the issues that CLF's attorneys advocate for.

For Max and Lily, their concerns about climate change, clean air, and plastic pollution align with CLF's work in Rhode Island and throughout New England.

And, for Tracy, it's important to support organizations addressing changes and policy locally, especially given the lack of attention to environmental issues at the national level.

Individually, each member of the family has their own environmental concerns. But, together, they agree that to address them all and reverse the effects of climate change, we need policy changes that are meaningful and enforceable – changes that CLF is working to make happen.

Our donors inspire us to never give up because so much is at stake. Hear more from CLF supporters at www.clf.org/whywegive.

JOIN THE CHAMPIONS CLUB

clf.org/champions

Be part of a community of committed members whose ongoing, monthly support provides dependable funding for our work.

OTHER WAYS TO GIVE

Want to give a one-time donation? Or find out if your company will match your gift? Want to give an honorary or gift membership? Or learn more about planned giving?

You can do it all in a few clicks.

So come visit us online and make your donation today.

www.clf.org/donate

Contact us today to learn more about giving to CLF.

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Megan Mayhew-Bergman

A writer, editor, and teacher, Megan Mayhew-Bergman's passion is helping people share ethical and compelling stories about the natural world. The author of two short story collections, she has also written for *The Guardian*, *New Yorker*, *Paris Review*, and *New York Times*. Now, she is sharing her passion and expertise with CLF as a volunteer Senior Fellow.

1 What inspired you to write?

I think a lot of pre-Internet small-town southerners have narrative built into them in the form of sermons, and that is why so many of us are oriented to short-form writing. My father was a great storyteller – hyperbolic, funny, and with an eye for offbeat details. I grew up loving stories – that feeling of connection and delight.

Henry James said a writer should be the person upon whom nothing is lost, and I think I am both observant and sensitive, which leaves me watching and feeling a lot. Writing is a way to process those impulses. Plus, I'm always trying to get back to the feeling I had as a young girl, reading a Nancy Drew novel on the beach, with a storm approaching on the horizon.

It's a holy exchange between reader and writer, offering someone the opportunity to be transported elsewhere, or to see something more clearly. I love being transported as a reader, and also offering a reader that same feeling as a writer.

2 What drew you to volunteer with CLF?

When I was writing my first environmental column for *The Guardian*, I had a realization

about the power of scale when it comes to impact. I think organizations like CLF (and its southern counterpart, SELC) can make an enormous difference in terms of scale by holding corporations and governing bodies accountable for their actions.

Also, I see an enormous gulf between what the general public knows and what the environmental movement is trying to accomplish. I think storytelling is a way of closing that divide, so I try to pitch in on that front.

3 What resonates with your readers about climate change and other environmental issues?

Readers sort through a lot of noise in 2020. They see data, facts, falsehoods, self-righteousness, shallow opinions. As content consumers, we're jaded and tired. What resonates with people now, and moves them toward action, are good stories – scenes, people, animals – real places, real losses, real stakes. It's about specificity and heart.

4 What can we all do better (our readers included) when writing and talking about these issues?

I have developed an affection for both brevity and clarity. In a sea of content, we need to be able to both spot and feel the truth.

I also think we can all support a move toward recognition of fact (science!)

versus opinion culture. The general public is confused, and there are organizations and people who benefit from this confusion. The planet does not.

In my work, I try to make space for both scientists and citizens on the frontlines of climate change. It's important to amplify truth in our current cultural moment. Plus, the people experiencing the brunt of pollution and climate change are typically not the people writing the op-ed, or attending the environmental writing conference. Therefore, in journalism and NGO work, it's important to make sure interviews are inclusive, and that we let people speak for themselves as much as possible. I always want to give a megaphone to scientists. But this also means that scientists have to give themselves permission to tell stories, to speak plainly and passionately.

5 Who are your go-to writers?

I always learn so much from Helen MacDonald, who is funny, sublime, and full of wonder. Jamaica Kincaid's work – like *A Small Place* or *My Brother* – is devastatingly clear. Jesmyn Ward's books honor the way place presses down and shapes the human experience, particularly *Men We Reaped*. ♦

To read selected works by Megan, visit www.mayhewbergman.com. Find more on CLF's Senior Fellows program at www.clf.org/fellows.



AROUND CLF

MAINE

The Maine Supreme Judicial Court has upheld the City of South Portland's Clear Skies Ordinance, which effectively shut down efforts to reverse an existing pipeline and send dirty tar sands oil from Montréal to the Maine coast for export. CLF helped to write the ordinance four years ago and has assisted in defending it against challenges from Big Oil ever since. While this state court ruling is a victory, the ordinance still faces challenges in the federal appeals court in Boston. CLF has filed a friend of the court brief in that case, and a ruling is expected within four to six months.

MASSACHUSETTS

Thanks to CLF, Boston's largest school bus operator, Transdev Services, will no longer allow its vehicles to idle excessively. This is a critical win in the fight to curb harmful tailpipe pollution, which takes its heaviest toll on the city's most vulnerable communities and has been linked to lung cancer,

asthma, and bronchitis. As a result of our lawsuit, Transdev will contribute \$800,000 to local nonprofits working to cut air pollution and improve air quality for people living and working near Boston Public School yards.

NEW HAMPSHIRE

CLF and the Sierra Club are challenging a Clean Water Act permit issued recently for the Merrimack Station coal-fired power plant. The permit fails to include critical protections that the EPA had previously proposed – specifically the installation of a modern cooling-water system. Without that system, the plant continues to harm wildlife and the iconic Merrimack River, and the permit amounts to a subsidy of a dirty, outdated power plant.

RHODE ISLAND

CLF scored a significant victory in its fight to hold Shell Oil accountable for its years of climate deceit and neglect,

which puts public safety at risk. In September, a judge rejected Shell's motion to dismiss CLF's case, meaning that the suit against the oil giant and its Providence terminal can move forward. Shell has deceived regulators and the public about the risks of the climate crisis for years. As the case moves ahead, it will mark the first time a private fossil fuel entity will need to fully answer for its knowledge of climate change and the risks it presents.

VERMONT

After years of delay, Vermont officials have implemented a new rule requiring both new and existing properties with watertight surfaces to control their polluted stormwater runoff. CLF and its allies pushed for this new clean water permit, which is critical to achieving mandated cuts in water pollution. Only 3% of land area in the Lake Champlain Basin is developed, but it contributes 18% of the lake's phosphorus pollution.

TAKE ACTION! Your Voice Matters

Speak up and take action on these issues and more across New England. Sign up for CLF emails, so you'll be the first to know when we need your help.
www.clf.org/signup

Other ways to keep up to date:

- CLF's blog: clf.org/blog/
- Twitter: @clf
- Facebook: facebook.com/TheCLF

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LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT



As we round the corner into 2021, many of us are looking ahead with optimism: Surely this new year will be better than the last, with a president who believes in science

and COVID-19 vaccines that promise a return to some semblance of life as we knew it a year ago.

I have no doubt that 2021 can be a year of recovery, opportunity, and hope. But that requires us not to turn our backs on 2020 too quickly. This past year revealed injustices and systemic failures that have been hiding in plain sight for far too long.

It's no coincidence that the pandemic hit the most vulnerable among us first and worst, especially Black and brown communities already overburdened by soot, smog, and other toxins, in every New England state and nationwide. Decades of racist policies have created inequities in access to economic opportunity and quality healthcare for communities of color – and led to disproportionate harms from industrial facilities that pollute the air and generate blight in neighborhoods.

Both the pandemic and the summer's protests against police violence have forced

these deep, damaging inequities out into the light of day. Now, as we start the new year, it's up to us all to ensure that they not only stay there, but that we actively work to redress them.

In our cover story conversation, Dr. Thea James, a CLF board member and head of emergency medicine at Boston Medical Center, implores us to ask ourselves what systems allowed any of us to thrive, and what conditions make it impossible for others?

Exploring the answers to these questions can be uncomfortable – but also necessary, especially if we are to achieve our mission of a truly healthy and thriving New England *for all*.

This past year was one of the most challenging our country has faced in many of our lifetimes. But, given all that we accomplished and learned together in 2020, I am confident that we will boldly confront the work ahead with the courage, integrity, and humility that define CLF and our supporters.

I'm honored to have you as a partner in this critical work.

Gratefully,

Brad Campbell,
President

Bradley Campbell
President

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