

Pittsburgh's Human Rights City Alliance
Hosts Event to Recognize Mother Earth Day

On Thursday, April 24, 2014 The [Human Rights City Alliance](#) joined with the [Sierra Club](#) and [New Voices Pittsburgh](#) and the [American Friends Service Committee](#) of Pennsylvania's Racial Justice through Human Rights Youth Group to host our fourth major event aimed at helping build a people's movement that will make Pittsburgh a real human rights city. This event, held at the East Liberty Presbyterian Church, aimed to provide a space for people to think about the connections between environmental health and human rights.

Opening the event, Human Rights Alliance co-organizer Jackie Smith pointed out that the day many people know as "[Earth Day](#)" was renamed in 2009 to [International Mother Earth Day](#) by a United Nations Resolution brought forward by President Evo Morales of Bolivia, who is the only current indigenous president. The language of "Mother Earth" is important, since it highlights the worldview common to indigenous traditions and that views humans as belonging to the land, in contrast to the Western notions that people control the land. Since we are working to build a people's movement for human rights in Pittsburgh, it is important to learn from movements in other parts of the world. In response to the threats of climate change and other environmental challenges, many people are coming together around a call for a [Universal Declaration on the Rights of Mother Earth](#). They see such a declaration as essential to realizing universal human rights.

Recognizing the importance of indigenous knowledge to our re-thinking of how human beings should live on the earth, we asked **Miguel Sague** of the [Caney Indian Spiritual Circle](#) & Council of Three Rivers American Indian Center to help open our program by sharing some of the perspective that comes from native peoples' traditions. He observed that there is a real difference in how indigenous peoples understand Mother Earth, or *Pachamama*, in that some environmentalists portray "Mother" earth as vulnerable and weak, capable of being "raped" and "destroyed" by humans. But for indigenous peoples, PachaMAMA is powerful. She will survive whatever disrespect humans impose on her. It is we who are vulnerable and whose survival is threatened by our failure to respect the Earth's ecosystems. Miguel shared a song that was a prayer to Pachamama to help bring the group to a space for listening and learning.

La'Tasha Mayes spoke about the work New Voices Pittsburgh is doing at the intersections of gender, race, class and environment. She pointed out Pittsburgh's reality as a "tale of two cities." While most white people enjoy many of the human rights outlined in the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), the conditions in our city for Blacks rank among the worst in the country and world. She pointed out the need for us to find new ways to work together across the divisions and to help people see these inequalities. Our typical organizing practices mask the inequalities and prevent frank and open discussions about the realities so many residents face. Women and people of color are the most impacted by these inequities, and environmental racism is a major impediment to our realization of a human rights city. She identified some of the work New Voices Pittsburgh has been doing to help lift up the stories of the women of color who are so often silenced and to build connections across different areas of organizing.

Fred Brown, of the [Kingsley Association](#) & [Larimer Green Team](#) shared some of the work he is doing to help bring environmental consciousness and skills to the residents of Larimer, one of the poorest and most neglected neighborhoods in our city. He noted that the neighborhood had not seen any new investments in development for over fifty years, and his program is helping train residents to enter jobs in the field of sustainable technology. The Larimer Green Team is also working to help raise consciousness about energy use and bring training and building improvements to poor areas that can reduce energy use and waste. An important part of Fred's message is that we need to help communicate the [solutions](#) and not just the problems, and help people envision a different and better world.

Jordan Schultz-McArdie, a Capa student in the 11th grade, president of the student environmental club and member of Sierra Student Coalition and the American Friends Service Committee PA, Racial Justice through Human Rights Youth Group, then brought the voice of youth to the table. She discussed the problems in our education system, with its overcrowded classrooms and standardized testing regimens. She urged the group to be better mentors to young people--to help show them alternatives to the dominant culture's models of living and being in the world. She stressed the important point that while we can help each other learn about our different perspectives, nobody can speak for an entire group.

As with the other presentations, the message that people's lived experiences and analyses are complex, and to fully understand the problems we all face as well as to develop strategies to resist the multiple forms of oppression we face, requires that we take time to really listen to one another.

Following La'Tasha Mayes's observation that our policies would look much different if more women were in leadership positions, Jackie Smith asked the audience how our policies and actions would look if youth and future generations' voices were included in major decisions. How would our policies be different if we were thinking of their impacts on the next seven generations, as indigenous peoples' cultures do? Attention to future generations is a mechanism for preventing us from destroying our ability to live on the Earth.

The discussion raised a number of important lessons, such as the need to listen to the experiences and perspectives of diverse people in the city. It is especially important to seek out the voices of those most marginalized and excluded by the dominant social order. Those voices are disappeared from public view and from policy debate, creating a city with two different tales. La'Tasha Mayes pointed out that creating a more unified story requires attention to building relationships in our movement work. White-led organizations can't just invite people of color to help bring "diversity" to an event. There is a need to reach out to have honest conversations and shared leadership in planning and framing the work we do. This takes time and patience and lots of listening. It was also clear that this requires going beyond the use of email and social media to do 'outreach' for movement work. Getting on the phone and building relationships is key to the kind of work that is required if we are to realize significant social changes.

We might add to this observation that our society's failure to understand the connection between humans and the Earth is another big contributor to the inequalities we are fighting against. Developing new relationships with Mother Earth is important to our work for equity, justice, and survival. Miguel Sague helped close our gathering, first with observations of the many indigenous people in our community who come from different parts of Latin America, and who face additional human rights concerns as immigrants. Then he shared a song from his own Taino tradition that honors the male god of the universe. It was a powerful and poignant closing for our event.

Our aim with the Human Rights City Alliance is to create more spaces for these sorts of discussion and to confront the inequalities that prevent so many residents of the city from enjoying their human rights. Speakers highlighted the need to cultivate a greater awareness of the different experiences faced by people of color, low income people, youth, and others who are defined as "different," so that we can better understand how our fates are connected. Our panelists help show how poverty and racism will prevent us from addressing environmental challenges. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. observed, "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."