

How Young Legacies is Reimagining Outdoor Access for Black Youth

Throughout our nation's history, we have witnessed systemic injustices for our communities of color embedded in our nation's law, policies, and institutions that have perpetuated unequal treatment and exclusion. Black Americans in particular have endured multiple forms of oppression, segregation, and structural inequality. They continue to face these barriers today. One of the most lasting harms is the disproportionate environmental burdens placed on Black communities. The Center for American Progress, a public policy research and advocacy organization focused on economic and social issues, released a report, published in July 2020, revealing disparities in access to outdoor spaces for communities of color, in which it was written that they are "three times more likely than white communities to live in nature-deprived areas" (Rowland-Shea et al., 2020). In history, this issue has stemmed from racist zoning laws and redlining practices. In 1933, the United States government initiated the New Deal Program to address housing shortages. However, these programs were designed to benefit white-middle class families, and Black Americans and other people of color were systemically excluded from these opportunities. The Federal Housing Administration, established in 1934, "furthered the segregation efforts by refusing to insure mortgages in and near African-American neighborhoods-a policy known as redlining," and anywhere African Americans lived, was marked red, signaling they were "too risky" to insure mortgages (Gross, 2017). This unjust and unfair policy of redlining has put disproportionate burdens on marginalized communities. Resulting in ethnic wealth gaps, housing injustices, and limited access to opportunities such as education and employment (Gosalvez, 2020). However, in the 21st century, with climate change emerging as one of the world's most pressing issues, it is clear that one of the most harmful consequences of these discriminatory housing policies has been the lack of access to natural spaces for Black communities, especially for Black youth. However, like many problems, it's multifaceted; not only is this disparity a matter of environmental injustice, but also a matter of public health and mental well-being.

Climate change, in particular, has intensified these burdens. Rising temperatures, extreme weather, sea-level rise, and loss of biodiversity are disproportionately affecting marginalized communities. In particular, Black neighborhoods, due to redlining and disinvestment, are more likely to endure the "urban heat island effect", where they experience higher temperatures due to minimal tree cover or poor infrastructure that exacerbates increased heat effects. These same

communities are often located near highways or industrial infrastructure, contributing to elevated rates of cardiovascular issues such as asthma. Poor infrastructure due to a lack of disinvestment in their communities also makes them more vulnerable to extreme weather events, and a lack of natural space has been associated with negative impacts on mental health (Strife and Downey, 2009). This environmental exclusion especially impacts Black youth, according to the article, *To Reconnect Black Kids and Teens to the Great Outdoors, San Antonio's Alex Bailey Is Teaching Skills — and Confronting Structural Racism* by Bekah McNeal spotlights Alex Bailey, the founder of Black Outside, a San Antonio-based organization which aims to encourage African-American youth and teens to participate more in outdoor activities, references The Outdoor Foundation's (nonprofit working to promote outdoor accessibility and community health) 2019 survey, in which it was reported that Black children have the lowest overall participation rate in outdoor activities among all ethnic groups. Even more so, fewer than 40% of Black youth aged 6-17 reported engaging in outdoor recreation at least once per month compared to approximately 60% of their white peers. Despite increased awareness of this issue, a survey by The Outdoor Foundation in 2023 still found that Black Americans "have the lowest overall participation rate in outdoor recreation" (The Outdoor Foundation 2023). Environmental health researchers from the University of Colorado, Susan Strife and Liam Downey, have found that "physical inactivity and lack of exposure to the natural world" may have an associated link to the increased rise of mental and cognitive disorders in children in the United States (Strife and Downey, 2009). While these effects, exacerbated by climate change, have disproportionately impacted communities of color, particularly Black youth. There is good news: numerous community organizations are working hard to combat these effects in various ways.

Community-led organizations such as Young Legacies, a nonprofit founded by sisters Alex and Angelica Young, are working to counter these trends by reclaiming outdoor spaces for Black youth. Young Legacies works to increase nature accessibility through culturally affirming outdoor experiences that celebrate Black identity. Their camp, which goes by the name Camp Legacy, creates a transformative summer camp experience grounded in "Black joy", instilling confidence and independence in their campers as well as cultivating a deeper connection with the outdoors. Campers not only build friendships but also cultivate a deeper sense of belonging in spaces that have historically been denied to them.

The importance of such programs is underscored by a 2020 Yale Center for Business and the Environment report, which found that nature-based programs have been shown to improve youth mental health and foster deeper connections to the land (Himschoot et. al, 2020). Moreover, over the past two decades, “rates of depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, and body dysmorphia have all modestly decreased” among youth involved in these types of programs (Himschoot et. al, 2020). These experiences have been proven to build “self-confidence, self-worth, autonomy, self-reliance, strength, coordination, focus, problem-solving, teamwork skills, " and lower negative emotions. (Himschoot et. al, 2020). Similarly, *the Nature Gap* report on “Confronting Racial and Economic Disparities in the Destruction and Protection of Nature in America” emphasized that children who spend time in nature exhibit “improved health and cognitive functions” and develop “a lifelong appreciation of nature” (Rowland-Sheat et. al, 2020). Furthermore, scholars from the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Illinois, Chicago note that youth programs that center racial identity such as Young Legacies does can positively shape ethnic racial identity development, which is the sense of belonging that an individual builds in connection to an ethnic group and how they are perceived in society (Loyd and Williams, 2017). These components of having an environment that acknowledges and respects Black youth, as well as one that seeks to build their sociodevelopmental skills and teach them to be nature advocates, are critical to Black youth flourishing.

While reading research from scientific scholars can offer a compelling argument for as to why nature-based youth programs are valuable, it can often feel disconnected from lived experiences, especially for families that are seeking culturally grounded spaces for their children. In contrast, testimonials of parents about the reasons why they registered their children in Young Legacies may provide a more grounded approach to the scientific research mentioned above. Some common themes observed in the reasons parents sign up their kids for Camp Legacy include cultural pride and representation, community connection, outdoor access, and leadership and personal development, which they view as benefits from their kids' participation in Camp Legacy. Along the lines of cultural pride and representation, one camper's parent, Latoya, signed up their son because she wanted him “to experience a culturally conscious camp”. Similarly, Kennesha expressed that “as a family in PNW and rooted in the South and Black Southern culture” they have struggled to ground their kids' identities “in the beauty of the diaspora and find healthy Black spaces” for them to connect in the PNW, however they felt that Camp Legacy

would offer this. Speaking to community connection and leadership development, another parent, Shea, wanted her daughter to join because Camp Legacy not only “celebrates and empowers Black youth” but also fosters “confidence, community, and cultural pride in a supportive environment”. Lastly, parents emphasized the importance of outdoor access and exploration on their child’s leadership and personal development. ChiAurelia reflecting on her daughter’s past participation, “Brooklyn had so much fun last time, the staff is great, it’s so important for melanated kids to be around others that are a reflection of them, the activities allow the kids to expand their experience/knowledge & mindset”. Likewise, Janett, remarked how the camp would be an excellent experience for her child “to step out of his comfort zone”, by building up his leadership and social connections. These parents' testimonials provide real, concrete evidence of the researched positive benefits that scientific researchers have found in nature-based programs, such as Young Legacies. However, as seen through these testimonials, Young Legacies has taken a step further in its organization and created a camp that truly centers on the identities of Black youth, ensuring they feel supported, included, and loved within the community.

Although systemic inequalities in access to nature persist, organizations like Young Legacies, through their work, offer a powerful model for repair and justice. Their work shows that access to nature is vital for maintaining mental, emotional, and physical health, as well as for affirming personal identity and community belonging. By creating spaces where Black youth can explore the natural world, advocate for it, build confidence and independence, and feel connected, Young Legacies challenges our nation’s long history of environmental exclusion. As we continue to face the intertwined crises of climate change and environmental injustices, it becomes increasingly clear that we must have equitable access to the outdoors to achieve a fully just and inclusive future. Supporting and being a part of organizations like Young Legacies is essential to building an environmentally sustainable world where all communities can thrive and to create the next generation of environmental stewards.

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