

Dr. Mildred McClain on Environmental Justice: A Lifetime Commitment

Summary

Dr. Mildred McClain has spent five decades on the front lines of the environmental justice movement, from a Savannah River Site radioactive spill in 1991 that catalyzed the founding of Harambee House, to building resiliency hubs across Savannah's West Side today. In this wide-ranging conversation, Dr. McClain, founder and executive director emeritus of Harambee House / Citizens for Environmental Justice, joins host and mentee Eriqah Vincent to talk about the origins of her environmental justice career, the climate impacts facing coastal Georgia, Harambee House's international work in Senegal and beyond, and the spiritual grounding that has sustained her through decades of this fight.

Key Takeaways

- Harambee House was founded after a 1991 tritium spill at the Savannah River Site, a Department of Energy nuclear weapons facility in Aiken, South Carolina, when Dr. McClain realized no organization was addressing the impact of nuclear weapons production on communities of color.
- Harambee House is building a network of resiliency hubs across eight West Side Savannah communities, transforming existing community centers with solar power, battery storage, and EV chargers so they can support residents during emergencies and every day in between.
- Workforce development is central to the organization's approach, with training in environmental remediation, solar installation, and other renewable energy fields, because, as Dr. McClain puts it, "we cannot talk about justice without talking about jobs."
- Harambee House's international work spans decades, from Dr. McClain's first trip to Tanzania in the 1970s to Harambee House's current partnership with the Senegalese government on reforestation, beach cleanup, and youth programs.
- Dr. McClain's advice for the next generation: stay rooted in whatever your spirituality is, because the work is a marathon, not a sprint, and self-determination, defining yourself rather than letting anyone else define you, is essential to sustaining a lifetime commitment to justice.

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Eriqah Vincent: Hello, everyone, thank you so much for joining us once again for this Drawdown Georgia interview series. I can't really even fully express how excited I am for this interview today. I am joined today by not only an environmental justice icon in Georgia, in this country, but also a movement mother of mine, Dr. Mildred McClain. I'm so glad that you all will get to see just a snippet of the light that she brings to this work. Thank you so much, Dr. McClain, for being here with us today, thank you for being here — we will get right into it.

I'll start off with a little introduction, but you are so masterful with your words, so I will not take up too much space. Dr. McClain has been an icon in this work for over 40 years. I often, when I speak of her — I was on a call the other day and said, folks I know in this state doing this work who've been around longer than anybody on this call right now, in the work, and are still fighting for community, for Black and Brown folks, definitely in Savannah, definitely on a national level, and definitely internationally. So if you're not familiar with Dr. Mildred McClain, you will be, just a bit, by this episode, and I encourage you to learn more, not only about Dr. McClain, but also about Harambee House, Citizens for Environmental Justice.

Dr. McClain, I'll hand it right over to you, and ask you to tell us about the history of Harambee House, also known as Citizens for Environmental Justice, and a little about the work the organization is doing in the community.

Dr. Mildred McClain: I'm excited to be on stage with you — you are one of the up-and-coming young leaders in environmental justice and climate justice work. I'm excited, because I started off as a youngster in the civil rights movement — as a matter of fact, at age 13, we were here in Savannah, marching to desegregate, first of all, the lunch counters and the schools and all of that. It's always a pleasure to be in the company of folk who are just like me, folk who are ready to be on the front line for justice, but with a sense of humility, a sense of love, and a sense of commitment. It's not a job, it's not a career, it's not something fashionable that we just jump into — it's a lifetime commitment.

So I've been doing this social justice work, like I said, since age 13. I was one of the second people in Savannah to integrate Savannah High School, which was one of our leading high schools at the time, and worked with the youth group of the NAACP, and was encouraged by a great leader of ours from Savannah, Earl T. Shinhoster, who went on to be a great leader in the NAACP. He grabbed me one day and said, you're going to a meeting — and so I've been kind of hooked ever since.

The history of Harambee House is a pretty interesting place, in that I never thought about organizing an organization or an institution to engage specifically in environmental justice work. I'd always been part of the broader movement around social justice, and working to change racism in America. But sort of serendipitously, I'd been working with the American Friends Service Committee in Atlanta, Georgia, as one of their coordinators for the nuclear freeze movement — so I was moving around the country, trying to encourage people to look at what the impact of the nuclear industry would be. But when I moved back to Savannah in 1990, I was looking at what was going on in my community — I'd been gone for decades.

So one morning, I think it was 1991, we woke up right after Christmas, and there had been a spill from the Savannah River Site, located in Aiken, South Carolina — 20,000 picocuries of tritium. And we were all like, okay, what's that, what's that? Because we didn't know anything about a picocurie — we're not scientists, nor did we know anything about tritium, and truth be told, because I'm honest, we didn't know anything really about the Savannah River Site. We'd heard, throughout our childhood, this thing about a bomb plant, and we were thinking, what do you mean, "bums" off the street, people who are poor and stuff, what are you talking about? So when this spill occurred, we jumped right into trying to do some work, some research, trying to respond, because we knew it must have been something big, because it was all over the newspaper, all over the newscast, this horrible accident that occurred 125 miles upriver from us. And that catapulted us into the work.

About six months prior to that, we'd been in discussion with a young man out of Sparta, Georgia, who was talking about the landfills and municipal dumps that were impacting the health of the people in Sparta. He said, what are y'all going to do — he kind of challenged me, what you gonna do, girl? I'm a high school teacher in the public schools, I think I'm doing quite a bit — but he challenged me, and said that was not enough. So one morning, I woke up after the spill, and I said, we need to put together an organization, or at least a group of people, that can begin to look at what the impact is, on communities of color, of the nuclear weapons production site. Because at that time, all of the communities were responding to landfills, and the petrochemical companies, and the paper mills, and all of that, and no one was looking at this horrific source of poisoning in our community — no one wanted to take that on.

Around that time, the first People of Color Environmental Justice Summit was being planned, and as a result of our kind of initiating work, we were asked to come and sit at the table, to serve on the planning committee, though they'd been working for over a year, so we were just getting in there. That struggle, around what's called federal facilities, under the jurisdiction of the Department of Energy, was primarily being launched by the Indigenous community, having a very difficult time engaging government and community about what was going on in the backyards of people who lived near the Savannah River Site, which is in South Carolina, the people living in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, near the Oak Ridge facility, people living in New Mexico around Los Alamos, people living in Washington around Hanford, Rocky Flats in Colorado. We were like the new kid on the block, and we were one of the few, if not the only, Black organizations that began to look at this very complex, very difficult issue of exposure to radiation in its different forms.

Around that time, there were decisions being made by the Department of Energy relative to the receipt back to America of 15,000 spent nuclear fuel rods, and the disposition of 50 metric tons of weapons-grade surplus plutonium. We were like, we were already fighting International Paper, fighting issues around the port, and here we come with this massive, complex facility that had been operating in our community for quite some time. For Savannah, we're downriver, the downwind port. So that was the real beginning of Harambee House jumping into the environmental justice movement, head on, hands on, feet on, with very little resource — we got started with a grant of \$2,500 that was given to us by Scott Douglas. We were just really excited to have the opportunity to join the environmental justice movement, to represent people's voices that had been disenfranchised and had never really spoken about the military complex in this country — because we weren't just dealing with the Department of Energy, but the Department of Defense as well. Those are the big boys — EPA is strong and powerful and all of that, but when you start dealing with the Department of Energy and the Department of Defense, that's a whole other arena.

Our goal was to educate our communities, to identify exactly what the issues were, and what we were facing, and to engage all of the communities along the Georgia and South Carolina side, because that facility, although it's in Aiken, its workers, about half come from Georgia and half from South Carolina. Our goal was to engage particularly the rural areas along that corridor, because they were the ones being most impacted, and yet they did not have a seat at the table. So we had to figure out how to use the National Environmental Policy Act, NEPA — I actually became the NEPA ninja — how do we use this tool to make sure regular moms and pops, Aunt Sally, Uncle Bubba, Pooky and them, were at the table, because they were, in fact, the ones bearing this horrific impact of all the activities going on at the Savannah River Site, as it intersected with twelve other facilities around the country. So even the vernacular was very new

to us — we had a very steep learning curve, not only for the community, but for ourselves, taking on this mantle of leading this fight.

The genesis of Harambee House, I'd have to acknowledge, really started way back when I lived in Tallahassee — we did a lot of work around community engagement on health issues, and we created what was called the C.W. Quinn Community Clinic, which we used as a tool to gather people. We were talking about how we could create a facility, an institute that would be ours, that we could use to launch any type of campaign around community, or environmental justice, or climate justice. We said, if we ever got a building, and ever formed an organization, we would name it Harambee. The reason is, in Kiswahili, spoken in East Africa — Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda — the word "harambee" means "let's pull together." We thought that would be the strategy, the value, the tactic, the attitude of it all — pulling as many different people together, as many different sectors, as many different allies and partners as we could, to really fight for the survival of Big Mama. And Big Mama is none other than the Earth. Because when we talk about what comes out of a paper mill or a petrochemical company, that's child's play compared to the impact of this whole nuclear piece. So we knew that, in order to push the needle, or even gain attention, we'd have to have as many voices at the table as possible.

At that time, we were using the terminology "stakeholder" — you know how the government is, they'll throw a terminology at you, and you've got to have your paper just to understand what they're talking about, you need your glossary. So we had to pull together as many stakeholders as possible, and believe it or not, people were eager, because they'd been seeing the health effects, calling for some way to get in the game, but it had just never presented itself. So when we went to community leaders like Mayor Emma Gresham in Keysville, Georgia — she was ready, and we participated in monitoring the first election held in Keysville in 56 years, when she came on as mayor — we made sure the Ku Klux Klan did not stop that process of voting, and she was overwhelmingly chosen as mayor.

So those communities were hungry to come to the table, to try to do something about what was going on, because so many people were dying from cancer, all forms of cancer, and when you touch a community's health, that's like the pulse of the community. So we came in saying, let us educate ourselves, and try to bring science into the picture, to support the claims of the people who were experiencing unusual amounts of various cancers, particularly the workers from the Savannah River Site — they were going home to their families and taking home some pretty dangerous stuff. So, again, that was the beginning of Harambee House.

I know I went all the way around the world, but I think those pieces are very important to the historical beginnings of Harambee House, because, unfortunately, that piece around the federal facilities and the nuclear weapons complex is still marginalized. It's still a very dangerous sector of work to be engaged in, and it's very complex, so people don't really want to take that on. There are some communities still fighting, because they're right in the mouth of it and can't do anything else, but very few resources are put in the hands of those particularly Indigenous communities, to fight against what's happening to them as a result of where they're situated, and their importance to the nuclear weapons production facilities in this country.

Eriqah Vincent: Absolutely, thank you so much for that background, and that makes so much sense on so many levels, as far as where Harambee House started, and I'm sure others are aware of how you all are handling that now, both the nuclear weapons development piece, but also with other pieces. To that end, you talked about the environmental and climate impact — are there other climate impacts you want to mention facing your community down in South

Georgia, and more particularly, what are the solutions and resiliency efforts you're finding are most meaningful and valuable to the communities you serve, and how is Harambee House contributing to those solutions and resiliency efforts, in the face of those environmental and climate impacts?

Dr. Mildred McClain: Oh, girl, you asked a big, complex, long question, so I'm gonna try to come at it as best I can. We're here on the coast — straight up and down, no chaser — and since I was a little girl in Savannah, I moved here when I was three years old, and I'm 76 now, so that's 70-plus years living here, and we have always had a problem with flooding. Now, with climate change in full force, we experience a greater degree of horrific weather events. Our hurricanes, our tropical storms, our rains, our heat, has increased to a level where we say we're in danger. Just the other day, we had Tropical Storm Debby come through Savannah, and like many other hurricanes that have come through the last decade or two, it was terrible, particularly in terms of the flooding issue. When you talk about something practical and right on the ground, flooding becomes a key issue. Our neighbors in Tybee, they talk about sea level rise, and we need to be concerned with that as well. So we go from the macro issue all the way down to the micro — the big one to the little one.

When you see that we still do not have in place a strong, robust emergency preparedness and response apparatus, to assist particularly our elderly, our disabled, our sick people, our young people, to evacuate in a safe and cogent manner — that is something we have to look at and change. We're experiencing a hotter summer — summer started in February, so we start sweating, and we're still living in substandard housing, made with substandard material, so our elders are in sweatboxes. And as a side note, their utility bills are up, skyrocketing, to where they're unable to keep up, and they have to make choices between, I'm going to get my medicine this month, or I'm going to pay the electric bill. All of that is intertwined.

We suffer from legacy pollution, air pollution — so, outside of the climate piece, we've got that environmental justice aspect, of the industries located in Savannah, and most of our communities on the West Side live right in the mouth of the port, so anything that happens weather-wise is much more critical for those residents, who are living in the old housing stock, the substandard housing stock, right in the middle, in the donut hole, of many industries that are still not working the way they should, with community-building partnerships that address these issues. So even though you talk about climate impacts and environmental justice issues, one of the central ones is our inability to create authentic partnerships with government, business and industry, and community-based organizations, to do the right thing. Not one sector can address all of these issues alone.

When you're talking about air pollution, and asking residents to be able to understand what that is, how to monitor it — one of the strategies we have here in Savannah is, we've created an air monitoring program, where we're training residents on how to actually assess what's going on in their air, and create strategies to mitigate it, how to interpret the data that comes from those monitors, in such a way that they'll be able to use it to go to government, business, and industry, and say, okay, here's what's going on, here's what we need to do about it, here are the resources we need, and here are the partnerships that have to be in place for us to be successful.

That's a key piece, in addition to the climate impacts and environmental justice — we're looking at building resiliency hubs. The Harambee House itself, its facility, serves as a resiliency hub — that's the new kind of bold, sexy thing that everybody's engaged in, and so we too are trying to create a network of resiliency hubs in Savannah. That includes eight communities on the West

Side, where the most egregious environmental justice and climate impacts occur, and we're trying to garner the resources to actually create, and use, the community centers already in place, transforming them into resiliency hubs, with all the solar bells and whistles, the ability to store energy in batteries, EV chargers, all of that good stuff — because these communities have agreed they want to be part of advancing solutions, rather than always talking about what the problems are. We know we suffer from cumulative health impacts, we know about legacy pollution, we know about redlining, we can go on and on — but what are we doing about it?

We're trying to work with our city government — it's a challenge to work with the county, but we're trying to do that. We've been working with the industries in that area through something called the Community Business Roundtable, an initiative we put together a few decades ago, where we have all the partners at the table, talking to one another, generating solutions and ways to address the issues identified by the community — not by Harambee House, we're a stakeholder, we're in the community, but I don't live over on the West Side of Savannah where these prominent issues exist, so we have to follow the lead of the citizens themselves, the residents — we changed to "citizens" and then to "residents," because we wanted it to be more inclusive, and we use the terminology "resident driven." When it's resident driven, you don't have to make somebody come to a session or a meeting, they're already there, they want to know how they can reduce the utility burden they carry regularly, how they call for a health assessment to have the data show and back up the anecdotal stories.

So I'm trying to give you a sense of how we approach the work. Some of the projects — of course, for us, we cannot talk justice without talking jobs, so a critical part of our work centers on workforce development. Our primary training right now is training disadvantaged workers, returning citizens, and young people in the field of environmental remediation — how do you take lead out of buildings, how do you do asbestos remediation, deal with hazardous materials. And we've introduced solar training — how do you construct panels, how do you install them, so that we too can participate in the greening of America, renewable energy. We worked with the City of Savannah in passing, unanimously, 100% Savannah, a renewable clean energy initiative here in Savannah — it took everybody being at the table to do that, but now it's a set of principles and work guiding Savannah in how we reduce the carbon footprint of our city, in collaboration and partnership with our community stakeholders.

Our resiliency hubs are slated to be able to function 24 hours a day, because there's always an emergency — how do we create certified emergency response teams in every church, every neighborhood association, so the deacons and the deaconesses and the mothers of the church and the teenagers are all working together, so that when a storm comes, they're able to gather themselves, and they've trained on how to respond to a medical emergency, a tree falling. So our resiliency hubs also include the aspect of workforce development. We also house emergency supplies — we were able to use our resiliency hub to respond to COVID-19, that egregious assault on the health of our people, by providing masks, providing food, providing gift cards to help with utility bills. You have to do that, because when you're building a base in the community, they respond to you based on how you've responded to them, and taken care of them, on the regular — not just in a state of emergency.

That's part of what our resiliency hubs are promoting — we're also promoting entrepreneurship, how you get in on these renewable energy enterprises, how you set up a charging station right at your neighborhood association center, so some money and resources come back to you. Because we're dealing with a multifaceted movement, with a lot of moving pieces, but they all align and intersect. To that extent, we're engaged in an initiative right now — over the past year,

we've created a Southeast regional environmental justice 10-year strategic action plan, that's attempted to capture all the primary issues of the eight states that make up EPA Region 4, and we've tried to provide strategies to address those priorities, identify resources that are needed, partnerships that need to be aligned — it's really taking on a life of its own, because this is the first time in our history we've done this. The old saying goes, if you fail to plan, plan to fail — so we wanted to put together a plan that would address the identified environmental and climate priorities of these eight states, including the coast, as well as the rural areas, because all of the communities are being impacted. This plan tries to bring as many different sectors together as possible, to address these priorities, and build on this moment when an unprecedented amount of federal dollars are available. Now, it's hard to get that money, but at least it's on the table — that's the first time we've had it on the table. Communities are in the process of trying to build these alliances, partnerships, plans, and strategies, to get this money to move the needle over the next 10 years, so that in 2035, we're able to say, indeed, we have reduced our carbon footprint, we've elevated the quality of living in impacted communities, and, oh, by the way, we've protected democracy — because in all that we do, we're always emphasizing that the movement is also about building power, so you can influence decision-makers and the decision-making process. Richard Moore, one of our environmental justice pioneers, always reminds us, if you're not at the table, you're going to be on the menu, and we definitely do not want to be on the menu. We want to be guiding those discussions, guiding the allocation of resources, and building in a way we have not built in the past, acknowledging all the lessons learned from the last 30 or 40 years.

Eriqah Vincent: Yes, you did, we absolutely did, and I'm so glad — there are so many things you mentioned in that answer, and I'm so glad you talked about, because I was going to mention it if you didn't, Harambee House's emergency preparedness work, because I've been part of a mini training that you all did around emergency preparedness. It was just a little bit of time — I think when we did it, it was a couple of years ago — you said, this is just a microcosm of our larger training, which takes a couple of days, and even in that 45 minutes to an hour or two, I learned so much, not only about the flooding and things happening in Savannah and on the coast, but also how to prepare for emergencies myself, as someone who lives in the Atlanta area, more inland, but still — we're joking now online about how we'd love to live in some precedented times, because everything is unprecedented, and it would be nice to be in some precedented times, at least take me back to precedented times. But I'm so glad you mentioned it, because that's so vital for Savannah, so vital for us to know in general, in communities across the country and across the world, but also to learn in Black communities — because something else I learned from you directly, over the course of the 10 years we've known each other, is that, yes, we have to be at the table, yes, we have to be in community with the city and the county as much as we can, but also, no one is coming to save us, so we have to save ourselves. It's not an option. Community has to be educated, but has to lead these conversations around what we're doing, what we can learn, and how we change things. Harambee House has always been a shining light to me, of what real community-led solutions and resiliency look like, and how the folks who work at Harambee House, and work with Harambee House, live in or are directly from Savannah, and are invested directly in their community's health. That is what real community-led work looks like, and I've always admired that work, and seen it firsthand. So I'm glad you mentioned the emergency preparedness work, and all the other things you all are doing. I also know — and I don't know if you wanted to mention a little about the international connections Harambee House has — I know you spent a lot of time in Senegal, and I'm looking to get to the continent over the next year or two, so I don't know if you wanted to highlight any of that before we get to the next question, because I think that's an interesting part of the work Harambee

House is doing, the international connections between Georgia and the continent of Africa, and other places.

Dr. Mildred McClain: Yeah, two quick responses, in terms of emergency preparedness and response — that's critical, and we start off at the very basic. Do you got your bug-out bag, right? Are you ready to roll when you got to go? Do you have your medicines, do you have your documents, do you have your emergency contacts — there's about 40 or 50 items, small things like a can opener, your flashlight, batteries, those things need to be in place prior to an emergency. And that includes the weather, but a wildfire is not weather, active shooting is not weather — you want to be prepared, if you have to move out of your residence, you want to be able to move, and survive that period of time, because you've prepared yourself, and know what to do in terms of response. So that bug-out bag, that emergency bag you need to have in place, that's where we start. Then we start talking about definitions — one of the key parts of emergency preparedness and response is the development of these CERT teams, and CERT stands for Community Emergency Response Team. That means you've gone through at least a 24-hour emergency preparedness and response training, which includes how you respond to the medical events associated with an incident.

We're trying to encourage every church — look, your deacon board needs to be a CERT, your senior choir needs to be a CERT, your junior choir needs to be certified, the neighborhood association needs to be certified, because not everybody is going to evacuate. We know this, historically and culturally — elders are tied to the land, to where they live, and just because a hurricane is coming, they're not going to jump up and say, I'm leaving, they're set in their ways. So how do you assist them in sheltering safely in place? You have to have teams ready and prepared to work with the people who will always shelter in place. So that's the CERT piece.

The international work is serious — I've been engaged in international work since 1974, a little before that, but I was able to participate in the Sixth Pan African Congress, held in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, the first one ever on the continent of Africa. The Pan African Congress was a forum that allowed African countries and their allies to meet, to plan the growth and development of Africa, to look at the repatriation of Africans from the diaspora, the taking back of its resources, and how to be a world player on the world stage. That was my beginning — it's where I met President Julius Nyerere. He was promoting, at the time, the concept of Ujamaa, which means cooperative economics, and what he was trying to create was self-sufficient villages in rural areas, where the populace didn't have to flock to the big cities to get jobs and get educated — they could get that right in their own home space. At the time, they were calling it, oh, he's trying to be socialist, he's returning to African communalism — call it what you will, it was working for the people, and because people were trying to destroy it, we knew it was something that was going to be good, and they fought him on that. But that was my first introduction to Africa, and I was so amazed about going home, as someone who had been stolen. I told the young people at the university I would be back within a year — my visit was so powerful, I was back in six months, and I was a married woman. I packed my two girls up, went to live in Tanzania for a little over a year, and that was the start of my Pan-African self, my jumping on the Black Star Line with the Honorable Marcus Mosiah Garvey, who said we had to go back to Africa, to take all the things we had learned, and all the skills we had gained, to rebuild Africa, better and better and better. I took that to heart.

In 1974, Harambee House launched its first youth delegation to Senegal, because our thinking has always been, we have to invest in the growth and development of our youth leaders, because I started at 13, so it's my job to nourish at least somebody who's 12, to come through

the ranks and become an elder in the movement. We took 12 young people to Senegal, they stayed for three weeks, interfaced with the Boy Scouts and youth groups over there, did beach cleaning and community engagement, learned how to speak Wolof, learned how to do art, built relationships — and that was really the beginning of our sustained international effort. The Honorable Malcolm X said we would not be just, if we did not enter the international arena, and that we had to always have our presence at the U.N. That's why, at Harambee House, we always try to send a delegation to the Conference of Parties, that's responsible for the climate change work at the international level. There's a great controversy over whether or not that's a waste of resources, but many decisions are being made there, and you need to be there — if you're not there, you can have no influence. I know it's expensive to go to these places — I've been to seven so far. I've been to Bali, I've been to Durban, I've been to Paris, I've been to Copenhagen, to Dubai, to Egypt. I don't think I'm going this year, because I'd like to see us organize a people's talk, and host it in Africa, where people get together, look at the official agenda of the official Conference of the Parties, and respond to it from the community level, and then have the folks who go in with the blue badges insinuate that into the conversation. It was Cecil Corbin-Mark who said, if you're not there, trying to get even one word changed in the documents, you're not doing your work. So our presence is required, and you might not see the full-fledged impact, because you don't have the blue badge, but even if you have the green badge, and you go into the NGO pavilion, you see the innovative solutions communities are coming up with, that will help reduce the carbon footprint and save Big Mama. So we have to go — our international presence is required, and believe it or not, many countries look to the diaspora for assistance, for resources, for partnerships — how do we link with Africa, to take advantage of the raw materials they're shipping out of Africa to America to be manufactured, and sent back over there and sold, keeping that cycle going. We continue to see these huge container vessels go to Senegal, and pollute their oceans with liquefied natural gas — we can't do that. So we have to be in Panama, we have to be in Costa Rica, we have to be in Guyana, we have to be in Barbados, we have to be in Belize, because we're talking about a worldwide revolution, to save the planet, but also to enfranchise those who have been disenfranchised — that era is over. So if we're not going to these — and I'm afraid of airplanes, I'm afraid of heights — but I have to go, because I have to have those discussions and dialogues, and be in the making of partnerships.

We were just approved by the Senegalese government — Harambee House has just been approved, with its partners, to be an official partner in Senegal. Oh my God, I'm just so excited, it just happened in the last few weeks, and we're taking delegation after delegation after delegation. Many people, like Dr. Cosima Boston, my sister, Queen Mother Myesha Mitchell out of Florida, Reverend Michael Malcolm out of Alabama — we cannot forget Sister Felicia with the HBCU Green Fund, and Jackie Patterson, and yourself — all of these people have always called for an international agenda, where we intersect and build those strong partnerships, because it's a worldwide movement, it's not just Savannah, that's in the U.S. So those international partnerships, links, and initiatives — right now we're helping, our outfit's working with the HBCU Green Fund, to plant 27,500 trees in Senegal, along the Senegal River, where it meets Mauritania. We're helping to clean up the beach, teaching young people coding, we're helping to build an orphanage in Senegal that will house 100 young people who sleep on the street. That's real movement, because when you can improve the quality of life of a child, or a widow who's lost her husband in a war they knew nothing about, then you're achieving the essence of environmental justice. Because it ain't — you know, all this environmental justice, climate justice, social justice, racial justice — it's just justice. Whatever adjective or label you put in front of it, it's just justice. How do we live in such a way that nobody is bearing the brunt of nobody else's

decision? The planet can feed everybody, all the little people and the billionaires as well, but hey, we want to eat a nice healthy salad too, and not pay \$40 for it.

The ancestors assured us that this earth has been here millions and millions of years, so we're just a tiny speck in a long timeline. But when they look back on our history, what will they be able to say, Sister Eriqah? What will you have — what will be under your name, what will be under the name of Drawdown Georgia, what will be your historical record? Anybody listening or watching this, check yourself, see what you're contributing. Did you throw that piece of paper down on the sidewalk and not pick it up? It's as simple as that — because we like to live in the micro world, but sometimes those little itty-bitty things help reduce the burden. It's this intergenerational movement that is setting, and has set, the tone for how we deal with every environmental justice problem we identify. However many climate impacts we scientifically explain, what it boils down to is how we work together as people, to put in place policies, programs, and resources to do the job — but in such a way that it's not big business, industries, and big academic institutions, and — I'm going to say it — big EJ organizations, getting all the money, then trying to tell us what to do, and trying to disenfranchise us from the table. Those are critical issues we have to face. It ain't all hunky-dory in the EJ movement and the climate justice movement — it impedes us from the overall goal we set for ourselves, way back in 1991, at the first People of Color Environmental Justice Summit. We put together 17 principles that were supposed to guide our behavior, our thinking, and a lot of people just use them as trophies — pull them out when you want to, dust them off, say them, but don't live by them every day. But those are principles and documents we put in place, to help guide our movement in such a way that we'd have not only a material outcome, but a spiritual outcome, because we don't live just in the physical body — we have a spirit as well, and we need to pull that more to the table, because that's a more honest being, you know — our scientific knowledge, our competency, our subject matter expertise — we need more prayer, and more singing. They used to not want me to come to the meeting, because they said I sang and prayed too much — I said, well, let me keep that on my resume, because it has moved people to come to the table, when they were so scared, they never thought they could even have a meeting with the Savannah River Site and the Department of Energy where their voice mattered. And they were scared — oh baby, they were scared — but we would gird ourselves up in prayer, sing, get fired up, put on our armor, and go on up in there, and talk plenty smack. But we were there in numbers, and numbers matter. Your action matters. Your vote matters. You being registered ain't nothing — it's when you get up and go to the poll, and use that registered vote you have, and cast it, that's when you're in the game. So we have to use every weapon at our disposal, to continue to move the environmental justice movement. One of the things we have to do is an assessment — where have we come in 30 years, where have we come, and where do we need to go, and how do we go after it? How do we hold industry and business, and HBCUs, and major institutions, and big greens and little greens, and big EJ groups, accountable to Aunt Sally, Aunt Sarah, Uncle Henry, Uncle Bubba, Pooky and them — because those are the ones who matter, not the ones who graduated from college and universities and have all these degrees behind our names — if it's not at the service of the community, at the service of the least of us, then we didn't need to go on and just join the enemy.

That's the energy of Harambee House — it's rooted in family, tackling critical, deep, complex, difficult issues, where our knowledge level is not where it needs to be. But thank God we are raising up a new generation of leaders who are competent, who are skilled. The only thing we have to deal with, with them, is making sure they don't get hardy, tardy, and maybe from the new oppressors — it's very difficult now, they've made it hard for you to get a dedicated person

without paying them \$90,000 a year, and a community-based organization, we don't have \$90,000 a year to pay what you deserve to get, but you still have to figure out a way to work with us — you still have to figure out how you'll use your skills and knowledge, and place it at our disposal, because believe it or not, the earth will compensate you. In 2019, I think I made about \$12,500, and I'm a mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother — \$12,500 ain't do me nothing, but that's what I made, besides some little honorariums here and there, but that W-9, or W-2, or whatever you get, or 1099, said \$12,500. But that was because the investment I was making is an investment in my people, and, like I say, always in Big Mama, because at some point, my spiritual belief is, I'm going to be held accountable, and I want, when that account is being reviewed, for them to say, I gave it all I had, gave what was needed. And I want to hear the words, as my mama used to say, "well done, thy good and faithful servant, well done." So that's the rooting of Harambee House, and that's what we've tried to share with all the people we work with around the country, and those partners we're building across oceans, because that's necessary — we cannot stay isolated anymore, the same problems around environmental justice and climate change, they are as well — some of the solutions we're coming up with. But now, listen, Africa is on fire, this climate change stuff, baby, they got some stuff going on. I was looking at a program in Uganda, where they're actually teaching young people how to build air monitors, they're building them, installing them, reading them, analyzing and interpreting them, and sending it back to the people. Even though there are many underdeveloped areas on the continent, it has not prevented them from coming up with innovative solutions to climate change issues, including sea level rise and emergency preparedness response. With what we're learning, and what we're finding, if we combine those knowledges, we have a better chance at really having a serious impact, and changing things.

Eriqah Vincent: Some of that is so much to sit with, but so necessary. I'm really glad you mentioned the connections we all have across the world, from Georgia, but also across the world. My last question to you — you talked a little about the intergenerational things Harambee House is doing, and has done, and the ways you were brought up in your younger years to do this work, and how you're doing the same for many of us — what is giving you hope? What's the most important lesson you can teach — not only me, I'm a millennial, but also Gen Z, Gen Alpha, as you know my daughter is Gen Alpha — what are the most important lessons you've learned, that you can impart on us, as we take the mantle and share the baton, as you say, to take this forward? And what is giving you hope, in the environmental justice movement? What are some of those parting words you can give us?

Dr. Mildred McClain: Ooh, child, lessons learned — I don't learn a whole lot, so to be able to boil it down to one that I would pass on would be kind of an old-fashioned one — I would say, whatever your spirituality is, stay rooted and anchored in that. Because there will be days when you want to snatch your own head off, tear your fingernails off, beat somebody up, kick down the door — because you're so angry at the way industry and big business still win out, and have the capability of continuing to pollute and exploit people. When you have been to 2,500 trillions of convenings and conferences, trying to advance policies and decisions, when you have gone to thousands of communities and listened to the stories of how their health has been impacted, and how their elders and children have died, when you go to what should seemingly be your partners, and they come up with some crap and talk some smack, and you just want to go buck wild, when you have gone so many days without eating, without sleep, and your body is wracked with pain — how will you stay on the front line? For me, it has been my spiritual anchoring, the teaching of my mama, my grandmother, her nine sisters, her six brothers — 14 of them — my public school teachers in Savannah, Georgia, I owe them so much. My Sunday school at Second

Honor Missionary Baptist Church, I owe them so much, because they instilled in me — Miss Green told me, my first grade teacher, she said, Mildred, you are ugly, you have nappy hair, you got a big nose and thick lips, and you are Black — the only way you're going to make it is through education, and holding on to God's hand. I said, that woman called me ugly — I had big lips, and a big nose, and some nappy hair, and stuff — but she ended it with, despite all of that, you have something that will help you be victorious in whatever you want to do. So I did that thing, and I became a lifelong learner — I'm always reading, always talking to people, always thinking, and I have never allowed my hand to slip out of the Creator's hand. I have never forgotten that I stand on powerful shoulders, within my family — those 14 brothers and sisters were born on a plantation, they were enslaved, their grandmother, their mother was enslaved, and they themselves were workers on a plantation, and if they could become the beautiful, stalwart people that they were — we only had one out of the 14 who finished high school, one who finished college. My mother finished third grade, and her greatest goal was to have her own home — when she died, she had her own home, with a third-grade education. So those kinds of people, being in my life, taught me: be who you are, who you were born to be, learn as much as you can, and always stay rooted and anchored in some type of positive spirituality — spirituality can be found all kinds of ways these days, but they were just old Christians, and they said, keep your hand in God's hand — it can be the man's or woman's hand.

That's the lesson I would pass on — that self-determination is key. Kujichagulia — don't let nobody define you, define yourself. You define yourself, and you help your community define itself — nobody can define you but you. And what is it that gives me hope? You. Don't make me cry. You, and how you and your husband relate as a team — that is so impressive, how you all deal with your daughter, and people like you, young people like you, who think it not robbery to come and work with us, even though you could go work in city hall, or the White House, you choose to work with community. So my hope is rooted in this intergenerational work — it's always been intergenerational. Don't let nobody define us. I had somebody mentor me when I was 13, though it was the older young people — my first demonstration walk in Savannah, I was being led by somebody who was 16. So my hope lies in the unmovable strength of oppressed people, to keep on pushing on, no matter how hard it gets. There's an old Christian song, "I feel like going on, I feel like going on, the trials, they come, on every hand, I feel like going on." So you hum that through yourself, all day, when you feel like you just can't do it — if that person says this to me one more time, I'm gonna, you know, never worry — but you suck in your breath, and you hum whatever tune, you have something that allows you to get yourself back to yourself, when you're coming out of yourself, because this is not what they did — there ain't no sprint, it's a marathon, and the marathon don't end until we win. My hope lies in the fact that, in 2025, we have a Black woman running for president, and she has brought so much energy and joy and hope and vision, when it was all dead — it was like everything was dead, we were like, well, we're going to go out and get people, but now we want it, we're out there day and night, because a symbol of true hope and joy has been placed right in our midst. I never thought I would see that day, so I'm thankful to the Creator that he let me live long enough to be able to say, yeah.

Eriqah Vincent: Yes, of course. I am so honored to have had this conversation with you, so honored, for the people who will watch this, to have witnessed what I always witness, and I love you so much, and there's nothing you can do about it — you better not stop loving me.

Dr. Mildred McClain: I never will, love you so much, I'm so proud of the work that you do.

Eriqah Vincent: But more importantly, I'm proud of the way you do the work — the work is important, but the way we do the work is even more important. I'm proud of you. The greatest

lesson Mildred McClain ever taught me — she took my head in her hands, and said, don't ever let anybody define you for you. I know who you are, and I know who you are because I see you — I see you, Dr. McClain. So thank you so much. Thank you all for joining us, I hope this has been as powerful for you as it has been for me. We will see you next time. Thank you, I love you.

Dr. Mildred McClain: Love you.