EDF ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENSE FUND®

Finding the ways that work

She stands up for climate equity and justice

By: Shanti Menon

Throughout her career, Heather McTeer Toney — an attorney, a former mayor and an EPA regional administrator under President Obama — has stood up for the historically underrepresented and stood out for her ability to work collaboratively, across race and party lines, to solve tough problems.

So it came as no surprise to her colleagues last fall that Toney, a senior director at EDF-affiliate Moms Clean Air Force, was being considered by the Biden administration to lead the Environmental Protection Agency. Over three years at Moms, a grassroots group of more than 1 million parents who advocate for clean air and climate action, Toney had helped expand and diversify the group's field operations, activated mothers across the country to join local government, and testified at multiple Congressional hearings on clean air and climate issues.

"She commands a room like a general," gushed Yaritza Perez, a Marine veteran and Moms organizer in Florida. "But she'll roll up her sleeves and get right in the trenches with you."

The job of EPA chief eventually went to EDF alumnus Michael Regan, but luckily for EDF, Toney stepped up to pioneer a new and critically important role as EDF's climate justice liaison, and she remains a senior adviser for Moms Clean Air Force.

From her home in Oxford, Mississippi, Toney spoke with us about her path to environmental activism; her deep roots in social justice; and her perspective on the past, present and future of climate action.

Heather, tell us about Moms Clean Air Force. What makes that group so powerful?

Mothers are a powerful constituency for any issue-based movement. Whether fighting against drunk driving or gun violence, we will do what it takes to protect our kids. And our message at Moms Clean Air Force is clear. We're protecting children from the dangers of air pollution and climate change. And we do it in a nonpartisan, fact-based way.

On the back of the Moms Clean Air Force T-shirt, it says "Listen to your mothers." Right? It's a very basic, authentic message that everybody gets. Do what your mama tells you.

I've seen mothers going to members of Congress's offices and totally blow them away. They are grabbing a kid with one arm, handing out snacks to little people

Mothers are a powerful force for climate protection.

playing on the floor, and they're spouting out data on asthma rates with their MPHs and their PhDs, and they're telling this congressman the exact amount of emissions coming out of plants in their districts. And these members thought they were just going to get some paperwork and take a picture. They were like, "I did not expect this today."

Our voice is valued on the federal level. We've already been in three congressional hearings this year on climate and air pollution.

We often hear that now is a critical moment for the environment. You've been in the heat of the action at EPA during the BP oil spill, the Flint water crisis — what's different this time?

We're entering a new era of action on climate and environmental justice. For the first time, we have an administration that has made climate a theme that runs across every agency, in all of government. At the same time, the country has been grappling with the deaths of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor — all of that happening in rapid succession along with COVID-19.

So in this moment we must address racial injustice and we have to have transformative, science-based climate action. We can and should do both. Climate is a social justice issue, and when we recognize that, then we can address it in a way that is equitable, and get buy-in from everyone who's affected. Given the makeup of the current Congress, we have about a year to get something done. And it doesn't matter if you're Black, white, Asian, Latino, Indigenous — we all recognize the science. We see the urgency of this moment.

Can you explain a bit more about how climate and social justice are intertwined?

Climate change affects everyone, but not everyone is affected equally. Communities of color and low-income communities are hit first and worst because of discriminatory policies that put them at risk for exposure to extreme weather and air pollution. Think about heat islands in urban areas, where people suffer more heat-related incidents and illness because they're surrounded by concrete. There are no parks and trees in these neighborhoods, and that was by design. Racist housing policies of the 1950s and '60s prevented minorities from living in white

neighborhoods and relegated them to overpopulated neighborhoods that lack infrastructure development and industrial permitting constraints. There was no investment in these communities.

We see industrial facilities adding to air pollution, which worsens as it gets hotter. Due to lax permitting requirements, these polluting facilities were purposely sited in low-income communities and communities of color, and still today, this is affecting people's health. We see higher rates of asthma and even shorter life spans in some communities because they are exposed to a disproportionate level of air pollution.

But people who live with these issues do not separate them into silos. This is what we live every day. You cannot separate the environment or climate change from everything else.

Tell us about your upbringing in Greenville, Mississippi, and how that influenced your work today.

It's a big part of who I am. I grew up in a social justice household. My father was an attorney working for the Center for Constitutional Rights out of New York. My mom had just gotten her teaching degree. They were supposed to pack up for two years and come to Mississippi to work on voter rights. Then the plan was to go back to Maryland and get, you know, one of those big New York or Baltimore law firm jobs.

But here we are, 47, 48 years later! They made a commitment to the Delta. My mom opened a Montessori school, my dad started a law practice based in civil rights and voter access litigation. My brother and I went to social justice marches. I was that kid that was running around the planning meetings, messing up all the papers, stapling stuff wrong, you know.

And this was an agrarian society. We were very aware of the land and the water and the seasons. My house was half a mile from the levee on the Mississippi River that protected us from flooding. That connection was always there. So my work is kind of like a return on the investment that they put in.

Were you always planning to stay in Greenville?

No, I fought it tooth and nail! I wanted to get out and see the world. When I wanted to go to Spelman College in Atlanta, I will tell you, it was a fraught period in my

The McTeer family chose to settle in Greenville, Mississippi, in the heart of the Delta.

household! My mom and dad both went to predominantly white institutions, and so they were pushing Harvard and Yale and Cornell, Stanford, the Seven Sisters. But I was dead set on Spelman and I was accepted early. I was determined to go.

My dad said he finally embraced it when he was moving me into my dorm. He realized just how important it was for me to be surrounded by people that he could see were concerned with my well-being. And it made him rethink how and why Black colleges are so protective of students.

Also, he was lugging my stuff up to the third floor right alongside Dr. J — Julius Erving, the basketball player! His daughter and I stayed on the same floor my freshman year. He had to help Dr. J carry stuff; Dr. J was helping him get my stuff up. It was like, OK, we're all Black family here.

That feeling must have been very different from what your father experienced in college.

He went to Western Maryland when he was 16, as one of the first two African Americans to integrate the school. He was very isolated. He did not have that very warm and welcoming experience, in the midst of the civil rights movement, in the midst of integration. I cannot imagine doing it at 16. Now that I'm older, I have a deeper appreciation for that experience and how it shaped my parents' determination in what they wanted to do in their lives.

Civil rights attorney Victor McTeer, Heather's father, successfully argued a Supreme Court case at age 25.

But in the end you chose to come back to Mississippi. Why?

I'd seen a number of my classmates and friends from college and law school move to Atlanta and move to Texas and to New York and Chicago, but not a lot returning home to reinvest our knowledge into the communities that served us. So many of the best and brightest from Mississippi were leaving. The base of our talent was going somewhere else and taking everything that had been sown into us as children and having it benefit other states.

So that's when I decided that I was going to go home. I was going to work with my dad and practice law. It was a crazy turnaround because, again, I had fought it tooth and nail. Yet, that's where I found myself most comfortable and happiest.

What made you decide to run for mayor of Greenville when you were just 27 years old?

I had been involved in politics all through college and law school. I volunteered on a lot of campaigns. I worked on the first campaign for Cedric Richmond when he was running for state representative in Louisiana, and now he's a senior adviser to President Biden.

I've had an opportunity to work with some amazing people but always in the background. And that's where I wanted to stay. I'm an introvert, so I didn't really want

to be public-facing. I would happily do stuff behind the scenes and then go home and get into my pajamas and go to bed.

But being home and seeing so many needs of the Black community go unmet really irked me, to say the least. I would hear people in the beauty shop and in the restaurants saying, "Who is going to run?" In a community that was 70 percent African American, there had never been a Black mayor.

You won the election, but it was disputed, and you even received threats. Were you afraid?

I was too young to be afraid, because I hadn't lived it like my dad had. I had never had threats before, just because of the color of my skin and because I was a woman. It is the beauty of youth, not knowing what you should be really scared of. You don't know what you don't know. Unfortunately, I had to learn quickly. I became familiar with handling very real threats but always presenting a face of confidence and stability. Was I ever afraid? Absolutely, but I could not allow that fear to overtake the mission of leading a community.

How were you able to work with people who didn't see eye to eye with you and maybe didn't even want you there at all?

It was a learning curve. We had good days, we had not-so-good days, but a lot of it was just common sense. After I was elected I found out the city was bouncing checks. So we literally had to go in and balance the checkbook like regular people do around their kitchen table. I had the willingness to try to figure things out and fix them. I was willing to work alongside people who didn't necessarily like me.

And people knew me. I was the kid who came home to be of service, who you taught, who can come in and have a conversation with you and try to figure things out together. Because my parents worked in social justice and law and education, I was able to do that in Black and white communities, which was very unique. I've always been around people of different faiths and different backgrounds. My godparents, who are now deceased, were Jewish. We had Muslim close family friends. I was raised in a Black Baptist church. My father's family was Pentecostal. I was able to cross some bridges that people had not crossed in the past simply because even in the Mississippi Delta, I grew up in a very diverse atmosphere.

One of the issues your city was facing was increased flooding due to climate change, with two 500-year floods in eight years. And you fought successfully for infrastructure funding to clean up Greenville's tap water. Did you consider yourself an environmentalist at that time?

No. Not at all. Because the image that I saw of an environmentalist was a stereotype, a white person who is vegan and wearing Birkenstocks and hugging a tree. It was saving whales, protecting turtles and polar bears. Those were the images that were associated with environmentalists. It wasn't even about people.

Power to the people: Heather and Moms Clean Air Force encourage their organizers to run for public office.

So it wasn't until Lisa Jackson, who came to Greenville when she was head of the Obama EPA, pulled me to the side and said, "You know you're working on an environmental justice issue." And I'm like, "Administrator, no, I'm really not. I am just trying to make sure that the water is clean and we have economic development in our town. That's my goal."

And she said, "No, no, no, no, no. These issues are tied to infrastructure in Black and brown communities." And it really changed the way that I saw environmental justice.

She put me onto the local government advisory committee for EPA and then told me

to chair it. So I'm all excited. Oh my God, Lisa Jackson asked me to chair a committee of 30 elected officials from all over the country to talk about environmental issues and how they impact small rural communities. I'm thrilled.

And then two weeks after that, the BP oil spill happened.

So I was immediately thrust, again, into this space of having to understand what was happening on the ground with local communities, to collaborate and bring people to the table to provide recommendations back to the agency.

I was really proud of the fact that we provided recommendations that were reflective of the needs of rural communities, of Black and brown communities, of white communities, that could be used to create long-term strategies for how we respond to these disasters.

In 2010, an explosion on a BP oil rig spewed 4 million barrels of oil into the Gulf of Mexico. Heather ensured that local communities had a voice in recovery efforts.

So Lisa Jackson was a big influence on you?

Yes, one of many! Lisa Jackson was a huge influence as a mentor and still is today. And she also charged me to do the same thing — to be a mentor to others. We need to make sure that other women of color, other young people, understand that there's a role to play and that things change only as we elevate our voices in this space.

There's a lot of folks that contributed to how I began to interact in this world. Dr. Mildred McClain out of Savannah, Georgia. Dr. Bob Bullard, the father of environmental justice. He actually taught one of the classes I took when I was at Spelman. To be able to work with him now on a professional level, that's awesome.

How did you end up joining Moms Clean Air Force?

I was familiar with Moms from my time as EPA regional administrator in Atlanta. I will always remember those red shirts and the children coming up and giving testimony. Because even as a regional administrator, I would take four-hour slots and go sit and listen to testimony. I remember their work.

As we got towards the end of the administration, I became pregnant. And it was during Zika. I couldn't travel to certain parts of my region because getting bitten by a mosquito could cause birth defects. Gina McCarthy was the administrator at the time, and Gina was like, "Nope, mm-mmm, we are not going to risk this. You're not going." My husband was the same way. So I took these protective measures, but I thought, wow, there are women who are living in these places. They don't have these options. They don't have these choices.

During the Flint water crisis, I was the only African American regional administrator, and I couldn't travel and be a part of that process in person because I was

Moms organizers work in 16 states and counting. Here, they talk clean energy with U.S. Rep. Deb Haaland from New Mexico, now secretary of the interior.

breastfeeding. The possibility of ingesting the water and harming my child — hundreds of women were having to deal with that every single day. What if you couldn't afford to buy bottled water? These things became a lot more personal to me.

Having to see and talk to farmworkers in Florida, Latina moms who described in detail how they could not hug their children when they came home because of the pesticides that were on their clothes. Having to push your children back because you're afraid of something that's on you — that is devastating to parents.

So I was starting to see those mother-child issues in a new light. When I left EPA, Moms was one of my first consulting clients. We did a program called Moms and Mayors, where we helped parents advocate for clean air and climate action in their local city government. So that's how I got into the door. And then the job opened up for the national field director position and I applied. I knew I wanted to be part of this amazing group of people.

How has Moms grown in recent years?

When I started working with Dominique Browning, one of the co-founders, she said to me straight off the top that she wanted a very diverse, very integrated and issue-based group focusing on all children. This was not a group of soccer moms. She wanted the organization to reflect that.

So now we have EcoMadres, which is Latina moms who are galvanized around air pollution, climate change and immigration. In the Latino community these are all interconnected. We're doing this in partnership with Green Latinos.

We launched Community Rx, which is focusing on engaging African American

ONE MILLION MOMS, **STRONG**

Moms Clean Air Force launched in 2011 as a special project of EDF's political affairs team. In just 10 years, this national "mom-partisan" organization has grown into a powerful grassroots advocacy group of more than 1 million parents organized in 16 state chapters, united to protect children's health from air pollution and climate change. Moms organizers meet with lawmakers at every level of government and on both sides of the political aisle to build support for equitable, just and healthy solutions to pollution. In 2020 alone, Moms staff and volunteers met with congressional lawmakers to discuss climate change and air pollution more than 230 times.

communities of faith. These communities are very grounded in climate and environment as a result of a Christian sense of duty.

We have just started an Indigenous women's group, partnering with Indigenous communities out West, incorporating this lens of being connected to the land. There are so many things that tie us all together as mothers and caretakers.

Climate change poses specific threats to Indigenous communities. Moms and the National Tribal Air Association produced a joint report detailing those impacts.

The nation is going through a long-overdue reckoning with racial injustice. How has EDF responded? Are we doing enough?

Every big green organization has had to grapple with this. How are we going to talk about the environmental changes that need to happen in Black communities? How are we going to collaborate in these places we need to be working? We haven't even mentioned George Floyd's name. Black people were feeling these things very deeply. We had to acknowledge what's happening.

So EDF had to have very authentic conversations internally about what was happening and about the reality of being a person of color at a major green organization. That was a tough time. It was not feel-good work, but it was necessary. I think we were wise to deal with it face-forward.

I really respected EDF president Fred Krupp for his statements on racial justice and his willingness to listen, and some of the actions that he took right away to help staff feel heard. This work isn't over — it is ongoing. It has to be if we're talking about real, true, equitable solutions.

As an organization, EDF is looking at how to collaborate with communities to ensure that the solutions we come up with are giving everybody a fair shot, that we're sharing space, inviting and encouraging all people to be engaged, and we're doing it in a way that is not giving one particular group a huge windfall that exacerbates inequity.

Faith Force, a faith-based initiative from Moms, is dedicated to advocacy in African American communities and rooted in a shared love of the earth.

We want to fight these storms together, to find the places where we agree and can move forward. That's where we are.

I've had people ask me, "You've done social justice work. You've done public service. Why are you still with a big green group? There are a ton of different places you could go."

I will very candidly share what some of the environmental justice leaders I have known and worked with for years have said: We need people who are sitting inside of major organizations. We need people who are starting their own. We need people in government, in industry. Wherever you are, make the most of being in that space. Do what you can to bring equity and collaboration. Because if we don't have people

who are willing to bring others to the table, then we're wasting time.

At EDF there is a willingness to be a part of conversations, to bring others to the table, to have discussions that maybe we weren't willing to have 15, 20 years ago. That's important.

What does your new role as climate justice advisor to EDF entail?

I work very closely with Margot Brown, who's the associate vice president of environmental justice for EDF. We talk every day, several times a day! It's about thinking through community engagement for our organization. How do we help communities understand the work we do and how we do it, and how is our work informed by what's happening on the ground in communities. I think of it as a midwifery position.

The primary thing I'm working on right now is on petrochemicals, in that corridor of the Gulf region reaching from Texas to Alabama, tying together some of the pieces of how we're going to engage with those communities.

It's wonderful to be a part of this journey within EDF to recognize equity and the value of diversity, and to then reiterate that out externally to communities to show them how we're growing as an organization.

Do you see any changes that are encouraging?

I see some of the people EDF is hiring, and the conversations that are shifting, and people reviewing things constantly and asking questions about equity. My inbox is full! Are we talking about environmental justice in the right way? Are we talking about community engagement in the right way? That is very encouraging to me, that people are thinking through these questions and posing more questions. We're having these learning moments.

And we at EDF can help. We are needed. If there's one thing I've learned, it's that we are known to have some of the most brilliant minds in the business. I was talking to Dr. Bob Bullard in Texas and saying, "What do you want? What do you need?" He said, "I need all of Elena Craft's health team working at all nine HBCUs (historically Black colleges and universities) across the state of Texas."

I said, wow, OK! Let me get to work on that! But that was so encouraging, because Dr. Bullard has been doing this work for forever, and to see that connection, that desire for collaboration, like, yeah, we need y'all to do this. We need your corporate accountability. We need you to stand up in these boardrooms. We know you can say these things that need to be said.

And as an organization, EDF is finding there are some ancillary things we have to support in order to make environmental action successful. Study after study has shown us that Black and brown people are the demographic that vote for climate action more than any other demographic in this country. So we have to engage in federal voter legislation if we are to protect the policies that we're putting forward. If we don't do that, then we're missing out on a huge opportunity to not only galvanize the people that we know will support the work, but also ensuring that we don't have to have a two- to four-year cycle before we can get voter action on climate.

Are we making any progress on climate and environmental justice on a federal level?

The Biden administration has really done a yeoman's job, stepping right into the headwinds with this all-of-government approach, and tackling climate and environmental justice head-on. President Biden's Justice 40 Initiative calls for 40 percent of climate funding to benefit communities of color and communities that have been marginalized.

Heather has testified multiple times before Congress on climate, clean air and environmental justice issues.

But there's plenty of work to be done. What does it mean, "benefit" versus actual investment in dollars into these spaces? What does implementation look like? Communities need to have a voice in these decisions.

How were you able to move all this forward during the pandemic, with a preschooler at home?

Well, if you ask anyone on EDF's political affairs team or the Moms team — they will all tell you that they have met Devin Benjamin Toney. Devin Benjamin Toney has popped his face into meetings, he has eaten his fruit snacks on camera, he has asked for juice, and I've had to go to the refrigerator in the middle of a meeting. It is very real and very in the moment. I don't try to hide it, but those first few months were crazy.

Part of the team: son Devin and daughter Deriah.

My husband is awesome. I have a 15-year-old at home as well, so she helped out a lot. And then the oldest is 25, and he lives in Georgia. So he's grown and out of the house, but the 4-year-old and the 15-year-old are at home and it is a hoot — a hoot.

So I tell people, if you survived the pandemic at home with kids and a spouse, and you all still love each other, you're doing really good.

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