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Bunyan Bryant: A giant for the environment and social justice

U-M teacher, leader earns 2008 Milliken Award

Bunyan Bryant, PhD, a giant in the field of environmental advocacy and social justice, is the recipient of the state's highest environmental honor in 2008—the Michigan Environmental Council's Helen and William G. Milliken Distinguished Service Award.



Bunyan Bryant

Bryant is director of the Environmental Justice Initiative and an Arthur F. Thurnau Professor at the University of Michigan School of Natural Resources and Environment (SNRE), where he teaches environmental justice.

But a dry recitation of his resume would be a disservice. MEC President Lana Pollack said Bryant earned the award for his unflinching dedication to the environment and social justice.

"I've long been a great admirer of Bunyan because I've never known him to step back from doing the right thing, no matter what the challenge," Pollack said.

It is Bryant's passion and depth of knowledge, embedded in a soft-spoken demeanor, which impresses his students and his peers.

"He is soft-spoken, but incredibly credible and determined," said Alma Wheeler-Smith, a state representative from South Lyon who has known and worked with Bryant for 40 years. "In 40 years, I've never heard him raise his voice."

Bryant was a leader in creating a national Environmental Justice movement when EJ was considered a fringe issue, said Wheeler-Smith. Today, innumerable studies and reams

of data confirm the truth—low income neighborhoods and communities of color suffer from asthma rates, cancers and debilitating illnesses as a result of pollution that far exceeds normal or average.

"Environmental Justice was never heard of at the University of Michigan School of Natural Resources before Professor Bunyan Bryant's work," said Roshani Dantas, a former student of Bryant's who is now an environmental justice advocate from southeast Michigan.

Dantas recalled environmental work was not in her plans until she took a seat in Bryant's classroom.

"As a student of color passionate about racial justice and affirmative action, I was ready to leave environmental work behind. After attending one of Professor Bryant's student initiated environmental justice classes, my life changed.

"Professor Bryant is a man who changed the history of environmental policy for all students, communities and people—a gentle-spoken leader with powerful words that changed the lives of many, especially students of color at U of M. I have endless admiration and thank yous that I owe him for changing my life."

Bryant's contributions go way beyond environmentalism, said Pollack.

"I've known him as a volunteer peace keeper at a Nazi demonstration, a truly inspired teacher and counselor to students who needed support that went beyond the classroom, and a voice for the disenfranchised in high level board rooms," Pollack said. "Bunyan is as versatile as he is brave."

Bryant will be awarded the Milliken prize May 28 at an event in Ann Arbor. ■

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