



COMEDY FOR

# RACIAL JUSTICE

IN THE CLIMATE CRISIS

LEVERAGING CREATIVITY AND BUILDING  
COMMUNITY POWER IN  
*AIN'T YOUR MAMA'S HEAT WAVE*

AUGUST 2020

*Comedy*  
THINK TANK

**CMSi**  
CENTER FOR MEDIA & SOCIAL IMPACT  
SCHOOL of COMMUNICATION  
AMERICAN UNIVERSITY • WASHINGTON, DC

BY CATY BORUM CHATTOO

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**3 About the Collaboration: *Ain't Your Mama's Heat Wave***

**5 About the Report**

**6 PART 1:**

**Addressing the Climate Crisis as Environmental Justice**

A Tale of Two Cities: New Orleans and Norfolk

Centering Environmental Justice and Local Community Engagement in the Climate Crisis

**9 PART 2:**

***Comedy ThinkTanks: A Co-Creation Model for Producing Social Justice Comedy***

How Comedy Plays a Role in Social Justice

Comedy Collaboration for Social Change

**13 PART 3:**

**How Comedy Can Mobilize Local Communities in Climate Justice**

Comedy and Cultural Production Strengthens Local Community Mobilization

Comedy Provides Shared Cultural Language

Local Communities Must Shape Their Own Stories

Comedy Acts as Catharsis to Build and Celebrate Community Resilience and Power

**19 Strategic Insights for the Future**

**21 Appendix: On-screen Subjects Featured in *Ain't Your Mama's Heat Wave***

**21 References**



# ABOUT THE COLLABORATION: ***AIN'T YOUR MAMA'S HEAT WAVE***

As a combined team of engaged researchers, comedians, activists, organizers, music producers and filmmakers, Hip Hop Caucus and the Center for Media & Social Impact (CMSI) began working together in the summer of 2019 to co-create a climate justice entertainment project that centers comedians of color. The ultimate goal was to bring to life a portrait of Norfolk, Virginia, which resembles New Orleans, the site of 2005's Hurricane Katrina, in its below-sea-level location and urban landscape. Our organizations met through the Climate Story Lab hosted by Doc Society and Exposure Labs, an initiative designed to spark collaboration and inspiration to creatively engage communities in the climate crisis.<sup>1</sup> The effort is grounded in Hip Hop Caucus's organizing and empowerment work with the Norfolk and expanded Hampton Roads communities for more than a decade, beginning in 2008.

In August 2019, we launched our collaboration with a *Comedy ThinkTanks* workshop, CMSI's week-long intensive, immersive process that brings comedians, activists, and subject-matter experts together to ideate and co-create new comedy, facilitated by comedian Bethany Hall, CMSI Creative Director of Comedy Initiatives. In November 2019, incubated from the CMSI *Comedy ThinkTanks* ideation sessions, Hip Hop Caucus produced *Ain't Your Mama's Heat Wave*, a live and filmed stand-up comedy show hosted in Norfolk's historic Attucks Theater, and the centerpiece of a comedic documentary film and short-form video content series, starring comedians Kristen Sivills, Aminah Imani, Clark Jones, and live show host Mamoudou N'Diaye. A network of community leaders and grassroots organizers in Norfolk helped shape the film in a production process that centered local voices as guides and on-screen subjects.

Molded through this co-creation model, *Ain't Your Mama's Heat Wave*, a docu-comedy, is described by Hip Hop Caucus as "the first feature length production from Hip Hop Caucus' Think 100% FILMS. It is a gripping

story of communities in the city of Norfolk and the seven cities of the Hampton Roads region of Virginia that are grappling with the climate crisis and the present day consequences of historic injustices and inequality. It's centered on four stand-up comedians, hailing from Virginia Beach, Atlanta, Chicago, and Ohio, and tells the story of their journey to Hampton Roads to 'make the climate crisis funny.'"<sup>2</sup>

*Ain't Your Mama's Heat Wave* was developed and produced as a cultural tool to center young people and communities of color in the climate movement – and encourage them to vote.



*The audience laughs at the "Ain't Your Mama's Heat Wave" comedy show at the Attucks Theater in Norfolk, Virginia. Image courtesy of Hip Hop Caucus.*

## About Hip Hop Caucus



Hip Hop Caucus is a non-profit advocacy organization dedicated to empowering communities impacted first and worst by injustice, with a focus on four key areas: Strengthening Democracy, Civil and Human Rights, Climate Change & Environmental Justice, and Economic Empowerment. Hip Hop Caucus leverages the power of culture, hip hop music and art to motivate young voters to participate. *Think 100%* is the organization's climate justice and activism platform designed to inspire climate action through culture, including a podcast, music, film, and community activism. [www.hiphopcaucus.org](http://www.hiphopcaucus.org) and [www.think100climate.com](http://www.think100climate.com)

## About the Center for Media & Social Impact



The Center for Media & Social Impact (CMSI), housed at American University's School of Communication in Washington, D.C., is an innovation lab and research center that creates, studies, and showcases media for equity and social justice. Focusing on independent, documentary, entertainment, and public media, the Center bridges boundaries between scholars, media producers, social justice organizations, and communication practitioners. *Comedy ThinkTanks* is CMSI's co-creation workshop initiative that pairs professional comedians and social justice organizations to create entertaining comedy to spark public engagement in social issues. [www.cmsimpact.org](http://www.cmsimpact.org)



# ABOUT THE REPORT

By sharing the participatory co-creation and production process of *Ain't Your Mama's Heat Wave*,<sup>3</sup> a novel docu-comedy and community mobilization initiative, this report invites social justice organizers, activists, community leaders, and environmental advocates to learn about the power of creativity and comedy to disrupt usual ways of doing business in the climate crisis – and why it matters.

The report analyzes the value and importance of comedy for local public mobilization in climate change, revealed through in-depth interviews conducted with the project's key participants, including a local climate scientist, community leaders, faith leader, local organizers, and the creative team.

At its core, this creative and research project operates from a fundamental, evidence-based premise: Climate change is a social justice issue that deepens inequities that already exist along lines of race and ethnicity. A failure to look with a racial justice lens means distorting the human implications. BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Color) have not been centered within the increasingly vocal climate change movement in the United States and around the world, despite the fact that, as Hip Hop Caucus' president and founder Rev. Lennox Yearwood Jr. argues, based on irrefutable data, "Black, Brown, and Indigenous people in the U.S. and around the world are first and worst impacted by climate pollution and climate disasters, while being least responsible for the causes."<sup>4</sup>

Navigating climate change preparedness as an environmental justice pursuit, then, means acknowledging that "environmental hazards are disproportionately located in low-income communities of people of color.... Sometimes the product of intentional siting decisions, and it is sometimes also the result of a long historical process of industrial legacies, racial segregation, zoning regulations, and other factors that lead to the formation of environmental inequality."<sup>5</sup>

This omission also is evident in mainstream media stories about climate change. For cultural organizers and media storytellers, centering social justice in climate change efforts means prioritizing visibility of people who are most at risk. Communities of color have been historically neglected or mischaracterized in entertainment storytelling and news coverage about climate change, and yet, leveraging culture and creativity to encourage public engagement in social challenges is key.

Against this backdrop, this report highlights the unique potential of social justice comedy as local community empowerment and mobilization strategy, and as disruptive creative expression inserted into a broader cultural conversation about climate change, centering communities of color and low-income people who are "hit first and worst"<sup>6</sup> by climate disasters. Resilience is the dominant theme – not only in the climate change sense, but also in the strength, expertise, and power of communities of color.

**"BLACK, BROWN, AND  
INDIGENOUS PEOPLE  
IN THE U.S. AND AROUND THE WORLD  
ARE FIRST AND WORST IMPACTED BY  
CLIMATE POLLUTION AND CLIMATE  
DISASTERS, WHILE BEING LEAST  
RESPONSIBLE FOR THE CAUSES."**

- REV. LENNOX YEARWOOD, JR.

# ADDRESSING THE CLIMATE CRISIS AS **ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE**



*Rev. Lennox Yearwood, Jr., president and founder of Hip Hop Caucus, speaks to community members in Norfolk in a scene from the "Ain't Your Mama's Heat Wave" docu-comedy. Image courtesy of Hip Hop Caucus.*

## A Tale of Two Cities: New Orleans and Norfolk

Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, Louisiana, in the dawn hours of August 29, 2005.<sup>7</sup> The levees around the city were breached in a few hours, and water began to rise.<sup>8</sup> An estimated 50,000 to 100,000 people were stranded with no way out, stuck on the rooftops of houses and apartment buildings or the Superdome sports arena and the city's convention center.<sup>9</sup> Nearly 2,000 people died, and as the weeks and months continued, almost 1.5 million residents were displaced.<sup>10</sup> About 60% of New Orleans' housing was destroyed; hospitals, schools, and other essential facilities were lost or closed.<sup>11</sup> The physical, ecological, and cultural destruction wrought by Hurricane Katrina – and the delayed, inadequate response of the federal government<sup>12</sup> – was staggering. Katrina was a historic natural disaster of astonishing proportions,<sup>13</sup> but low-income African American residents were disproportionately affected. They paid the highest price in lost lives, homes, jobs, chronic physical and mental health damage, and neighborhood cohesion as they were forced to migrate.

Neighborhoods with predominantly Black residents, the hardest hit by Katrina, “were concentrated in the most vulnerable parts of the city, located well below sea level and poorly protected by inadequate levees.”<sup>14</sup> Residents

of the city's Ninth Ward – the primary area devastated by flooding, where 98% of residents were Black – lived in crumbling, unstable housing well before Katrina made landfall.<sup>15</sup> Scant measures were in place to safeguard people of color living in flood-prone areas; the majority of less damaged, protected areas were white and wealthier.<sup>16</sup> With decades-old racist housing policies firmly rooted, the process of recovery intensified historical inequities. Re-building measures favored big developers and businesses over working-class Black residents who had lost the most.<sup>17</sup> The impact was persistent, as “Blacker, poorer, and more devastated communities faced relatively low rates of return by 2007, jeopardizing their long-term ability to recover from the storm in their original homes and exacerbating pre-storm racial and economic disparities.”<sup>18</sup>

Several hundred miles away lies a parallel region that also resides below sea level: Norfolk, Virginia. The environmental similarities are evident, noted by scientists and journalists: frequent flooding, inadequate barriers to hold back high water, coastal storms exacerbated by climate change.<sup>19</sup> Like New Orleans, Norfolk's rising sea levels endanger all of its inhabitants, but a particular ferocity faces low- and middle-income Black communities due to the distinctive pattern of poverty and substandard housing, unprotected low-lying areas, a historical legacy of segregation, and other structural mechanisms of injustice. When it comes to climate justice and the impact of superstorms, Black communities are chronically “overlooked and under-resourced,” a partial consequence of historic and contemporary housing policies that concentrate Black neighborhoods in flood-prone low-lying areas.<sup>20</sup>

Bordered by the Chesapeake Bay and the Elizabeth River, Norfolk is part of a sweeping region of coastal southeast Virginia known to the locals as Hampton Roads, a composite of seven cities connected by waterways and tunnels: Norfolk, Portsmouth, Chesapeake, Virginia Beach, Hampton, Newport News, and Suffolk. Scientists and environmental policy groups place Norfolk near the top of the list of risk-prone coastal areas. The Norfolk metropolitan area, according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, “ranks 10th in the world in the value of assets exposed to increase flooding from sea level rise.”<sup>21</sup> In Hampton Roads and Norfolk, the impact of climate change is intrinsically linked with a host of social and human health concerns.<sup>22</sup>

Like New Orleans, Norfolk neighborhoods inhabited by people of color face substantial risk from frequent flooding and the possibility of increased hurricane-level storms.<sup>23</sup> The city's leaders recognize the need to address looming climate-related events and to focus on strategies for *resilience*, a concept that encompasses various methods by which local municipalities prepare and adapt systems and infrastructure to withstand climate change impacts.<sup>24</sup> In 2013, Norfolk became one of the first cities chosen to participate in the Rockefeller Foundation's 100 Resilient Cities initiative, which includes funds for a chief resilience officer, and one of eight cities selected for the “RE.Invest Initiative,” described by the city's coastal resilience plan as one that: “helps cities attract private investment and use public resources more efficiently to upgrade their infrastructure,” and also to “beautify the City; make Norfolk more resilient to extreme weather, more attractive to businesses and investors and save significant taxpayer money.”<sup>25</sup>

Experts have praised Norfolk's official resilience strategy.<sup>26</sup> And yet, questions about equitable outcomes linger. Will predominantly lower-income Black communities, rather than being strengthened, be inadvertently pushed out to make room for high-investment retail and housing properties that are better protected from flooding and storms?<sup>27</sup> **Public engagement is key.**

WHEN IT COMES TO CLIMATE JUSTICE  
AND THE IMPACT OF SUPERSTORMS,  
**BLACK COMMUNITIES ARE  
CHRONICALLY “OVERLOOKED  
AND UNDER-RESOURCED,”**  
A PARTIAL CONSEQUENCE OF HISTORIC AND  
CONTEMPORARY HOUSING POLICIES THAT  
CONCENTRATE BLACK NEIGHBORHOODS IN  
FLOOD-PRONE LOW-LYING AREAS.





The historic Attucks Theatre in Norfolk, Virginia, hosted the "Ain't Your Mama's Heat Wave" live comedy show. Image courtesy of Hip Hop Caucus.

## Centering Environmental Justice and Local Community Engagement in the Climate Crisis

Climate change is often culturally portrayed on a global and national scale, but communities tangibly experience the manifestations of climate change as a local reality.<sup>28</sup> In Norfolk, particularly in underserved low-income neighborhoods, flooding continues regularly. And yet, public dialogue about the climate crisis and a precise hurricane evacuation mobilization plan may not necessarily reach African American low- and middle-income residents across the Hampton Roads area. A local environmental justice strategy for the climate crisis means inviting impacted neighborhoods to build awareness and solidarity and centering social justice: “Research, environmental decision making, and governance focused on adaptation to climate change impacts are strengthened by an explicit consideration of social justice issues.”<sup>29</sup> Climate resilience, if enacted on the community level to help structurally dismantle – rather than perpetuate – decades-old inequities, requires inviting impacted neighborhoods and people to be involved in “fair participation in planning and making decisions on adaptation.”<sup>30</sup>

In Norfolk, this means thoughtfully engaging and centering African American communities as the city prepares for coastal storms, flooding, water contamination, and daily life in a place below sea level. Social justice organizations and environmental justice coalitions are crucial in mobilizing local citizens.<sup>31</sup> In turn, contemporary environmental justice mobilizations are successful when they garner local government support and inspire substantial public engagement and civil disobedience.<sup>32</sup> Success is also crafted by forging thoughtful relationships between local coalitions and larger national organizations, and capturing broad, nonlocal attention.<sup>33</sup>

Norfolk is a singular city – encompassing some neighborhoods that are acutely vulnerable from a complex maze of structural racism, poverty, and gentrification – but it’s simultaneously many communities around the country, united in legacies and contemporary realities of inequity. Engaging local climate change participation as social justice means giving voice to places around the country – usually unseen until and unless trauma is visible – that are immediately and disproportionately affected by the interconnected complexities of environmental injustice.

Inviting wider audiences to see and understand local environmental matters can encourage them to re-contemplate a tangible set of challenges often communicated in ways that seem abstract and clinical. Shaping a just future is not possible without local communities mobilizing their own people. Citizen involvement matters. Voting is essential. But how can this be encouraged and made manifest? **Enter comedy, a deviant and disruptive form of cultural expression.**



# COMEDY THINKTANKS: A CO-CREATION MODEL FOR PRODUCING SOCIAL JUSTICE COMEDY



*Comedian Aminah Imani performs at the "Ain't Your Mama's Heat Wave" comedy show in Norfolk, Virginia. Image courtesy of Hip Hop Caucus.*

## How Comedy Plays a Role in Social Justice

In the participatory media age that has empowered grassroots voices,<sup>34</sup> a generation of social justice leaders and activists is embracing culture initiatives, wielding stories and entertainment as active tools for community and political engagement in social problems. Within this context, innovative digital-native advocacy groups and their leaders are beginning to see and strategically choose comedy as a mainstream, movement-essential genre. They see comedy's power and potential influence – as a mechanism to attract attention, persuade, critique the status quo, open taboo cultural conversations, disrupt harmful dominant narratives, humanize those who are othered, and invite needed hope and optimism into somber, complex issues that are often reduced to ideological sides; climate change is a prime example.<sup>35</sup>

## PART TWO

According to research included in my book with co-author Lauren Feldman, *A Comedian and An Activist Walk Into a Bar*: “Comedy can help realize the civic imagination, by offering both a new perspective on social reality and a form of social critique. It is, therefore, in lockstep with social justice. Comedy – as an avidly shared and rapidly consumed form of cultural narrative that can introduce new perspectives and new voices in the digital age, and can offer a creatively deviant lens on a problematic status quo – contributes to a new societal portrait by which people shape and interpret meaning.”<sup>36</sup>

As a mechanism for public persuasion and motivation, comedy breaks down social taboos, persuades through the route of entertainment value and positive emotions, serves as a force of cultural citizenship and empowerment for traditionally marginalized voices, sparks both hope or frustration that can mobilize action, and creates stimulating artistic fodder for sharing and breaking down complex ideas.<sup>37</sup>



In a scene from “Ain’t Your Mama’s Heat Wave,” Comedians Clark Jones, Aminah Imani, and Kristen Sivills learn about Norfolk history from Mr. Terry Brown, superintendent of Fort Monroe National Monument. Image courtesy of Hip Hop Caucus.



## Comedy Collaboration for Social Change

Through CMSI research and understanding of the creative process behind great comedy, we identified a challenge: social justice organizations and comedians work in vastly different ways and may not naturally find one another or know how to collaborate. In this context, under the creative direction of comedian Bethany Hall, CMSI's Creative Director of Comedy Initiatives, CMSI launched the *Comedy ThinkTanks* initiative in 2019. *Comedy ThinkTanks* is a guided creative week-long writers' room workshop that brings together comedians and subject-matter experts to collaboratively co-create to develop comedic public engagement strategies and new comedy entertainment ideas that highlight urgent social challenges.

The *Comedy ThinkTanks* process mimics a traditional comedy writers' room experience<sup>38</sup> while it incorporates principles of co-creation practiced in participatory documentary and community media – that is, building a shared multi-author space for story collaboration. Co-creation protocol ensures that ideas are heard and embraced by multiple members of a curated team; a horizontal process for generating ideas is favored over a top-down or single-author approach, even while a trusted guide moves the creators through assignments and expectations to provide structure.<sup>39</sup> It's tempting for comedy about social justice to become didactic and boring, which renders it useless if we understand the traits of comedy that make it so ripe for social change – that is, the ability to persuade through entertainment and positive emotions, breaking down social taboos, the social sharing function, and memorable messages through the vessel of jokes.<sup>40</sup> The comedy must be funny, not sacrificing humor for shared factual information and framing.

In the *Comedy ThinkTanks* scenario – a collaboration between social justice activists and issue experts and comedians – the lead comedy facilitator trusts and gives space for the disparate “sectors,” even as they work together, to do what they do best: issue experts provide the facts and deep insights, and comedians create the comedy. And yet, each gets to absorb and take on the other role: comedians become issue experts who find the play in the somber facts, and the social justice advocates are creatively empowered to imagine and find absurdity alongside the artists. In this way, *Comedy ThinkTanks* combines the wild-idea-generation open space of comedy improv and the shared-vision practices of participatory documentary media. The outcome is new power for each group as they co-create – creative power for civil society, and civic power for comedians. And yet, comedians are given full artistic power to find the funny, engaging material, thus ensuring that the process does not result in communication materials made mildly amusing instead of true entertainment.

We hosted the Hip Hop Caucus *Comedy ThinkTank* in August 2019 with a group of professional comedy writers and performers from Chicago, New York, L.A., and Atlanta – Yedoye Travis, Shantira Jackson, Clark Jones, Aminah Imani, and Tessa Hirsch – led by ThinkTank facilitator Bethany Hall; activists and grassroots organizers Rev. Lennox Yearwood Jr. (“Rev”), Liz Havstad, and Jazmine Williams of Hip Hop Caucus; environmental justice advocate Roger Kim, who directs the Climate and Clean Energy Equity Fund; filmmaker Elijah Karriem; hip-hop producer Dejuan Cross; singer-actress Antonique Smith, co-host of Hip Hop Caucus’ Think 100% podcast; and myself.

THROUGH CMSI RESEARCH AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE CREATIVE PROCESS BEHIND GREAT COMEDY, WE IDENTIFIED A CHALLENGE: **SOCIAL JUSTICE ORGANIZATIONS AND COMEDIANS WORK IN VASTLY DIFFERENT WAYS AND MAY NOT NATURALLY FIND ONE ANOTHER OR KNOW HOW TO COLLABORATE.**

## PART TWO



Comedian Kristen Sivills performs in "Ain't Your Mama's Heat Wave." Image courtesy of Hip Hop Caucus.

Over the months that followed, based on its deep grassroots community organizing work in the region since 2008, Hip Hop Caucus began working with Norfolk community leaders and its own Norfolk team, and the comedians created stand-up comedy material based on and inspired by the *Comedy ThinkTanks*. The project evolved into *Ain't Your Mama's Heat Wave*, a live stand-up comedy show and docu-comedy produced with the support and collaboration of leaders in Norfolk's Black community, produced and filmed in late 2019. The on-screen story unfolds: A diverse group of comedians takes a funny journey to Norfolk, Virginia, and they learn through local leaders and ordinary people about resilient community and the challenges of daily life.



# HOW COMEDY CAN MOBILIZE LOCAL COMMUNITIES IN **CLIMATE JUSTICE**

To produce *Ain't Your Mama's Heat Wave*, the final cast of comedians (Kristen Sivills, Aminah Imani, and Clark Jones) made their way through Norfolk, meeting with people and using some of their Comedy ThinkTanks material – classic observational humor about the absurdity of reality. The Norfolk community leaders (not all of whom who are featured on screen) and docu-comedy's subjects spotlight a diverse mapping of community engagement roles, and their voices and experiences inform this report through in-depth interviews (for a full list of on-screen subjects in the film, see the report's Appendix). All interviews were completed by the author over the phone between December 2019 and April 2020.

- Mr. Charles “Batman” Brown, music marketing influencer, grassroots organizer, and Hip Hop Caucus Virginia’s Leadership Committee Coordinator
- Ms. Gayle Kanoyton, president of the Hampton Roads branch of the NAACP
- Ms. Keja Reel, Hampton Roads business owner and community influencer
- Dr. Tom Allen, geography researcher and professor tracking Norfolk’s sea level rise
- Ms. Deidre “Mama D” Love, founder and executive director of Norfolk’s Teens With a Purpose community center
- Mr. Roger Kim, Executive Director of the Climate and Clean Energy Equity Fund
- Rev. Dr. Dwight Riddick, tenured pastor of the sprawling Gethsemane Baptist Church in Newport News, Virginia

In-depth interviews with these key players, along with the creative team and Hip Hop Caucus team (Rev. Lennox Yearwood Jr., Liz Havstad, Elijah Karriem) – participants who made the live comedy show and documentary element come to life – reveal key themes and insights about how comedy can mobilize local communities in climate justice, how comedy can help rightfully center communities of color in the climate movement, and why comedy matters.



Bordered by the Chesapeake Bay and the Elizabeth River, Norfolk is part of a sweeping region of coastal southeast Virginia known to the locals as Hampton Roads, a composite of seven cities connected by waterways and tunnels: Norfolk, Portsmouth, Chesapeake, Virginia Beach, Hampton, Newport News, and Suffolk.

## Comedy and Cultural Production Strengthens Local Community Mobilization

***Local community organizing is vitally important for public engagement in the climate crisis, and the entertainment factor of comedy can help provide the fuel and enthusiasm to encourage people to participate.***

The process of making *Ain't Your Mama's Heat Wave* was a strategy for local community mobilization – setting the stage for the project's widespread distribution in Norfolk and communities across the country. The production protocol was shaped by grassroots organizing as a mechanism to build community power. The docu-comedy was designed, from the logistics of production to what we see on screen, to authentically ensure that, as Rev. Yearwood explains, “people [who are not usually shown] will see themselves in the climate change conversation. It's on all levels. We have folks who are kids on the block, in the community garden, to the comedians, to the mayor, so you have all levels of government, the different aspects and people who are engaged, and they will see themselves as important.”

Hip Hop Caucus engaged local leaders and influencers to help shape and spark excitement about the live comedy show in Norfolk. In so doing, groups and individuals came together as a grassroots network. For Batman, the community organizer, it's crucial to bring together three distinct realms of power in Hampton Roads – the social justice activists, entertainment influencers, and political officials. While each is good at a particular kind of community engagement, they don't often come together. Comedy, as an entertainment and cultural event, can bring them together.

Batman explains, “the social justice community and activists are really good at organizing within their sphere. Those people activate right away... [local entertainment influencers] are active within their world and they're able to be successful because they have the influence when they put up a social media post....and in the political world, you have to be invited into that world...It's always best, I think, when those three worlds can come together and partner up. I think the problem is that doesn't happen as much as it should.”

The ultimate goal in local climate crisis organizing is in strengthening the civic power of the community, and comedy is a particularly good way to bring people together. It all connects back to policy and the need to create ways to engage people. As the NAACP's Gayle Kanoyton explains, local climate advocacy groups are expert organizers in the area, but encouraging residents to connect with them is a constant challenge.

As part of its grassroots mobilization to produce the project, Hip Hop Caucus facilitated a local community leaders and activists meeting, notably including an appearance from the Norfolk mayor's top aid, and a first-ever gathering of local faith leaders to discuss climate change preparedness. As Pastor Riddick says, “It was probably one of the first. There was a meeting where we talked about the potential of what could happen for those in the event of having maybe a category two hurricane. It was a tremendous eye opener. There were members of the clergy there, and some of our civic and political leaders who were there in the room, and it was one of those meetings where people left saying, ‘Hey, tell me more. How can I get the information about this?’”

THE ULTIMATE GOAL IN LOCAL CLIMATE  
CRISIS ORGANIZING IS IN STRENGTHENING  
THE CIVIC POWER OF THE COMMUNITY, AND  
**COMEDY IS A PARTICULARLY  
GOOD WAY TO BRING PEOPLE  
TOGETHER.**



## Comedy Provides Shared Cultural Language

*Leveraging the shared language of entertainment and comedy can rightfully center historically disenfranchised people in a movement that has not prioritized the stories and voices of communities of color.*

Communities of color are disproportionately affected by the climate crisis, and yet, they are often excluded from messages, stories, and tactics of the broader climate movement. But as Rev Yearwood reflects, “We can’t do this movement as a siloed, segregated progressive kind of movement. We need everybody. We need a movement that has everyone.” Comedy provides shared cultural language to center communities of color in the climate crisis.

According to Gaylene Kanoyton: “In the African American community, many people don’t even know about what that [environmental justice] means and how it applies to them. This has been affecting our community and underserved people for years. And we know that when a crisis happens, whether it’s a tsunami or an environmental crisis, climate environmental crisis happens, that the African American community and underserved are the first that it affects. It affects them first.”

Keja Reel, local business owner and community influencer, explains, “It does flood in higher income neighborhoods. But they have more resources, and they’re better prepared to deal with it. But for African-Americans, if they’re living in public housing and it floods, they lose something and it’s hard for us to replace it. People say, ‘well why don’t you just move, why do you keep, why do you stay there and it floods every time it rains?’ Where are they going? How are they going? How are they going to get there? The resources are not there. The housing is not there. The money is not there. You know people just can’t pick up and move.”



Comedians Aminah Imani, Clark Jones and Kristen Sivills learn about Norfolk's vulnerability to rising sea levels from Dr. Tom Allen, a professor of geography at Old Dominion University in Norfolk. Image courtesy of Hip Hop Caucus.

Comedy is also a powerful way to attract attention to a dire, complex social issue. As Batman says, “We’re not hitting this demographic properly. Without hurting anybody’s feelings. I know a lot of people put a lot of time and energy into creating these fact sheets and all that kind of stuff, but it’s not appealing in any way. It’s a lot of words on paper. Comedy can do things that other mediums sometimes can’t. **Laughing is universal.** We’re all in the same battle in general, but again, some of the differences in how it affects different communities in different ways.” Pastor Riddick sees the value of comedy to expand information: “I think comedy certainly broadens your reach. It broadens to the people that may not attend a church or a local place of faith. Comedy allows you to reach maybe an additional population.”

Entertainment helps build a shared, inviting cultural language, as Hip Hop Caucus’ Liz Havstad says: “What you’re doing when you’re creating cultural products is you’re actually empowering leaders to be able to communicate and engage their section of the movement, of the world, of the decision making process, with that cultural product. We want the product to go out to the masses as far and wide as we can figure out how to do, but the real potential is in giving folks a product to organize around to where they can better talk to their neighbors, friends, fellow members of an organization, constituents, elected leaders, to influence them with whatever the product is that we create. And it’s not even just in that final product. It’s in the process of creating that product together. It’s dozens and dozens of small meetings that are organizing meetings that are happening leading up to that event and now following it. Connecting people’s cultural expression to their political experience means they can use their cultural expression to affect when they’re participating in the political process. Culture is a shorthand for how we all relate to each other. If we want to build power through collective action, it’s that collective action is taking place because we’re connecting through that shorthand of a shared culture and identity.”

Roger Kim, Executive Director of the Climate and Clean Energy Equity Fund, sees cultural work as particularly important in a climate movement that has not prioritized the stories of communities of color: “Given the history of social movement in the United States, culture has always been the leading indicator in terms of creating the context of change to happen. It’s even more important in tackling the issue of climate change because of the way that the issue has been conveyed – through people like experts who know what’s best for everyone. And this is particularly important in a movement that is primarily white and upper class advocating for an issue that affects poor people and people of color.”

**“CONNECTING PEOPLE’S  
CULTURAL EXPRESSION TO  
THEIR POLITICAL EXPERIENCE**

MEANS THEY CAN USE THEIR CULTURAL  
EXPRESSION TO AFFECT WHEN THEY’RE  
PARTICIPATING IN THE POLITICAL  
PROCESS.”

- LIZ HAVSTAD, HIP HOP CAUCUS





Aminah Imani and Clark Jones visit with Ms. Deirdre "Mama D" Love, executive director of the Teens With a Purpose youth empowerment organization in Norfolk. Image courtesy of Hip Hop Caucus.

## Local Communities Must Shape Their Own Stories

*To help power community engagement in the climate crisis, local neighborhoods must see their stories and voices represented on screen. Comedy provides a way to reflect optimism and power in local stories.*

Working with local communities to shape portraits of resilience and power is vital. Comedy offers an accessible way in, particularly for neighborhoods that often don't see themselves represented in entertainment storytelling or local news. As Deidre "Mama D" Love says, "There's never been any real push to tell positive stories about what's happening here. That's never been a big push." But as Pastor Riddick explains, "It's significant that you bring those folks along so they have buy-in from the very, very beginning."

As Roger Kim of the Climate and Clean Energy Equity Fund sees it: "There's a history of social movements and it's based on local folks feeling the issues passionately and doing something about it, whether it's voting people out or other actions. People need to make those connections viscerally, and the only way to do that is to start at the local level. The climate movement has not been structured that way. It's also racialized -- communities of color are willing to do more, pay more, and vote more, but they are not the communities getting the resources."

According to Batman: "Nobody's going to be able to relate to these issues better than somebody who is living with them, who are affected by them, who may have even had ideas of how they can be fixed. They're going to tell you, 'I don't want this thing in my neighborhood now and this is what it's doing to myself and my family and my friends and my community.'"

Keja Reel says: "It's important that we be able to tell our own story and we haven't been able to do that.... But I think getting the point across for people to really start taking note it needs to come from us. It needs to be our story. Nobody can tell our story better than we can."

## Comedy Acts as Catharsis to Build and Celebrate Community Resilience and Power

*For communities that may feel chronically disenfranchised or traumatized, comedy can act as needed catharsis that builds resilience and provides a way to engage.*

Comedy can offer a welcome form of catharsis that can help build and celebrate the resilience and power of communities of color dealing with environmental justice challenges. According to Rev. Yearwood, “There’s a scripture in the Bible that says, ‘God will use the foolish things to confound the wise.’ Sometimes I think that we need more foolish things.”

As film director Elijah Karriem explains: “Climate change can be exhausting. So, but comedy is one of those things that can be the perfect vehicle to help communicate this issue, overall. Because in itself, the climate crisis is a very serious, not-laughing matter, but in order to be able to cope or process certain things, we have to be able to talk about it. And especially when you’re dealing with people of color, you’re already dealing with different layers of cultural trauma, especially in America, where you have a lot of people that have unresolved or unaddressed trauma from a historical perspective. So mixing that in with another issue of, ‘we’re already socially or financially disenfranchised, now we have to deal with a global climate catastrophe on our hands?’ You know, it can be a bit much.”

Gaylene Kanoyton says, “We’re such in a crisis age right now. People are stressed. I mean, it’s always something, whether it’s something financial, health, education, it’s always something. So everything is stressful, but if you break relief through comedy, and when I say relief I’m not talking about relief in terms of making light of it. I’m just talking about bringing relief that this is a serious matter, but we can put it in a way that you can understand it and enjoy learning at the same time. If you have one more documentary, one more article to read, it’s going to tick so many people off. You’ve got to find creative ways to educate the people most vulnerable.”

Deirdre Love, the teen community center director, concludes: “You can use comedy to bring information into context, and make a broad audience empathize long enough to take it in and put themselves in that space and just being in an uncomfortable space, and get that little house and where you can breathe by laughing before you go back into it again. It’s genius. It’s just creating the dialogue. We believe that change happens through dialogue, and the comedy is a form of dialogue that transcends. Everybody can be engaged in this dialogue because people like to laugh, so they’ll all come out just to get their laugh on. But at the same time, you have the opportunity to really use that platform and do something great.”

**“WE BELIEVE THAT CHANGE HAPPENS THROUGH DIALOGUE, AND THE COMEDY IS A FORM OF DIALOGUE THAT TRANSCENDS. EVERYBODY CAN BE ENGAGED IN THIS DIALOGUE BECAUSE PEOPLE LIKE TO LAUGH, SO THEY’LL ALL COME OUT JUST TO GET THEIR LAUGH ON.”**  
- DIERDRE LOVE, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF TEENS WITH A PURPOSE





# STRATEGIC INSIGHTS FOR THE FUTURE

*The St. Paul's neighborhood in Norfolk, Virginia, as depicted in 'Ain't Your Mama's Heat Wave,' the docu-comedy. Image courtesy of Hip Hop Caucus.*

Through the open-minded experience of co-creating with comedy professionals, social justice organizations can embrace the innovation and creativity that comedy can provide. Comedy can cut through cultural clutter, and it also entertains and invites feelings of play. This kind of light is needed in the climate movement, which can feel too complicated and difficult to engage disparate groups and communities beyond a stream of fatiguing outrage or clinical statistics.

Disenfranchised Black and brown communities need civic power to ensure they are centered in climate resilience measures that will be mapped and implemented in their neighborhoods, and creativity can help shake up the status quo and sound the alarm. Comedy is meaningful as a creative vehicle to capture attention and interest in places that don't feel seen or heard; it provides a dynamic, energizing way into a topic that has felt disconnected from many daily lives, and an entertaining reason to convene and discuss in the first place.



As Batman puts it: **“Energy creates momentum and momentum creates opportunity.”** What that means is you can be standing in the middle of Norfolk, wanting to push climate change forward, but if you don’t have any energy around you, meaning you’re not moving around enough for people to clearly understand what you’re doing and to understand that this is a long-term campaign and you’re going to be relentless and not stop, you’re not going to have enough energy around you or excitement around you for people to gravitate towards what you’re doing.”

To be sure, comedy isn’t a magical panacea for explicit disenfranchisement, gentrification, racialized policies, and climate change. Humor can’t convey the full scientific or sociological or policy complications of these challenges, nor would we want it to. But cultural products can shine a glaring spotlight to engage local and national audiences, and comedy is unexpected and disruptive. It is a critique and an invitation.

Ultimately, comedy’s utility in this context is entertainment value, catharsis and resilience, and a pathway to building local coalitions and a community’s civic strength and power to impact policy. As Rev. Yearwood says, “Clearly the old saying is true, ‘Either you shape policy or policy will shape you.’ The reality here is that while we can have this film and we can have discussions, if we aren’t putting things in place to create legislation, the policy to create changes, either the crisis around the housing crisis, or the crisis around climate, or around the issues of how do we become more resilient or adaptation. I think that this film allows us to have real conversations to really exalt that. And then, again, having people who can see themselves as part of the solution and helping them solve the crisis is part of it.”

In the fall of 2020, Hip Hop Caucus will release the comedy special, *Ain’t Your Mama’s Heat Wave*, and short-form digital content, to drive non-partisan voter turnout on climate justice. In 2021, the team will take the feature-length docu-comedy on the road, back to Norfolk and around the country as a centerpiece of their cultural efforts to mobilize Black and brown voters around climate justice. With the power of creativity and entertainment, the same local organizing machine that came together to produce the docu-comedy and fill the Attucks Theater for a live comedy show will power local climate activism -- in Norfolk and replicated in similar communities. The comedy here is about much more than entertainment, although the accessibility and shared cultural experience is the mechanism by which people might be willing to engage in messages that are otherwise exhausting or, as Batman says, “boring.”

Ultimately, *Ain’t Your Mama’s Heat Wave* is about bringing people together, reflecting the voices and stories of BIPOC communities that have been marginalized within the climate change movement, celebrating their resilience, inviting in their expertise to guide the way, and inviting others along. Ultimately, and over the long term, as Rev. Yearwood says, “the number one thing that we need to do with this kind of crisis is to broaden the movement.” The climate catastrophe is urgent, and if comedy can play a new starring role, there’s no time to waste.

BUT CULTURAL PRODUCTS CAN SHINE A  
GLARING SPOTLIGHT TO ENGAGE LOCAL AND  
NATIONAL AUDIENCES, AND **COMEDY**  
**IS UNEXPECTED AND**  
**DISRUPTIVE. IT IS A CRITIQUE**  
**AND AN INVITATION.**



# APPENDIX

## On-screen Subjects Featured in *Ain't Your Mama's Heat Wave*

Dr. Tom Allen, Old Dominion University  
Kenneth Cooper Alexander, Mayor of Norfolk  
Charles “Batman” Brown II  
Doug Beaver, Norfolk Office of Resilience  
DJ Bee, Freshtopia  
Alisha M. Burke, Teens With a Purpose  
Terry Brown, Fort Monroe  
Aminah Imani, Comedian  
Clark Jones, Comedian  
Lance Jones Jr.  
Malik Jordan, Teens With a Purpose Poet

Gaylene Kanoyton, Hampton Roads Branch, NAACP  
Deirdre “Mama D” Love, Teens With a Purpose  
Mamoudou N'Diaye, Comedian  
Andria McClellan, City of Norfolk  
Rev. Dr. Dwight Riddick, Sr., Gethsemane Baptist Church  
Tiffany Sawyer, Teens With a Purpose Poet  
Kristen Sivills, Comedian  
Antonique Smith, Co-Host, Think 100% Podcast  
Toiya Sosa, Community Leader  
Kyle Spencer, Norfolk Office of Resilience  
Rev. Lennox Yearwood, Jr., Hip Hop Caucus

## References

- 1 Climate Story Lab. Retrieved from <https://climatestorylab.org>
- 2 Think 100%. Retrieved from <https://think100climate.com/films/aint-your-mamas-heat-wave/>
- 3 Think 100%.
- 4 Rev. Lennox Yearwood, Jr. “Climate Justice is Racial Justice, Racial Justice is Climate Justice,” Shondaland.com, June 22, 2020, <https://www.shondaland.com/act/a32905536/environmental-justice-racial-justice-marginalized-communities/>.
- 5 David J. Hess & Lacey A. Satcher (2019). “Conditions for Successful Environmental Justice Mobilizations: An Analysis of 50 Cases,” *Environmental Politics*, 28:4, 663-684, doi:10.1080/09644016.2019.1565679, 663-664.
- 6 Hip Hop Caucus, Climate Strike. Retrieved from <https://hiphopcaucus.org/climatestrike/>
- 7 Donald P. Moynihan (2009). “The Response to Hurricane Katrina,” International Risk Governance Council, [https://irgc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Hurricane\\_Katrina\\_full\\_case\\_study\\_web.pdf](https://irgc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Hurricane_Katrina_full_case_study_web.pdf), 1-2; National Weather Service (2005), “Extremely Powerful Hurricane Katrina Leaves a Historic Mark on the Northern Gulf Coast.” <https://www.weather.gov/mob/katrina>.
- 8 Moynihan, 2009.
- 9 Donna Young (2009). “Hurricane Katrina,” Oxford American Studies Center, <https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-45713>, 1.
- 10 Jean Rhodes, et al. (2010). “The Impact of hurricane Katrina on the Mental and Physical Health of Low-Income Parents in New Orleans.” *The American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, vol. 80,2 (2010): 237-247. doi:10.1111/j.1939-0025.2010.01027.x
- 11 Rhodes et al., 2010.
- 12 Rodney D. Green, Marie Kouassi, Belinda Mambo (2013). “Housing, Race, and Recovery from Hurricane Katrina,” *The Review of Black Political Economy*, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1007/s12114-011-9116-0>, 147.
- 13 Moynihan, 2009, 1-2; National Weather Service, 2009.
- 14 Green, Kouassi, and Mambo, 2013, 146

- 15 Sherrow Pinder (2009). "Notes on Hurricane Katrina: Rethinking race, Class and Power in the United States," *Twenty-First Century Society*, 4:3, 241-256, doi:10.1080/17450140902988883, 245.
- 16 Young, 2009, 1, 3.
- 17 Green, Kouassi, and Mambo, 2013, 145.
- 18 Green, Kouassi, and Mambo, 2013, 145.
- 19 Mike Tidwell, "Will Norfolk be the next New Orleans?," *The Virginian-Pilot*, June 2, 2013, [https://www.pilotonline.com/opinion/columns/article\\_27fde306-329f-5d63-89d1-544196cbcd5c.html](https://www.pilotonline.com/opinion/columns/article_27fde306-329f-5d63-89d1-544196cbcd5c.html)
- 20 Katherine T. Egland and Rev. Lennox Yearwood Jr., "The Next Disaster for Black Communities," *The Hill*, June 24, 2020, <https://thehill.com/opinion/energy-environment/504279-the-next-disaster-for-black-communities>
- 21 Natural Resources Defense Council (2011). "Norfolk, Virginia: Identifying and Becoming More Resilient to Impacts of Climate Change," PDF, 2.
- 22 Thomas R. Allen, Thomas Crawford, Burrell Montz, Jessica Whitehead, Susan Lovelace, Armon D. Hanks, Ariel R. Christensen, and Gregory D. Kearney. "Linking Water Infrastructure, Public Health, and Sea Level Rise: Integrated Assessment of Flood Resilience in Coastal Cities." *Public Works Management & Policy* 24, no. 1 (January 2019): 110–39. doi:10.1177/1087724X18798380, 111.
- 23 Nicholas Kusnetz, "Norfolk Wants to Remake Itself as Sea Level Rises, but Who Will Be Left Behind?," *Inside Climate News*, May 21, 2018, <https://insideclimatenews.org/news/15052018/norfolk-virginia-navy-sea-level-rise-flooding-urban-planning-poverty-coastal-resilience>
- 24 Sierra C. Woodruff, Sara Meerow, Missy Stults, and Chandler Wilkins (2018). "Adaptation to Resilience Planning: Alternative Pathways to Prepare for Climate Change." *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, doi:10.1177/0739456X18801057, 2.
- 25 Coastal Resilience Strategy (n.d.), City of Norfolk, PDF, 10
- 26 Kusnetz, 2018.
- 27 Kusnetz, 2018.
- 28 Michael Paolisso, Ellen Douglas, Ashley Enrici, Paul Kirshen, Chris Watson, and Matthias Ruth (2012), "Climate Change, Justice, and Adaptation among African American Communities in the Chesapeake Bay Region," *Weather, Climate, and Society*: Vol 4, No 1, <https://journals.ametsoc.org/doi/full/10.1175/WCAS-D-11-00039.1?mobileUi=0&>, 34.
- 29 Paolisso et al., 2012, 34-35.
- 30 Paolisso et al, 2012, 36
- 31 David J. Hess & Lacey A. Satcher (2019). "Conditions for Successful Environmental Justice Mobilizations: An Analysis of 50 Cases," *Environmental Politics*, 28:4, 663-684, doi:10.1080/09644016.2019.1565679, 663.
- 32 Hess and Satcher, 2019, 681.
- 33 Hess and Satcher, 2019, 681.
- 34 Henry Jenkins, *Participatory Culture Interviews* (Medford, Massachusetts: Polity Press, 2019).
- 35 Caty Borum Chattoo and Lauren Feldman, *A Comedian and An Activist Walk Into a Bar: The Serious Role of Comedy in Social Justice* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2020).
- 36 Borum Chattoo and Feldman, *A Comedian and An Activist Walk Into a Bar*, 25.
- 37 Borum Chattoo and Feldman, *A Comedian and An Activist Walk Into a Bar*.
- 38 Warren, M. (2019, June 25). Inside the TV Writers Room: Tools and Techniques for Breaking In. Retrieved from <https://www.filmindependent.org/blog/inside-the-tv-writers-room-tools-and-techniques-for-breaking-in/>; France, L. R. (2018, July 18). Real life is funny that way: Inside the writers' rooms of 3 hit comedies. CNN. Retrieved from <https://www.cnn.com/2017/03/23/entertainment/sitcoms-writers-room/index.html>
- 39 Cizek, K., & Uricchio, W. (2019). *Collective Wisdom. Co-Creating Media within Communities, across Disciplines and with Algorithms*. MIT Open Documentary Lab. Retrieved from [https://cocreationstudio.mit.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Collective\\_Wisdom\\_Executive\\_Summary.pdf](https://cocreationstudio.mit.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Collective_Wisdom_Executive_Summary.pdf)
- 40 Borum Chattoo and Feldman, 2020.



COMEDY FOR  
**RACIAL  
JUSTICE**  
IN THE CLIMATE CRISIS

**LEVERAGING CREATIVITY AND BUILDING  
COMMUNITY POWER IN  
*AIN'T YOUR MAMA'S HEAT WAVE***



The Center for Media & Social Impact gratefully acknowledges our funders for the *Comedy ThinkTanks* program, including Luminate, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Atlantic Philanthropies and the McNulty Foundation.

**WWW.CMSIMPACT.ORG**