STAT
Color Code
Season 2, Episode 2: “A textbook case of environmental racism:” The Battle over the Brookhaven Landfill

Transcript Key:

In this written version of the episode, all words, including speakers, ambient sound, effects, and music, will appear in size 11 black type. SPEAKER NAMES are in bold. Music and other sound descriptions are indicated by [brackets] in regular font.

Speakers:

- **Nicholas St. Fleur (Nick)** is the host of Color Code and a science reporter for STAT, where he often covers the intersection of race and medicine. Based in Long Island, NY, he is in his early 30s.
- **Abena Asare** is a professor in the department of Africana Studies at Stony Brook University on Long Island, and one of the founders of BLARG.
- **Hannah Thomas** is a Black and Indigenous North Bellport citizen and BLARG founder, who has been fighting the landfill since before its opening 50 years ago.
- **Monique Fitzgerald** is Hannah Thomas’s niece, and a member of BLARG.
- **Robert Bullard** is a professor of Urban Planning and Environmental Policy and the director of the Bullard Center for Environmental and Climate Justice at Texas Southern University, and is regarded as the father of environmental justice.
- **Dennis Nix** is another co-founder of BLARG, a lifelong North Bellport resident, and used to work at the Brookhaven landfill.

[The sound of a trash can being wheeled down pavement plays in the background]

**Nick** (narrating): Growing up on Long Island, one of my chores around the house was taking the trash to the curb twice a week. Of the hundreds of times I’ve wheeled those cans down the driveway. I’ve never really thought of what happens after I place them at the curb.

[Sound of garbage trucks whooshing by and the wheels squeaking as they stop to a halt]

Obviously, the garbage trucks come the next morning and collect the cans. But then where did those trucks go? Where exactly does my trash go?

[Soft piano music plays]

My trash is a tiny part of the gargantuan 6750 tons of garbage that Long Islanders produce every day. In New York terms, that's about 45 Statues of Liberty's worth. Much of that waste gets sent to one of four incinerators on Long Island. Then my trash, which has now been turned into ash, ultimately ends up just a
couple of towns away from me, in North Bellport at the Brookhaven Landfill. Pretty much since the landfill first opened in 1974, members of this majority Black and Latino community have feared that harmful chemicals from the landfill are spewing into their air and seeping into their groundwater. For decades, local environmental activists have waged a battle to shut down the landfill that they say is making their community sick.

[Sounds from an electric keyboard enter. A musical phrase glides back and forth. It’s the THEME MUSIC for Color Code.]

My name is Nicholas St. Fleur, and this is Color Code, a podcast where we examine racial health disparities and delve into the impacts of racism in health care. In this episode, we're looking at the environmental activists trying to close the Brookhaven landfill.

[The sound of a car starting, and driving away.]

Nick (field recording): So we are at the Brookhaven landfill. Right now it is like a mountain of trash and dirt, so many seagulls, an unbelievable amount of seagulls. It really gets in your nose — the smell of mulch, I would say. There's a lot of little dump trucks, everything going all around. Yeah. So it's a huge landfill.

Nick (narrating): Every year, lines of huge diesel trucks dump over a million tons of construction waste and incinerator ash into the Brookhaven landfill. This smelly 270 foot tall monster looms over the town of North Bellport. North Bellport is a town, well, technically a hamlet, about 20 minutes from where I grew up.

It's governed by the town of Brookhaven. It's maybe easiest to understand North Bellport's racial and economic status when comparing it to its neighboring town, Bellport Village. North Bellport is home to about 10,000 people, of which about 36% are Latino and 22% are Black. Meanwhile, Bellport Village has a population of about 2200 people. Of that, 93% are white and only 1.5% of Latino and 1% is Black.

Now, when we look at the median household incomes in North Bellport, it's about $82,000. But in Bellport Village, it's about $124,000. The poverty rate in North Bellport is about 15%, which is more than double the Long Island average. In Bellport Village, the poverty rate is only 2 to 3%. Now, what's particularly striking about North Bellport is that it has the lowest life expectancy on Long Island, just 73 years. Compare that with Bellport Village, which has a life expectancy of 87 years. And it's worth noting that this 14 year difference is a pre-pandemic number. So that divide has likely gotten even worse. And now to give you just a little more perspective, a 2021 New York Times article described Bellport Village as, “a village with extraordinary privileges.” For starters, Bellport Village residents get automatic membership in the country club and ferry rides to an exclusive beach on Fire Island.

Abena Asare: There is a history of segregation that is on deniable. You literally go over a set of train tracks and see a completely different reality on one side of the train tracks and on the other, North Bellport and Bellport. They have the same zip code. It's one town, and yet there have been all of these different efforts to kind of separate them because of a particular history.
Nick: That's Abena Asare. She's a professor of Africana studies at the nearby Stony Brook University. She's also a founder of an activist group called BLARG. BLARG stands for the Brookhaven Landfill Action and Remediation Group, and its mission is to shut down the landfill and rectify the damage it has caused the community. North Bellport in the village of Bellport, where once basically the same thing. Both were predominantly white working class neighborhoods.

But in the 1960s, as a few Black families started moving into, what is now North Bellport, things drastically changed. Unscrupulous real estate agents used these few occurrences to stir up a panic. One real estate agent in particular, a man named Gerald Cutler, told white folks that they should hurry up, sell their houses and move out of the neighborhoods before Black folk took over. He'd offer the white folks a lowball price and say something like, I can't put it on the market for much more because there's a colored family that moved in two doors down. But if you sell it to me directly, I'll take this burden off your hands. He did something like that for about 50 houses. This was a practice known as blockbusting, where real estate agents would buy houses for super cheap from the white families and then sell them at higher prices to incoming Black families. Between 1960 and 1970, the white population in North Bellport dropped by about 730 people. That's according to the Long Island History Journal. Meanwhile, the Black and Latino population skyrocketed from 265 to about 2,500. It was the start of the segregation between Bellport Village and North Bellport. Now, in the 1970s, the question arose "Where should the town of Brookhaven, which governs North Bellport and the Village of Bellport, where should it put its landfill?"

Segregation helped provide the answer.

Abena Asare: A choice is made at the town level and also at the state level to place the Brookhaven landfill right next to North Bellport. Now, this landfill continues to shape the fortunes of that area over the next decades. This is one of the things that we talk about a lot at BLARG. What does it mean to live next to a landfill? How does that impact the home prices within the area? How does that impact the ability of that community to kind of acquire equity and wealth in their homes? How does that change what type of business investment comes into the area? The landfill becomes a feature in shaping the destiny of that area, right? And that reality hasn't ever been accounted for.

Nick: To Hannah Thomas, a Black and Indigenous North Bellport citizen and BLARG founder, what her community is facing boils down to one thing:

Hannah Thomas: It's all about racism, and it's a shame because they have done some terrible things to us.

Nick: Hannah has fought the landfill for 50 years, since before it opened in 1974.

Hannah Thomas: There weren't too many people of color fighting it because they didn't know the risks of the landfill. I only knew because I was fighting for the environment.

Nick: Hannah's years of environmental activism have brushed off on her niece, Monique Fitzgerald, who fights right there beside her.
**Monique Fitzgerald:** You know, I came into this understanding that the landfill was basically something that was detrimental to our health. I knew that my whole life, but I wouldn't say that I was doing anything about it other than fighting with my body, which is what most people are doing, even if they don't say a word about the landfill. You know, if you live near a landfill, you have no choice but to fight for your life every day.

**Nick:** A report by the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice in 2007 shows that over half of hazardous waste sites, including landfills and incinerators, were located in communities of color. I spoke to one of the authors of this report, Dr. Robert Bullard. He's often been called the father of environmental justice.

**Robert Bullard:** My name is Dr. Robert Bullard. I am the professor of Urban Planning and Environmental Policy and Director of the Bullard Center for Environmental and Climate Justice at Texas Southern University in Houston, Texas. I'm a sociologist by training, but I tell people I don't do dead white men sociology. I do what's scientifically called kick ass sociology.

**Nick:** In the decades that Dr. Bullard has been fighting environmental racism, he's heard stories like those happening in North Bellport time and time again.

**Robert Bullard:** You have painted a textbook case of environmental racism, from the standpoint even in the suburbs. We're not talking about an inner city, you know, in the heart of the ghetto. We're talking about a suburban county. For some reason, the toxic racism finds us. It finds Black and brown people. When I first was writing about this, I thought it was a Southern phenomenon. I thought it was something that was just created out of remnants of slavery and segregation and Jim Crow.

But what you described is basically Jim Crow up north, new up south, and that this is not unique. The issues that you describe revolves around the original sin of segregation and racial redlining and sorting people into neighborhoods based on race, ethnicity and color, and at the same time, denying that community the same kinds of benefits and amenities and things that make a community healthy. But on the flip side is giving the Black and brown community what we call in planning, a fancy name — locally unwanted land uses, or LULUs. We get the LULUs and the white community get the amenities, they get the parks, the greenspace, the walk trails, the bicycle lanes, and all of those things that we know make our community healthy, resilient, and increase the the self-esteem of the residents and particularly children. The ultimate insult and assault is to our children.

**Nick:** And being right next to a LULU, like a landfill, can have some devastating impacts to a community.

**Robert Bullard:** We know the science, that there's a relationship between health and wealth. And so if you are depressing the wealth of that community and you're depressing the property values, and if you somehow allowing that landfill to continue to exist longer than the life expectancy of a mortgage, which is usually 30 years, you're talking about stealing wealth, stealing health, and stealing the vitality of that neighborhood.
Nick: Stealing health. That's what the activists in North Bellport have been shouting from the rooftops for decades. While connecting health effects like cancer directly to landfills can be tricky and oftentimes downright impossible, there are studies that suggest that living near landfill can be detrimental to one's health. A 2021 meta analysis from studies conducted on landfills around the world found some evidence that living near landfills increased the risk of birth defects, the risk of mortality from lung cancer and other respiratory diseases, as well as an overall increase in mortality.

The researchers note that it's difficult to say for sure that living near landfill directly caused these diseases and that more research is needed. On Long Island, in addition to having the lowest life expectancy, North Bellport also has the second highest asthma rates. The BLARG activist and some community members believe that toxins from the landfill have contributed to cases of cancer seen in teachers at the nearby Frank P. Long Intermediate School, as well as migraines, nausea and rashes in the students. From 1998 to 2008, more than 30 teachers at the school have developed cancer. Of those, more than ten have died. There's even a documentary called “Sick School,” highlighting these cases and their potential tie to the landfill.

Now because of the community's concerns, in 2005 the New York State Department of Health conducted investigations on the number of cancer cases in the area served by the school. They compared the actual number of diagnosed cancer cases over a 13 year span to the number of cancers they expected they'd see during that time. Now, they did find more cases than expected in women, especially in uterine cancer. But the report adds a caveat that uterine cancer has no known environmental risk factors. Some 15 years later, they did another review of the cancer cases at the school and found that, "The number and pattern of cancer diagnosis do not appear unusual." So basically, they're not finding a link, as you can imagine, for the activists and community members. These findings are rather frustrating, especially when they feel that something must be inherently wrong living by the landfill, even if the data doesn't point in their favor.

Abena Asare: In shorthand, the response of the school board and the town have always been "You cannot blame the landfill for any particular health outcome faced by individuals who work or attend the school." For me, it is so difficult to imagine that that is what the response is.

The problem of having an elementary school at the foot of a landfill, in my perspective, is not something that we need miles of testing to see is not something that is questionable or up for debate. It is a problem to have a school where young bodies and lungs exist close to a landfill with known toxins in it. So it's about a lack of accountability. And one of the things that has been shocking for me is to see that even the lives of children are not sacred.

Nick: Abena and the other activists remain skeptical of the government's studies. They're calling for an independent review of the landfill, especially after the death of a student in 2022, which has reignited outrage within the community.

[A series of television news reports, from different outlets play in succession]

Newscaster: A Long Island mother is fighting to have the school her son attended closed.
Newscaster 2: New at five, a mother suing a school district and town on Long Island because she claims they're responsible for her son's death.

Newscaster 3: The lawsuit claims Javien Coleman's non-Hodgkin's lymphoma was caused by toxic conditions at the school.

Newscaster interviewee: The school really needs to be shut down like they jeopardized a lot of kids, not just the kids, but the teachers, the workers. And they needed to shut it down.

Nick: Javien Coleman was a 13 year old student at Frank P. Long Intermediate School. His mother believes that toxins from the landfill contributed to her son's death. The school is barely a mile away from the landfill. You can see the giant mountain of waste from the playground. And some days the stench is so bad and it washes over the school. Many members of BLARG also have a connection to the school. Like Abena.

Abena Asare: My son right now is in the Frank P. Long School. When he comes home with a headache, with a rash, my heart sinks. Is this the beginning of something bigger, right? Recently, when there were reporters around the school because of this new lawsuit, you know, when we came home in the evening and he was speaking about it, I saw him making the calculations in his head. —“Am I at risk? What do I make of this reality?” And I just felt so ashamed. That this is the calculation he and any of his classmates have to make. Do the adults around us, are they putting us at risk?

[Soft xylophone music tunes up]

Nick: Although studies have not been able to conclusively link landfills to cancer, throughout the years, air and water contamination in the nearby community has been traced back to the landfill.

Newscaster 5: Tonight, there is an underground menace moving through some areas of Brookhaven, a plume of toxic contamination.

Newscaster 6: The problem started in 1980. Chemical waste from the trash started seeping through the landfill liners here at the Brookhaven Landfill into the ground. There's all sorts of medical waste.

Nick: In the 1980s, officials discovered a plume of chemicals that was leaking from the landfill. This plume eventually reached private drinking water wells, which resulted in many residents switching to the public water supply. Throughout the eighties, and the '90s, investigators found volatile organic compounds or VOCs in private wells. A few of those wells had levels that were higher than the limits set by the state, although officials say that potential sources of the leaks have been capped.

Newday reported in 2008 that chemicals from the landfills plume have reached local waterways like Beaver Dam Creek. They note that it posed a threat to local wildlife. The town of Brookhaven has also been hit by fines from both the state and federal government for failing to contain odors. In 2020, the U.S. Justice Department and the EPA said that the landfill violated the Clean Air Act and ordered it to pay an
almost $250,000 fine. In 2019, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation also ordered them to pay more than $150,000 and to improve their facilities after multiple odor complaints from residents. With all of these problems, some parents have raised the question of moving Frank P. Long school. But as Abena describes there's a paradox in doing that for the local government.

**Abena Asare:** The reality is if the school was moved, we would have to confront the landfill issue because then institutions would be admitting that something is wrong, that things are not perfect, and it is easier to not be accountable for one bit of it. We aren't going to move the school. We aren't going to admit anything is wrong, because what would happen then? You would have to then admit that things are not okay with the Brookhaven landfill.

**Zoom bot:** This meeting is being recorded.

**Monique Fitzgerald:** In a few. We're going to do our acknowledgments first and then we're going to get to intros. All right. So our acknowledgments are we are a working group that started out in the spring of 2020 after George Floyd's murder. We took to the streets…

**Nick:** Hannah, Monique and Abena hold virtual meetings with concerned community members during their large gatherings. Nearly every Friday, I sat in on several of these virtual meetings. During my reporting on this episode. A few dozen folks from North Bellport and nearby towns show up regularly. The meetings serve as opportunities for the community members to share information and point out strategies to get the town of Brookhaven to listen to their concerns. Despite their years of activism, the BLARG members say they have not been granted a one on one meeting with the town government, and it's not for lack of trying.

**Dennis Nix:** We've invited the supervisor, we invited the councilman, and they, they've been a no show, no show. They are not willing to sit and speak and talk with us. And it's like, "Why are we the bad guys, why we painted the villain," you know? Because we want to help a community that's been treated wrong by government for the last 50 years? Our voice you need to be heard then.

**Nick:** That's Dennis Nix. He's another co-founder of BLARG, a lifelong North Bellport resident, and he used to actually work at the Brookhaven landfill.

**Dennis Nix:** You know, I enjoyed the outside work being able to work part time labor on the road. When it was inside, you would pick up trash around the landfill, or they would put you on the hill and they would have to, like, dig trenches and put piping in. You would have to help up there. Horrible smell, horrible like the smell and conditions were horrible. It was many nights, many days of going to work there, I went home, my wife could tell you with like encrusted eyes, it's like from the fumes. It's just horrible.

**Nick:** Dennis's ties with the landfill, they go back pretty far. As a kid, he used to go around his neighborhood with his dad and collect people's trash and then dispose of it at the landfill. And growing up, he was actually a student at what is now Frank P. Long.
**Dennis Nix:** You know, there were some days we couldn't go outside to play. I remember, I remember that As bright as day they would say, like "The animals escaped." It wasn't that. It was that the smells were too harsh for us to play outside because people were getting sick. So they would say things like, "Oh, animals escaped. Y'all can't go outside today." You know that school. People were getting sick when I was attending that school and I'm 42 years old now.

**Nick:** Dennis also has a lawsuit against the landfill because he said he was exposed to toxins while working there that have adversely affected his health.

**Dennis Nix:** I don't think they care about us. You know, and I think with the government and I've seen it when you know, like I said, I was once a worker there, you know, and I was on the other side of the fence at one time, like it's nothing, you know these people. But once I got sick, once I was exposed, I realized they don't care. They don't care.

**Nick** (interviewing): Knowing the history with North Bellport, knowing you have this big landfill, knowing, as you put it, you know, you feel the local government doesn't care about your community. Does it surprise you that North Bellport has the lowest life expectancy here on Long Island?

**Dennis Nix:** No, it does not. We have the one the largest landfills right next to us, you know. You know, the landfill generates about 60% of the town of Brookhaven's money, the revenue and they're not going to stop that for a little community that they don't live in.

**Nick:** Dennis was referring to numbers from the 2021 budget. I took a look at the town of Brookhaven's budget for 2022. It says that landfill fees brought in about $57 million. That's about 50% of the town of Brookhaven department revenue. The landfill fees are projected to bring in about $59 million in 2023.

One way BLARG members try to get face time with the people in power is by attending the Brookhaven Town board meetings. Some of these meetings are held during the day at 2 p.m. when most concerned community members are at work and the community members are only given 3 minutes each to address their local representatives. At one meeting in February, Dennis took the mic to speak. In his hands, he gripped a bag of pills — medicine he has to take due to his health issues that he believes were caused by working at the landfill. He raised the bag high over his head.

**Dennis** (at town board meeting): I have asthma pumps, psychological meds, you name it, it's in here. I suffer from type two diabetes and before my incident I needed none of this. So I say to you, I say to you all how many more people in our community need to suffer from this landfill before something gets done. Thank you.

**Nick:** Dennis said that he and his fellow activists and community members will continue going to the town hall meetings until their message is heard.

**Dennis Nix:** Do something. Give us some numbers. Why do we have the lowest life expectancy rate? Give us information like help us, and nothing. Still nothing, you know? And I asked them this and they
just hide behind their monitors and do nothing, and it's just it's tiring. But we're not stopping with BLARG. We want answers.

Nick: The town government has stated that the landfill will close in 2024. That's when officials believe the landfill will reach its capacity. But the BLARG members are not convinced. As members of the community, they've been fighting the landfill for decades and they've heard potential closure dates before. They think it will be yet another broken promise from the town.

Abena Asare: When it was placed there, the Bellport area was told after the landfill would close in some 20 years, the whole area would be turned into a beautiful park. I've seen the plans that were shared back then in those days of a park with ski slopes and pools. The idea was you will get the landfill now for some time, but in the future that community will be made whole and, in fact will be improved, because you took on this role. And all of those promises have not been kept. Right? And this is part of the legacy of this landfill is about broken trust between the government and that community.

Nick: The Color Code team reached out to the town of Brookhaven for comment. They haven't responded.

[Soft, ethereal music]

Nick: So how does all of this get resolved? What is the solution to the Brookhaven landfill problem and to Long Island's waste problem?

Monique Fitzgerald: The first question everybody asks us when we say we're fighting a landfill, like, well, where is the waste going to go? You know what I mean.

Hannah Thomas: We don't have the answer to that.

Nick: The BLARG team acknowledges that there is no simple solution to Long Island's trash problem. The ideal scenario would be something that moves us closer to zero waste, something that makes people more mindful about their consumption habits and puts more emphasis on community composting and using sustainable and reusable materials. But the first step is just acknowledging that we have this trash problem here on Long Island and recognizing that it needs to be addressed on both the local governmental level and on the individual's level.

Abena Asare: It is all of our waste. So it's all of our responsibility, right? Most people's waste goes into the Brookhaven landfill. If you live within Long Island. And that can either be a source of guilt and shame if you think about it at all, or it can be a source of connection. You are also connected to this huge problem. You have an investment in in how this problem is solved. Your waste is creating toxicity right now for the communities which are most proximate to the Brookhaven landfill. What does that mean for you? Right. How do you become involved in this issue, beyond adding your waste to the problem? So we are looking for people to become educated and care about the fact that this is all of our waste. This is all of our problem. So we need to really solve it together.
[Soft, trilling music plays]

**Nick:** Abena's words really stuck with me as a Long Islander. I too am part of the problem. It's eye opening to sit down and talk with the people who your trash is harming, to learn about what really happens after I rolled that trash can down to the driveway and place it at the curb. Hearing about the history of North Bellport and the history of blockbusting on Long Island, I couldn't help but draw parallels between that history and my family's own history in our community. You see, my family was the first Black family to move onto our street some 30 years ago. A neighbor had mentioned to my parents at that time that one of the white families on the street considered selling their house because my parents had moved in.

Since then, my neighborhood has become way more diverse. There's tons of Black and brown families living here, and I can't help but think, does that devalue us in the eyes of the local government in much the same way that North Bellport has been devalued in their eyes? I keep reflecting on what I've heard and learned about North Bellport and its present day reality. I mean how it's been fighting this landfill for 50 years, how the local government won't listen to it. I think about the conversation I had with Dr. Bullard and how he said this is a textbook example of environmental racism. Yet the town kind of keeps its eyes closed to it and its ear shut. And I think about the activists and the community members' skepticism that the landfill will close in 2024 and how they think that it'll be just another broken promise from the local government. Though, one thing that does keep me hopeful is hearing about how the BLARG members have even taken to the streets to protest against the Brookhaven landfill, that their fight is going to continue going even if the landfill stays open past 2024. Now, I don't know what the solution is to Long Island's waste problem, but I do know that I can be more mindful about the garbage that I produce and wheel down the curb.

[COLOR CODE THEME plays]

**CREDITS**

Thank you for listening and being part of our Color Code community.

Our team here at STAT is Alissa Ambrose, Hyacinth Empinado, Theresa Gaffney and me, Nick St. Fleur. Our theme music is by Bryan Joel, and Anil Oza is our intern.

Thanks to the Commonwealth Fund for supporting this podcast.

If you like the podcast, please leave a review, and subscribe! And if you have any thoughts for us, you can reach us at ColorCode@statnews.com.