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Having lived in Oregon for thirty years, I have never seen this level of hatred expressed in our community. Not even close.

As an antidote to this appalling trend, the organization I lead, Beyond Toxics, along with the Eugene-Springfield NAACP and Medford-based Unete Farm Worker Advocacy Center, were awarded a two-year \$90,000 grant. We are three diverse, now united, Oregon nonprofits dedicated to solving racial injustice.

The Collins Foundation, an Oregon-based philanthropic organization, is supporting our project “Intersectional Collaboration for Environmental Justice,” serving Latino, African-American and other vulnerable communities as well as low-income, rural residents in Lane, Jackson and Josephine counties. The purpose of the grant is to build a deeper understanding and greater support for racial and environmental justice values in Oregon.

We recognize that, in these extraordinary times, we are called upon to be intentional about the way we connect issues of racial, immigrant and environmental justice. To combat the distressing drift towards intolerance and hatred, we must emphasize the commonality and interconnectedness of these struggles. We can do this through the specialized and unique skills and expertise each organization brings to the table.

As Oregon's lead environmental justice organization with offices in Lane and Jackson counties, Beyond Toxics is dedicated to ending persistent environmental risks that daily weigh upon vulnerable communities. This approach connects us with our partner organizations. For more than six years, Beyond Toxics and Unete have collaborated on environmental justice and farm worker issues. The NAACP and Beyond Toxics successfully co-proposed a “Resolution on Human Rights and Climate Change” to the Eugene City Council, and we supported NAACP's Climate Justice Rally and Lobby Day at Oregon's State Capitol.

Our organizations may serve diverse communities, yet Beyond Toxics, NAACP and Unete find we have the potential for incredible cross-organizational reciprocity. Ultimately, our goal is to build infrastructure in our communities to stand up to policies of injustice, discrimination and economic disparities.

The wise words of our co-organizer Eric Richardson, president of the Eugene-Springfield NAACP, speak to this reciprocity and power. “True movement building calls for diverse groups to work together despite differing perspectives,” Richardson said. “This innovative project seeks to open up new lines of communication and collaboration between the Latino and Black communities understanding our shared struggle for a safe, welcoming, accountable society.”

According to the City of Eugene’s 6th annual *Hate and Bias Crime Report*, our community experienced a 70 percent hike in reports of hate and bias attacks in 2017, compared to 2016: 139 incidents versus the previous high of 82 reported hate and bias crimes. Race is the leading motivating factor reported to the police in these crimes. Shocking statistics like these serve to remind us that racism is all around us, degrading the quality of our lives every day. I believe racism survives and thrives when the dominant culture keeps us separated and suspicious of one another.

Insidiously, the powerful elite stoke fear within communities of color over access to jobs, education, housing and more. Struggling to overcome this system keeps us distracted from grappling with who gains from tearing communities apart. Racism and bias can also show up in ways as subtle as environmental injustice, a pattern of devastating pollution and disease falling upon the neighborhoods also suffering from social inequality.

Racism thrives in soil that nourishes it. The collaborative project funded by the Collins grant will help our three organizations deepen our relationships and combine our diverse strategies to strengthen communities of color to build an environmental justice movement. Focusing on cross-cultural, cross-racial, and cross-geographic movement building, we gain the strength needed to better fight oppression. Together, we envision creating a cultural shift that grows directly out of the experiences of those most impacted.

Traditionally, the burden of changing this system has been placed on the very communities who are targeted by racist policies, yet they have the least resources and political clout to deal with imposed injustices. Removing these burdens begins by building community leadership to advance justice.

This takes intentional and collaborative work. Between our three organizations, we organize youth, low-income residents, immigrants, rural communities, workers of color and people of color who are the most marginalized and affected by environmental racism and inequity. By combining our experiences and strengths and by utilizing our networks and alliances, we'll have a better vantage point to see the next steps we must take to overcome systemic discrimination.

The funding from the Collins Foundation grant is essential to our small non-profits collaborating for the needed brave and tenacious work that lies ahead: advancing the cause of environmental justice in Oregon.

*Lisa Arkin is executive director of Beyond Toxics, which promotes environmental justice engagement and community-based environmental grassroots organizing to ensure environmental protection and health for all communities.*

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