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# Investing in Systems Change

BY BRIDGET SHIRVELL

**F**or the past 18 months, Simon Bunyan '22 MEM has crisscrossed the country, talking with community groups about what they need to implement clean energy solutions. These conversations are part of his work with the Department of Energy’s Justice40 Initiative, which directs 40% of overall federal investments in clean energy, energy efficiency, sustainable housing, and clean water infrastructure into disadvantaged communities.

“It’s a challenging charge that requires us to essentially shift the research and development way the agency has operated since the 1970s,” says Bunyan. “We’re looking at the money the federal government is investing through the Inflation Reduction Act, Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, and CHIPS and Science Act, and making sure that they are benefiting frontline communities, not just going into industry.”

Bunyan reaches out to communities that are ready to discuss a wide array of potential funding opportunities that can range from a few thousand dollars to more than a billion. Still, his real work is listening to what the communities need. For some, like the Pauma Band of Luiseño Indians, it might be solar installation, while others want to explore wind power, geothermal energy, or even mineral processing and extraction.

“The important thing is simply listening to what tribes want and then figuring out how we can support them, finding the right funding opportunities for them, in the right space that isn’t burdensome to apply for,” Bunyan says.

It’s one thing to know that the world needs to transition from fossil fuels; it’s an entirely different thing to determine how to put together the puzzle pieces of the on-the-ground clean energy transition.

“The question I went to YSE to address is, ‘what does an equitable and just world with 100% clean energy look like?’” says Bunyan, who started at YSE in 2020, on the heels of the Green New Deal proposal. “Because of the realities of our extractive energy systems, if we don’t intentionally and thoughtfully engage frontline communities, we’re simply going to replicate the economic and environmental hazards we have now, but with clean tech.”

Bunyan came to YSE with work experience at the Department of Energy, the White House Council on Environmental Quality, and the Environmental Defense Fund. However, he credits his time at YSE with helping him view the energy system with a critical lens.

“Simon was a standout student in my course on environmental justice,” says Professor of Environmental Justice Gerald Torres. “He brought his passion and considerable analytic skills to investigate the causes and possible remedies for the maldistribution of both environmental burdens and environmental goods.”

While he never thought he would be back in Washington, D.C., working for the federal government after school, Bunyan sees the role at the Justice40 Initiative as a powerful way to address inequality in policy implementation.

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