



Seattle
Public
Utilities



2025-2030 Strategic
Business Plan

**ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE
POETRY COLLECTION**

As we envision a Seattle where community members and employees thrive in safe, healthy places with nature and water, our reality includes the array of experiences conveyed by these poets.

In our City, marginalized communities continue to be disproportionately affected by underinvestment, pollution, climate change, and health risks. This compendium of commissioned poems provides SPU employees and our community with an opportunity to reflect on both the beauty and creativity of our City, and what environmental justice really is and means. It calls us to actively engage in dismantling structures of oppression and address the root causes of disparities.

We commissioned these voices to shed light on the lived experiences of those most impacted by environmental injustices. Their words offer powerful insights and perspectives that challenge us to think deeply about our roles and responsibilities. By reading these poems, watching the accompanying video, and engaging with the reflection questions, we hope you will not only gain a deeper understanding of the issues but that they may spark meaningful action in your own life and work.

Thank you to these poets for reminding all of us that we can and should embrace equity, empathy, and solidarity, and for helping us forge a path toward a more sustainable and just future for all.

Andrew Lee

General Manager/CEO
Seattle Public Utilities

INTRODUCTION

We all share responsibility for the land and environment. Recognizing this shared responsibility entails actively engaging in efforts to dismantle structures of oppression and address the root causes of environmental disparities. It requires fostering inclusive decision-making processes that amplify the voices of environmental justice communities and center their experiences in decision making. Environmental justice demands a paradigm shift in how we perceive and interact with the natural world—one that embraces equity, empathy, and solidarity.

These poets are asking us to confront the realities of environmental justice in our city. These discussions must be considered within broader conversations surrounding civil rights, oppression, disparity, and inequity.

Why do certain communities bear the disproportionate burden of environmental and health disparities?

Why are marginalized communities facing the brunt of environmental degradation and pollution?

Addressing these questions necessitates an intersectional approach that acknowledges historical injustices and systemic inequalities. It involves advocating for policies that prioritize the rights of all living beings to a clean and healthy environment. Environmental stewardship must extend beyond our services; it requires a collective commitment to healing past injustices and ensuring equitable access to environmental resources and protections. SPU acknowledges the disproportionate burden of pollution and contamination placed on marginalized communities and seeks to mitigate that harm.

At SPU the mission is clear, we want a utility that ***fosters healthy people, environment and economy by partnering with our community to equitably manage water and waste resources for today and for future generations.*** To articulate and address environmental justice at SPU we co-created Environmental Justice in Action at SPU, defining and committing to an being an institutional ally.

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IN ACTION AT SPU

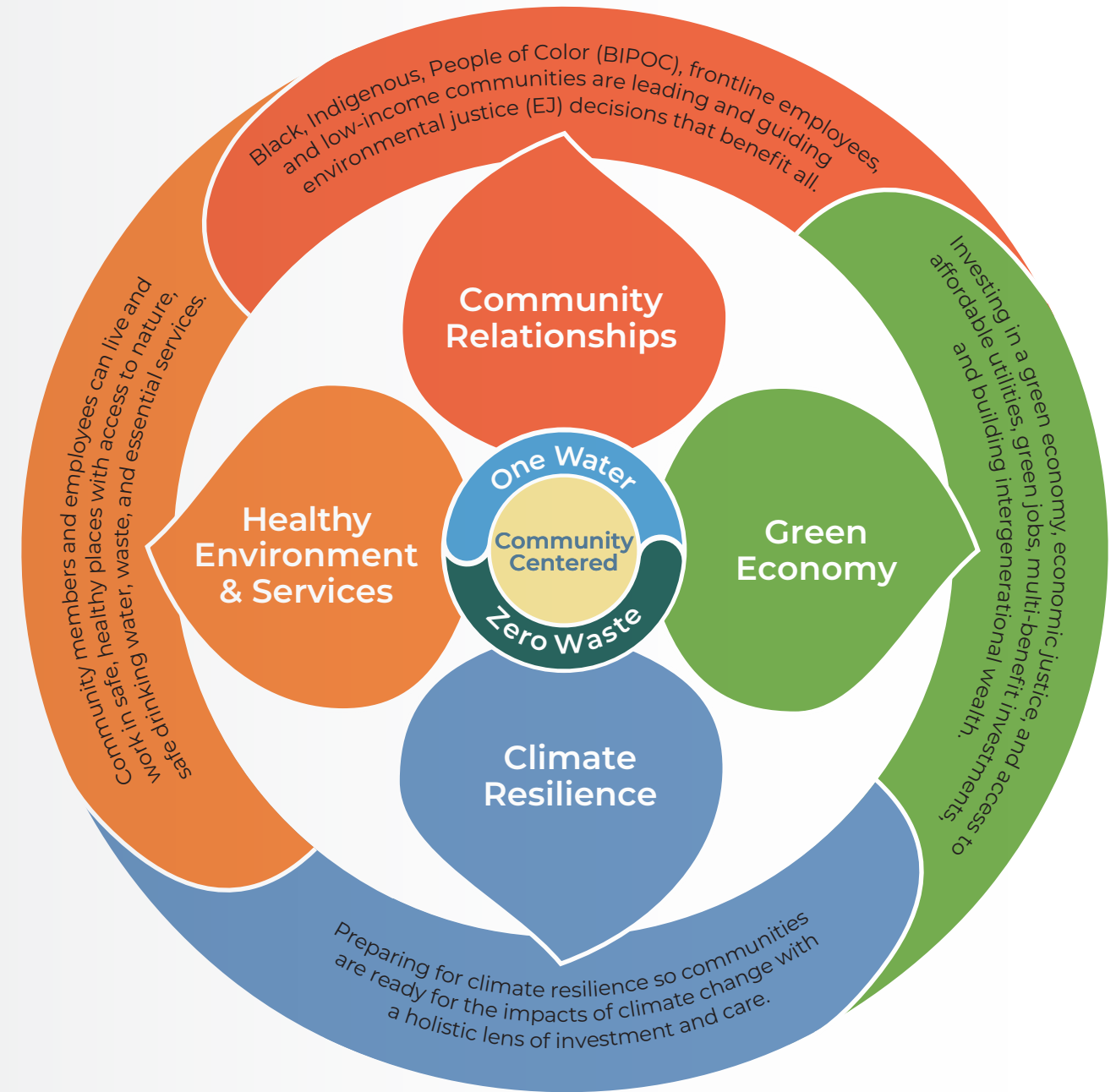
SPU defines environmental justice as removing disparities for communities and employees who are disproportionately affected by underinvestment, pollution, climate change and health risks.

We seek to be a government partner that co-creates environmental solutions and strengthens communities by centering racial equity, sharing power, and prioritizing the experiences of those most impacted by SPU policies and practices.

We envision a Seattle where communities can thrive with access to nature, safe water, sustainable waste services, and related jobs.

SPU commits to:

- Developing and centering **community relationships** with Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC), and low-income communities so that they are leading and guiding environmental justice (EJ) decisions that benefit all.
- Protecting and prioritizing **healthy environments and services** so community members and employees can live and work in safe, healthy places with access to nature, safe drinking water, waste, and essential services. SPU is committed to prioritizing the safety and wellbeing of frontline employees.
- Investing in a **green economy**, economic justice, and access to affordable utilities, green jobs, multi-benefit investments, and building intergenerational wealth.
- Preparing for **climate resilience** so communities are ready for the impacts of climate change with a holistic lens of investment and care.



What is the connection between poetry and environmental justice?

Two of life's greatest gifts are nature and art, both of which give us the opportunity to experience awe. Whether you find it in a coincidence, a sunset, a painting, or maybe in this collection of poetry, awe challenges us to experience curiosity and joy, it evokes introspection, challenging perspectives, and inspires a sense of just how small and large we are. May this poetry inspire a deeper understanding of our interconnectedness with the natural world and our role in stewarding this land.

EACH SEATTLE MORNING

By Ching-In Chen



Biography: Descended from ocean dwellers, Ching-In Chen is a genderqueer Chinese American writer, community organizer and teacher. They are author of *The Heart's Traffic: a novel in poems* (Arktoi Books/Red Hen Press, 2009) and *recombinant* (Kelsey Street Press, 2018 Lambda Literary Award for Transgender Poetry) as well as chapbooks *to make black paper sing* (speCt! Books) and *Kundiman for Kin :: Information Retrieval for Monsters* (Portable Press at Yo-Yo Labs, Leslie Scalapino Finalist). Chen is co-editor of *The Revolution Starts at Home: Confronting Intimate Violence Within Activist Communities* (South End Press, 1st edition; AK Press, 2nd edition) and currently a core member of the *Massage Parlor Outreach Project*. They are also a Kelsey Street Press collective member and an *Airlie Press* editor. They have received fellowships from *Kundiman*, *Lambda*, *Watering Hole*, *Can Serrat*, *Imagining America*, *Jack Straw Cultural Center* and the *Intercultural Leadership Institute* as well as the *Judith A. Markowitz Award for Exceptional New LGBTQ Writers*. They are currently collaborating with *Cassie Mira* and others on *Breathing in a Time of Disaster*, a performance, installation and speculative writing project exploring breath through meditation, health and environmental justice. They teach in the *School of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences* and the *MFA program in Creative Writing and Poetics* at *University of Washington Bothell* and serve as the *Poet Laureate of the City of Redmond*. www.chinginchen.com

because this Seattle morning
 an animal tugged me out door
 dark before coffee pulling
 me towards secret stream
 we pause a moment watch glistening
 trees and listen to beginning rain
 a liquid harmony
 we wonder where the water flows
 grateful for this small patch of unpaved
 dirt beneath our feet

give thanks to garbage truck rolling
 down street dog rushing forward
 greeting Tuesday workers
 a weekly ritual to let go our old
 meals and sorrows worn
 toys and bare threads
 what can be transformed they bring away
 what can be re-made as dirt
 as we make space for new week
 as we make space for new season

because this Seattle morning
 we open faucet
 welcome
 cool rush of clean
 water down throat
 a sweet sweet gift
 to replenish what we lost

because this Seattle morning
 even flush of toilet
 daily ritual taken
 for granted

to start each morning
 we thank those
 who smooth our days
 each Seattle morning
 with their labor
 each Seattle morning
 we say thank you

SO MUCH I LOVE IS COMPLICATED BUT YOU CAN LEARN SOMETHING SIMPLE

By Arianne True

I

I grew up playing in the drainage ditches, the grass banks sloped and small, down to the concrete halfpipes that carried all that stormwater down the hill, blocks and blocks and miles sometimes, back down to the Sound. I'm talking about the small ditches, the ones in the curb strip between sidewalk and road, or instead of sidewalk, in the Seattle neighborhood I grew up in. and the parts where the ditches cross under intersections, whole pipes, too small even for our small selves, just big enough to sometimes, on a brighter day, lie on your stomach in the narrow concrete and look up to see a cat silhouetted by sun, hiding in the pipe. attempts to lure, and then distracted by all these plants you didn't know were all grasses, and their heavy seedheads and the breeze that moved them and brushed grass blades across your legs, arms—some so soft and some like papercuts.

we played only when it was dry, jumping back and forth, dug bank to dug bank, pleasure in landing just right on the slant to push off again, momentum and gravity and whatever spins children to keep them going. I don't remember adults near the ditches. just me and my brother, or our friends, and summers marked by leaping or sitting there, looking for cats and the softest grasses. then waiting for the fall rains to gush the ditches full, squatting to watch every texture of water and what flowed with it, sticks clumped with each other and leaves. there's grates on the openings to the pipes now, where they cross under streets. I suppose that makes sense. surely much better for them.

but there was something magical when they just went, went for who knows how long and sometimes the water deeper than the pipe could handle and making small reservoirs there.

some days, these were rivers.

II

but they are not rivers, they are the floodgates flung open, a rush of sky and cloud grown heavy and falling through the streets. running to become such big water again.

this water diverted too, though. it should be soaking in the ground, rushing to the roots or to bring the cliffsides down. not fast over the top and right back to itself. I can't think too long sometimes, it all starts to crumble and rust. the changes they made here. and that we uphold. it's complicated, is what I want these drainage ditches to tell you.

III

the watershed is complicated. once, in high school, when I worked years for a type of organization I no longer think should exist, we took a research trip to chester morse lake, to see where the water comes from, the water we take into and over our bodies. and how the october fog hung so beautiful in the trees, and the walkways over pipes in the forest something no less than magical, and the shape the mountains make of the lake, and the smell of the air, and the sweetness of meeting the water you're drinking, in a new place. and complicated, this place: how the rivers have changed. were changed by settlers before any of us took over managing these waters. the Cedar River, which flows through the lake, diverted at its end from where it used to touch and become the Black, diverted by a town of settlers who thought they should be more permanent than a river. the Black River, most of it killed by the ship canal that lowered lake washington, and how there were Natives living on the river, and how there was a salmon run in that river, and how you have probably never heard of that river.



SO MUCH I LOVE IS COMPLICATED BUT YOU CAN LEARN SOMETHING SIMPLE

By Arianne True

IV

I have been asked for my Indigenous perspective on natural resources. here it is, from me: a river is a being. not thing. alive. person. words like “conquer” and “tame” make my body sick to hear. are still on official government websites talking about their rivers. here. other places have started to fix this, put rights of rivers themselves in law. so many peoples have known this kind of truth for so, so long. but you may be new to it, and until you learn the rivers as alive, until you know they are a person, you will keep rehashing all this settler logic into the ground, into the water, into the rivers you want so badly to restore.



Biography: Arianne True (Choctaw, Chickasaw) is a queer poet and teaching artist from Seattle and has spent most of her work time working with youth. She’s received fellowships and residencies from Jack Straw, the Hugo House, Artist Trust, and the Seattle Repertory Theater, and is a proud alum of Hedgebrook and of the MFA program at the Institute of American Indian Arts. She lives near the Salish Sea with her cat. Arianne is the 2023-2025 Washington State Poet Laureate.

WATER, THE SOURCE OF LIFE

By Joe Hudson



Water, the source of life
The flowing mana by which we unite
Trickling along, singing a medley
But for the unfortunate, its song is deadly
This is the River so few want to restore
And who is to blame?
The factory next door
Only affecting those who are struggling,
Life and death they are left juggling
While the wealthy enjoy a day at the beach,
Just downstream, they may as well swim in bleach
For this water is as unseen as a nook,
It’s also the victim of great overlook
Now as I scribe these words to you,
I simply must ask, what will you do?

Biography: Joe Hudson, age 13, is a seventh-grader at Denny International Middle School and lives in South Park

THE WATER SCHOOL

By Cedar Sigo

A river in the hand has no voice.
We are blood and land broken by water,
An incomplete body left adrift.

Tonight, we are piecing together
A two-story house under lake quinault.

What did our initial collections look like?
A clean and empty stump of driftwood,
Hollowed out and left to face the dim stars.

Our baskets require a watertight weave,
Boiled with a few white stones we left in the fire,
A dried clam or handful of fish
Dropped to flavor the broth.

Our poetry is the conversion
Of landscape into sustenance.
Each cycle and season
Must be tended to.

We fashion gates and lures,
Our words are poured down
Through walls of hollowed night.

We try and gain some footing in the onrush,
Blown toward pebbles of islands
Where we catch our breath.

We take the corners lightly
In a boat folded tight,

To scribe is to cut
From the insides of words,

Tonight, the sounds function
As a sheet of glass, black and flimsy,
A spotted light turned angular.

The heads of spirits race
Toward the top of the chamber,
These movements (splintered) spell out
A hidden order from our beloved (dead).

Their exact message is less telling
Than the exquisite timing and drumming of light,
Frozen where it catches our sight. A glancing off.

Water is an interruption uneasily outlined,
A twitch extended. A bob. A weave.

Water is a mortar. What jewels leak out
To spin the arc of language?
Pinpointing its surface,
A clatter of thinking.

Biography: Cedar Sigo is a poet and member of the Suquamish Nation. He studied at The Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics at the Naropa Institute. He is the author of endless books and pamphlets of poetry, including *All This Time* (Wave Books, 2021), *Stranger in Town* (City Lights, 2010), *Expensive Magic* (House Press, 2008), two editions of *Selected Writings* (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2003 and 2005) and most recently *Siren of Atlantis* (Wave Books, 2025). In 2022 he received a grants to artist's award from The Foundation for Contemporary Arts. He has taught all over the country including The University of Washington, Bard College, Washington University, Naropa University and The Institute of American Indian Arts. He lives in Lofall, Washington.



AN ODE TO WATER

By Jamaar Smiley

The Rivers twist and turn as distance burns a place within the banks

And the many greens that grow within, and life that pass from fish to fin,
now move through channels thick and thin 'til only few are known and
hold a face within the ranks

And now the face of Rivers burnt, move through the phases of live
and learn, and life that pass will miss a turn, and fishes skip the history
with fire water sipped as tea, and life we know would pass and flow as
watered down as tonic

At times the many greens that grow would filter life to clean the soul, the
River streams would team and glow to show the sky a scene of wonder,
clouds apart remain asunder, once equipped, we come legit, but now the
distance burns in numbers, and anything that lives in Thunder once was
Super Sonic

The city was our River

And it contained all the hopes and dreams that one desires

And each domain that filled with life and every pulse that moved the sky
was snatched up out the River, now the bank remains in fire

The city was our River

And we swam from West to South

But as the Gentry fire spreads, we watch and stand powerless as the
pressure is applied through time

We are Chinook

We flow in droves, and leagues, and swarms to mold the caste of social
norms from everything we think, believe, and breathe into existence

We are Chinook

Through ancestral planes before my birth, we bring life and soul to
everything we touch

There would be no river without us

Cause pain, and war, and segregation fuel the flames that light my spirit,
and like a beacon from the night we dance, and praise, and sing 'til
lobster, shrimp, and crab across the World and Nation hear it

And fish will comes from leagues away in droves and swarms to show out

Once we get together, we shine bright as the Sun, and from Light comes
Life, until the scavengers come

With their hidden agendas and passive aggression

As the starve at the basin, asking for lessons

And they haven't eaten in days, so we feed them

And they love what we've done to the place, how we look, how
we eat, and how we act and they want to learn more from our
ways, so we believe them

Now we just keeping it Old School, and feeding them Soul Food,
acting in Goodwill, so they getting the clothes, too

And while we feeding them the soul, they still digging for some
more, taking everything they can to give it back to they own kind

Because scavengers would never last, they survive off appropriation,
and to them we're just a cultural Gold Mine

Now the River is in flames, but the fish ain't escaping

And we stuck at the bottom, spread out through the basin

So we climb through the ranks, or we crawl to the banks, and we watch
as the River goes through rearrangement

We are Chinook

We go hand in hand with live and learn to watch the Rivers' faces burn
and when the River falls we are the first to pay the homage

But as the River twist and turn, we live inside of mystery, and all will
know the history within the Rivers faces, face the fate of the Duwamish

The city was our River
 And it flowed with grace through many seasons of the rain
 Carrying the hopes of Sir-Mix-A-Lot and Jimi Hendrix
 Mixed with Ezell's bones and the smooth tones of Quincy Jones as it
 roams from the Souf End to the Central District
 And it twist and turns into braids and locks, as Black Panthers
 parade the blocks for Langston, Dixon, Medgar Evers- read The
 Facts to get the weather or watch as we flow into pieces blended
 through the sound
 Listen close, and you can hear the River cry
 The broken heart of generations bleeds into every gas station and
 street corner
 Every high rise and subsidized housing building
 Where each family has 5 to 6 mouths of children
 Every token black kid in a private school
 That is scared of embracing their pride and rule
 Every bus that you take is a major pain
 As it rolls through the hood, cause it ain't the same
 All the places you go when the party was over
 Got turned into CrossFit, Pilates and Yoga
 All the summers we spent hooping 3 on 3
 Cut short cause the hours at PCC
 All these people locked up and they stuck for life
 For the same bags they selling at Uncle Ike's
 And the next block over they ask you what
 Should we do about the place where Red Apple was?

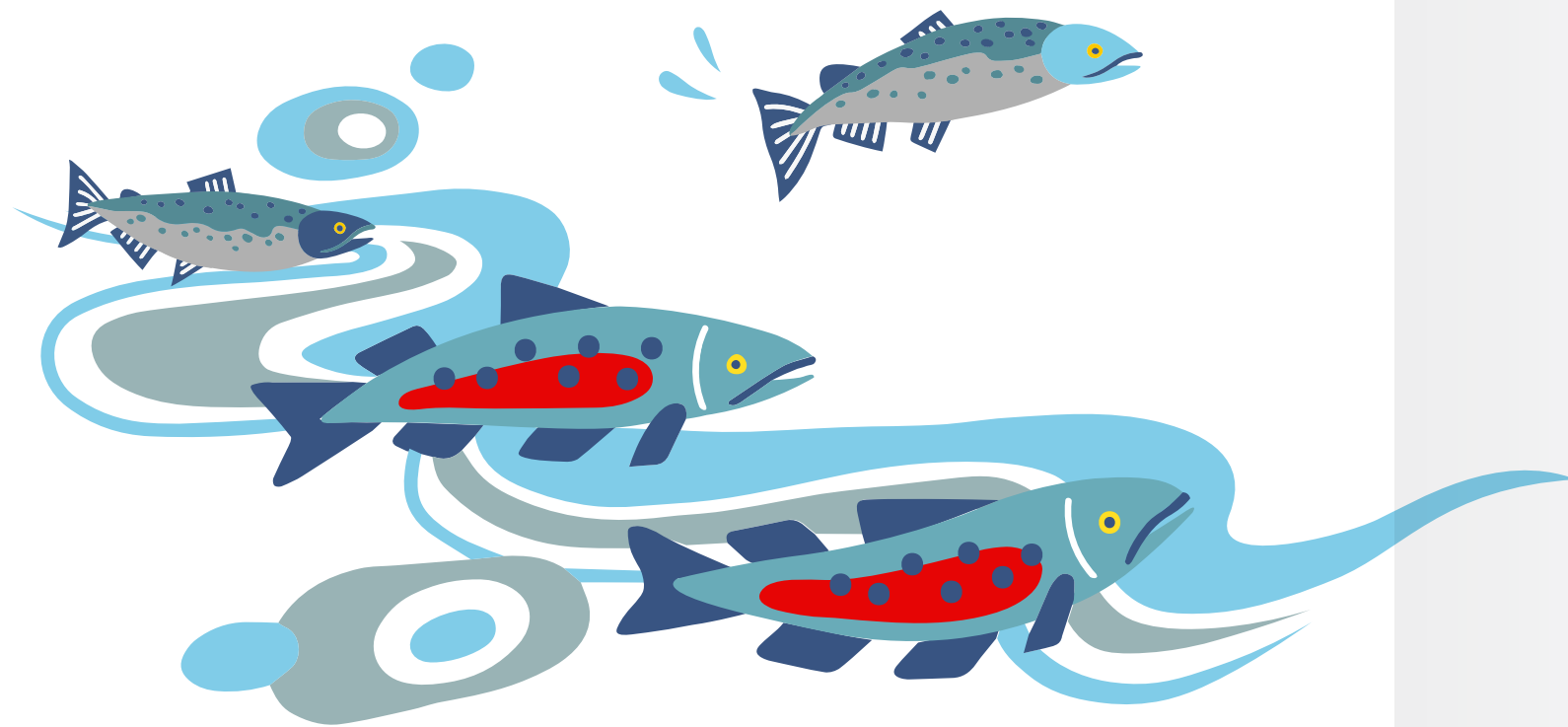
But what about all the Salmon,
 That swam to the damn in the distance while dipping
 and dodging the planning?
 Turning the currents and moving through wire and
 twisting and turning while burning desire, inspired
 by Legions of Doom of the Century, Empathy enters
 the river as mystery, mixing with Mr. Miyagi and old
 teriyaki, and sake in pockets of Holly Street
 Honestly, we let the fire defeat us
 By helping the ember grow into a fetus
 To feed us the flames of rivers and banks that
 crumble with pressure in time
 And if we continue to fuel this flame, and not stand
 together to build on our trust
 Then all our pain and tears, through all these years,
 will be packaged and sold at Starbucks



Biography: Jamaar Smiley, a leader in Poetic Disruption, is a transformational Spoken Word Artist and one of the most impactful voices of this generation. His work captures the essence of black culture, the resilience of the human spirit and inspires the courage inside of us all, to be fearlessly authentic. From motivational speaker and activist, Jamila T. Davis, to the international performer, artist and poet icon, Rupri Kaur, to an ever-growing list of star-studded actors, comedians, international musicians, government officials and more, Jamaar Smiley has ignited the stage with the power of his words.

UNTITLED

By Rosalina Lindsey



***Biography:** Rosalina Lindsey is a current senior at Foster High School. In her free time she enjoys working with the Duwamish Valley Youth Corps in South Park. Duwamish Valley Youth Corps is a youth engagement program that focuses on environmental justice and job skills. Rosalina has been a part of this program for 5 years and has recently been awarded the Unsung Hero award by the South Park Neighborhood Association. Through Rosalina's experiences she has found her own way to advocate for justice through community murals. You can find her work in Rainier Beach and South Park. Her main goal is to connect with the community through art and help her region thrive.*

We knew something needed to be done before it was too late. Duwamish Valley Youth Corps Swept through, planning to save South Park from the now uncontrollable river.

A river that once was a natural curvy course but is now a straight line. A river that was once a clean habitat for salmon and seals but now is determined as a superfund sight.

Carmen Martinez, the facilitator of Duwamish Valley Youth Corps suggested one place we could start and that was,

Storm drains.

Often forgotten about but repeatedly polluted with garbage, toxic fluids and leaves. materials that clog the drains, increase floods, and are chronic for the river's wildlife. Exposing the fish to toxic chemicals and deathly plastics.

A sign! Is just the thing we needed..

Safe River, Safe Salmon is the slogan we came up with

We went out through the streets of South Park. Spray Painting next to nearly every drain with the new stencils we made. Neighbors surrounded, thanking us for our work. Positive conversations brewed as we went door to door sharing our mission.

Unfortunately, things don't always go as planned.

The king tide approached and the flood crashed through South Park, seeping into basements, destroying homes, precious family photos, and heartwarming memories. Crashing through people's homes days after Christmas.

It was devastating watching people's homes get destroyed. It was a step back. But I loved South Park too much to stop trying to help our environment and pushing to keep it safe. This is not the end of our work.



Seattle
Public
Utilities