

Environmental Activist Vernice Miller-Travis Exhorts Students to 'Fight Toxic Injustice'



Liz Torrey Oct 3 2017

This past weekend at St. Andrew's we celebrated the School's commitment to sustainability and the stewardship of its 2200 acres with our annual Environmental Lecture and Pond Day. On Friday evening, we welcomed environmental activist Vernice Miller-Travis, who gave a talk to the School community in Engelhard Hall on her work for environmental justice and equitable development. As the principal of the environmental consulting group Miller-Travis and Associates, she advocates for sustainable economic development and community revitalization strategies and policy. In 1988, Miller-Travis became involved in an investigation of a sewage treatment plant planned for her West Harlem neighborhood, and out of that activism founded [WE ACT for Environmental Justice](#), a community organization that fights against environmental racism and works to build healthy communities of color. You can watch Miller-Travis's talk [on our Livestream channel](#).

"Miller-Travis addressed the intersection of many of the issues our country is facing right now: the environmental crisis, a resurgence of racism and nativism, and inequities in how environmental problems affect our country," said St. Andrew's Director of Sustainability Diana Burk. "Her talk empowered our students to find a way to make a difference in others' lives through hard work, data, and courage. She also urged our students to be civically engaged and informed citizens."

Dean of Teaching and Learning Elizabeth Roach agreed. "In her powerful and inspirational talk on Friday night, Miller-Travis charged our students to think about 'what [their] contributions are going to be' to make the world a better place," Roach recalled. "She began by saying that 'In the spaces you are in, you can do things that fill your soul and fight toxic injustice. Anything you can imagine, you can do.' As she exhorted the youth in the room to find their passions, become activists, hear and listen to the narratives of people other than their own, and vote, all I could think about was our immense responsibility as teachers to prepare our students to do this essential work. We need to teach them, according to Miller-Travis, how to do research; how to make sure data is correct; how to interpret data; how to tell the story that is incontrovertible; how to be creative, clear-thinking, and informed; how to respond with tenacity and courage to frustration, adversity, fear, and intolerance. She reminded me that there is a direct line between what we are doing every day in each of our disciplines and the future lives of our students as citizens and activists."

The following morning, the entire student body headed out into the fields and forests of St. Andrew's to celebrate the School's annual "Pond Day" (formerly known as Environmental Orientation). Students participated in outdoor activities that allowed them to explore the campus, and to reflect and discuss Miller-Travis's talk. The goal of Pond Day is to encourage all students to fully take advantage of all the natural resources available on our 2200-acre campus during their time at St. Andrew's.

"Now in its third year, Pond Day emerged as a new School tradition as an important expression of the connection of the land, Noxontown Pond, and sustainability initiatives within the School, nation, and world," explains Head of School Tad Roach. "We see the 2200 acres of campus, woodlands, farms, and water as both the literal and metaphorical expression of an education tied to principles of preservation, exploration, conservation, generosity, and grace. Therefore, we seek each year to welcome an environmental leader or thinker on an autumn Friday night and follow up with a Saturday morning of exploration, reflection, and renewal."

This year's Pond Day activities included:

- Andy Goldsworthy-inspired nature art
- Nature photography class & exhibition
- BioBarge tour of Noxontown Pond
- Fishing on Noxontown Pond
- School beehive care tutorial
- Trail maintenance & trail blazing the remainder of the South Pond Trail
- One-day waste audit
- Learning about the Lenape Native Americans (who lived along the local Appoquinimink River)
- Topic-based discussion groups:
 - An Examination of the Flint Water Crisis
 - Exploring the Intersection between Women's Health and Environmentalism
 - Exploring the Unequal Costs of the Environmental Crisis: A Discussion of Class, Race, and Disasters

- Kayaking & canoeing
- Trail hikes & runs
- Mindfulness nature awareness walk
- Road biking around SAS farmlands & discussion of impact of Middletown's development on local farmers

"Because we knew Miller-Travis would give a powerful talk about environmental justice, on Pond Day, members of the faculty lead outdoor discussions on a variety of topics related to that subject," said Burk.. "Faculty covered topics such as the intergenerational inequity of climate change, the lack of diversity in the environmental movement, the water crisis in Flint, Michigan, and the unequal consequences of disasters like Harvey, Irma and Maria. These important discussions combined with the 30 different activities led by faculty on our pond, trails, and rivers on our campus—all on what felt like the first fall day of the year—made for a meaningful morning for our entire community."

