Closer to JUSTICE

In a story-telling course that examines legal systems, students profile residents of a rural Alabama town who were sued after they expressed concerns about their community's health.

BY OLIVIA MCMURREY AND ERIN MOSLEY

In December of 2008, 5.4 million cubic yards of coal ash spilled into the Emory River in Roane County, Tennessee, after a barrier failed at the Tennessee Valley Authority Kingston Fossil Fuel Plant. It was the largest coal-ash spill in history. A byproduct of coal production, coal ash contains a mix of arsenic, lead, mercury and other toxicants that can cause cancer and neurological damage in humans, according to a report from the Physicians for Social Responsibility and Earth Justice.

From 2009 to 2010, much of the spilled coal ash was transported by train to the Perry County Arrowhead Landfill near rural Uniontown, Ala., an impoverished community with a majority-black population.



Uniontown, Ala., residents [l-r] Ben Eaton, Mary Schaeffer, Esther Calhoun and Ellis Long, who were sued by landfill owners after they spoke out against the dumping of 4 million tons of coal ash in their town. *photo courtsey the ACLU*

After a group of Uniontown residents worried about their community's health filed a complaint with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Office of Civil Rights and posted their concerns on a Facebook page, owners of the Arrowhead Landfill, which is located in a residential area, sued them in the spring of 2016, alleging defamation and seeking $30 million in damages. Uniontown's annual median household income is $15,054, according to the 2010 U.S. Census.

"It was an opening to talk about what it means for a group of community members who are advocating for their community to be sued into silence," says Andy Grace, who co-instructs The University of Alabama's yearlong, TCF 446 Anatomy of a Trial course with Chip Brantley, senior lecturer of emerging media. "I think we get closer to justice when we get closer to people who are suffering from injustice," says Grace, who teaches documentary film.

During the 2016-17 academic year, UA students in the Anatomy of a Trial course investigated and reported stories surrounding the coal ash controversy in Uniontown, Ala. They produced four profiles of Uniontown residents and a long-form journalism piece.

Brantley and Grace have been teaching the course for four years. Each year, instructors and students discuss several topics related to the Alabama or federal justice systems before choosing a single issue and a medium for telling stories related to it.

"It's hard to realize that Uniontown is only an hour and 15



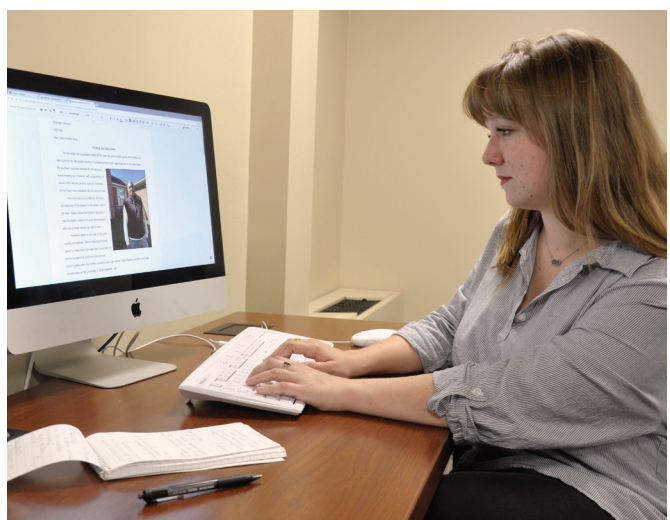
minutes away from here," says Miranda Fulmore, a senior from Birmingham, Ala., majoring in journalism. "I am so used to spending time in my own little bubble that I don't realize what's going on."

Fulmore wrote a profile piece about Ben Eaton, vice president of Black Belt Citizens Fighting for Health and Justice and one of four people sued by Green Group Holdings, the owner and operator of the Arrowhead Landfill. Eaton was raised in Uniontown and moved back with his wife and a dream of building their home there. "It pulled at my heart strings and made me think even more that this needed to be told," Fulmore says.

Working on the Uniontown projects affirmed Fulmore's desire to pursue journalism as a career. "This is what I want to be doing," she says. "This is what I'm supposed to do for the rest of my life – to talk to people and learn more about them and learn that not everything happens in my bubble."



Bulldozers push coal ash at the Perry County Arrowhead Landfill. *photo by John Wathen I flight courtesy SouthWings*



UA student Miranda Fulmore writes a piece about Ben Eaton, vice president of Black Belt Citizens Fighting for Health and Justice. *photo by Olivia McMurrey*

The first semester of the class is primarily dedicated to research, and students focus on arranging content into stories during the second semester. "Since it's a yearlong class, you get to learn so much more," says Jenny Leto, a senior from Miramar, Fla., majoring in journalism. "Everything is so much more in depth. It's a lot of work, but it doesn't feel like schoolwork. I'm doing it because I'm interested in it."

Grace says his goal is for the course to help students become more informed and sensitive individuals. "If you take the opportunity to go outside of yourself and listen to someone who has a different perspective and a different life than you, then you gain a certain richness in that experience, and I think it makes you a more well-rounded person," he says.

Matthew Wilson, a senior from Robertsdale, Ala., majoring in journalism, echoes that vision. "I have always seen writing as a way to bring about change, whether that be spiritual or emotional, or if it's just to bring awareness to an issue," he says. Wilson wrote a profile of Esther Calhoun, president of Black Belt Citizens Fighting for Health and Justice.

"State officials would never have allowed the landfill to be here if we were a rich, white neighborhood," Calhoun says in a statement on the American Civil Liberties Union website. "They put it here because we're a poor, black community and they thought we wouldn't fight back. But we are fighting back and we're not afraid to make our voices heard."

The ACLU represented Calhoun and the three other Uniontown residents Green Group sued. In February of 2017, Green Group withdrew its lawsuit and agreed to address future disagreements with community dialogue first rather than litigation. It also agreed to notify the public before the Arrowhead Landfill receives any potentially hazardous waste products and to continue using current EPA-approved standards to seal off any future shipments of coal ash.

Wilson says he found his strength in long-form writing with the help of the Anatomy of a Trial course. He will begin a graduate program in magazine writing at New York University in Fall 2017.

TCF 466 Anatomy of a Trial is a two-semester course that begins each fall. Students from all disciplines are encouraged to apply. For more information, contact Chip Brantley at chip.brantley@gmail.com or 205-348-4692 or Andy Grace at agrace@ua.edu or 205-348-8245.