

Climate & Health Award Acceptance Speech

Global Health & Peace Awards, Oct. 21, 2023

Eliana DaCunha

Good evening everyone. Anna asked one of us to say a few words so on behalf of our group, I just wanted to say thank you so much for this award—it is such an honor. For those of you who haven't heard about our work, Tristan, Wafaa, Efi, and I organized the Climate and Health Day at the Massachusetts State House this past June where we advocated for Mass Climate Action's priority bills, all of which aim to address environmental injustice and improve public health.

It's a very full-circle moment for me receiving this award at Harvard Medical School because around a year ago, I was listening to a webinar hosted by Harvard's School of Public Health where physicians like Dr. Aaron Bernstein and Dr. Caleb Dresser discussed their experiences at COP27, which they found needed "a bigger health voice." This was really surprising because, to us, the impacts of climate change on human health are some of the most compelling arguments to take action on this issue. Climate change is not some far away doomsday event the media often portrays it as, but, as you all know, a public health crisis that has already begun impacting people globally.

Hoping to learn more about how we can help people view the climate crisis through a human health lens, I joined PSR's Next Gen Climate & Health Ambassador program. Through the program, I connected with Tristan, Wafaa, and Efi who are also local to the Boston area and asked if they would be interested in organizing a climate &

health advocacy day with me. They graciously agreed, and together we were able to bring 10 health professionals—including GBPSR’s very own Dr. Wynne Armand, Dr. Brita Lundberg, Andee Krasner, and Dr. Susan Racine—and 6 medical and pre-medical students to meet with the offices of 13 different state legislators. We voiced our concerns, shared our experiences, and succeeded in persuading several legislators to co-sponsor bills that would establish a zero carbon renovation fund, require all municipal utilities to adhere to the same clean energy goals, reduce embodied carbon, and help environmental justice communities prevent more polluting facilities from being built in their neighborhoods.

This work is certainly a small drop in a very, very large bucket but even the smallest drop can send ripples. In the words of the anthropologist and environmentalist Margaret Mead, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful citizens can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” If you are interested in joining us and helping us expand our work, please let us know. Thank you so much to everyone who has supported us—family, friends, and organizations like GBPSR. It’s very easy to lose hope with everything going on today but being in a room with an amazing community of changemakers like you all reminds us how many people we have working towards a better world. While we have the privilege to look away from injustice, we know we have the responsibility not to. May we all continue to embrace that responsibility in our global health work, hold it close to our hearts, and let compassion guide us to action. Thank you again for having us here tonight. We’re looking forward to speaking more with you all this evening.