

Alyssa Lucas
Hillcrest, Corpus Christi: Still Home

[Mr. Williams]: I live in the home that my father built, and Hillcrest has been home for me (laughs) over the years, and I, yes, and it still is home for me.¹

<soft piano music>²

[Alyssa Lucas]: My name is Alyssa Lucas, and I am a student and budding historian at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi. In this episode of South Texas Stories, I will be sharing about a neighborhood that many in Corpus have seem to have forgotten about but holds endless significance. Hillcrest is a neighborhood in Corpus Christi's north side. For many residents of this neighborhood like Mr. Henry Williams, Hillcrest is still home. Mr. Williams is the president of the Hillcrest Residential Association who has been an advocate for this neighborhood the last few decades. This area's history along with his story has become very important to me because through working with the community, I have learned just how much fight goes into protecting a neighborhood that is in the midst of environmental injustice. This type of injustice is when low income or minority neighborhoods are unfairly exposed to hazardous plants, refineries, or chemicals. The Hillcrest neighborhood of Corpus Christi has been plagued with these injustices for over a century. From segregation to isolation from the rest of the city to being surrounded by refineries to the point where they are creeping into their backyards, the list goes on and on. Hillcrest residents are now forced to fight against the pressures the city puts on them to move and hold on to faith that they will be heard that they simply don't want to go. They no longer want to be the ones to sacrifice for industry. They don't want to be forced to move without being given proper compensation. What they want is to remain in their community, their neighborhood, their home.

<soft piano music>

[Lucas]: Meet Mr. Williams, a godly African American man who has called Hillcrest home for as long as he can remember. He is an elder at the Corpus Christi Christian Fellowship Church and his faith is incredibly important to him. His roots here go deep since many generations of his family lived here before.

[Mr. Williams]: I am a third generation Corpus Christian. My grandfather lived in Corpus Christi. My father was also born in Corpus Christi. He taught at Solomon Coles School for a number of years and then he went to medical school. Well, he attended college at Tougaloo College in Mississippi then he came back to Corpus Christi and taught at Solomon Coles High School for

¹ Oral History Interview with Mr. Henry Williams by Alyssa Lucas, October 11, 2022, to be placed on South Texas Stories.

² Elaineaeris, "Night Sessions (Piano & Bass) - 120BPM," January 3, 2020, <https://freesound.org/people/elaineaeris/sounds/500942/>. This song is licensed under the Creative Commons 0 License.

eleven years then he decided to go into medical school, and he went into medical school at Meharry Medical College in Nashville, Tennessee. He returned to Corpus Christi as a physician. At that point, he built a home in the Hillcrest neighborhood and at that time, I think I was about twelve years old. That was when my life in the Hillcrest neighborhood began.

[Lucas]: With such a long history in Corpus Christi, Mr. Williams is familiar with dealing with the city and asking them to not be negligent to their neighborhood.

[Mr. Williams]: And we dealt with, was it, city government also. We needed the city of Corpus Christi to be responsive to the needs of the people of the neighborhood, and some of the problems that we dealt with were the closing of Crosby Elementary School, vacant properties that were left unkept or trashed, grass and weeds uncut, allowing transients to live in abandoned buildings, inadequate police control, inadequate street lighting, inadequate care of the historic cemeteries in the neighborhood.

[Lucas]: To understand Hillcrest's rocky relationship with the city, it is important to understand the history of the neighborhood. Hillcrest has been facing instance after instance of environmental injustice dating back almost a hundred years. Before 1914, when the city of Corpus Christi got an incinerator, the area used to be a landfill.³ It wasn't until the 1950s that Corpus Christi made it one of the only places African Americans were allowed to live because of discrimination and segregation. The housing built here was specifically labeled for African Americans. In the process of building this specific housing, budget cuts were continuously made. Contractors opted for cheaper solutions such as removing doors from cabinets and using cheaper materials for the walls that wasn't as durable. The neighborhood is also isolated. In Alan Lessoff's book, *Where Texas Meets the Sea*, he explains how Interstate 37 consequently separated African Americans from the rest of Corpus's population.⁴ Nowadays, there are countless refineries surrounding the neighborhood threatening the health of those who live there. However, one of the most major changes that caused residents to move was the building of the Harbor Bridge.

<soft piano music>

[Lucas]: When the new Harbor Bridge was first being planned, Residents of Hillcrest filed a Title VI complaint against it. The Title VI emerged as a part of the civil rights act of 1964. This civil rights act was created in an effort to ban discrimination based on race or sex.⁵ In this complaint, residents cited that one of the main reasons they didn't want the roadway was because it would act as "a new 'barrier'" between Washington-Coles and Hillcrest.⁶ The Title VI also cites how they believe there are "less discriminatory alternatives" on where the bridge could be

³ "Government," *Corpus Christi Caller-Times*, January 1, 1950. NewsBank: Access World News.

⁴ Alan Lessoff, *Where Texas meets the Sea*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), 46-47.

⁵ Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 124.

⁶Irene Rico. U.S Department of Transportation. 2017.

https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/civilrights/programs/docs/title_vi_compl_dec/2015-0124.pdf, 32.

placed.⁷ As a result of the Title VI, Hillcrest signed on to the four-party agreement with TxDOT in which residents were given the chance to move through the Volunteer Relocation Acquisition Program. However, some residents didn't want to be a part of it.

[Mr. Williams]: I did not feel that I had anything to gain from, you know, the Volunteer Relocation Program, and I stayed away from it.

[Lucas]: Some who took part in the relocation program were satisfied. This allowed people to sell houses they couldn't repair and pay off debts. However, it also hurt some who took part of it. They were relocated to neighborhoods where the property tax was too high and couldn't afford to live where they were sent. Those who chose not to take part in the Volunteer Relocation Acquisition Program were also hurt since they were left to deal with the remnants of the Port's actions. Mr. Williams notes the state of the vacant land, once the Port had acquired it.

[Mr. Williams]: but we have more vacant land now than we had at that time, and that is also something that we are dealing with because we want the Port to keep up, to keep clean the properties that they have received and also the city of Corpus Christi to continue to maintain the properties in the neighborhood.

[Lucas]: While the construction on the new Harbor Bridge began in the summer of 2016 and was originally planned to be completed in 2020, the bridge has yet to be completed.⁸ The date has gotten pushed time and time again with no clear definitive answer on when the bridge will be completed. In the meantime, the members of Hillcrest are left living in the midst of the construction and blocked off roads, only leaving them one way out of the neighborhood.

<soft piano music>

[Lucas]: Instead of relying on the government to take accountability to fix up the neighborhood, they decided to take matters into their own hands which is one of the reasons why the Hillcrest Residence Association was formed. This organization was involved with several of the Title IVs that were filed as well as the four-party agreement. Each of these meetings begins and ends with a prayer, where in the middle they discuss steps that need to be taken to continue to support the neighborhood. As president of this association, Mr. Williams discusses how they are able to do so with the help of their 501c3 recognition.

[Williams]: During the early years of the 501c3, we went to one of the refineries, and they contributed to us, okay, in assisting with home repairs, and they can do that tax exempt

⁷ Irene Rico. U.S Department of Transportation. 2017. [this needs formatting work, see Chicago] https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/civilrights/programs/docs/title_vi_compl_dec/2015-0124.pdf, 36.

⁸ Briones, Joseph, "Project Profile: US 181 Harbor Bridge," Accessed Nov 12, 2022, https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/ipd/project_profiles/tx_us_181_harbor_bridge.aspx.

because we have the 501c3 recognition and as president of the Hillcrest Residence Association, it's just important that I stay abreast of the needs and initiate that which is helpful.

[Lucas]: Mr. Williams lists a couple different ways that the neighborhood association has helped those in the community.

[Williams]: And here recently, there was a lady who had a problem with her air conditioning in her home (laughs), and we took our 501c3, the organizational instruments to Home Depot and to Lowe's. They donated to us the needed materials so that we could assist this lady with her air conditioning

[Lucas]: While their efforts as an organization have been successful in helping residents of their community, they have a much bigger upcoming battle to fight, the battle against the Inner Harbor Desalination Plant. While a desalination plant may seem innocent because they are known for removing salt from water, they can be very loud and can produce an unpleasant smell. They can also cause environmental damage to their surroundings. Scientists who've studied Texas bays and estuaries recently published a report that this desalination plant may lead to brine concentrate in the surrounding ecosystem along with more carbon dioxide being emitted into the air.⁹

<soft piano music>

[Protesters]: No more desal in our bays. It is time to change our ways. No more desal in our bays. It is time to change our ways.

[Lucas]: At Corpus Christi City Hall, students and other concerned citizens gather and protest against environmental injustice as well as the recently proposed desalination plant which is planned to be placed in the Hillcrest Neighborhoods. Members of the community are standing against this by filing a Title VI complaint on the grounds of racial discrimination. This is their third Title VI complaint in fifteen years and residents are actively fighting it and doing as much as they can to prevent it from being built.

[Mr. Williams]: We believe that it would be damaging both to the neighborhood and that it would be damaging also to our local waterways, and it could possibly contaminate the bay. We are standing against that, okay? And we are organizing with those who stand in agreement with the fact that the Inner Harbor Desalination Plant is a potential contaminant to the bay and organizations who agree with this positioning, we're standing together in doing so, and we're seeking to organize and to deal with that area as effectively as we can.

⁹ Montagna, P.A., D.M. Coffey, R/H. Jose, and G. Stunz. 2021. Vulnerability Assessment of Coastal Bend Bays. Final Report 2120 for the Coastal Bend Bays & Estuaries Program, Texas A&M University, Corpus Christi, Texas, USA, 56 pp.

[Lucas]: His and others worries are legitimate. However, in order to stop the building of the Inner Harbor Desalination Plant, they are going to have to prove the complaints made on their Title VI and hope that the Environmental Protection Agency sides with them. Like a majority of citizens in Corpus Christi, they have a vision for this city and want what is best for it and part of that is protecting the waters that make Corpus Christi so special.

[Mr. Williams]: And we also are desiring for Corpus Christi to live up to the meaning of its name, the body of Christ, and of, of the names of our city has been the Sparkling City by the Sea, and we don't want to see that sparkle dimmed.

<soft piano music>

[Lucas]: While Hillcrest has been fighting for environmental justice for a long time, they still have a long way to go. However, many of the residents who live there are resilient and not giving up anytime soon. After all, who wouldn't fight to save their home? This has been Alyssa Lucas for South Texas Stories. Thank you for listening.

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