

# This Baltimore 20-year-old just won a huge international award for taking out a giant trash incinerator

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By **Darryl Fears** April 18

Baltimore stands apart as the American big city with the most deaths caused by air pollution, and Curtis Bay is its dirtiest community. Several years ago, the air there stood to get even worse when the state approved a permit for a giant incinerator that would burn 4,000 tons of trash every day and emit up to 1,240 pounds of lead and mercury every year.

But destiny intervened. More specifically, a 17-year-old high school senior named Destiny Watford.

Outraged that her community was once again “being dumped on” and that the health of her family and neighbors was being “sacrificed for a profit,” the self-described shy girl led fellow students at Benjamin Franklin High School in a four-year campaign that mobilized Curtis Bay and halted the incinerator’s construction indefinitely.

As state environmental officials seek to revoke the permit for good, Watford is being honored with one of the world’s most prestigious environmental awards. On Monday, she was announced as a 2016 Goldman Environmental Prize winner for her community leadership.

Not only is Watford, at 20, the youngest of this year’s six recipients — who hail from Slovakia, Cambodia, Tanzania, Puerto Rico and Peru — she’s the third-youngest honoree in the history of the prize. She says she never imagined becoming an activist, let alone that her efforts would allow her to stand shoulder to shoulder with internationally recognized advocates of environmental justice. But her mother, Kimberly Kelly, isn’t surprised.

“I have five kids,” Kelly said, “and I just knew she was going to be different. She’s a debater. She wants to get her point across.”

Growing up in Curtis Bay, a community of rowhouses near Baltimore’s industrial southern tip, Watford watched her mother struggle with asthma. She knew neighbors afflicted with respiratory disease. During the campaign, when she and other students asked members of an art class at Franklin High if any of them had asthma, “almost every hand shot up,” Watford recalled last week.

A 2013 study by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology found that 113 people per 100,000 Maryland residents — higher than in any other state — die as a result of emissions from car and truck traffic, trains and ships, commercial heating systems and industrial smokestacks. Baltimore’s rate was far higher, exceeding that of New York City and smoggy Los Angeles.

Curtis Bay is Baltimore’s epicenter of pollution and bad health. Jutting into the bay where it meets the Patapsco River, it started out as a focal point for World War II-era shipping. It later gained a coal-burning power plant, a chemical-processing plant, a medical-waste incinerator and other industry.

And the air kept getting dirtier. In 2007 and 2008, Curtis Bay ranked worst in the nation for the release of toxic air pollutants, according to a report by the Environmental Integrity Project using emissions data from the federal Environmental Protection Agency. The following year, it ranked second.

Like many residents there, Watford had no idea the incinerator had been approved for her community until she saw a story about it on the Internet in 2012.

Energy Answers International was promoting the project — set to be the biggest of its kind in the nation — as an energy-producing power plant that would serve schools and other facilities. It would be located less than a mile from Franklin High and Curtis Bay Elementary, which state environmental regulations wouldn’t typically allow. But the rule became irrelevant when the Public Service Commission approved the incinerator as an energy plant.

The company said by email last week that the PSC granted the exemption because the tire rubber, vinyl, plastic, metals and other municipal waste burned at the site would be processed into a fuel elsewhere. About 1.5 million tons of landfill waste annually would be diverted, converted and marketed as renewable energy, making the facility, “by all definitions, an energy plant,” according to a company statement.

The statement noted the upper limits of lead and mercury emissions under the permit and said the company never expected the incinerator to approach those. The project would require 1,300 temporary construction workers and create 200 permanent jobs, the statement said.

Watford and her classmates were concerned more about the air. They formed an advocacy group called Free Your Voice and studied the history of industry and pollution in Curtis Bay, as well as in the nearby Brooklyn and Hawkins Point neighborhoods. They began knocking on doors, expanding their network to hundreds of residents who circulated petitions that resulted in thousands of signatures. Their rallying cry: “Clear air is a human right.”

Ten students were the core of Free Your Voice, but the Goldman Prize will be given to Watford, because “she’s kind of been the glue, the person who not just stuck around but deepened her involvement,” said Greg Sawtell, an organizer for the nonprofit activist group United Workers who acted as a mentor and helped nominate her for the award.

“She distinguished herself beyond the organizing with her ability to use writing and creative expression through video,” Sawtell said. “Older people said they got involved from their doors being knocked on by Destiny. She inspired a multigenerational struggle. She showed a lot of wisdom and patience.”

Watford, whose soft Afro frames a baby face, had never heard of the prize. When the Goldman Prize director called to congratulate her, she almost didn’t answer because the number showing on her cellphone was unfamiliar. Then she didn’t know what to say: “I was really confused. I didn’t know who he was or what he was talking about.”

He was talking about her work. Early on, the students thought they would win because of the incinerator’s proximity to the two schools. They persevered after that setback and discovered that the school district and city government agencies had signed an agreement to purchase energy from the incinerator, according to the Goldman Prize. Watford led students to a school board meeting at which they used artwork and video to convince members to reconsider. The board eventually took a student-organized tour of the proposed site and divested from the project.

In the end, the plant was derailed last fall on a different issue identified by Free Your Voice. According to state law, construction on an industrial project must begin during the 18 months before a permit’s air-quality provision expires. That never happened. In December, the 90-acre construction site was still only gravel and patches of grass.

The students pressed the point during a showdown at the Maryland Department of the Environment’s headquarters. With the help of United Workers, Free Your Voice brought 200 protesters to confront Environment Secretary Ben Grumbles. Only a few were allowed in for a discussion.

“We told them, ‘You guys have to take action. If not, there’s going to be a consequence,’” Watford recounted. The group would not accept the secretary’s explanation that his hands were tied by legal red tape, she said, and the protesters refused to leave until Grumbles declared that Energy Answers no longer met the air-quality provision. The agency officially notified the company last month of its decision.

“The permit had expired due to a lack of ‘continuous construction,’” Grumbles said in a statement last week. The statement acknowledged the students’ frustration over the months-long wait for his department’s final decision. It also

singled out their leader.

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“Destiny is a talented, resourceful and passionate young advocate,” Grumbles said, “with great potential to make a difference in the lives of those around her.”

The Goldman prize described her in similar terms, noting her “unwavering dedication and wisdom beyond her years.”

Energy Answers still holds a lease on the property and is fighting to build its plant, but at this stage of the process the company would have to get the community’s approval, which is unlikely. When Energy Answers President Patrick F. Mahoney attended a Curtis Bay meeting in March to talk about the jobs and revenue the plant would bring, he was shouted down by angry residents.

Watford, who is a junior at Towson University north of Baltimore, is now leading an effort to turn half of the proposed construction site into a community-owned solar panel farm. The project would provide energy to schools and businesses just as the incinerator would have — but without the same health risks.

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Darryl Fears has worked at The Washington Post for more than a decade, mostly as a reporter on the National staff. He currently covers the environment, focusing on the Chesapeake Bay and issues affecting wildlife.