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Chester's Zulene Mayfield receives national Community Sentinel Award

The chairperson of Chester Residents Concerned for Quality Living was honored Thursday in New Orleans.

CHESTER, Pa. — Zulene Mayfield of Chester was honored Thursday night in New Orleans with a 2026 Community Sentinel Award. The Community Sentinel Award for Environmental Stewardship is a national award, presented since 2015 by FracTracker Alliance and Halt the Harm Network, that honors frontline community leaders in the environmental justice movement who are standing up to extractive industry.

Mayfield was born, raised and educated in Chester. It was her love of her large family that led her to join a group of residents concerned about what was being billed as the Westinghouse trash-to-steam plant. She was the youngest of the group and the only woman of color. She became chairperson of Chester Residents Concerned for Quality Living (CRCQL) in 1993, a year after the group formed.

CRCQL has defeated numerous waste processing facilities, shut down the nation's largest processor of infectious medical waste, and successfully sued a sewage treatment and sludge burning plant, resulting in increased EPA and DEP fines. It also filed a Title VI lawsuit against the DEP alleging a discriminatory practice of issuing permits in Chester, the first of its kind in the nation, and its actions led Pennsylvania to create the Office of Environmental Justice.

"We discovered that this wasn't going to be a battle of comfort or convenience. This right here is a battle of survival," Mayfield said, accepting the award by video from Chester. "They call us the Cancer Alley of the North, unfortunately."

"In the 30-some years that we've been involved, with all of the billions of dollars that we've gone up against, they have not been able to squash this organization," she said. "They have not been able to intimidate us."

Mayfield helped form Campus Coalition Concerning Chester (C4) at Swarthmore College, has served on the National Environmental Justice Advisory Committee (NEJAC), and advises C4 and CRCQL's Choices Environmental Youth Leadership Group. She is now leading her community and its allies in mobilizing against Penn America LNG, a proposed liquefaction facility.

Hilary Flint of the Center for Organizing, who introduced Mayfield, said that when the developers shifted their plan to the neighboring community of Eddystone, "instead of walking away and saying, that's not my community, she started knocking doors in Eddystone."

Mayfield also spoke about Choices, the youth group that started with six young people and has grown to 44. Its members have spoken before Chester City Council and Philadelphia City Council. "Every child I know deserves the fight that I have in me. But my job is also to teach them how to fight effectively," she said. "I will not pass off the incinerator fight to them. We will stop incineration in Chester."

Mayfield was one of five people honored this year. The others are:

- Loice Malvo of Lake Charles, Louisiana, founder of Fisherville Environmental Action Now
- Eboni Neal Cochran of Louisville, Kentucky, co-director of Rubbertown Emergency ACTion (REACT)
- Qiyam Ansari of Pennsylvania's Mon Valley, executive director of Valley Clean Air Now (Emerging Leader Award)
- Karen Feridun of Berks County, Pennsylvania, co-founder of the Better Path Coalition and No False Climate Solutions PA (Community Choice Award)

This was the first time the Sentinel Awards have been held in the Gulf South. The region has long borne the brunt of pollution and toxic industry. It is also home to leaders who have done the seemingly impossible, defeating some of the largest corporations in the world to protect the health and well-being of their communities.

"The Sentinel Awards are a time to celebrate and lift each other up," said Shannon Smith, executive director of FracTracker Alliance. "Our communities face many challenges in the face of powerful, polluting industries. The Sentinel Awards remind us that when we confront these challenges together, we are all stronger."

The ceremony included music by New Orleans musician Bruce "Sunpie" Barnes and a keynote by Jo Banner of The Descendants Project in Louisiana's St. John the Baptist Parish.

About the awards: Established in 2015, the Community Sentinel Award for Environmental Stewardship honors those who work to stop the harms of the fossil fuel industry on their communities and their environment. The 2026 program is at fractracker.org/sentinels-program.

About FracTracker Alliance: FracTracker Alliance is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit that maps, analyzes, and communicates the risks of oil, gas, and petrochemical development. To learn more, visit fractracker.org or connect with us @FracTracker.

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