

Berea College Students from Elizabeth Walker's "Women & Health" Class Talk with Rep. Ben Chandler

A group of Berea College students had a frank conversation about chemical reform with Congressman Ben Chandler Monday. Using digital storytelling and the power of personal stories, they raised their concerns about lack of full chemical information, untested chemicals, their exposure to well known harmful chemicals like lead and Bisphenol A (BPA), and their concerns about environmental justice.

Kyla Pemberton worries about the 80,000 chemicals that have never been tested for safety. She also worries about the lack of consumer information on chemicals like bleach. She talked about how her family cleans with bleach, and how they have no idea what makes up 94% of bleach labeled inactive. "I have 5 nephews and in my family we use bleach a lot. We're using bleach on our counter tops and bleach to rinse our cups. These things are going into our bodies and the bodies of these 5 kids and as an aunt that concerns me a lot," she said.

Tiffany Pope continued the meeting by discussing the prevalence of known toxic chemicals in consumer products, such as lead found in lipstick and mercury found in mascara. "There are all of these chemicals that we know are bad and are in products that we use on a day to day basis," she said.

Cheyenne McGraw talked about her ten-month-old nephew and how she wants to be a mother one day. She worried that BPA, a chemical used in baby bottles and sippy cups that mimics estrogen, would harm her nephew and her future children. BPA has been linked to many health problems, from childhood obesity to cancer.

Janie Gilbert brought up her concerns about chemical hot-spot communities. While the EPA monitors emissions from individual chemical plants, if several plants are located in a cluster around one community the cumulative impacts of those plants lead to dangerous health impacts. Too often, these under siege communities are communities of color or low income. Janie brought up the example of Rubbertown in Louisville, a place surrounded by chemical plants that also had fatal rates of lung cancer several times higher than the rest of the state.

Courtney Sturgill and Emily Wallace put forth solutions. They asked for testing for the 80,000 chemicals already on the market and an improved

infrastructure for testing new chemicals. They asked that consumers have access to all chemical information; no more mystery bleach ingredients. They asked that the chemicals that we already know are bad, like BPA and lead, be outright banned from consumer products. Finally, they asked that the EPA identify and take action to clean up at least 20 "chemical hot spot" communities in the next three years.

Congressman Chandler listened closely to the students and responded with his own concerns about cost. While the Office of Management in Budget has yet to do a cost analysis of the bill, industry has already agreed to pay for new chemical testing. Tiffany Pope responded, "I think we all agree that our health is more important than cost because in the long we'll save more money on healthcare if we're cutting out things that are harmful to our body."

While Ben Chandler did not agree to co-sponsor any legislation at the meeting, he did say he agreed with what the students were saying. He said he can't think of a single family that has not been struggling with cancer, and that this may not have always been the case. "There have got to be environmental factors involved [in the rising cancer rate.] Its just criminal not to do anything about it."