

Good afternoon everyone,

My name is Julian Whitley, and I have been asked to speak to you all today about my experience with environmental education, and the important role I've seen it play through my work.

A quick little background info about myself, I was raised in Maryland, specifically the suburbs of Baltimore county, where I spent most of my childhood until leaving to go to college at the University of Maryland, College Park. Since graduating in 2015, I have worked for Living Classrooms at their environmental education campus Masonville Cove as an educator, teaching MWEE's (which stands for Meaningful Watershed Educational Experiences) to multiple schools in the southwest region of Baltimore. I am happy to share that beginning this fall, I will be making the transition to a classroom teacher, teaching 8th grade science at Lakeland Elementary Middle school, one of Masonville Cove's partner schools.

If you would've told me back in high school, or even college, that I would become an educator of some sort, I would've called you crazy. I was never the biggest fan on speaking in front of crowds, and am still trying to figure out exactly why I agreed to be up here in front of you all now. Most people who become educators have a story detailing how much they loved going to school growing up, or how there was one specific teacher who had a profound impact on their life, motivating them to become an educator. If I'm being 100% honest, I didn't have any of that.

I wasn't the student who loved going to school everyday, or the student who had some life changing relationship with a teacher. My attitude towards school was a very indifferent one. I showed up, hung out with my friends, did my work, and went home.

But despite all of that, there was one class in particular that always stuck out to me; Environmental Science. It was in 6th grade where I got my first exposure to environmental education, and it quickly became my favorite class. We spent much of our time away from our desks, either outdoors collecting data, in the laboratory conducting experiments, or on field trips applying what we had learned in class to the real world. For me, environmental education served as was a way to get me engaged in class, and got me excited to come to school everyday. It exposed me to something completely out of the ordinary compared to all of the other classes I had been in.

It was that 6th grade class that sparked my interest in environmental science, and prompted me to continue studying it in high school and in college. It wasn't until the summer before my senior year that I had my first experience in the role of an environmental educator. My introduction to the role came via the Urban Conservation and Education Internship (or UCEI for short) with the National Aquarium. I spent time with a number of different organizations such as U.S. Fish and Wildlife and Living Classrooms, learning of the careers in each one.

It was at Living Classrooms that I fell into the role of an environmental educator, with a one time internship turning into a seasonal position, which turned into a full time position after graduating. You know it's funny how life works out. Again let me remind you that this is the same person who as a kid had no strong feelings towards most of the classes he had taken, now teaching students. Never would I have thought that the roles would switch, and I would be the one teaching environmental education to my own set of students. But after some thought, it made sense. I wanted to share the same feelings of joy and excitement that I had experienced as a student in environmental education with others.

I can't tell you how many times I've walked into a school and literally seen the students' faces light up, ready to get started on the lesson I have planned for them that day. I've seen students with the same indifferent attitude towards school that I had, become the most engaged learners when it was time for an experiment, or when they came to visit Masonville Cove on a field trip. There are still both students and teachers to this day that tell me that their field trip to Masonville was the best they've ever had. I have students come up to me as I walk through their school, reminding me of our time conducting water quality experiments in the labs at Masonville, or of our time out on the Lady Maryland, one of Living Classroom's boats, learning about the creatures of the Chesapeake Bay.

As mentioned earlier, I will be starting my first year as a teacher this fall at Lakeland Elementary Middle and couldn't be more excited to bring everything I have gained from my experiences with environmental education, both as a student and as an educator, and apply it to my very own classroom. I know that engaging our students through environmental education has a critical impact on them not only because I saw it every time I stepped into their classroom, but because of the impact I've seen it have on myself as well. It is my hope that the same fire that was sparked inside of me by environmental education can be sparked inside of someone else. Thank you.