Wildfires and Asthma: A Mother and Daughter Discuss Hopes for Cleaner Air

Ta’Kira Danette-Byrd lives with her mother and two younger brothers in Vallejo, a city in Northern California that has poorer air quality and health outcomes than in other parts of the state.

From the age of 5, Ta’Kira started having trouble breathing—by 8, she was taking regular trips to the emergency room.

Air quality continues to worsen in communities like Vallejo and across the Western U.S., as climate change fuels extreme wildfires and smoke pollution. Child asthma rates have skyrocketed—and Black children, like Ta’Kira, are disproportionately impacted.

In January 2021, Ta’Kira and her mother Shawntierra sat down to talk about their experiences and hopes for the future.

Transcript:

Ta’Kira: How did you feel the day I was born?

Shawntierra: I loved you when I first saw you. I was so happy. I was crying and everything, I held you. You know just to see your face, I was very emotional.

Shawntierra: You used to go in the kitchen and sneak cereal in the middle of the night. I caught you on the counter one time trying to get some Cheerios. You was like 2 years old, and I think I got a picture of it, too.

Ta’Kira: What do you remember about the first time I got sick?

Shawntierra: I remember I was really scared. I just kept hearing “uhhuhhh,” and your face was really pale, looking like it was turning like a little bluish. I was actually on the phone with the nurse and she was telling me to turn on the shower, to let it get really hot. So, you know, I carried you into the bathroom and let the steam try to open up your lungs.

Me being a first-time mom, I don’t know what was going on. I just tried to comfort you and hold you.

That night I thought I was going to lose you.

They ended up keeping you in the hospital for a couple of days. And then they told me that you had asthma.
**Ta’Kira:** Sometimes I can't breathe. I get like a little dizzy, and I can't get up. My chest hurts a lot and when I cough it makes my chest hurt way more. I wheeze a lot, because of all the smoke in the air.

**Shawntierra:** Yep, if there is another wildfire in the area, then you can't go anywhere. And we have to seal up all the holes or the cracks in the windows so the smoke won't come inside because I don't want anything to happen to you.

**Ta’Kira:** Mom, when you were growing up, do you remember hearing about the wildfires?

**Shawntierra:** I heard a little bit, but my mom always had to have a positive attitude about everything. So we don't really talk about anything that was going on in the world. I think we've been seeing more wildfires because the weather keeps changing.

I get scared for you mainly, because I feel like if there's another wildfire in the area, then I got to be more concerned about you.

**Shawntierra:** What do you miss most about the world outside?

**Ta’Kira:** Seeing my friends. The hardest part about having asthma is that I can't run around and play that much.

**Shawntierra:** I just want everything to go back to the way it used to be. You can be outside and just play like a normal kid.

I'm mostly scared that what's going on now can get worse. People just need to get the picture before it's too late.

What do you hope for in the future?

**Ta’Kira:** That I become a veterinarian or a scientist. When I look outside or whatever, which is not a lot, I like to know what things are like, how snails eat and stuff like that. Scientists can know all that stuff.

**Shawntierra:** I hope that you go to college and become a scientist or a veterinarian. You're an example. You can motivate other kids and be like, hey, I have asthma, but I'm still here. I'm brave enough to tell my story. And I hope asthma doesn't affect you from being what you want to be in life and that the air quality gets better for you, too.