

# Father and Son Study Racial and Economic Inequities in the 2021 Heat Wave in the Pacific Northwest

Vivek Shandas has been studying heat and climate change in urban environments for the last 20 years.

One of the things he's looked at is how the presence of green spaces can impact a city's ability to protect itself and how past policies have resulted in lower income communities having less tree canopy and hotter temperatures.

Vivek sat down with his 11-year-old son, Suhail Shandas, to remember a recent record-setting heat wave...

## Transcript:

**Suhail Shandas:** What do you remember about the first day of the heat wave?

**Vivek Shandas:** I remember looking at my phone and seeing 111 degrees in Portland, Oregon. It was like, oh, my goodness, we have a temperature that is going to really hurt people who are living without homes, people who don't have air conditioning. And so my heart kind of got a little bit trembly. How are we gonna find ways to stay cool?

**Suhail:** I remember we did experiments and felt the temperature outside versus inside. And if you touched your little pinky toe onto the sidewalk cement, it would burn so bad.

**Vivek:** We used a little special camera. It's infrared. Do you remember I was taking pictures of lots of different things, and you were saying, "Hey Papa, don't stop on the road. Cars are going to be coming." And I was like, "This is for science, Suhail, let's try to document everything!" And I remember the black concrete wall that we saw, it was about 167 degrees. And right next to it was a wall that had green ivy on it, that was 117 degrees. And so we were able to really see that some surfaces were really hot, some surfaces were a lot cooler.

I really wanted us to stare at heat right in the face.

**Suhail:** What neighborhoods did we see that were hurt?

**Vivek:** Neighborhoods that have less trees are generally neighborhoods with lower incomes and who are communities of color. Those people didn't get a lot of parks or green spaces that a lot of communities that were wealthier did. And so now that we've seen that, the question of what we can do about it is what's in front of us.

**Suhail:** Why was it important to share your work with me?

**Vivek:** I wanted you to spend a little time outside experiencing what was like an unprecedented event. Heat waves actually kill more people every year than any other natural disaster.

This heat wave was directly linked to climate change. And climate change is not something far away where an island is going underwater or polar bears are losing their ice. This is something happening in our backyard.

And I would love for you to start early and think often about what are the ways in which you can contribute to making this world a better place.

**Suhail:** I definitely know I'll find a way to help my friends. I'll help my family. It's just scary to think that if I do have kids that they'll be living on their own in this big, problematic world.

**Vivek:** I feel like the more practice we get in having the conversations about the lightness and the darkness of the world, the more capable we'll be to navigate the complexities that we're all going to be increasingly facing.

I lose sleep over the fact that our planet is warming up. Yet you taught me that you can take in something as serious as a climate event like a heat wave, and still be okay. We will get through it, and we'll find some solutions that actually support our communities and give you a really beautiful, wonderful future.