

## **Saving Our Backyard - toxic waste in small Louisiana town**

Ziba Kashef

Grandmothers in a small Black community in 'Cancer Alley' fought being targeted as a national 'dumping ground' for toxic waste and pollution

When Emelda West's neighbor called one July morning in 1996 to warn her about a new toxic chemical plant moving into their town of Convent, Louisiana, the then-72-year-old retired schoolteacher immediately thought about her daughter, Yolanda.

Mysteriously stricken with breast cancer at age 30, West's eldest daughter had died in 1982 after six years of suffering. "They said it was birth-control pills; I thought it was the environment," says West. Yolanda had lived in nearby Alsen, a Black community so heavily polluted by an incinerator and hazardous-waste landfill that residents organized to sue the waste-site owners to clean up their act. With her daughter's memory in mind, West didn't hesitate to agree that morning to join her neighbor at a community meeting to discuss the proposed plant, a large facility that would be located less than a mile from an elementary school.

West, a five-foot-tall powerhouse of a grandma with unwavering eyes, simply wasn't having it. For more than 40 years she had watched as Convent--a predominantly African-American town with little more than 2,000 mostly impoverished residents--gradually became crowded with one industrial plant after another. Foul-smelling odors from smokestacks and incinerators had long since replaced clean air, forcing folks to roll up car windows as they drove through the one-road-in, one-road-out town. West and her neighbors (many were descendants of slaves who had occupied the land) remembered the days when they could pull shrimp from the Mississippi River, and grow fig and peach trees for food. But after decades of development, West says, "I noticed the trees, just rotting and falling." Most concerned about the children of Convent, who frequently complained of nosebleeds, rashes and asthma, the mother of seven and self-described "education freak" notes: "They're absorbing all this poison."

So West and the mothers of St. James Parish (parish is Louisiana's equivalent of county) went to work, setting up meetings in their homes, local schools and churches to share details about the plant, known as Shintech, which would be producing polyvinyl chloride resin (PVC), a plastic used to make such products as pipes. In the manufacturing process the Japanese-owned facility would release several toxic substances, including a particularly dangerous chemical, dioxin, into the already toxin-choked air. Dioxin has been linked to health problems, including reproductive damage and cancer, according to published emissions data.

The group's first task was to form an organization, St. James Citizens for Jobs and the Environment. Despite its initial efforts to block the plant at public hearings, both the local parish president and Louisiana governor Mike Foster welcomed Shintech. This was just the beginning of a David-and-Goliath battle that would pit the mothers and grandmothers against a multimillion-dollar multinational corporation. The St. James group had engaged in the larger war against "environmental racism"--the targeting of poor communities of color as dumping grounds for the nation's garbage and waste.

#### Environmental Justice vs. Jobs

As West and the St. James group dug in their heels and organized against Shintech, other residents argued that the company would bring jobs. Shintech had promised to employ 2,000 workers to construct the plant and pledged also to practice affirmative action in hiring. In a town where a majority of Blacks were unemployed and those who had jobs earned an average of less than \$5,000 a year, the prospect of such work was appealing. Even Ernest Johnson, the president of the Louisiana branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, signed an agreement with Shintech guaranteeing jobs to local residents.

However, West and other St. James Parish citizens pointed out that only 165 of those 2,000 positions would be permanent, and they feared most of those would not go to people in the community. "We've had 40 years of 'economic development' in St. James Parish," says Gloria Roberts, 72, the group's treasurer. "Yet people are living in deplorable conditions." Many African-Americans who applied for jobs at existing plants were told they were either underqualified or overqualified, forcing some to relocate in search of work. "Whether or not we educate our children in St. James Parish, they're never good enough to acquire jobs in these industrial sites that are poisoning and killing all of us," says West.

The St. James Citizens continued to organize by circulating a petition--signed by more than 1,100 residents--and by writing letters to local newspapers. For legal and technical support and assistance, they also reached out to grassroots organizations, including the Louisiana Environmental Action Network (LEAN), Tulane Environmental Law Clinic and the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice. When St. James Citizens contacted Greenpeace--the well-known international environmental activist organization--their local struggle moved beyond Convent and became a symbol of the worldwide struggle for environmental civil rights.

#### A 'Test' Case

If there was ever a clear case of environmental discrimination, Convent was it. Located along the Mississippi between Baton Rouge and New Orleans, the town was set in the heart of an industrial

region dubbed Cancer Alley by environmentalists because of its elevated rate of cancer deaths. And St. James Parish had the third-highest level of toxic industrial emissions in the state, according to published data.

A survey conducted by the Deep South Center revealed a pattern of discrimination. "There was almost a perfect correlation between race and proximity to industrial sites," says the center's director, Beverly Wright, M.D. "The closer you are to the sites, the more Blacks you have." Robert Bullard agrees. He's the director of the environmental justice resource center at Clark-Atlanta University, which also provided support to the people of Convent. "You have this historical pattern, the population being African-American and poor and all these plants concentrated in one area," he notes. "It was naked racism."

So on behalf of St. James Citizens, on April 2, 1997, Greenpeace and Tulane University Environmental Law Clinic filed the first of several complaints with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The first grievance objected to air permits issued to Shintech by the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality (LDEQ). Additional complaints charged discrimination: They cited President Bill Clinton's executive order that requires state agencies funded by the federal government to consider the impact of pollution on poor and minority communities. "The Shintech case emerged as the most important civil-rights case ever involving charges of environmental racism," says Damu Smith, the southern regional representative for Greenpeace. "Other communities would be affected by whatever decisions were made."

The legal maneuvers worked, at least temporarily. On September 10, 1997, EPA president Carol Browner stalled Shintech's air permit on technical grounds. In a letter to the LDEQ, Browner asked the agency to hold public hearings on the plant and consider the impact on the predominantly Black community. She wrote:

"We believe it is essential that minority and low-income communities not be disproportionately subjected to environmental hazards." For the first time in EPA history, the agency also launched its own investigation into whether the LDEQ violated Convent citizens' civil rights.

Mrs. West Goes to Washington

To put further pressure on Shintech, in April 1998 West and Roberts went to Washington, D.C., where they met individually with EPA representatives and congressional Black Caucus leaders, including Maxine Waters, Jesse Jackson, Jr., John Conyers and Bobby Scott. The two septuagenarian "lobbyists" also held a press conference in D.C. After Greenpeace's Smith and Minnesota Senator Paul Wellstone addressed the reporters, Roberts used a map of the parish to point out the 16 toxic facilities in the area, and talked about how Shintech would dump 600 million

gallons of waste material into the Mississippi each year. When West took the podium, she spoke without a script. "I have a lot of pent-up emotion," she began in a trembling but searing voice. "We have our two schools, which are 95 percent African-American, our Head Start and our elementary school on each side of the River. Those are my kids. They're trying to kill our future generations."

In June 1998, West and Greenpeace representatives went to Japan to press their case in person at Shintech's parent company, Shin-Etsuin Tokyo. Company representatives were reluctant to meet with them, but Smith called every day: "I told them I have a 72-year-old African-American grandmother who wants to meet with you. You cannot refuse a meeting while we are here in your country." After several days, an assistant to Chihiro Kanagawa, Shin-Etsu's CEO, agreed to receive the petitions and letters from Convent residents that West had brought with her. Despite the cordial but cool reception from Shintech executives during an hour-long meeting at the company's corporate headquarters, West ended her presentation by pounding her fist on the lectern and crying out, "We don't want Shintech!"

Victory at Last?

After 18 months of work, West, Roberts and St. James Citizens finally slew their Goliath. On September 17, 1998, Shintech announced it would suspend efforts to obtain permits for the Convent plant and proposed building a smaller facility in the nearby community of Plaquemine. "The state of Louisiana really wants that industry here," says West. So instead of celebrating, "we should just have a thanksgiving and praise the Lord and wait." Now galvanized by her own fight, West has lent her support to her neighbors in Plaquemine--a racially diverse middle-class community--in their quest to stop Shintech.

The women of Convent have used their fame to educate others. "The Sierra Club came to listen to our story," says Roberts. "The Rockefeller Foundation president came and we took him on a tour of the area where people are being impacted most by the toxic air."

With her deceased daughter and Convent's schoolkids as her focus, West explains why she won't give up: "There's a danger with industry. You can't walk away from it now." After a pause, she adds, "The fight isn't near over."

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Environmental hazards harm African-Americans disproportionately: Fifty percent of Blacks live in regions with poor air quality, whereas one third of Whites live in similar conditions. If you are concerned about the quality of your air, there are proven ways in which you can safeguard your family and community:

\* Be informed. Keep up with local news and join local community organizations or councils to stay up-to-date on business developments--new industry, incinerators--that may affect your environment.

\* Organize community meetings. Inform the broader public about the issue through meetings in churches or community centers.

\* Create an organization or join forces with an existing one. Give your organization a name, elect officers and draw up a mission statement.

\* Get outside help. To gather information about environmental issues in your community, turn to local environmental groups, civil-rights organizations and local universities with experts in the environment.

\* Contact local and state health officials, including your city and state departments of environmental quality, departments of health, and congressional representatives and senators to ask questions and voice your concerns about new developments.

\* Disseminate information. Put the facts of your case in writing on flyers, press releases and petitions, and circulate them in the community and to local media.

Ziba Kashef is the senior editor for health at Essence.

\* "Powerless people can stand up, organize and fight on their own and win," says ESSENCE senior health editor Ziba Kashef about the fierce women who fought environmental racism in "Saving Our Backyard" (page 160).--Z.K.

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