

Empowering Ourselves:

Women and Organizing



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Empowering Ourselves: Women and Toxics Organizing

Center for Health, Environment & Justice

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Edited by Robbin Lee Zeff, Marsha Love, and Karen Stults



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Mentoring a Movement

Empowering People

Preventing Harm

About the Center for Health, Environment & Justice

CHEJ mentors the movement to build healthier communities by empowering people to prevent the harm caused by chemical and toxic threats. We accomplish our work by connecting local community groups to national initiatives and corporate campaigns. CHEJ works with communities to empower groups by providing the tools, strategic vision, and encouragement they need to advocate for human health and the prevention of harm.

Following her successful effort to prevent further harm for families living in contaminated Love Canal, Lois Gibbs founded CHEJ in 1981 to continue the journey. To date, CHEJ has assisted over 10,000 groups nationwide. Details on CHEJ's efforts to help families and communities prevent harm can be found on www.chej.org.

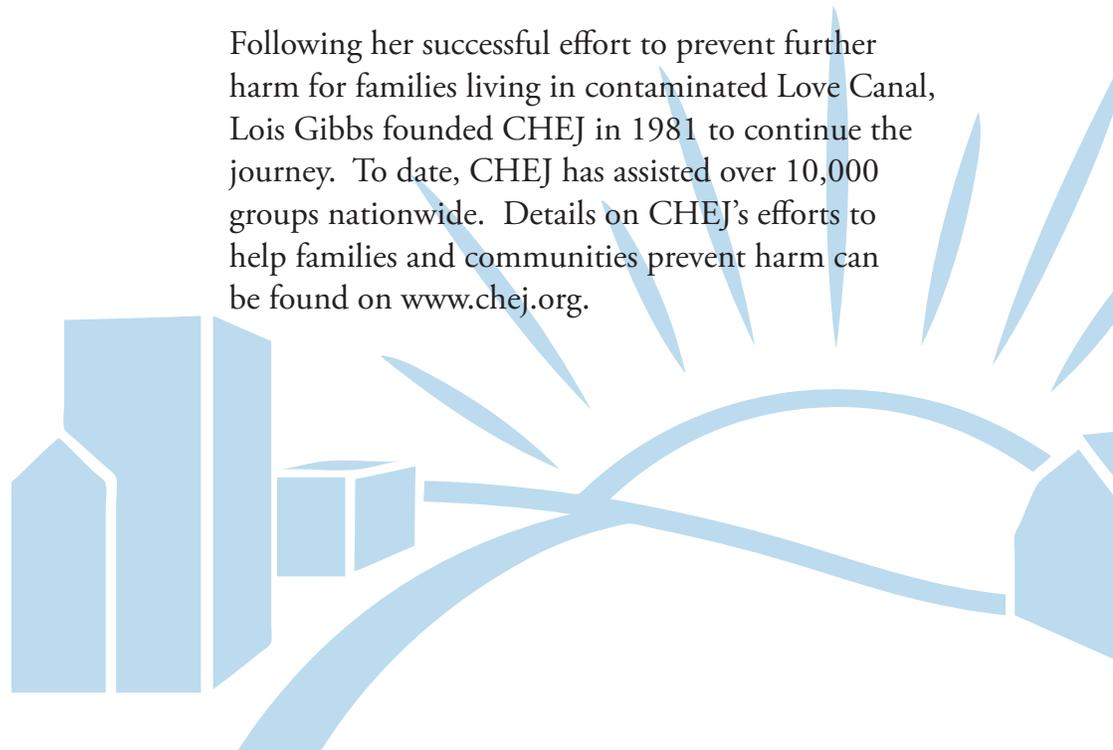


Table of Contents

pg.	1	1. PREFACE
pg.	2	2. INTRODUCTION
pg.	5	3. WOMEN MAKE IT HAPPEN
pg.	8	4. HEALTH EFFECTS
pg.	15	5. STRESS
pg.	20	6. WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP
pg.	24	7. PERSONAL GROWTH
pg.	27	8. ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT
pg.	29	9. MOVING FROM A LOCAL GRASSROOTS LEADER TO A FULL-TIME ORGANIZER
pg.	33	10. IT'S UP TO US
pg.	35	11. APPENDIX

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Most of all, CHEJ would like to thank the participants in the 1987 Women in Toxic Organizing conference

for sharing their thoughts and ideas with us which made this publication possible:

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This book is dedicated to the memory of Nettie Ballenger.



Chapter 1

Preface

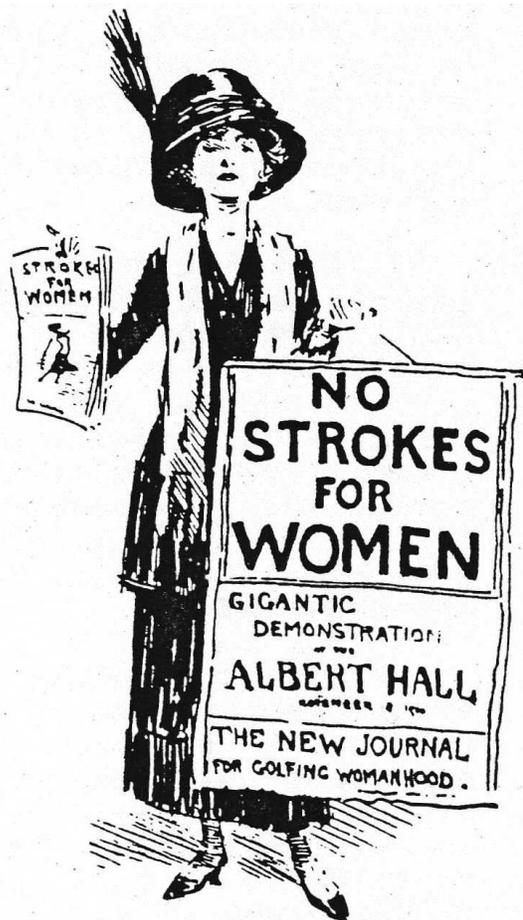
This guidebook reflects the collective work of a group of 43 women who attended a conference held in Arlington, VA in 1987 that was originally published in June 1989. The text has been revised in this edition in only minor ways including updating our name from the Citizens Clearinghouse for Hazardous Wastes (CCHW) to the Center for Health, Environment & Justice (CHEJ). For the most part we left the words as they were published in 1989 as it reflects

the thinking and issues of the time. Consequently, some statements may be out-of-date (such as where speakers are working now). It was not our intent to update the guidebook, but rather to share the output of this meeting. We feel strongly that the issues raised in this guidebook are still important and we feel it provides a useful resource that is still relevant to women in organizing today.

Chapter 2

Introduction

You are the newest links in a long chain of great women who have been leaders in the struggle for social justice. Many women leaders have been forgotten by society. Ellen Ryan, a professional organizer for social justice, asked participants at CHEJ's Women in Toxics Organizing conference, "How many can tell the story of Sojourner Truth? Elizabeth Cady Stanton? Florence Lusca? The Grimke Sisters? Mother Jones? Florence Reece? Ella Baker? Fanny Lou Hammer? Jessie Lopez de la Cruz? Delores Huerta? Wenona LaDuke? Helen Waller? Andrea Kid? Lois Gibbs? Theresa Freeman?" (To learn more about these women, see Suggested Readings). These women, and thousands and thousands of others whose names have been lost, were American leaders for social change. Sojourner Truth, born into slavery, fought more than 100 years ago for freedom. Ella Baker led in the civil rights movement 100 years later. Mother Jones fought for better working conditions in the coal mines at the beginning of this century. Delores Huerta is organizing migrant farm workers today. Our history has been stolen, for these stories are not in the history books. These women played a role in many struggles that preceded the fight against toxics. They are with us in spirit.

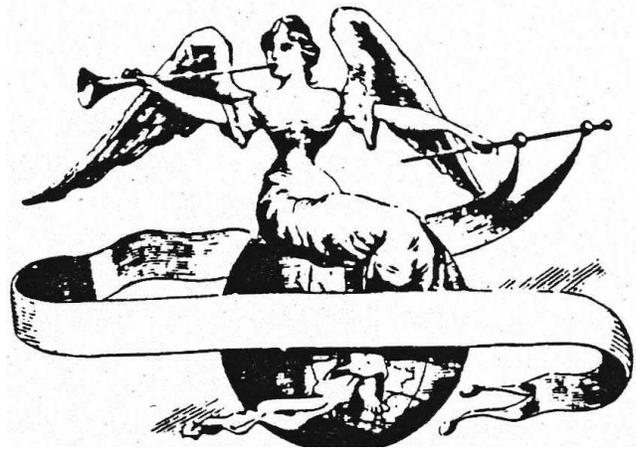


Our story is their story. We are making history and it's important that we be active in writing that history. No one can tell the story of the struggle for a clean and healthy environment better than the women who are making it happen. One of the reasons for this publication is to record what we have done so that our work will never be forgotten.

As women activists in the environmental justice movement, we have found that the road to success is fraught with difficulties that we did not anticipate. Many of us feel great discomfort and anxiety, because we have suddenly been forced to take on new roles. We are having to confront City Hall, to speak out in public for the first time. We are learning to do things that “nice girls don't do.” As women leaders responsible for an organization, we also find that our organization puts a strain on our traditional role as homemakers. Our families—the very people we are fighting for—often feel neglected because of the time we put into this work. Marriages may experience great tension as we grow and change.

These two concerns—the growing pains of women becoming leaders and the stress we experience in our family life—first became apparent at CHEJ's 5th Anniversary Meeting in June, 1986. You could hear women talking over dinner or in the halls about these two issues, saying things like, “What did you do when the government/polluter/scientist called you a hysterical housewife?” “That happened to me, too!” Or, “How have you been able to get time in for the family?” “Is your husband growling as much as mine is about the time you put into organizing?”

A number of women at the 5th Anniversary meeting felt that additional meetings were needed to deal with concerns specific to women organizers. The first step was a CHEJ-sponsored conference on family



stress, held in February, 1987. That meeting was followed by a series of regional workshops across the country designed especially for children so that they could talk about their parents' involvement in toxics organizing and how it has affected them.

Even though these events were very valuable in laying out the problems that families face, women felt that more still needed to be discussed. Over the next months, a committee of grassroots activists from around the country planned another meeting on issues related to family stress and the personal growing pains involved in being women leaders and organizers. This meeting, Women in Toxics Organizing, took place in November, 1987, when 43 women representing 25 groups from around the country spent two and a half days in Arlington, Virginia, sharing thoughts and experiences as leaders and organizers.

This is a manual for local leaders and activists in the environmental justice movement. The need for this type of publication grew out of the fears, frustrations, conflicts, and successes that many of us experienced in our personal lives and with our families as we struggle for a healthy environment in our local communities. All of the people who contributed to this publication are women because the leadership of the grassroots movement against toxics is predominantly female. Most of the grassroots groups against toxic waste around the country started because one woman—usually a housewife and

mother—felt compelled to do something to protect her family from the tragic health effects of chemical contamination in her community. That lone woman reached out to her family, friends, and neighbors to work with her, and together they built a local organization.

Even though this publication is written by women and addresses women's thoughts and concerns, it is not for women only. This manual is also meant for the men who are invaluable to our organizations and our personal lives. We hope that this publication will enlighten them to the special stresses and concerns of women in leadership positions.

The goal of this publication is to provide support and guidance to grassroots leaders who feel isolated. As we grow and develop personally, we become stronger and more confident in our own abilities as leaders, more able to carry on our local fight. By sharing our ideas and experiences with one another we have come to see the connectedness in our seemingly isolated struggles.

Each chapter incorporates excerpts of presentations made at the conference by the woman who is identified in the text. Each of these women were asked in advance of the meeting to prepare remarks on the topic of the chapter. Also included are suggestions people shared for coping with the many obstacles facing toxic organizers. This manual should not be viewed as “the last word” on any of the subjects presented. We view this as a living document and encourage your suggestions for future editions.





Chapter 3

Women Make It Happen

CORA TUCKER

Cora delivered the opening remarks at the conference and what follows are excerpts from her address. Cora lived her entire life in Halifax, Virginia, a rural area near the North Carolina border. She was active in the fight for social justice most of her life. Cora began her work with civil rights before becoming active with Citizens for a Better America. Cora's work is an inspiration for all in the struggle for human dignity.

It's so good to be here. To see so many women. You know each time I go to a conference and see only women, I think about the first time I went to the General Assembly and I was there fighting about the right to vote and the speaker said, "We have all these hysterical housewives here." I used to get upset and go home and cry, "I'm a hysterical housewife." I've learned that's a tactic men use to keep us in our place. So when I started the stuff on toxic waste and nuclear waste, I went back to the General Assembly and a guy gets up and says, "We have a whole room full of hysterical housewives today, so men, we need to get prepared." I said, "You're exactly right. We're hysterical and when it comes to matters of life and

death, especially mine, I get hysterical." And I said, "If men don't get hysterical, there's something wrong with them." From then on, they stopped calling us hysterical housewives when we came to present an issue.

I was talking to a lady this morning who said she was kind of an oddity in her community. They're supposed to be mothers, supposed to go to the PTO [Parent-Teacher Organization], act a certain way. And if you are out of the norm, they say "What's wrong with this woman?" They think you're crazy. Most of your mommas would never have gotten up at a board meeting and say anything about toxic waste because they were trained that "ladies" didn't act that way. Ladies don't take on an issue. I don't know if "lady" is a compliment or not. I really don't like to be called a lady because my momma used to tell me that a lady was a woman who didn't know which way was up. And I really think we know which way is up. What we are is people. As long as we allow other people to make decisions, they're never going to make them in our best interest. Nobody makes a decision in our best interest unless we do it ourselves.

I think women bring so much more to an organization

because we go at it, most of the time, from the point of view of how it affects our children. We've seen the effects on our children more than anybody else in the community. We try to figure out why Johnny can't read or why Johnny can't write. And we're the first ones to ask our husbands and our friends. Most of the time we talk to other women. We know there is a problem, but we can't figure it out. But then when we start looking back where Betty and Johnny came from we find 99% of the time they come from an area with a toxic waste dump or something around



there. Women are the first people to make those connections. We know more about our community than anybody else. None of your politicians know more than you do and when you go to the local government bodies... they pat you on the back like

you do a child when she's complaining and say, "O.K. Sugar, we're going to look into it." I find that the only people who are going to do things for us is going to be us. We can't depend on politicians, because they are not going to address the problems that we're facing unless we make them. Nobody is going to willingly say that we're going to clean up this toxic dump. We have to make them do it. And most of the time it's the women who have to make the men in our lives start taking notice that there's a problem.

People don't get all the connections. They say the environment is over here, the civil rights group is over there, the women's group is over there, and the other groups are here. Actually all of them are one group and all the issues we fight for become null and void if we have no clean water to drink, no clean air to breathe and nothing to eat. They say, "Now Miss Tucker, what you really need to do is go back to food stamps and welfare, environmental issues are not your problem." And I said to him, "Toxic wastes, they don't know that I'm black."

And that's one of the things that I've found that politicians and other people in leadership positions use to separate us. They tell blacks that the environment isn't our problem, it's their problem. They tell you that food stamps is not white folks' problem. Everything is a women's issue because every child that's born, some woman had it. But the way the people cut the issue sometimes does not allow us to become sisters in the fight for whatever it is we're fighting for. And I find that's the same thing that happens with minorities. And one of the problems is that most white people don't know how to deal with black folk on issues like this. They say black people are only interested in bread and butter issues. But nothing in the world is more bread and butter than clean air to breathe or having good water to drink.

We get so stressful because we have to cope with so much. We have to be the mother, the father, the provider. People don't give us credit because most of us don't get paid for what we do. So they don't give credence to our work. "She's nothing but a housewife." "She don't do nothing." We do

work, whether you get paid or not. What you do is extremely valuable. Nobody really can afford to pay you for what you're worth. I know nobody can afford to pay me. That's why I don't work for anybody.

The real joy in having people come together at a conference like this is knowing that you can make a difference. People say, "Well, it don't make no difference." One of us can't make no difference. But 50 organized people can beat 10,000 unorganized people. And we just proved it in Halifax County on Election Day. They had a 16-year veteran running for the House of Delegates and a newcomer who had never run for political office before in his life. Everybody in the community spoke out and endorsed the 16-year veteran. We took our little organization and we were the only group in the 5-county area that endorsed this person. We took 50 people and we organized them in 3 counties and we beat them to death. And we told them, "The Number One thing on everyone's agenda from this day forward shall be the environment."

So we have got to start in our own communities doing and linking to other folks. If you don't have an answer to a problem, ask somebody. Women are different from most people because women will ask. Men will be lost for a week and not ask nobody for directions. But we will ask somebody which direction to go. I don't mind calling folks up and saying "I'm at a point and I don't know where to go. What do I do?" And most of the time I'm in luck because I know I can contact a whole lot of people who will tell me where I need to go for this or that. There really are groups, organizations, and women who have expertise in different areas of environmental stuff. We need to connect with them and find out where they are so we can call them when we need them. The only person who is going to save us from the polluted world is us. And when women set out to do something, if hell freezes over, we still do it. And I think that's something special.

So we need to get about the business of doing it. Not just for us, but for the generation coming after us. They may not say nothing else about us, but I want

them to say in the years to come, they didn't do much but at least they tried.



Chapter 4

Health Effects

The environmental justice movement would not exist today were we not concerned about the devastating health effects on our families from exposure to toxic wastes. We got involved because we want justice for ourselves and others who have already been harmed. We're concerned about protecting families against future harm from incinerators, leaking landfills and other sources of hazardous waste contamination. Involuntary exposure to toxic substances is a form of persecution. We will no longer be victims to environmental persecution.

Since environmentally induced illness is such an overwhelming reality in all of our lives, we have devoted a large portion of this publication to the subject of health effects. In this chapter, three women who have faced the consequences of the environmental poisoning of their families and their communities tell their stories. Then we discuss the emotions we feel as we deal with illness and, finally, some obstacles and solutions for dealing with the health effects of toxic exposure.

PENNY NEWMAN

Penny Newman is a long-time veteran in the grassroots movement against toxics. She founded Concerned Neighbors in Action of Riverside, California and is now the Executive Director of the Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice. Penny was one of the first to work with Lois Gibbs at Love Canal to discover that hazardous waste was in everyone's backyard. Penny was one of the key activists at the Stringfellow Acid Pits site in Riverside, California.

“I didn't know the danger.”

We chose to move to our community because we thought it was the place to raise our kids. The small town atmosphere, the rural countryside, was the kind of place we wanted to be. I knew that when you go house hunting, you find out about the schools in the neighborhood. But I didn't know then that I had to ask whether the community had a toxic dump.

This community is near a Class 1 hazardous waste site. On the site there are volatile organics, TCE,

DDT, the heavy metals. We have radiation. We have everything at Stringfellow. I didn't know it then.

When we moved there, I was three months pregnant. At 5 ½ months I miscarried. Eric was conceived just a few months after that. Eric was born 6 weeks premature. He had a lot of allergies from the very beginning and was always a fairly fragile child. It was routine not to sleep at night, because you lay there listening for his breathing. At any time you might have to rush him to the hospital for his injections.

“The doctors didn't know what was wrong.”

When Eric started school, instead of things getting better, like everybody told me it would, “he'd outgrow the asthma,” he just got worse. We went through a year of really severe abdominal pains and the doctors just didn't know what was going on. Eric went through all kinds of tests. They finally said it was an epileptic stomach. It had to be a teacher who was putting pressure on Eric at school. That seemed really strange to me, because he had a very laid-back teacher.

One night he had to have emergency surgery. They thought it was appendicitis, but it wasn't. So they did exploratory surgery and took out Eric's gall bladder. They decided that's what it was. A six year old with a gall bladder problem! So unusual, they wrote articles in medical journals about him. On top of this, Eric was diagnosed as having a congenital defect which required being in braces. Eric also had no vision in one eye. They classified it as “lazy eye,” but it wasn't quite that. So we went through a period of braces, glasses and an eye patch. He knocked out teeth, because he kept falling with his braces. He looked like a battered child. Every time we took him out, I'd have to say, “No, I really don't beat this kid.” It was very embarrassing.

After the gall bladder surgery Eric seemed to do a little better. Every time the flu came around he wasn't drastically ill. Every time a cold came around he wouldn't be out of school for two weeks.

Shawn was always the healthy kid. I finally thought, “Aha, we've got one that is going to make it.” Until he

started school. The school is ¾ of a mile from the site. Shawn started with asthma, which he didn't have as a younger child. He seemed to develop it very quickly, as I did, because I had started working at the school. His skin would crack open and ooze. And he had ear infections, continuous ear infections.

“The officials didn't tell us.”

In 1978, we had overflows from the site. They pumped 800,000 gallons of chemicals into the community. It flowed down the street and the flood canal, which goes directly behind the elementary school. It overflowed into the playground. The state officials didn't tell anyone they were doing this. They didn't want to panic the public.

The school district found out and decided they should do something. They didn't want to close the school, because they would lose state financing, based on the average daily attendance rates. So they set up an evacuation plan. They told the staff, “If you hear one bell, take the kids down to buses. If you hear two bells, it will be too late; the dam will be broken. Put the kids on the desks and hope for the best.” The staff was instructed not to tell parents.

So we were sending our kids off to school every day, and the kids played in the puddles, as all kids do. They didn't know that they shouldn't be playing in that water; they thought it was rain water. We had foam in the community which they kept telling us was agricultural foam. The kids could actually make beards out of it. They put the foam on their faces.

“Doctors ended up adding to the problem.”

After that, Shawn began having neurological symptoms--the blurred vision, the headaches. The headaches would get so bad he would just scream. It didn't do any good to put him in a dark room; it didn't do any good to give him aspirins. And then he'd start in with dizzy spells to the point of really being nauseous. And you'd actually have to hold on to him, so he could see he wasn't moving. He was in the 4th grade.



We went through two years of tests on him. It was probably the biggest nightmare I'd ever gone through. At that point I really began to hate doctors. They ended up adding to the problem rather than helping it, by telling a 4th grader that he had brain damage without giving him any explanation. By telling him later on that he was just doing it to get attention. They said this to a young man in his formative years.

Shawn graduated into junior high school, which is out of that immediate area. Things began to subside a bit. He was put on phenobarbital. And we never figured out if it was the medication or just removing him from the area. But he seemed to improve a little bit. However, he never, from that 4th grade period on, did well in school again, as he used to. And Shawn had been recommended for the gifted program. He was extremely bright and very well coordinated. But he wasn't anymore. Clearly there was a change. He noticed it more than I did. He became very conscious of it, to the point that he didn't want to participate in sports anymore because he couldn't do things that he used to be able to do. He has also told me he simply can't concentrate.

“The state says there are no significant health effects.”

In the last year we've started having testing done, as part of our lawsuit. And despite what the state has said in their epidemiological studies—and

our community has been studied like a zoo by the state—they kept saying there were no significant health effects. But we got ahold of an internal memo, where they outlined health effects that included an increase in cancer, urinary tract infections, respiratory problems, ear infections, heart problems. But they considered this “no significant health impact.” A young man with terrific potential. That potential is reduced. They'll never be able to give that back to him.

I look back now and think: How stupid could I have been? But I just never made the connection. And it wasn't until we got a list of all the chemicals and their health effects that I started reading and thinking, “My God, That's Eric's problem, that's Shawn's problem.”

“People were scared.”

My kids are not the sickest kids in our community. They are considered pretty healthy kids. For a long time people didn't even want to discuss what was going on, because they were scared. Some suspected, mainly because of skin problems. You could see the rashes; you could see the sores. Sores that didn't respond to treatment. And so people would talk about that. The things they wouldn't talk about were the suicide tendencies of their kids, or the really emotional state that some of the people were in. They didn't talk about the reproductive problems they were having. And a lot of it was that they didn't associate those problems with those chemicals.

It's frightening to have a doctor go through this whole list of things that are wrong. And knowing that there are not any doctors around us who are even going to acknowledge that it's happening, much less provide treatment. That's a real problem. What do you do with people by telling them they have these problems and not being able to offer them any help?

LUELLA KENNY

Luella Kenny joined the grassroots movement for environmental justice in 1978 when her son Jon died from chemical exposure at Love Canal.

Luella remains active as member of CHEJ's Board of Directors, the chairperson of the Love Canal Medical Trust Fund, and speaks to grassroots groups nationwide.

I was one of the original activists at Love Canal. And I'm ashamed to say that the only thing that got me involved was because my son died, because he was playing in his own backyard. Otherwise I was just as complacent as the next person and didn't pay attention to what was going on.

Yet back in 1978 my 7 year old son suddenly became ill. And I was too busy running back and forth from the hospital to pay attention. I knew that 1/10th of a mile from my house there was a lot of ruckus going on. People were protesting.

Both my husband and I are in the sciences. We went to the medical library and started reading. Jon had a kidney disease known as nephrosis. We found out that this disease could be triggered if you're exposed to chemicals. I was told not to worry about it.

But 4 months later this little 7-year-old boy died. The members of the Love Canal Home Owners Association were interested because the death occurred in the immediate neighborhood. And New York State said that they were going to investigate Jon's death. Ironically, I worked for the New York State Dept. of Health for 29 years. I was very trusting. I thought this was what we should do. We should investigate it.

“The Commissioner of Health didn't look me in the eye.”

It's not very easy for a mother to have to read her son's autopsy report and to try and deal with the officials. I thought it was important to know what had happened, so I sat down with the Commissioner of Health of New York State and tried to go over this autopsy report. Typical of most officials, his head down, not looking me straight in the eye, he had the nerve to tell me that little boys have the tendency to pick their nose and therefore they get bloody noses,

not because they are exposed to chemicals. Nothing happens to little boys' kidneys because they are exposed to chemicals; it's because they play football and they fall down and rupture them.

Children have a gland called the thymus gland. It is what determines the immune response. It usually disappears when children are 14 years old. The autopsy report indicated that Jon's thymus was already shrunk. In the medical journals, all of the animal studies showed that a shrunken thymus is an indicator of exposure to dioxin. That's what was in our backyard. Dioxin.

Who would have thought that my other son, who was 10, was anorexic because of the appetite-suppressing chemicals at the creek? Who would have thought that the hundreds and hundreds of warts that were all over his body which we constantly had to have removed, who would have thought it was due to chemical exposures?

“Don't be intimidated by doctors.”

I had worked in the scientific field, and yet I was given stupid answers. I was considered a hysterical housewife. But the officials didn't address the issues any better when I tried to approach them without emotion. Because they are not ready to accept it.

I want to make one last point. Don't be intimidated by doctors. They are not gods. And don't take what they say. You have to go out and search for what you know is true. Don't let them focus only on cancer and miscarriages, which are the obvious things. David Axelrod, the Health Commissioner, told me, “Collect yourself, go back home, start your life again.” It's impossible. This is 9 years later. I've started my life again, but certainly not in the direction he told me to.

PATTY FRASE

Born and raised in Jacksonville, Arkansas, Patty first became involved in the toxics issue when she lost her parents to toxics-related illnesses. Patty now lives in

Benton, Arkansas, and directs the Environmental Congress of Arkansas, which works on a variety of issues such as hazardous waste incineration, deep well injection, and landfills.

“Don’t trust government and industry research studies.”

When I hear these stories I get so angry. I want to go out and grab these doctors and throw them in the pit. I want to take them out there and let them drink our water.

We have “independent” studies we’re supposed to rely on. The majority of those studies are funded by the chemical companies. So they’re going to have a study that says, “It’s ok. Don’t worry about what’s in your landfill. There is nothing wrong with your landfill.”

“CDC: Center for Diffusing Citizen Concern.”

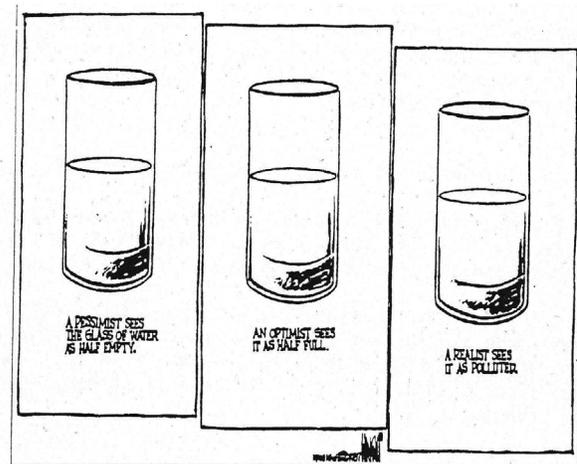
The government studies are also bogus. We just have to start out knowing that the Centers for Disease Control, the EPA, or any of these regulatory agencies are not telling the truth. When they come your way, tell them to go away. Tell them, “We don’t need your studies.” You don’t need their studies, because then you are countering more than you were before they got there. Because now they are reinforcing that you’re crazy. But you’re not crazy; there is nothing wrong with you.

Some of the things that go on with the CDC and the EPA are so incredible that it’s hard to believe that we’re the ignorant ones. The CDC and the EPA came to town and said, “We’re going to do you a favor. You’ve been asking for all this stuff, so we’re going to test 10 people that have died in your community. We’re going to do liver samples. We’re going to do brain samples. We’re going to do intestinal samples. We’re going to do it all.”

My Congressman’s office calls me two weeks later and says, “Patty, I don’t think you want that. You’re the control group for Times Beach, Missouri.” So I called

the CDC and I asked them if this was true. And I called the press, like crazy. The next day the study was cancelled. Thank goodness. We were supposed to be the control group. We were. Our contamination level was just, as high, if not higher, in some parts of our community, than Times Beach. They evacuated Times Beach at the 1 part per billion (ppb) level. Some of our homes have 2.8 ppb, 3.7 ppb, 4.6 ppb.

Don’t let any of them tell you anything, because it’s all b.s. The CDC was supposed to test for 10 chemicals. There were no established background levels for these chemicals, so they compared the levels of these chemicals with DDT, DDE, etc. So that they can show you that you’re crazy.



The CDC got up at a press conference with an autopsy report, and they say 508 ppb 2,4-D and 2,4,5-T. This is the autopsy of a little baby. A baby that’s never eaten anything. Been on canned formula. Canned formula. The CDC holds up the autopsy report and a can of mothballs and says “These children are no more contaminated than if they ate these moth balls.” They took the warning labels off the moth balls, and they held them up in front of us hysterical housewives to justify to us idiots that the children are no more contaminated than if they swallowed moth balls.

“They don’t know how to handle us hysterical housewives.”

They don’t know how to handle us emotional people, which is wonderful. I thank God they don’t, because otherwise we’d never win. I’m glad I’m hysterical. Now they’re putting sociologists and psychologists in the field to come deal with us crazy people, us emotional people.

HEALTH EFFECTS: OBSTACLES AND SOLUTIONS

OBSTACLES:

Emotional responses to health effects. Handling a serious illness in the family is difficult.

Environmentally caused illnesses are all the more tragic and difficult for families because they are less understood, harder to treat, and caused by corporate carelessness. It is especially stressful for women since we are the primary caretakers of the ill family member. Whether we are dealing with illness or death, in ourselves or in others, we feel many emotions: denial, sadness, fear, and anger.

Denial:

You deny the death, hoping to cheer others up. You become a bit hard. You close off your feelings as you see someone dying.

We are the strong ones. We have no one to break down with. We cannot show remorse, cry or be sad with our groups, whenever we feel like it. Most times, when it is time to cry, we are the ones helping others to express their grief, enabling the process, rather than participating in it for ourselves. As organizers we are involved in the recovery, the moving on.

Sadness:

Yet it’s hard to keep being pumped up. You’re losing still another person in your support group. We have

delivered eulogies to beloved community leaders and have felt the loss of the entire community and have expressed that with sadness.

Death of children at a site is the most devastating. We have children ourselves and when we counsel others on the loss of a child, we are reminded of our own child’s vulnerability. We own the problem twice.

Fear:

It’s terrifying. You wonder who’s next.

Anger:

I really had to work off my anger. My daughter was contaminated and had symptoms and I was contaminated and exposed to the chemicals. “I’m going to get these people,” I thought, “they just can’t do this to me and get away with it.” I wanted to get them back.

SOLUTIONS:

It’s ok to be emotional. Warm and caring people feel emotions. In our work, we are reclaiming the role of women as healers and nurturers. Acknowledge your emotions and let your sadness, anger, and fear lead you to ACTION.

OBSTACLES:

Physicians’ lack of knowledge on illnesses due to toxic exposure. Your local family physician is not likely to know anything about toxic chemicals. Medical students receive only 4 hours of training on this subject in 4 years of medical school.

SOLUTIONS:

It’s our job to educate our doctors, so that they know what questions to ask us and how to treat our families when we become ill. Shortly after this conference, CHEJ began a newsletter called “Environmental Health Monthly” which is sent to doctors across the country to educate them about environmental health issues. Contact CHEJ to get your local doctors on the mailing list.

OBSTACLES:

Too much emphasis on cancer. Scientists and government agencies who study our communities have not validated all the types of health effects that may occur. In their view there's only a problem if a population shows up with cancers and reproductive problems. They are not so quick to acknowledge or accept, for example, neurological damage or immune system dysfunction.

SOLUTIONS:

Be persistent. Don't give up. Trust your instincts. We are being forced to be living experiments of chemical exposure. If you believe there's a real problem which they're not acknowledging, don't accept what they tell you. Contact CHEJ for advice about what to do.

OBSTACLES:

Experts. The environmental science field is not all that big. The same "experts" get called in to evaluate communities all over the country. Some of them do good work, but some of them do not. Many "experts" have bad reputations with environmental groups because they act more like "hired guns" than scientists and professionals.

SOLUTIONS:

Let CHEJ know of your experiences dealing with scientists and other experts. CHEJ will keep a "Hit List" of names of people to avoid. If they are brought to your community, just say, "No thanks, we're not cooperating until this person is replaced." Try to check an expert's credentials and find out which other communities they have worked in. Call those communities to find out what kind of job they did. A national network of sympathetic doctors and industrial hygienists has also been created to help exposed workers and their families deal with work-related health problems. These professionals may be helpful to our local groups. Contact CHEJ for more information.

OBSTACLES:

Intimidation of scientific language. Lots of scientific

and medical terms are thrown at us by government agencies and scientists who study our communities. Learning the language they use and knowing how they operate can be confusing and difficult.

SOLUTIONS:

CHEJ has a science department that can help you decipher technical reports and studies. CHEJ has guidebooks available for community groups that make science accessible to everyone. These books describe how epidemiological surveys are done and how to conduct your own health survey.



Chapter 5

Stress

We are paying a price for the work we do in fighting against toxics. The work itself is stressful. It's physically exhausting and emotionally draining. It takes a personal toll on us. It also takes a toll on our families. Every moment we spend fighting, we are not with them. This section of the manual describes the many ways in which women organizers experience stress and present suggestions for reducing personal, family, and organizational stress.

THERESA FREEMAN

Theresa is the founder and director of Vermonters Organized for Clean Up (VOC) headquartered in Barre, Vermont. She began her fight against toxics as a local leader in Williamstown, Vermont, where discharges from a local dry cleaner were contaminating the local elementary school. Now, as a statewide organizer, Theresa has helped found several VOC chapters which do grassroots organizing across the state.

When I first started doing this work, I didn't think I was under any stress. I was just a workaholic. I kept denying what was happening. My life was disrupted. The phone rang. The kids needed to be fed. The

phone kept ringing. I resented having to cook. I had to stop and cook. Everything became stressful—eating, too little sleep. I started drinking. My husband was not supportive. He wanted me to stop working on this—or get money for it. Not only was I not getting paid for this work, I had to spend money to do it! My phone bill was out of sight. Then we went through a period where my husband was supportive of this work. Now my husband's asking me to stop again.

I felt nuts. I needed life support, which I got from Lois (Gibbs) and from others. You do become someone different, someone who's much more competent, who needs to be dealt with.

Maybe if I could have exercised and done swimming, I could've reduced the amount of stress. I had such anxiety. I couldn't sleep. My body would ache. I should have been watching my food and been careful. You don't eat. You drink coffee and smoke cigarettes and you really get whacked out on that. The very next stressful situation, I'll be exercising. But I didn't know that then.

KATIE LAJOIE

A member of Work on Waste USA, Katie lives in New Hampshire. Katie got involved when she found out, just after having her second child, that an incinerator was going to be put up in her neighborhood. Katie has been active ever since.

Husbands. Even supportive husbands can be stressful, because you feel guilty that you haven't cooked, provided for the family. The baby still gets up at sunrise after you've come home at 1 AM from a meeting. Clutter: There's envelope stacks all over the house. I find myself thinking, "My clutter is more important than your coloring books," and then feeling guilty. The stress of phone calls, trying to have a professional conversation while the kids are screaming in the background. I had to quit a part-time job. I couldn't concentrate. So we lost income.



"When I woke up this morning,
I had one nerve left ...
and now you're getting on it!"

STRESS: OBSTACLES AND SOLUTIONS

OBSTACLES:

Stress and family life. As a leader of an organization, we find that the work of the organization interferes

with family life. Whatever we do, we feel guilty. If we spend time on the organization, the family suffers. If we spend time with the family, we worry about how we're going to get all the organizational work done in time for the next hearing, the next rally, the next fundraiser.

Previous homemakers find themselves no longer cleaning, baking cookies, and gardening. They turn their kitchens into offices, use dishwashers as file cabinets.

The quality of meals slides. We'll cook whatever's around, whatever's quick. Some of us don't want to prepare anything at all; we'd rather use the time for working.

Our men complain that we are not paying enough attention to them.

We get obsessed with the work. We don't know when to stop. Suddenly we realize that we've missed a whole fall, spring, summer—the leaves have changed, and we haven't noticed. Holidays get short shrift. Some of us have missed "once in a lifetime" family events. We feel terrible. We're losing intimacy with our families.

SOLUTIONS:

Limit how much you will talk about the problem with the family. For example, one hour after work. And make sure that they talk about their day with you.

Take time for family functions. They will help you remember why you got involved in the first place.

Tell them about your successes and victories. Then they won't think that all you do is complain or sound frustrated and discouraged.

OBSTACLES:

The stresses of motherhood. Kids want to be with their mother, but their mother is preoccupied with the work. Children feel slighted, angry and/or confused, especially when they're too young to understand mom's involvement: "Why can't we be NORMAL like other families?" We get impatient and angry with the kids, the very ones we're fighting for! And then we feel guilty.

Mothers are also troubled by the knowledge that their children are sick or could become sick from exposure to toxics. What's worse, there's often insufficient scientific and medical information about the substances they've been exposed to. Mothers' fears are left to fester. We're terrified about what the future may have in store.

SOLUTIONS:

Tell your children what's going on. Don't keep it all inside. They can handle it.

Make a deal with older kids so that you can do organizational work and do something for them: "If you come to the rally with me, I'll take you to x."

Bring your children into the organization. Think of things they can do:

- They can help picket.
- They can make posters and help with poster contests.
- They can circulate children's petitions.
- They can write letters to the newspaper.

Bring children to media events. They love to have a chance to be disrespectful. Let reporters interview them.

OBSTACLES:

Financial Pressures. There's not enough money. We've used family finances for our enormous telephone bills. We've quit part-time jobs to have more time for this work. We're living on credit. Some of us have used up our savings.

SOLUTIONS:

Money is a never ending aggravation for grassroots groups. Try to make fundraising as important as your other organizing duties, instead of a last minute affair. In the beginning you will be more willing to dish out money from your pocket for xeroxing and mailing. Once your group is established and you realize your fight will take longer than you anticipated, you need to make your organization support itself financially.

Try thinking about fundraising as "fun raising" and plan events that are enjoyable as well as profitable. For more information on how to fundraise, get the CHEJ publication, "How to Raise and Manage Money."

OBSTACLES:

Community opposition. We are faced with opposition by people in our community, our own neighbors, the people we are trying to help. For some, we are the harbinger of news they don't want to hear. They don't want to know that their kids are sick, that their house that they've worked so hard for will lose its value. They try to isolate you. You become a pariah. Your children lose friends.

SOLUTIONS:

Many people are afraid of knowing the truth and go after the messenger who bears bad news. Many women have experienced hostility from other members of the community because they make the local contamination problem public. This is a hard one.

Find strength in knowing that you are doing the right thing, and that bringing about change is one of the toughest jobs there is.

OBSTACLES:

Wife jealous over husband's involvement in group. Some of the women in the community don't trust us. They think that we are taking their husbands away from them when their husbands stay late at meetings, talk on the phone to us, etc. They become jealous and resentful. The result may be that we lose the husband's involvement in the group and that we become the source of unfounded gossip... another reason we can become isolated in the community.

SOLUTIONS:

Get the spouse involved. She might be thinking jealousy when she's really feeling rejection. Once you find a project that suits her, she could become an ally instead of an enemy. Also, she will appreciate her husband's work for the group instead of resenting the group.

OBSTACLES:

The pressures of organizing. Just as our families want us to be there for them, so do our organizations. We're tugged at by all sides. As leaders, we have ultimate responsibility for our fight. We are absorbed by questions about our struggle: What specific things should we do to win? How can we keep members interested and active? How will we manage to raise money—the opposition is so rich, and we're so small! What do these technical scientific reports mean? Why are we being lied to? Who can we trust in government, in the scientific community? Should we get involved in a coalition with other groups; what if they take us over?

We get added responsibilities from the group. The more we do, the more people expect of us. They expect us to do it all.

We expect a lot from other members. We're disappointed when they don't hold up their end.

SOLUTIONS:

For You: Be good to yourself. Don't ignore the signs of stress. Let yourself feel them, or they will catch up with you later.

Set up rules for yourself. Limit what you do. You are not a sacrificial lamb.

Take time for yourself. Do whatever you like to do. For example, veg out in front of the TV. Find outlets for yourself to help relieve tension, for example, playing music, getting exercise.

Do activities at home that are short-term and where you can see an immediate result such as using housework as therapy to give yourself a break from the pressures of organizing.

Choose a support mechanism or a coping mechanism for yourself. Some examples:

- find someone to confide in
- join a support group on grieving
- prayer

Ms Meg

by bulbul



- exercise

For Your Organization:

Set time limits for meetings.

Have an agenda and stick to it.

Write letters to politicians expressing your feelings. Some people find writing very therapeutic.

Don't just complain. Call the editor of the newspaper and let him know that he screwed up the story about your group.

Call other groups to share victories with them. Call with good news. Likewise, if you're having problems, a call to another group might help you figure out the solution.

Think of yourself as an organizer, not a troublemaker.

Divide up tasks in the group. Don't think of yourself as completely indispensable.

Try to get over your resentment at others in the group who don't come through the way you think they should. Lower your expectations.

Make short-term plans, not a five year plan. Take it as it comes. Nevertheless, realize that it's a long process. There's lots of time to learn.

Pick your battles. Line up with others when you can.

Recognize your limits.

Stay focused. It's easy to be inundated by requests from other groups. Try to figure out when it's advantageous to work in a coalition and when it's not.

Build parties and good times into your organization. Acknowledge your successes, no matter how small they may seem.

Maintain a sense of humor.

Chapter 6

Women In Leadership

Although men, women, and children all participate in the grassroots movement against toxics, it is a movement dominated and led by women. 70-80% of the local leaders, the ones calling the meetings, bringing in new members, troubleshooting, and motivating in their communities are women. They are women leaders in a community run by men. Because of this, many of the struggles and obstacles that these women face as leaders stem from conflicts between their traditional female role in the community and their new role as leader: conflicts with male officials and authorities who have not yet adjusted to these persistent, vocal, and headstrong women challenging the system.

Despite our knowledge and abilities, we're frequently ignored or discriminated against by government officials, industry spokesmen, and professionals. Some of the men who are active in our organizations may also treat us the same way, seeing our value in the organization linked to our coffee-making rather than our public speaking or negotiating skills. Although there are many wonderful men in this movement who are supportive of their wife's involvement, or involved themselves, there are many times when the personal relationships with the men in our lives become

strained due to the fight. Personal stresses, adjustments to new roles and new lifestyles, are hard on relationships, sometimes bending them to the point of breaking, and sometimes strengthening them. In this chapter, women share their frustrations and their creative solutions for coping with and for changing these patterns of sexual discrimination in the fight, the community, or the home.

In a session about how women in leadership interact with men, Penny Newman asked us to "Think about situations in which you've felt degraded, dismissed, patronized, used, or ignored by men, whether they were government officials, corporate spokesmen, environmental activists, scientists, attorneys, or members of our own groups."



“She may look like somebody’s granny to you, but she was instrumental in putting a \$4-billion nuclear power plant in the deep freeze.”

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP: OBSTACLES AND SOLUTIONS

OBSTACLES:

Lack of recognition. A man in a national environmental organization, when asked why there were so many women leaders in the toxics issue, responded, “It’s because they don’t have anything else to do.”

A woman involved in negotiations over Superfund legislation had been tracking one item in the bill. She shared information with a coalition of groups to help them monitor the bill’s progress. When it came to the final negotiations with Congressmen, she was not invited to the meetings, even though she had done all of the work.

Grassroots leaders, women and men, face disdain from people who think only professionals are legitimate spokespersons. When awards were given out at a statewide conference for outstanding work in toxics, a key woman was passed over because “she’s not doing it for money.”

SOLUTIONS:

Sometimes women aren’t as concerned about who gets credit, as long as the job gets done. Nevertheless, for the sake of other women in the movement—and for our own dignity—it is important for women to claim credit for their accomplishments, especially if others have unrightfully taken credit at our expense.

Women are more likely to acknowledge other people’s contributions--to share the fruits of victory--or to say that a victory was won because of the efforts of the group as a whole, not just the leader’s efforts.

When men take credit for ideas that women have presented earlier, don’t let the situation stand uncorrected. Tactfully, but clearly, point out where credit is due for the idea.

OBSTACLES:

Our emotions. There are times when emotions get the best of us. Sometimes when we get angry or start crying at a meeting, we put ourselves at a disadvantage. How can you get back in control in order to get your point across?

SOLUTIONS:

Don’t feel embarrassed. Remember, you’re only showing that you care deeply about the situation.

Stop. Take some deep breaths.

Have breath mints or hard candy handy. They help relax the vocal chords and generate saliva in your mouth.

Since many meetings have time allotments for speakers, ask that your time be stopped until you can continue. They will be hard pressed to deny a weeping woman a chance to gain control of herself. This also gives you time to get your thoughts in order.

OBSTACLES:

Male chauvinism. Some men are threatened by women’s abilities and do not want to give up power. One woman with extensive knowledge of groundwater problems in her area was asked to brief a young man on the issue so that he could participate on a local TV talk show. Some men still want women to act in traditional ways—to fit into traditional roles (the secretary, the cook, the maid). These men tend to treat women leaders as “the little woman,” “ladies,” “envelope stuffers.” At meetings, women are expected to make coffee, serve refreshments, take minutes. It’s important to educate men, to get them out of that mindset, so they look upon women leaders as equals.

Other common examples of discrimination that women have experienced in their fight include:

- Agency officials will not make eye contact with you when speaking.
- Ministers, particularly older ministers in rural areas, respond to women's activism by saying, "You need to be bedded down."
- A man in your own group makes a point and gets listened to, even though a woman has made the same point 20 minutes before.
- You have nothing else to do. Make coffee, stuff envelopes, while we attend the press conference.

SOLUTIONS:

Don't serve refreshments at meetings or make sure everyone takes turns bringing them. Encourage men to buy cookies or snacks if they won't make them themselves.

Rotate the responsibility for minute-taking at meetings.

Have workshops on sexism in your organization for men and women.

Do role playing with men you can trust, to learn how to deal with men and stand up to them.

If all that fails, let men know that their behavior is not acceptable. Tell them to leave.

OBSTACLES:

Intimidation. Once women have the ball rolling, men may want them to turn over the leadership. Sometimes it can get very ugly. Men can be very intimidating, even physically threatening.

SOLUTIONS:

Take a self-defense course to feel more secure. Threaten them back, verbally. Make the intimidation threat public by informing the police and the press. Once you make their threat public, if anything should happen to you they will be the immediate suspect. At this point, they will probably go to great lengths to make sure nothing does happen to you. Intimidation only works if one gets intimidated.

OBSTACLES:

Equal time for speaking at group meetings. Some women have a hard time gaining the floor in order to speak at group meetings.

SOLUTIONS:

Set up rules that ensure equal time for women to speak, such as: Every time a man speaks, a woman is also given an opportunity to speak; or everyone is given an opportunity to speak on an issue. Give every person 3 coins. Each time someone speaks they toss in a coin. When you're out of coins you must keep quiet.

OBSTACLES:

Jealousy/ Sexual Tension. Sometimes men in the group will come on to the women. Sometimes we're not only dealing with a man in the group, but also his wife. Some wives are threatened by their husband's involvement in a group where women are key players. Jealousy can be a problem.

SOLUTIONS:

Stay professional and businesslike, so that your actions aren't misinterpreted. Be open with the wives. Give them information about the group. Try to involve them in the group.

OBSTACLES:

Government and industry officials. Women are frequently ignored by male politicians, male government officials, corporate spokesmen, male professionals.

SOLUTIONS:

Have the men in your group be alerted that they may need to remind your adversaries to listen to the women. In other words, have the men in your group support the women. For example, Joe in your group says to the company official, "Mary has just made an important point." But then, after repeating Mary's point, Joe should step back, let Mary continue, and not take over for her.

Do role playing with the men in your group on how to deal with government and industry officials to

develop confidence in women to assert themselves more.

Have an assertiveness training workshop in your group.

When you're being ignored or patronized by officials, refer to them by their role. Call them Mr. Chemical Company, Mr. Health Dept., etc. It puts them off guard, and it's very difficult to ignore. Further, turn labels that are used against you to your advantage. For example, make up signs or T-shirts that say "Hysterical Housewives" or "Country Bumpkins" and bring them to meetings with the opposition.

STRENGTHS OF WOMEN LEADERS

As you can see from the solutions we've created for ourselves, there are many strengths we, as women, have as leaders. Here are a few highlights.

- Despite men's attempts to portray women activists as "hysterical housewives," women have quite effectively used their role as mothers symbolically in the media.
- One of the keys to an effective community group is shared leadership which enables all members to contribute and feel ownership in the goals the group is trying to reach. Most women are more likely to look for the contribution that each group member can make and to encourage full participation than are men. Women are more likely to recognize the importance of helping members through difficult times. Women leaders have found that many men are quicker to criticize other people in order to put themselves forward. Women have learned to make points firmly, in an assertive manner, and to offer constructive comments, rather than aggressively put other people down.
- Women are frequently criticized for being too "emotional." What's really so bad about showing your feelings? Emotions and intellect are not conflicting traits. In fact, emotions may well be the quality that makes women so effective in this movement. They propel us forward. They remind us why we're in this fight. They help us speak the truth. Ralph Nader said: "It's when emotions and intellect come together that one achieves true leadership."
- Women trust their intuition and act on gut feelings. There are times when emotions can be very powerful in helping us make dramatic statements at public hearings, press conferences, meetings with corporate spokesmen and government officials, etc.
- You can't act on an emotional level all the time, however. It's important to know your stuff, to recite the facts, calmly. Doing that sometimes throws the officials off. Then they're the ones who respond emotionally. They lose it. They get on the defensive.



Chapter 7

Personal Growth

All of our lives we are taught to believe certain things about ourselves as women, about democracy and justice, and about people in positions of authority. Once we become involved with a toxic waste problem, we need to confront some of our old beliefs and change the way we view things. In the process, we're doing things we never dreamed we'd do.

Taking on the government and the polluters. We are up against the largest corporations in the U.S. They have tons of money to lobby, pay off, bribe, cajole, and buy influence. They harass us. They tap our phones. They threaten us. Yet we challenge them with the only things we have—people and the truth. We learn that our government is not out to protect our rights, strange as it may seem. Government officials lie to us, so we have to confront them. When we were growing up we were taught to be ladies and not raise our voices. To protect our family we are now forced to picket, protest, and shout.

Taking on the experts. We have to gain an enormous amount of education in a short time. We may have taken some basic science in high school way back, but suddenly we're confronted with technical reports from many fields: epidemiology, toxicology, hazard-

ous waste disposal technologies, law, you name it! We're insecure challenging the authority of university trained experts, but we also have a title of authority: "MOTHER!"

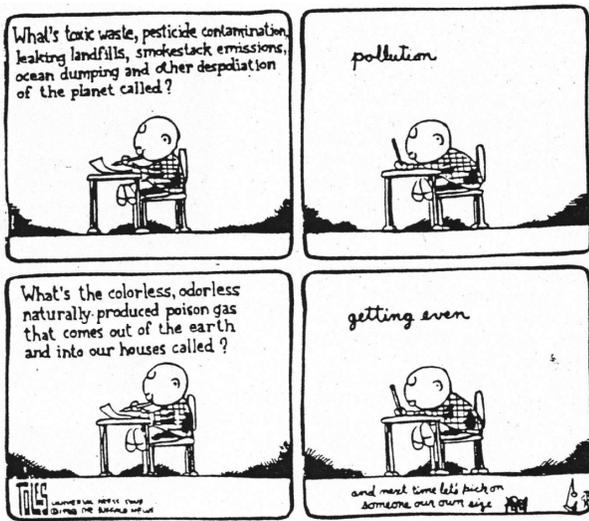
Becoming a public speaker. Public speaking is the #1 fear of most Americans. Many of us were shy and lacked self-confidence before we got involved in the environmental justice movement. Because this issue brought a crisis into our homes and our communities we had to speak out. We are speaking out at hearings and calling press conferences.

Losing anonymity. You wake up one Sunday to find you're on the front page of the newspaper. The press and the opposition tag you as the sole spokesperson, even though you've referred them to other people in your group. We are becoming symbols, whether or not we want to be one, which leads to a loss of anonymity.

Being THE LEADER. You're the one who's supposed to have it all figured out. The one everyone else turns to. Who do we turn to for role models? We set up high expectations for ourselves. We feel we have to solve everything, every day. We also set up high

expectations for others in the group. When they don't meet our standards, we feel resentful and frustrated.

Changing our world views. Our thinking about the world changes as a result of our negative experiences with the government and industry. We see how corporate influence is used by the government against the health of the people, and we see injustice being done in other parts of society. As a result, we may think about and take on other issues that we haven't been socialized to deal with—like racism and sexism. As a result, we may no longer have things in common with some friends, neighbors, family members, as we once did. We may find ourselves feeling very alone and having to make a new set of friends. But the disillusionment we experience leads us to empowerment as we become members of the social justice movement for environment rights.



MAINTAINING YOUR MARRIAGE

For some women, the experience of being actively involved in their organization and taking a leadership role may profoundly alter their views about the world and their behavior with friends and loved ones. As women grow and change, their men have various reactions. Some husbands are actively supportive. Some take no stand: “Go ahead and do what you want. Just make sure you have dinner on the table and my shirts washed.” Other husbands forbid time away from the

family. Some spouses have taken to alcohol abuse, some have left the family, and some have divorced “this woman who is not the same woman I married.” Thus, it's important to address how women's changing roles, ideas, and behavior affect their relationships at home.

Here are some ideas about how to keep marital relationships together while involved in our fight:

- Communicate openly with your spouse about the changes you are experiencing.
- Be aware that some of the stress and emotional reactions you and/or your husband

may be experiencing may be a direct response to chemical exposures. You may want to try professional counseling and set up educational programs, form support groups, to help understand the effects of these exposures on the body and on emotions, and what to do about them.

Sometimes marriages cannot withstand these profound changes. Husbands and wives may need to accept that separation or divorce may be the best course of action for the family. Professional counseling or support groups may be helpful in getting through difficult transition periods.

Groups lose women whose husbands hold them back.

What to do if your man is resistant to your involvement in the group:

- Hook your husband up with the men in your group so he can get insight on what you're doing from another man.
- Find a connection between his interests and the issue. For example, if he likes computers, maybe he'll get interested in developing a program to manage data in your organization.
- Try to have your spouse get other men from the community involved in the group.

Even spouses who are generally supportive of their wives' involvement in the organization are unsure of how much time their wives should give up:

- Plan your schedules together, so that you maximize your time together and that your work does not conflict with important family events.
- Try to find ways to divide up some of the responsibilities (cooking, household tasks, child care) among you, your spouse, and older children.

The husband or other family members may be employed by the polluter. If that's the case:

- Let those group members do quiet, behind-the-scenes work (such as mailings, research, etc.).
- Keep their names out of the limelight.
- Make sure they know that you understand their situation so that they don't feel guilty about keeping quiet.



FOR BETTER OR FOR WORSE BY LYNN JOHNSTON





Chapter 8

Organizational Development

How do we prepare ourselves to win the fight that we're engaged in? What do we need to know? What must we do? This chapter discusses how we as leaders and activists can grow, how our organizations can function better, how we as leaders can deal with the growing pains we experience, and how our organizations can work more efficiently.

MADELYN HOFFMAN

Madelyn helped organize a local citizens group in the Ironbound community of Newark, New Jersey, in 1980 when she discovered toxics illegally stored less than a mile from her home. She became the director of the Grass Roots Environmental Organization (GREO), which works with 100 citizens' groups statewide.

I've been involved in working on environmental issues for about seven years. It began back where I was living, in Newark, New Jersey. I first learned that there was a warehouse chocked full of illegally stored hazardous waste, explosives, and radioactive wastes, and that kind of thing. And shortly after that knowledge, the mayor of the city set up a task force that came up

with a list of another 12 sites in Newark that needed to be cleaned up immediately. And 10 of those were in the neighborhood where I was living. So all of a sudden, I was hit from a number of different sides with the knowledge that there was something potentially very dangerous in the community. That it wasn't just in one place. That most people in the community lived within a mile of something that could be affecting their health. And I realized that I was afraid. I wanted to do something about it. And I wanted to find out if there were other people in the community that wanted to do something about it.

We became involved in setting up a local organization called the Ironbound Committee Against Toxic Waste and through that process, we realized that what we were facing in our own hometown was not limited to our own hometown. It was spread throughout the state. And that we would need to reach out to other people and other parts of the state to help build a power base. To help expand our own power and our own community.

ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT: KEY LEARNINGS

Once a group gets started, it's likely to encounter many challenges to keeping it going. Here are some key elements for group survival and suggestions for making them happen:

Increasing Membership

Go door to door to recruit members. Personal contact can be very effective.

Write flyers, pamphlets, articles. Make sure the community knows what you're doing and how you're progressing.

Keeping the Membership Active

Identify simple tasks that can be broken down into many parts so that there's something for many members to do.

Find out any special skills that members have and utilize them.

Getting Members to Follow Through Once They've Said They'll Do Something

Rotating phone trees.

Make a buddy system for tasks. If people work in pairs, they feel less alone, and one is likely to prod the other to keep going.

Getting Out of the Doldrums When the Group Hits a Low Period

Have a party. Celebrate how far you've come.

Do the filing and other organizational maintenance items that there's no time for in the heat of battle.

Countering the Opposition's P.R.

Get to know the opposition from the Chairman of the Board on down.

Keep your literature simple and straightforward.

The slicker their pamphlet, the more bull is in it!

Working with Other Groups

Send one person to their meetings. Later you can call on them for help. When you attend another group's meeting, fan out. Don't sit together.

Chapter 9

Moving from a Local Grassroots Leader to a Full-time Organizer

LOIS MARIE GIBBS

Executive Director, CHEJ

When I first started out at Love Canal, I didn't know that what I was doing was called "organizing." We didn't use that term. We called it talking to people, getting them together, reaching a decision and taking action—for the survival of our children and ourselves.

Later, I discovered this was called "organizing" and that there was a "formula" for it you could learn through study or training, but mainly through experience. Even the most academic organizing trainer agrees experience is the best teacher.

For myself, I wasn't really sure whether our success at Love Canal was because we were very, very smart, had good instincts or were just lucky. As I thought about it, I decided as a "housewife" and mother, much of what I learned to keep the household running smoothly were skills that translated very well into this new thing called "organizing." I also decided that this training in running a home was one of the key reasons why so many of the best leaders in the Toxics Movement—in fact the overwhelming

majority—are women, and specifically women who are "housewives" and mothers.

When male organizers get together, it's almost like watching a meeting of a secret society. They have their own language and codes so they can determine who's part of the club and who isn't. They use language and terms some of us have come to learn: "cutting the issue," "actions," "hits," "targets," "strategy," "tactics," etc. Just when I thought I'd mastered the subtle differences between coalitions, alliances and federations, I listen to Citizen Action and Clean Water Action people talk about "formations," whatever those are.

In addition to their language, they have their own history and constantly tell stories about historical events in organizing, as well as stories about each other. Every meeting of these veteran organizers is filled with updates on who's doing what, who got fired, who got hired and, "Say, guess what ole Bill is doing now!"

And here we are, a new bunch of organizers, women who've had the kind of local experience that's led us to decide to make organizing our life's work. How do

we fit in? How do we take our experiences as local leaders in local fights and take the next step? Are we supposed to unlearn what we've learned? Change the way we've behaved in the past? Become something or someone different? Or are we a new type of organizer? If we ARE a new type of organizer, what are the rules that apply to us? What do we do next?

Organizing is a profession and it does have a history and a theory that we should study and learn. We would be foolish to deny ourselves the benefit of that history because to ignore it, we'd lose the benefit of avoiding past mistakes.

On one key point, a good organizer and a good leader behave the same way. An organizer must always have as a first goal and priority the task of empowering other people, of helping people develop their own skills and confidence to fight for themselves. So should any good leader. A good organizer and a good leader must both learn to set aside pride and ego and let other people come forward so that they learn and become empowered.

I think the main difference between a good organizer and a good leader is the DEGREE to which you stand aside and let others be up front. We all learned, as women in local fights, that we had to deal with the constant put-downs from men—whether they were friends or foes—who lacked respect for us in our fights just because we are women. Sometimes we had to deal with this by being even more assertive; sometimes we had to handle this problem by being less so, and getting others to do what men felt we were incapable of doing.

This common experience we have had is generally helpful as we make that transition from local leadership to full-time, long-term organizing. Male organizers tell me one of the first things a professional organizer has to learn, in order to be a good one, is how to suppress pride and ego and let others do it. Well, most of us have learned to do this very well! It's when we feel the other emotion—that is, the need to rise to the challenge of the put-downs and prove ourselves—that we “break” the classic rules of organizing.

Another common experience we've had as local leaders is the way we've learned to be totally focused on winning the fight. Because so much is at stake in these fights (our kids, families, homes), we act according to what Will Collette calls the “Ya Gotta Do What Ya Gotta Do” rule. A trained, professional organizer will let people fail, if by failing they learn. A professional organizer places a higher value on building long-term, deep-seated community power, and sometimes LOSING a fight (but learning from it) is a way to build this power. Our experiences have been such that it's very hard, maybe even impossible, for us to accept this, even though, intellectually, we can see the logic in it.

In that, we often have the attitude of an “advocate” (a person who fights other people's causes for them). In organizing training, the difference between an organizer and advocate is shown by the different ways the organizer and the advocate value “winning the fight” versus “building the group.” The organizer and advocate would agree that the best outcome of an organizing effort is to win the fight AND build the group. They'd also agree that the worst outcome is to lose the fight AND hurt the group. But if given the choice between the two, the advocate would always place the higher value on winning the issue over building the group. The organizer would rather build the group than win the issue. We're organizers, not advocates, but because of our experience, our attitudes on this key point are more like advocates than organizers.

I'm not sure this is something we need to “unlearn,” at least in this stage of the development of the Grassroots Movement Against Toxics. Nearly all of the groups in this movement are focused on winning their local fight. The movement is still too young for there to be a whole lot of groups that intend to stay together for the long-haul, or for a broad range of issues, beyond the local issue that brought the group together. This is starting to change, slowly, as more groups form state federations and as some local groups dig in for the long-haul. But for the vast majority of groups in the movement, the local fight is everything and for us to try to impose the formal rule

of organizing that we can sacrifice a local fight for the sake of long-range organizational development just won't wash, at least not right now.

Where this becomes a concrete problem is in those situations where local groups want us to step forward and “lead” a fight, rather than “organize” it. I have struggled with this for six years at CHEJ. On the one hand, I've learned that the “organizer” is almost always invisible, in the back of the room, out of sight, having done the work of “organizing” behind the scenes, preparing people to speak for themselves. After I learned this “rule,” I was uncomfortable with playing the up-front speaker role nearly every community that's ever invited me to come to visit wants me to play.

I took to heart the stories I heard from male organizers, that according to the classic rule of organizing, if you want to be an organizer, you never stand up front at a meeting or hearing and speak, and never get quoted in the newspaper, especially when there's a local leader around to speak.

After time, I developed my own rules. Yes, I will stand up and speak. After all, that's why people invited me. I don't “testify” at hearings; for me, that crosses the line within my rules. However, I will speak at meetings and rallies and I will talk to the media, but only according to the rule that I do it with local leaders, so that the news story is about their fight and how I support them, not about me and my experiences at Love Canal, which is what the reporters usually want to write about. When it happens that I talk to a reporter alone, because there is no local leader available, I try to be very disciplined about always talking about their local issue in such a way that the reporter has to deal with it.

At CHEJ, the main rule our staff follows is that you always put the highest priority on serving people's needs BUT you don't do for people what they can, should and must do for themselves. Our Field Organizers do pretty much what I do when they conduct site visits: they'll speak at rallies and meetings, do strategy meetings with local leaders and joint media interviews. In that sense, we've

“institutionalized” my new rule. But all of us are pretty tough and disciplined about building people's skill and confidence to fight for themselves.

We can't deny our history and experiences. We can't deny who we are and what we've become as we've evolved from our local work to making a long-term commitment to organize. There's nothing in this that should make us feel defensive. In fact, we should be proud, because we've made our decision to become organizers, not because it's a job and not out of some intellectual political agenda, but because we are committed to this work, heart and soul. Further, most of us have arrived at this point at an incredibly awful personal price to ourselves and our families, a price so high it would make most men go off screaming in the night!

What does it mean to be a professional organizer, especially our new kind of professional organizer? Dignity, respect and recognition is a large part of what we have a right to demand. Compensation is a feature, too. Many of us have been USED by larger organizations and institutions as though we were a “Poster Child.” Professional organizers, big organizations, use our names, our faces, our stories and our presence as though we were on display at “Show and Tell.” Many of us have had the experience of being brought out to show off to funders, to the media and at meetings and conferences. We tell our stories and pour our guts out but when it comes time to (a) make the decisions and (b) divide up the money and resources, it's as though we were never there. Even when our presence is acknowledged, we're treated like junior members of the team and our opinions are rarely respected.

At CHEJ, we have a principle that must never be violated by any staff member: the people who are directly affected by an issue or policy must make the decisions on what will be done about it. Since the Toxics Movement has women in the vast majority—as the leaders, as the members, as the people who do most of the work—women must be in the majority and in the dominant roles in making decisions. Anything less than that is a violation of basic

democratic principles.

In summary, I suggest the following guidelines for women who are making the transition from being a grassroots leader on a local fight to being a long-term, full-time professional organizer who will work on a broader range of issues:

- Be proud of what you learned in your local fight and use it. Don't apologize, organize!
- Study and learn from other movements. The Civil Rights, labor, environmental, welfare rights, anti-war, and women's movement all offer lessons on what works and what doesn't.
- Learn the classic rules of organizing. Read books (see Resources for suggestions), but remember, they aren't the last word on organizing. A good organizer draws from life experience and common sense.
- As your group grows and gains experience, you'll find that "A good organizer and a good leader behave the same way. An organizer must always have as a priority the task of empowering other people, of helping people develop their own skills and continue to fight for themselves. So should any good leader. A good organizer and a good leader must both learn to set aside pride and ego and let other people come forward so that they can learn and become empowered."
- Remember that as leaders, we became GOOD leaders when we helped others become leaders, too. Being an organizer is much like that, only with a strong emphasis on developing others as leaders and a lot less on developing ourselves as leaders. Instead, we must put more emphasis on developing our skills at helping others grow.
- We must not do for people what they can and should do for themselves. This, too, we learned as good leaders. As organizers, we simply do more of it.
- As leaders, we did more leading in helping people make decisions. As organizers, we should be more disciplined and restrained in helping people make

decisions. For example, we ask more questions: "What do you think about x?" rather than make statements like "I think we should do x."

- We have a right to respect, dignity, recognition and compensation from our male counterparts. We're going to have to keep fighting for that.



Chapter 10

It's Up To Us

THERESA FREEMAN

Vermonters Organized for Clean-up

Most of us developed because we had a site in our backyard. We started out as leaders. We talked to the media. We had problems with our family and our husband. We built community groups. We went to other communities. It's been kind of a track record we've set for ourselves, sort of paced ourselves in this growth and development. We have come through these experiences and somehow landed on our feet. And we have changed. When we try and find out who are our role models, it's been a little cloudy. And the reason that CHEJ sponsored this conference is because we are convinced that we are different. We're developing a new model of organizing. Women in the toxics issue is new stuff. We're winning. We're great. And we're powerful!

The work that we are doing in these communities cannot be matched. We are doing it. I am in awe of the work that we are doing. Nobody is doing it like we are!

Through CHEJ we've grown. CHEJ has been the vehicle to bring us where we are. I really feel it's time

for payback. It's time to pay back the training, the love, and the guidance we received from the CHEJ staff when we started out. The payback I'm talking about has to do with the commitment for you to go home and to build those statewide organizations in the communities around you. To become a spider. To reach out with those legs like a centipede. To consciously look for the leadership we need, people like us. To look for the funding to get those organizations going and keep them going. We are great leaders and organizers, and we are moving out!

I'm going to ask a lot. Because I need you. I need this to happen. I'm so tired of being alone and afraid. Feeling that I don't know what I'm doing; that I'm untrained; that I'm a seat-of-the-pants organizer; that I'm an hysterical housewife. I need to know that you're going to work as hard as I'm working for our movement. Organizing starts at home. It's not great all of the time, but it's fantastic some of the time.

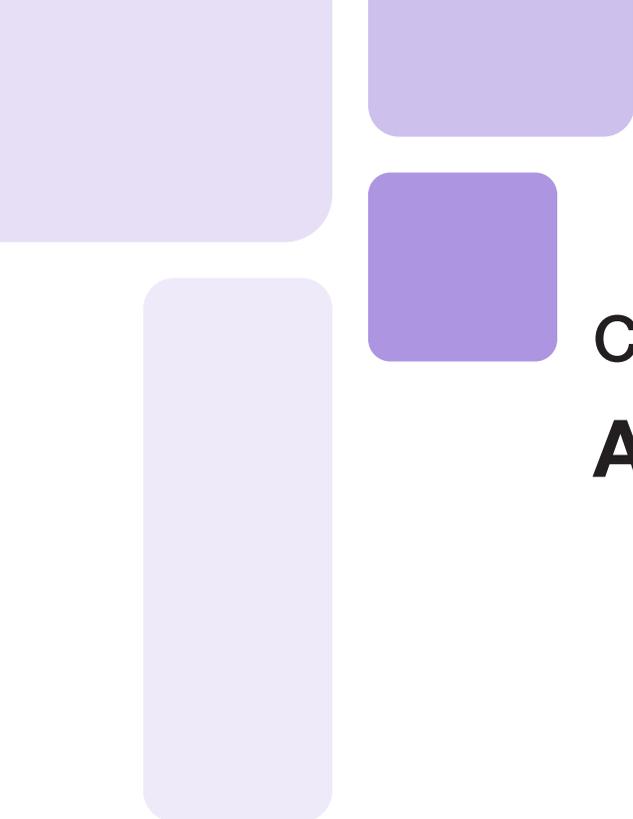
I'm asking you for 5 years. I'm asking you for 5 years of hard work. I'm asking you to quit your other paid job, whatever it is: the bank teller's job, the store job. I'm asking you to become an organizer, to work on this movement for 5 years. I'm asking you to find that

money to pay yourself to do it. I'm asking you to be brave enough to steal some of the money those other environmental groups are getting. We're the ones that should be paid, because we are the front line. I'm tired of knowing that our phone bills can't be paid; that we're not buying milk. That's not right. We need those big bucks. I'm asking you to go after that money.

I'm asking you to declare that your job is going to be as an organizer. You're going to get money to do this work and you're going to get paid for it. Organizing is a worthy profession. I'm willing, and CHEJ staff is willing, to do anything it takes to help you do that: finding funders, writing letters and grant proposals, setting up a tax-exempt status, whatever you need, we'll give it. We have to give to each other, because only through giving are we going to make this movement happen.

We are a movement, but nobody knows we're a movement. We're localized. I'd like to see us be able to unite this movement and do something. I'd like the commitment to get together and to work these things out, to make the damn thing happen. And in 5 years I'd venture to say we're going to be doing something great. It's up to us.





Chapter 11

Appendix

Women's History and Leadership

Cantarow, Ellen.

1980 Moving the Mountain: Women Working for Social Change. New York: The Feminist Press.

Evans, Sara.

1979 Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left. New York: Vintage Books.

Garland, Anne Witte.

1988 Women Activists: Challenging the Abuse of Power. New York: The Feminist Press.

Gibbs, Lois.

1982 Love Canal: My Story. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Gurko, Miriam.

1976 The Ladies of Seneca Falls: The Birth of Women's Rights Movement. New York: Schocken Books.

Schaef, Anne Wilson.

1985 Women's Reality: An Emerging Female System in a White Male Society. San Francisco: Harper & Row.

Wilson, Michael.

1978 Salt of the Earth. New York: The Feminist Press.

Organizing and Organizing History

Alinsky, Saul D.

1969 Reveille for Radicals. New York: Vintage Books.

1972 Rules for Radicals. New York: Vintage Books.

Evans, Sara, and Boyte, Harry.

1986 Free Spaces: The Sources of Democratic Change in America. New York: Harper and Row.

Lynd, Alice.

1973 Rank and File: Personal Histories by Working-Class Organizers. Boston: Beacon Press.

Piven, Frances Fox, and Cloward, Richard A.

1979 Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed. How They Fail. New York: Vintage Books.

Health

Legator, Marvin; Harper, Barbara; Scott, Michael.

1985 The Health Detective's Handbook. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. (701 West 40th St., Baltimore, MD 21211. \$14.95 prepaid).

Toxic Substance Control Commission.

No date Citizen's Guide for Community Health Studies. Lansing: State of Michigan. (State of Michigan, Ottawa Street Building, 3rd floor. PO Box 30028. Lansing, MI 48909. 517-373-1031 FREE)

Stress

Gibbs, Lois.

No date “Women and Burnout.” Arlington, Virginia: CHEJ.

1985 “The Impacts of Environmental Disasters on Communities.” Falls Church, Virginia: CHEJ.

“CHEJ is the strongest environmental organization today – the one that is making the greatest impact on changing the way our society does business.”

Ralph Nader

“CHEJ has been a pioneer nationally in alerting parents to the environmental hazards that can affect the health of their children.”

New York, New York

“Again, thank you for all that you do for us out here. I would have given up a long time ago if I had not connected with CHEJ!”

Claremont, New Hampshire



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