

Celebrating Success and Urging on Young Activists: Living Room Leadership with Jackie Young Medcalf



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In August of 2017, shortly after Hurricane Harvey hit, Jackie Young Medcalf parked her car outside of the San Jacinto River Waste Pits in Houston, Texas, waiting for EPA administrator Scott Pruitt to finish a damage survey. The security guard wouldn't let the young activist through the gates of the Superfund site, but she was determined to relay the concern of local residents. As Pruitt left the site, Jackie conveyed to him the urgent need for a full clean-up effort of the site, underscoring the damage from the hurricane and the continuing spread of contaminants into surrounding communities.

Pruitt promised Jackie that he would get the clean-up underway by mid-October. She told a reporter, "he has until that date to prove to me whether he's a man of his word or wasting my time." By October, Pruitt signed a record of decision for full remediation of the site. Jackie wonders what would have happened to the site had she not camped out outside the site that day, leaving Pruitt in conversation only with the corporate responsible parties. "It was a pivotal moment in my career," she recalls.

"Like Lois Gibbs, I'm an activist by accident," Jackie said in a Living Room Leadership interview CHEJ in July. She grew up with a slew of mysterious health problems, and soon a family member of hers fell seriously ill, too. She was studying environmental science and

geology in Houston and working on a project for her hydrology class when she discovered the root of their unsolved health problems: heavy metal contamination in their well water.

Jackie lived beside [San Jacinto River Waste Pits, a decades-old Superfund site](#) containing dioxin, heavy metals and PCBs from paper mill waste. Since the 1960s when a paper company first dug the pits into the banks of the San Jacinto River, highly toxic waste had migrated into the river. From there, migration and flooding during hurricanes and tropical storms spread the waste into the aquifer, residential wells, and residents' backyards. Climate change has increased the frequency and intensity of storms, speeding up this process.

After learning about the contamination, Jackie started attending local meetings with EPA officials, but grew outraged by the inaction she saw. So, in 2015, she founded the [Texas Health and Environment Alliance \(THEA\)](#), an advocacy group working to protect public health and water resources from the harmful effects of toxic waste in the Houston area. Through strategic science, media exposure, grassroots organizing and education, the group has led the fight for full remediation of San Jacinto River Waste Pits Superfund Site.

“We are creating the change we so desperately need.”

Jackie learned to have tough conversations even if they intimidated her. She learned to trust herself, because even when people in power denied it, she knew in her gut “it wasn’t chance that all these people got sick.” And when, after years of back and forth, the state health department finally studied the health of the local residents, they found fourteen types of cancer at statistically significantly higher rates than normal; she was right. Jackie learned to enter a room full of men in suits with confidence that she was supposed to be there. And she learned that there is a place for emotion *and* a place for facts in conveying your experience. Thanks to her organization’s efforts and her daring leadership, full remediation of the San Jacinto River Waste Pits has begun. THEA is actively involved in the clean-up efforts, working with EPA officials to ensure a safe and just process.

Visit <https://txhea.org> to learn more about THEA and their fight against environmental contamination in Houston.