



# Louisiana Environmental Justice Voices

Volume 1, Issue 3

November 2004

Louisiana Environmental Justice Project

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## “Down in the Parish: Way Down Cancer Alley”

by Joy Lewis

My name is Joy Lewis, living since 1955 in Chalmette, Louisiana.

After I raised my family and retired, I was looking forward to my Golden Years with my husband. Not so easy! Spending time outside my home sometimes is not very pleasant.

I thought the Department of Environmental Protection (DEQ) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) would protect our community and neighborhood from pollution.

After having a double oil refinery explosion and fire within minutes of one another, I realized how unsafe and unhealthy it was to live near a refinery. I knew then that I had a choice- to accept the

refineries as they are, or take the responsibility to change their pollution ways. I chose the latter.

Chalmette and Meroux refineries pollute our air as long as they are in operation. Finding evidence of excessive upsets that exceed accepted limits is very difficult. It's like catching a ghostly object. However, with the Bucket Brigade, it can be accomplished.

We experience cake dust on autos and vegetation, and at times it seems thick enough to chew in the air. Calling complaints to refineries have been in vain. Joining the St. Bernard Citizens for Environmental Quality LLC (SBCEQ), receiving

(see **Chalmette**, page 2)

## Fighting Pollution in St. Bernard Parish

by Elizabeth Miner, Louisiana Bucket Brigade

This year, the community of Chalmette in St. Bernard Parish is the main focus of the Louisiana Bucket Brigade's campaign for clean air and environmental justice.

According to the Louisiana Tumor Registry, St. Bernard Parish has the highest cancer mortality rate of any parish in Louisiana, with lung cancer rates above the statewide average by 22% among white males and 35% among white females.

Overall cancer rates are 35% higher in black males in St. Bernard Parish than they are in the rest of the state. The Exxon Mobil Refinery in Chalmette is the single largest source of carcinogens in the parish and experiences frequent accidental releases and violations of state and federal air quality regulations and screening levels. It is located right next to a densely populated neighborhood and an elementary school.

The Louisiana Bucket Brigade (LABB) is work-

ing alongside the St. Bernard Citizens for Environmental Quality (SBCEQ) to address pollution problems in the area. Kenneth Ford, Founder and President of

the SBCEQ, is retired from the Louisiana Air National Guard, and was appointed by the parish council to the St. Bernard Parish Coastal Zone Management Advisory Committee. He has been active on environmental matters in the parish since the 1970's and has earned great respect. Mr. Ford and his wife have lived in Chalmette for over 40 years. "I did develop cancer," says Ken. "I had my left lung completely removed on April 16, 2002. I've developed bladder cancer, so that makes two

(see **Bucket Brigade**, page 3)



*The Bucket in Action*  
(photo courtesy of LA Bucket Brigade)

**REMINDER:** Submit your articles & creative writing for the December Louisiana Environmental Justice Voices by **Monday, Dec. 5th!**

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assistance from the Louisiana Bucket Brigade and educating ourselves at the Sierra Club meetings have all helped us make positive moves toward cleaner parish air.

Now, we have an ongoing environmental lawsuit with one refinery and we have successfully met with refinery officials in a positive way. SBCEQ has monthly meetings. We have completed a local healthy symptom survey with forthcoming results for our community. The group has protested the Louisiana Tumor Registry's inconclusive, biased facts and we have protested in front of New Orleans City Hall, for which we received television recognition. My husband has attended an odor-testing school. We have also attended two press releases, organized coffee and tea neighborhood meetings, taken air quality samples and advised our friends and neighbors how to report upsets.

I thought my mission would be easy. Well it's not! The reason is our refineries are our parish's largest private employer. It's not easy for our friends and family to talk about our cancer. As I have advocated in the past, "Everybody want to get to heaven. Nobody wants to die." All of us

want clean air, but so few can step up to the plate with today's demands and responsibilities. I believe that DEQ should be accountable for us that live in "Cancer Alley," or "the least healthy State of the union," or the "Parish with the highest tumor rate."

I do not believe that citizens have to file suit with oil refineries to get clean air in our parish. I paid my taxes and expect DEQ to clean up this mess so I can begin to enjoy my family and retirement.

I am thankful and grateful for the help and consideration that have been given to those of us who ask for help with our parish air.

I cannot understand how our government allowed such an awful environmental situation exist. One would believe that our environmental agencies are ignorant or prejudice.

I will continue to help clean up our air in St. Bernard Parish, even if it's one bucket at a time.

*In their November 1st issue, the Louisiana Weekly featured a piece on Joy's struggle, titled "Cause for Concern."*

## Local Activist Travels Coast to Coast

Local, lifelong activist and award-winner Margie Richard has been very busy lately, traveling across the country to speak out for Environmental Justice. During the month of October, Margie spoke at a number of events on both US coasts.

Margie first spoke to a number of Environmental Sociology and Environmental Justice classes at the University of Vermont. She then traveled to Drexel University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania where she spoke of the need to have more studies and research on environmental health issues related to environmental justice.

Next, Margie climbed aboard a jet to the West Coast where she spoke at three events. The first affair was in San Francisco at the Christy Field Center. The Center helps young people to develop and inspires them to be emerging leaders. Here she spoke about becoming an activist and leader in a

community struggle. She then traveled to Fresno to be part of a roundtable discussion at a meeting of the Commonwealth Leaders group. The discussion topic was "What is to become a leader and an activist?" Her final stop was at the National Environmental Law Conference near Yosemite, California, where she spoke on reasons to protect the environment.

Earlier this year, Margie was awarded the Goldman Environmental Prize for her activism. She was also listed in the top 50 environmentalists in America by the *Organic Style* magazine. Margie is best known for the landmark victory of her 14-year struggle against Shell Chemical in Norco, LA.

Ms. Richard is willing to work with groups. Please send her a letter and tell her how she can help your group: Margie Richard, Truth Community Outreach, 33 Edgewood Dr, Destran, LA.

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## Bucket Brigade (Cont from page 1)

separate and different kinds of cancer...it was a very traumatic experience. I think of all the children that go to school there right behind me, and the possibility that these children are going to be in my same position."

### Air Monitoring

The Louisiana Bucket Brigade has trained the St. Bernard Citizens for Environmental Quality to take air samples using the simple and community-friendly Buckets. So far they have taken 21 air samples over an 18-month period, exposing and documenting 101 violations of state and federal standards and health screening levels. Benzene (carcinogen), sulfur dioxide (respiratory irritant), toluene and xylene (developmental toxins), and hydrogen sulfide are detected in nearly every sample. This is powerful evidence, which the community has not previously had, about the toxins they are being exposed to.

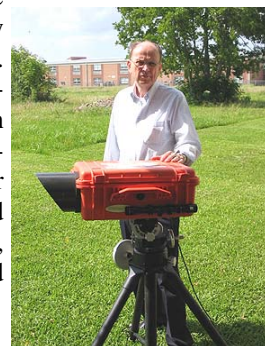
The next step is to demonstrate how much more industry and regulatory agencies *could* be doing to keep people safe. We brought the high technology Cerex Open Path Air Monitor to Chalmette to gather continuous, real-time data on pollution levels in the neighborhood. In Ken Ford's back yard, we showcased the Cerex *UV Sentry* monitor and the more mobile *Hound* model to Parish officials, while documenting high levels of sulfur dioxide, a known respiratory irritant that contributes to asthma and bronchitis. Parish government has since taken an interest in purchasing the monitors and running them continuously in Chalmette, a major step that the Bucket Brigade is encouraging and facilitating by bringing the equipment back to St. Bernard Parish from February to April.

### Health Survey

Another important link in the chain connecting pollution to health problems involves researching disease rates in polluted communities and then comparing them to comparable communities without polluting industry.

In the summer of 2004, Tulane graduate student Casey Roberts collaborated with the LABB,

Dr. Orris, and SBCEQ to conduct the St. Bernard Parish Health Symptom Survey in Chalmette. Community members chose the questions in the health symptom survey and will also carry out much of the research, as well as be involved in the decisions about how to use the results. The survey asked about symptoms. The questions were correlated to the known health effects of chemicals detected by residents in their air samples, and included difficulty breathing, coughing, headaches and miscarriages.



Ken Ford with the Cerex Open Path Monitor (photo courtesy of the LABB)

The results of the survey, which are still being analyzed, show that the Chalmette community suffers from many of the symptoms of chemical exposure at rates much higher than the general population. For the first time ever, the community has evidence of health harm.

### Law Suit

The Louisiana Bucket Brigade filed a joint lawsuit with the St. Bernard Citizens for Environmental Quality against ExxonMobil in Chalmette, which is ongoing. In October we beat back Exxon's attempt to stop or delay the law suit. Our student attorney Clay Garside eloquently told the judge, "Mr. Ford has only one lung, how long can he wait?" The suit will require continual and intensive organizing, media work and a campaign to educate Chalmette residents that forcing Exxon Mobil to clean up does not mean we want them to shut down and end people's jobs.

Slowly but surely, progress is being made in Chalmette to hold Exxon Mobil accountable for their pollution, and also to build a model for grassroots activism that can be applied in fence-line communities throughout the country.

For more information, visit [www.labucketbrigade.org/communities/Chalmette](http://www.labucketbrigade.org/communities/Chalmette).

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environmental\\_justice](http://www.sierraclub.org/environmental_justice)



## UPCOMING EVENTS

### Sierra Club– New Orleans Group Holiday Supper

Celebrate the season with the Sierra Club-New Orleans Group Holiday Pot-Luck Supper on **Sunday, Dec. 12th** at the Carrollton United Church (at the corner of Carrollton and Freret). RSVP to Darryl Malek-Wiley, 504-865-8708.

### Join the Sierra Club for Lunch!

The Sierra Club– Baton Rouge office invites all environmentally minded folks to join us for our monthly brown bag lunch. The next lunch will be on **Dec. 14th**. Please RSVP to [mara.cohen@sierraclub.org](mailto:mara.cohen@sierraclub.org) or 225-925-8650.

*If there is no struggle there is no progress ... This struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, and it may be both moral and physical, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will. Find out just what any people will quietly submit to and you have found out the exact measure of injustice and wrong which will be imposed upon them, and these will continue till they are resisted with either words or blows, or with both.*

—Frederick Douglass  
August 3, 1857  
Speech in Canandaigua, New York

## EJ News– 30th Anniversary of Bhopal

Friday, December 3rd marks the anniversary of one of the worst industrial accidents in world history. Twenty years ago on this day, a Union Carbide chemical plant in Bhopal, India, leaked more than 27 tons of poisonous gas into the air, immediately killing 8,000 people and harming many more. Today 20,000 deaths have been attributed to this disaster and the survivors are still looking for retribution. In 2001, Dow Chemical merged with Union Carbide, but denies any responsibility for the tragedy and refuses to clean up the mess of contamination that the event has left.

Two Bhopal activists, Rashida Bee and Champa Devi Shukla, received the Goldman Environmental Prize this year for their “courage and tenacity [which] have galvanized the grassroots in their own country and abroad.” They have been working hard to hold chemical companies accountable for the gas leak and its fatal effects by organizing rallies and hunger-strikes and have also filed suit against Union Carbide. “A woman’s life involves discarding relationships that she has known from infancy and adopting strangers as her own,” said Bee on [goldmanprize.org](http://goldmanprize.org), referring to the cultural tradition of brides leaving their families to marry into those of their husbands. “If she can face the world outside at such a fundamental level, then why should any other struggle for empowerment scare her?”

**WEBSITE OF THE MONTH**  
[www.bhopal.net](http://www.bhopal.net)