



The Sustainable Campus

The Newsletter of the Berea College

Sustainability and Environmental Studies Program

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Environmental Justice at Berea College

By Richard Olson

Environmental justice is the right of all people to their basic needs: clean water, healthy food, non-toxic communities, open space, safe energy, and equitable educational and job opportunities.

Environmental justice begins with the belief that a healthy economy depends on a healthy environment.

Berea College with its motto "God has made of one blood all peoples of the earth" and its commitments to service and sustainability has a strong ethical foundation, and an equally strong obligation, to promote environmental justice. Promotion, however, must go beyond teaching about environmental injustice to acting in a manner supportive of justice, and in assisting students, faculty and staff to do the same in their lives outside the institution.

Most of us would recognize the destruction of the Niger River Delta for oil, the razing of Appalachian mountains for coal, the pollution of "Cancer Alley" in Louisiana by chemical factories, and the exploitation of children in sweatshops as environmental injustices. Yet, as an institution and as individuals, we buy these products, invest in these companies, and are often silent on these issues in the political process. Justice requires that we do better.

This issue of *The Sustainable Campus* tells the stories of a group of environmental justice activists who came to Berea this fall to educate and sound a call to action. Their passion and

sacrifices are an inspiration to us to translate our values more fully into right actions, without which there can be no justice.

"How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action." -1 John 3:17-18

Richard Olson is the director of the Berea College Sustainability and Environmental Studies Program.

Campus-Wide Symposium Highlights Environmental Justice

This year, Berea's College-Wide Symposium tackled the issue of environmental justice, emphasizing the connection between human health and environmental well-being. Held on November 2, 2006, *Environmental Justice: Transforming Values into Action* presented 400 Berea students, staff and faculty with the struggles and successes of environmental justice activists and grassroots leaders Margie Richard, Jennifer Osha and Craig Williams.

Margie Richard is an activist whose work has hit close to home—a home 25 feet from a chemical plant in the neighborhood of Old Diamond in Norco, Louisiana.

Diamond, a historically black community of four square blocks located on the fence line of a Shell Chemicals plant, suffered unusually high levels of disease with more than a third of the

children in Old Diamond experiencing asthma or bronchitis.

Sarcoidosis, a rare bacterial infection which typically affects one in a thousand people, claimed the life of Richard's sister Naomi at the age of 43. At least three other members of the Norco community have also been afflicted with this disease, a much higher incidence than is normal. In addition, a Shell pipeline explosion in 1973 destroyed one home and killed an elderly woman and a teenage boy. Together, these events set Margie Richard on the path of activism.



Richard accepting the Goldman Prize in 2004.

In 1989, Richard founded Concerned Citizens of Norco, a grassroots community organization seeking justice from Shell—fair resettlement costs for the Old Diamond community. During the course of 13 years, Concerned Citizens of Norco rallied the community and helped expose the Shell facilities' practices.

A report produced by environmentalists and researchers

Continued on Page 3

Berea Students Visit Louisville's "Rubbertown"

By Eli Wright

Upon arrival at Rubbertown, you see the normal sights and sounds of an urban neighborhood--people on their front porches talking, kids playing in parks, and daycare centers every few blocks. But just around the corner from these ordinary scenes, the skyline is dominated by smokestacks and the air is filled with the smell of paint thinner and bleach. These sights and smells are why REACT (Rubbertown Emergency

ACTion) and other grassroots citizens groups are fighting for stronger legislation protecting air quality, enforcement of current environmental laws, and an informed and proactive public in the communities surrounding Rubbertown.

Rubbertown is the nickname of the area in Louisville, Kentucky where a group of 11 chemical plants operate. According to REACT's website, elementary school children are exposed to unsafe levels of several known carcinogens including vinyl chloride, 1,3-butadiene and acrylonitrile. Air samples taken by a citizen-led "Bucket Brigade" from neighborhoods near the plants have revealed toxin levels 540 times greater than the established EPA guidelines. Some of these toxins are believed to be linked to the increased rate of cancer and lung disease in Rubbertown residents.



A group of six Berea College students organized by Berea Bonner Scholar Ken Johnson attended the Urban Witness Tour of the Rubbertown district held from September 29 to October 1, and sponsored by REACT and Kentuckians for the Commonwealth (KFTC). The tour was a stop for the Environmental Justice Tour Bus that came through Berea on

September 29th. When asked why he decided to organize this trip, Johnson replied, "I'm from another part of Louisville, but have asthma and think it may be related to the air quality in the area. The more people who know about this problem and do something, the better chance we have to fix it."

The first part of the tour was a dialogue with Rubbertown residents held in a church's fellowship hall in the center of Rubbertown. Residents shared heartfelt stories of loved ones lost to cancer and lung disease, and expressed concerns for future generations and the hardships of current health problems.

Afterward, participants got a chance to be part of the solution by taking part in a door-to-door informational campaign, which was focused on informing Rubbertown residents what they could do about the air quality in their neighborhoods and encouraging them to register to vote.

Tour participants from across Kentucky and the mid-eastern United States came together to learn about and fight for the rights of Rubbertown residents. Beth Coleman, a Berea Political Science major, said she attended because "I am hoping to get involved in getting urban issues into public policy throughout Kentucky. I know a good deal about the troubles faced in the eastern part of the state since I am from that region, but I wanted to gain a perspective of the problems in western Kentucky to be more effective for all Kentuckians."

Other participants represented a vast array of activist groups ranging from church groups to an environmental musician coalition. When asked what the biggest thing that she took away from the weekend was, Berea student Brandie Wagers, a Theater and Communication double major, said, "I really gained a respect for how people from so many different organizations could come together and make a difference without any one group trying to push their own agenda on the rest."

Eli Wright is a sophomore SENS student director.

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Campus-Wide Symposium...

(Cont. from page 1)

revealed that the Shell refinery in Norco released over 2 million pounds of toxic chemicals each year. Old Diamond community members formed “bucket brigades” to test their air quality and monitor hazardous air pollutants. Finally, in 2000, Shell agreed to relocate all four streets of the Diamond community. Since then, 200 of the 225 lots have been purchased by Shell at fair market value

Margie Richard’s struggles illustrate the disproportionate environmental impacts suffered by African-Americans and other communities of color. Concerned Citizens of Norco has developed a form of activism that combines environmentalism with civil rights. For her efforts, Richard received the Goldman Environmental Prize for North America in 2004, becoming the first African-American to receive the award. In talking about her struggles, Richard gave inspiration to the symposium attendees, urging them to stand up and become involved. “Don’t dwell on the past and say that nothing can be done. Take what happened in the past and move forward.” (For more information on Margie Richard’s work in Norco, check out the film “Fenceline” from Log In Productions.)

Following Richard’s talk, Jennifer Osha, an activist, teacher, mother, and singer, discussed mountaintop removal mining in Appalachia. She has been working on the issue in her home state of West Virginia for six years, supporting education and activism. Coming from a family of coal miners, and as the first generation to be raised outside of the mines, Osha is closely tied to the mountains and the people there.

Mountaintop removal is used by coal companies because it is the cheapest mining method. However, the price of mountaintop removal coal doesn’t include the forests and topsoil that are destroyed. It doesn’t take into account the destruction of mountains that

are blown up with explosives up to 100 times as strong as the ones that tore open the Oklahoma City federal building. It doesn’t reflect the millions of tons of “overburden” – the former mountaintops – which are pushed into the narrow adjacent valleys, thereby creating “valley fills” that permanently destroy the streams. The cost of mountaintop removal doesn’t include the 60% decline in employment rates since 1980 in eastern Kentucky alone.



Jennifer Osha

Osha’s activism began during her time at the Yale School of Forestry when activist Larry Gibson and former West Virginia Secretary of State Ken Hechler came to speak. The presentation moved her to tears. She spoke with Gibson afterward, letting him know that she wanted to come to West Virginia after graduation to join their work. Since then, Osha has worked as a professor, educating students on issues of environmental justice, as well as an activist. She currently works with Aurora Lights, which supports grassroots organizations and student projects of environmental justice.

Among Osha’s accomplishments is the production of (and performance in) the all-volunteer album “Moving Mountains: Voices of Appalachia Rise Up Against Mountaintop Removal Coal Mining,” a music and informational CD from Falling Mountain Music. Most of the proceeds from “Moving Mountains” support non-profit organizations for communities affected by mountaintop

removal.

Jen’s presentation also revealed the real-life struggles of Appalachians, from the destruction of their homes and surrounding environments to the rising poverty and economic difficulties brought on by mountaintop removal.

Chemical Weapons Working Group (CWWG) director Craig Williams concluded the presentations. Williams’ work with CWWG helped implement a water-based neutralization process at the Bluegrass Army Depot near Berea to dispose of the nerve gas held there, rather than the more hazardous incineration method, which was the original method proposed. CWWG and Williams continue to work with communities near other incineration sites, advocating for human rights and working to implement safer disposal technologies. (For more on Craig and CWWG, see page 4.)



Craig Williams

Afterward, the three speakers held a question and answer session. This dialogue reinforced the message of hope and change that Richard, Osha and Williams brought to students. One student asked whether real change on a large scale was possible in the face of threats such as global environmental damage and a rapidly growing world population. The overriding message of the presenters was best summed up by Craig Williams’ quick reply, “Hell yes.”

Hometown Hero Wins “Environmental Nobel”

By Wes Lowe

In April 2006, Craig Williams of Berea, Kentucky received the Goldman Environmental Prize for North America. The \$125,000 Goldman Prize, often compared to the Nobel Prize, is awarded every year to one grassroots environmental leader in each of the six inhabited continental regions: Africa, Asia, Europe, Islands and Island Nations, North America, and South and Central America. Williams received the prize for his work with the Chemical Weapons Working Group (CWWG) to find alternatives to incineration for disposal of the chemical weapons, such as those stored at the Bluegrass Army Depot outside of Berea.

A cabinetmaker by trade, Williams served as a translator in the Vietnam War.

After returning home, he began working with Vietnam Veterans Against the War, and would later help found the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation, one of the co-founders of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, which received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1997.

In 1985, the military announced plans to burn chemical weapons (mostly nerve gas) stored at the Bluegrass Army Depot. At a community meeting to discuss this issue, when the citizens were asked if they had any questions, Williams says “I put my hand up and I haven’t put it down since.”

Soon after that first meeting, community members organized the Chemical Weapons Working Group (CWWG) to reach out to other communities and change the Army’s decision. Sixteen years later, Williams sold his cabinetmaking business to become the director of CWWG, now a full-time nonprofit organization. After nearly two decades of struggle, the Army announced in early 2003 that safer alternative disposal methods would be used instead of incineration at some weapons sites including Bluegrass Depot.

Critical to the success of CWWG was a solution-oriented focus as opposed to merely protesting the military’s actions. Williams cites the CWWG’s credibility as due to their focus on solutions and on their research. Williams says “our cardinal rule is if you can’t back up what you say, then don’t say it.”



Craig Williams at Bluegrass Army Depot.

The CWWG argued for alternative disposal technologies, but no significant technical reports on the subject existed at the time. The group collaborated with the international scientific community to develop a credible proposal, a process which took three years. In the process of identifying safer disposal methods, private-sector companies were invited to submit plans for the disposal.

Each plan was judged on a set of criteria developed by all participants in the discussions including federal representatives, military officials, US EPA employees, and tribal representatives. The selection criteria included cost, speed, environmental impacts, and many others, and a score was assigned to each point. After several rounds of judging, the best proposal was determined: a neutralization process followed by super critical water oxidation (SCWO). This process separates the chemical agents from the explosives in the weapons, and mixes each with a neutralizing agent, which reduces their toxicity. Next, the SCWO process further decomposes and detoxifies the waste products of the weapons, reducing them to their elemental components. The resulting non-toxic wastewater is re-used in the

SCWO process.

Though this process does produce hazardous materials such as heavy metals that will need to be landfilled, the process is much less hazardous than incineration. Even the bomb casings are stripped and recycled.

The long and complicated task of developing a safe disposal method took about five years to complete and was fraught with difficulty. Numerous leaked military documents obtained by the CWWG revealed corruption and blatant disregard for Congressional decisions. One document, actually titled “The Pot of Gold,” exposed a misappropriation of the budget intended for reviewing the proposed alternative technologies. While the Army Comptroller’s office claimed that no money remained for testing three of the six possible technologies, the leaked memo revealed that more than \$6 million had been distributed to other military spending programs to make it appear as if there were no funds available.

Another leaked document was an internal evaluation of the incineration process, which showed that representations made by military agencies to media, citizens and Congress were knowingly fraudulent. The CWWG convinced Congress to hold a hearing on the issue at which military officials admitted using the false data, followed by Williams revealing the leaked document, showing Congress that they “have been lied to on every account.” A Congressional research team later validated the CWWG’s claims. Since then, Williams says, “the Army has had a much more difficult time misrepresenting the process.”

The mission of the CWWG, as Williams puts it, is essentially based on human rights. CWWG supports the intrinsic rights of human beings to live in a toxin-free environment and states that military groups and corporations do not have

Continued on Page 5

Hometown Hero... (Cont. from pg 4)

the right to place such a burden on citizens. "Organizations should not dictate what's acceptable; society should direct those entities," Williams says.

He sees legitimate activist communities as the ones who fight for the rights of society at large. The common thread in Williams' work, from Vietnam Veterans for America to CWWG, is "the fundamental belief that individuals and communities have certain rights that should not be trampled on by bureaucratic decisions, corporate polluters, and the military." Activists such as Williams are a vital component of society, and he gives advice to the activist community: "If you are motivated by justice and fairness and equality, then you can achieve your goals."

Wes Lowe is a junior SENS student director.

Nationwide Environmental Justice Tour Visits Berea

On September 29, 2006, the Environmental Justice for All Tour arrived at Berea College. This significant event helped solidify the college's role in the environmental justice movement as well as provide students, staff, faculty and Berea residents with the opportunity to learn more about environmental justice and the struggles that people around the country have endured.

The environmental justice movement includes the struggle against the injustices often visited upon communities of color or lower economic status by industries sited in peoples' neighborhoods, often literally right in their backyards. Noise, foul odors and serious long-term health effects are among the consequences suffered by neighbors of the industries, which have often been unresponsive to citizen complaints.

The Environmental Justice for All bus tour resulted from a meeting of environmental health groups and individuals from Los Angeles, Louisville (Kentucky), New York, Mossville (Louisiana), New Orleans, and Texas,

who gathered in Louisville in May, 2004, to support the grassroots work to improve air quality in Louisville's "Rubbertown", (see page 2). In June of 2004, the Louisville Metro Council passed a Toxic Air Pollution Reduction Plan, as well as the Strategic Toxic Air Reduction (STAR) program, the strongest of its kind in the country. The Environmental Justice for All tour was conceived as a way to build on this success by sharing the lessons learned with other environmental justice groups.

The first speaker at the Berea tour stop was Hilton Kelley, former Screen Actor's Guild

actor/stuntman and founder of Community In-Power Development Association (CIDA). In 2000, Kelley returned to his hometown of Port Arthur, Texas, and was appalled at the condition of the community. To help the youth of Westside, the African-American community of Port Arthur, Kelley proposed building a community center, but was told it wasn't feasible because of industrial contamination. Shortly thereafter, Kelley founded CIDA to investigate the disproportionate incidence of asthma and premature deaths afflicting black residents of Port Arthur. Today, CIDA works to bring industries in the area to justice by exposing their violations of the Clean Water Act through the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality.

Next, Christine and Delma Bennett discussed the struggles in Mossville, LA, an area with fourteen different chemical plants near residential areas. Christine recalls her childhood memories of the plants being beautiful, like a "city of industries." But as a child, Christine couldn't foresee that the industries would pollute Mossville beyond imagination. Mossville has higher concentrations of the highly toxic chemical dioxin than any other area in the United States. Mossville residents are instructed to "shelter in place," or simply remain in their

homes during chemical emissions from the plants' smoke stacks. This process offers little or no protection, as hazardous chemicals seep into homes while residents sit, oftentimes without air conditioning in the 90-plus degree Louisiana heat.



Environmental Justice Tour participants holding protest.

Delma is quick to point out the motive behind the environmental degradation—corporate interest. "You have to choose between the good life and living" he says. (And even the "good life" is elusive—very few local African-Americans are hired to work in these factories, a condition common in Port Arthur and other predominantly African-American communities affected by industry throughout the country.)

Delma also cites the lack of data on the cumulative or additive effects of such pollution. Information exists on each individual toxin, but nothing shows the effects of multiple chemicals allowed to mix in the air; "When these emissions meet in the air, what happens then?" Delma asks.

José Bravo, from California, then discussed environmental justice issues faced by Latino-Americans and indigenous peoples throughout the world. Originally from Mexico, the US-Mexico border is just a ten minute drive for Bravo.

Many Mexicans and Mexican-Americans face unfair, unhealthy work conditions and pollution, seemingly just by virtue of

Environmental Justice Tour...

(Cont. from Page 5)

their ethnic and economic background. To avoid US regulations, over 385 chemical plants operate on the Mexican side of the US-Mexico border. In Bravo's words, this is an example of "models of exploitation in colored communities exported out to other countries." Bravo went on to cite the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice report, *Toxic Wastes and Race*, which states that the greatest factor in deciding where refuse is dumped is the race of the community, followed by economic class. The report also states how lower-income communities have higher toxic chemical concentrations than rich communities.

Not bringing only bad news, Bravo's presentation also included possible solutions to the problems of pollution, including the Green Chemistry Movement, which works to reduce air pollution by using chemical reactions to render hazardous pollutants inert.

Bravo now works with the **Just Transition Alliance** (www.jtalliance.org), a voluntary coalition of labor, economic and environmental justice activists, indigenous people and working-class people of color, developed in 1996 to open dialog on community issues and help transform unhealthy or unsafe communities and workplaces into safer, more sustainable places.

Attorney Monique Harden, co-director of Advocates for Environmental Human Rights (AEHR),



Members of REACT (pg. 2) at Environmental Justice Tour press conference.

a non-profit public interest law firm, gave an impassioned speech on human rights and environmental justice. Three of the communities she has worked with have achieved their goals of keeping chemical plants from locating in their area. Prevention is the best cure, says Harden. In older communities like Mossville, the struggle is much more difficult because the industries are already established.

She pointed to a lack of enforcement of existing laws: industries are permitted to build dangerous facilities near homes because there isn't enough government enforcement or implementation of strict standards, causing a lack of real environmental protection in these low-income, predominantly minority communities. "You just don't do this to people" Harden exclaims, marking such actions as clear violations of intrinsic human rights.

AEHR works to find ways for such communities to help themselves, though, such as by finding flaws in permit applications for companies attempting to set up a plant in the area, or by delaying the permitting process. Oftentimes, Harden says, such actions can cause companies to give up their building plans.

Following the tour speakers Teri Blanton of Kentuckians for the Commonwealth (KFTC) spoke on environmental justice issues facing Appalachia, specifically the coal industry in eastern Kentucky and West Virginia. She described the chemical emissions of coal facilities and a lack of reporting—companies don't report their chemical use and aren't required to do so. Even when enforcement is attempted, many companies merely pay fines because it is less expensive and easier than cleaning up their facilities. As a result, poor communities in Appalachia suffer from increased rates of respiratory illnesses. Blanton puts education at the top of the list as a means for communities to overcome exploitation.

All of the Environmental Justice for All Tour speakers pointed to a common factor in the struggle against environmental injustice—that of community. In order for people to overcome systems of oppression, they must come together. Says Harden, "People can become involved within their communities...they need to coalesce around *something*."



On the Environmental Justice Tour bus.