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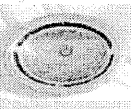
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March 2005

The Rosa Parks of the Environmental Justice Movement: Margie Richard

From her trailer in a small town in Louisiana, a retired schoolteacher took on the world's 10th largest corporation to save her community.

by Steve Lerner



Until four years ago, Margie Richard lived in a trailer smack on the fenceline with a giant Shell/Motiva refinery and a Shell Chemical plant. Richard, a retired schoolteacher, lived in Diamond, Louisiana, a small African-American community located on the banks of the Mississippi River, 25 miles west of New Orleans. Looking out her window across Washington Street, Richard could see a maze of pipes and giant chimneys; at night, the flares burned so bright she didn't need to turn on the lights to read. Sometimes the fumes wafting across the fence from the Shell facilities burned the back of her throat, provoked coughing fits and slung her eyes until tears ran down her face.

Richard, 61, was one of many Diamond residents who were convinced that emissions from the Shell plants were making the community sick. When her sister was diagnosed with sarcoidosis, a rare disease associated with chemical exposures, the doctor asked if she lived near a petrochemical plant. She died at the age of 43. Then Richard's daughter, who'd experienced chronic respiratory distress, was hospitalized for a collapsed lung.

"When my sister died, I said to myself that I would do everything I could to relocate [our community] because there were too many sick people," Richard remembers. Thus began one of the epic environmental justice struggles of recent times.

A Community at Risk

Richard was not alone in experiencing problems from Shell's emissions. On some nights, when the pollution from the plants collected close to the ground and seeped under their doors, residents resorted to placing wet towels over their heads to keep from choking. Many kids had asthma while older residents rented oxygen tanks to help them breathe. An unusual skin disorder was disturbingly common in town and, while they couldn't prove it, residents worried that exposure to chemical releases from the plant might be giving them cancer.

On a beautiful summer day in 1973, Leroy Jones, a 16-year-old resident of Diamond, was cutting a lawn on Washington Street adjacent to Shell Chemical when a spark from his lawnmower ignited gas that had leaked from a Shell Chemical pipeline. Eyewitnesses describe the ensuing explosion as a giant flamethrower that lit Jones on fire and incinerated the adjacent house of Helen Washington who was taking a nap. Washington was killed immediately. Jones is reported to have clutched his eyes and spun around until someone grabbed him and wrapped him in a blanket. They laid him under an oak tree until the ambulance arrived. Jones later died of his injuries at the hospital. In the aftermath, Shell gave his mother \$500 and purchased Washington's fire-gutted property from her family for \$3,000.

Fifteen years later, at 4 a.m. on May 4, 1988, a catalytic cracking unit at the Shell/Motiva refinery blew up, killing seven Shell workers and injuring 48 workers and residents. Debris from the explosion was found five miles away. In Diamond, ceilings fell, windows were blown in, doors were knocked off their hinges, and 4,500 area residents were evacuated. One resident thought that a nuclear bomb had gone off; another was convinced that an airplane had crashed into the town.

Following this blast, no one in Diamond felt safe and neighbors began to talk about moving out. So in the early 1990s, a group of church-going women in Diamond met to discuss what to do. Margie Richard came to see what the meeting was about. When she came through the door, a resident said: "We need someone to help us file a lawsuit against Shell... We need a leader... We elect you president."

Diamond residents knew Richard as an energetic teacher who bestowed on her students a kind of tough love. A petite woman, she spoke her mind plainly and came from a family that had long taken a leadership role in the community. "All my life I heard people say that the [Shell] plant was making people sick. Half my life I heard people say they wanted to be relocated," Richard recalled. Her sister's death and her daughter's illness prompted her to devote her full energies to the project.

Ask Richard what gave her the moxie to go toe-to-toe with the third largest petrochemical company and the world's 10th largest corporation and she will tell you that it was her religious faith. God's plan for her, she believed, included helping her neighbors fight for a safe place to live.

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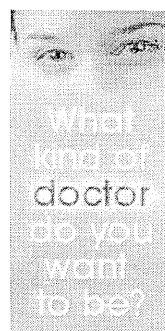
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Richard's Roots

Her family traced its roots in Diamond back to slave days when one of their ancestors took part in the slave rebellion of 1813. In that year, 500 slaves rose up and marched on New Orleans. The revolt failed and many rebelling slaves, armed mostly with agricultural tools, were slaughtered. A number of prisoners were decapitated in New Orleans. As a warning against future revolts, their heads were skewered on pikes and placed along the banks of the river near the current town of Diamond.

By 1929, when Shell Oil moved into Louisiana and set up a huge refinery, Richard's grandfather was farming the rich soil nearby and made a good living hiring his neighbors as laborers. Then, in 1953, Shell purchased the land he was farming as a site for a chemical plant to transform their refinery wastes into saleable petrochemical products. Richard's grandfather was forced to move, and he purchased several small properties on the fenceline with the new Shell Chemical plant. During the next decade, the plant expanded until it stood just across the street from Richard's house. Her father had hoped that the plant would provide decent jobs, but Shell only hired Diamond residents as janitors, painters, and maintenance workers. The good-paying technical jobs went to whites who lived in Norco.

In those days, Jim Crow rules were observed in Diamond and Norco. Blacks lived in Diamond in a subdivision divided from the whites in Norco by a wooded strip of land. The town theater was segregated, there was a water fountain for whites inside and a tap for blacks outside, and African-American students sat in the back of the bus. Even Shell's facilities were segregated, with black employees barred from the company swimming pool and bowling alley. The annual Shell outdoor party was held on different days for white and black residents. That legacy left the area racially polarized and residentially segregated even in the early 1990s when Richard began to organize her neighbors.

The first time Concerned Citizens of Norco (CCN) tried suing Shell, they lost. But that defeat only made CCN stronger, Richard claims. She began outreach programs in local churches and private homes. "I was one of the first out there [picketing Shell] with little Margie," said Janie Campbell, 80. "We would go out in the hot sun marching. We started picketing [because] so many kids were being sick with all this mess and stuff coming out of Shell. We never stopped because we thought it was time," observed Campbell who remembers sitting in a lawn chair along the fenceline with a sign treading: "What's That Smell? It's Just Shell."

Diamond v. Shell

For the next 15 years, Richard brought visitors to her trailer on the Shell fenceline and told them the story of how her community was being poisoned. Richard said it was God "who opened the door" and allowed her to take that message to a human rights conference in Geneva and environmental conferences in the Netherlands and South Africa. She brought bags of polluted air from her community to these international gatherings and demanded that Shell buy out the homes of her neighbors.

Richard also reached out to environmental justice activists for help. Greenpeace, the Sierra Club, the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice, EarthJustice, The Refinery Reform Campaign, The Louisiana Bucket Brigade, Coming Clean, and the Louisiana Environmental Action Coalition responded, as did a number of foundations, nonprofits, religious groups — and Rep. Maxine Waters (D-CA). All these groups helped mount a media campaign that made Shell officials nervous.

Shell spokesperson David Brignac said that, while there had been major industrial accidents at their facilities, improvements had been made since the big explosion in 1988. He also argued that Shell was meeting its obligations under both state and federal regulations and that, if they didn't, regulators would shut them down. But when Diamond residents began sampling the air with citizen air sampling devices [See "Taking the Toxic Tour," February CG], they found traces of toxic chemicals, which suggested that the air they were breathing wasn't safe.

All this negative publicity began to catch the attention of Shell officials who were just recovering from twin controversies over their plan to cut up and sink the Brent Spar (their huge North Sea oil storage tank) and the Nigerian government's execution of nine activists who had protested massive pollution by a Shell/Nigerian oil extraction operation in the farmlands of the Niger Delta.

The Diamond relocation campaign clearly had the potential to become another media disaster, so, in September 2000, Shell offered to buy out half the properties on the two streets closest to their fenceline. Town residents were outraged: Did pollution coming from the plant stop after the second street, they asked? And what would happen to those left behind?

In June 2002, after protracted negotiations, CCN won their relocation campaign: Shell finally agreed to buy out all of the residents of Diamond who wanted to move. For her efforts, on April 19, 2004, Richard became the first African-American woman to win the \$125,000 Goldman Environmental Prize for grassroots activism.

Birth of a Movement

Diamond is now a ghost town. Its residents have fled the toxic air emissions that drifted over the fence from the nearby chemical plant and oil refinery. Most of the houses have been torn down and their foundations ripped from the earth. What was once a tightly knit, African-American community with roots branching back to slave days is gone. For the residents of Diamond, the victory was bittersweet: to save their community, they had to destroy their town — leaving their homes, churches, and neighbors to seek housing where the air was safe to breathe.

Nevertheless, Diamond's passing will be remembered as pivotal in the struggle for environmental justice. It was a rare, high-profile fenceline battle that illuminates the plight of residents in hundreds of other towns scattered around the country immediately adjacent to highly polluting facilities. As

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currently enforced, neither federal nor state regulations protect residents in these toxic hot spots. Few fenceline towns have air-monitoring equipment calibrated to document the trespass of toxic chemicals into their airspace; nor do residents participate in the government-funded health surveys that might provide early warnings that pollution was causing illness. Standards for buffer zones, indicating how close people can safely live to dirty industries, are often non-existent or flawed.

Since the government is doing a poor job of protecting fenceline communities, it is left to local activists and environmental justice advocates to agitate for safe conditions for these citizens. Curiously, many mainstream environmental groups (with the exception of Greenpeace and the Sierra Club) have been slow to lend their political muscle, financial resources, and scientific expertise to these struggles. This seems shortsighted since those exposed daily to the nation's most polluted air and water would logically make some of its most dedicated activists. Were the Big Ten environmental organizations to make environmental justice struggles central to their agenda, it could, arguably, help expand their membership making their campaigns more economically and racially diverse.

Nor have civil rights groups been quick to recognize that environmental justice struggles, such as the relocation campaign in Diamond, constitute a vital new front of the civil rights movement. Studies have demonstrated that heavily polluting industries are disproportionately sited in low-income communities of color and, as a result, these communities are exposed to more environmental health hazards than other segments of society.

When they decided to fight Shell for relocation, Richard and other members of the Diamond community, were walking in the footsteps of the civil rights leaders of the 1950s and 1960s. And that is why some call Margie Richard the Rosa Parks of today's environmental justice movement.

Steve Lerner is author of Diamond: A Struggle for Environmental Justice in Louisiana's Chemical Corridor (MIT Press).

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