

# Journal of Civil Rights and Economic Development

---

Volume 9, Spring 1994, Issue 2

Article 9

---

## A Personal Story

Hazel Johnson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.law.stjohns.edu/jcred>

---

This Symposium is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at St. John's Law Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Civil Rights and Economic Development by an authorized editor of St. John's Law Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact [selbyc@stjohns.edu](mailto:selbyc@stjohns.edu).

## A PERSONAL STORY

HAZEL JOHNSON\*

My name is Hazel Johnson. I am from the southeast side of Chicago, an all-black community, maybe some of you have read about it. I call it the "toxic doughnut;"<sup>1</sup> the reason being that we are sitting in the center surrounded by steel mills, landfills, chemical companies, and treatment plants. I want to say that I feel that this pollution issue is racial and not economic. I am going to tell you about three communities southwest of us. They are all-black communities. They are among the fourteen poorest communities in the country, one of which is named Robbins, where there is a proposed incinerator. Then we have Harvey, which is another all-black community. There is another proposed incinerator. Then there is Ford City. That is another all-black community, where there is a proposal for two incinerators.

Let me get back to Chicago. There is also another proposal for the extension of a Waste Management landfill. There are also three proposals for a transferring station. All of this is on the southeast side of Chicago, which I feel is heavily bombarded with a lot of industries as it is. The place that I live in is built on a landfill. The painful thing about these companies is that when they come in to your community with their incinerators, they tell you that there are jobs. But it is not jobs for the people in that community, because they do not know the high-tech quality of incinerators. The only jobs that they might get, if they have a cafeteria in the plant, is working in the cafeteria or cleaning up the place. Those are the only kind of jobs that they will get, because the majority of these companies bring in their own people. They do not tell you how they will tear up your community with the big trucks; 700 trucks rolling in and out of your community per day,

\* Co-founder, People for Community Recovery, a Chicago group devoted to addressing local pollution problems. Ms. Johnson has long been involved in grassroots community environmental activism.

<sup>1</sup> Josh Getlin, *Fighting Her Good Fight; Hazel Johnson Battles Those Who Want to Turn Her Chicago Housing Project into a Toxic Dump*, L.A. TIMES, Feb. 18, 1993, at E1.

dropping waste and everything that your children might be playing with. They do not tell you these things. They make it sound so good that you think this is the best thing for your community, and a lot of black people accept it because they are looking towards jobs. They need jobs.

In reality, they do not know how it will affect them, and how, down the road somewhere, it will also affect human health, with cancer, with respiratory problems, with kidney problems, or with birth deformities. I am telling you from my own experience. I know what it is like because I did my own health study in my community. I found out that there are hundreds of cases of asthma. My husband died of lung cancer. That is the reason I got really concerned about the community, because I looked around and saw so many other of my neighbors dying of cancer or respiratory problems, and children coming here with some types of deformities. We have seven girls in our community with brain tumors, except for one of them whose brain was protruding from her head. They all died between three and seven years old. It is hard to see a victim suffering, especially infants.

My husband died, and from the time he went to the hospital until death, exactly ten weeks—and he was a big heavy guy—he went down to nothing but bones. My children suffered; I had seven at the time, so it was hard. You know, a lot of times you do not hear how it affects human health. You do not hear how it affects the wildlife. But it does. I want to tell you also that it is not just affecting the people that live in that area. Think about the ozone. If it is affecting the ozone thousands of miles in the air, do you think it is affecting you? If you do not think it is affecting you, then you are wrong. This could affect you twenty years from now or an unborn child. So this is a problem not just for people that live in these communities, it is a problem for everybody.

I live in a Chicago housing development. The apartment was built on a landfill, and we had asbestos in our apartment. We had to fight to get that removed. We had asbestos in our schools. We had to fight to get that removed. Then the landfill came. They wanted to add another landfill, when we already had four active landfills.

We organized eight communities and did a sit-in demonstration one day at Calumet Industrial Development (“CID”), which is owned by Waste Management, which has mountains of garbage

and mountains of hazardous waste. We turned away fifty-seven trucks that day by dusk time. When all the media and everybody had left, Waste Management decided to have us arrested for trespassing. Seventeen of us went to jail. But that did not stop us because right after we got out of jail, we went back. But we did not go on their property. Instead we went right next door to them, and we protested with posters, and cars and trucks were passing by blowing and honking. Waste Management did not like that, so they called the police again, but nothing could be done because we were not trespassing.

A few months later, Waste Management came out and said they wanted to be good neighbors. They came and offered us twenty-five million dollars. Then the city came—because they were running out of space for the garbage—with thirty million dollars. Please believe me, everybody that was not involved got involved so they could get that money. But the group of us was strong enough. We fought against it. We said we did not want their money, nor did we want their landfill. But we won that battle; it was a hard battle, but we won it.

We kept out there complaining and complaining. Then the state decided to clean up three lagoons that house over 30,000 tons of poison in a year. To try to keep my mouth shut, they agreed to clean it up, but that was not enough for me. We continued protesting. We worked with Greenpeace as well. Greenpeace decided to take us to the country. Not me, but them, because I am too old to be running under trucks. It took them twenty minutes in the beginning to practice getting under a truck, by putting one arm each in a pipe. Then they connected that pipe under the truck.

We stayed with Greenpeace three days. When we left, they were able to do it in five seconds. When we rolled in where Waste Management's incinerator was, first thing they did was call the police. When they called the police, there was nothing that they could do because we had two kids under the truck that were chained together, and the two of us that were in the cabin of the truck were already chained to the bottom of the cabin of the truck. Waste Management's incinerator had three entrances, and we had three trucks, one at each entrance. The fire department came with all the big heavy equipment. They were frantically running in and out trying to find out what to do with us, since they could not move the truck because of the kids underneath.

Then the police department came. They came and were running around trying to find out what to do with us as well. It took over twelve hours before they finally decided what to do with us. They then came in and started to tear up one of the trucks. So we decided not to let them destroy all the trucks.

The first time we went to jail, they did not have a women's facility where we were, so they had to transport us. The policemen in that station kept us there for six hours until the next shift came on. It was about a hundred and three degrees the day we went to this jail. Inside that jail it felt like it was about fifty below zero. But we entertained each other. We were calling backwards and forward, talking to each other, because we all were in different cells. The second time we went to jail, they let us out under the guidance of our state representative.

Two weeks before court time came, Waste Management had an explosion at the incinerator, so they did not come to court. Every time Waste Management went to court, we were there protesting; it is fortunate that we got a jury that was on our side. The judge said he did not want to handle it, but since he was handling it, he was going to take care of it. So he went out to the site each time to investigate, and each time that he went, it was not being operated safely. So this past February 13th, it has been closed for two years, and I hope that it stays closed.<sup>2</sup>

With the regulations, a lot of these companies wait until late at night, around eleven to two o'clock in the morning to do all their dirty work. They go way beyond what their permit allows them to do, on weekends as well, because no one is there to check on them. That is how the federal government found Waste Management's incinerator violations, because they went way beyond what their permit allowed them to do. They did it twice in 1986, and they did it twice in 1987. The state's environmental protection agency decided to take them to court because we kept repeatedly complaining.

By the court's consent decree, they had to hire community people. This was the first time in the nation they had to hire community people as monitors or overseers. To make sure that I had somebody that was on my side there, to tell me the truth of what was going on in that incinerator, I had my daughter be one of

<sup>2</sup> Marianne Lavelle, *An Industrial Legacy*, NAT'L L.J. Sept. 21, 1992, at S3.

those monitors, so I knew exactly what was going on. After they were there about a month, they found twenty-seven violations. The federal government then came in and sued them for over three million dollars.

We have the law, but the most important thing is for us to have that law enforced. When I first started out, I went to an Environmental Protection Agency ("EPA") hearing in the early 1980s, and the director just completely ignored me. He answered everybody's question except for mine. So when they had a state legislature meeting, I attended and started talking about him, how he treated me and how I did not like it. To let them know that I was not talking about him behind his back, I turned around and pointed him out in the back of the room. So when they turned around, within a few minutes they found out that I knew who he was and I knew he was present, they then had a recess.

After the recess, they came back in to find out that Waste Management had outstanding penalties for five straight years that had never been collected. The administrator was always telling them that he was fully staffed, which he was not, and that he could not do anything. They found all this out about him; that he was not doing the job that he should have been doing. So a few months later, we had a new director, and I am happy to say that because she seemed to think the way I am thinking, the federal government needed to come in and start cleaning up our areas. Instead of research, or study, or whatever, it is time for them to clean up our area.

I want to say that we are beginning to get the government to come out. We also got the Center for Disease Control ("CDC") to come out, and they are going to do a health study. We are going to make sure that they do a good one because they have a bad name around the country too, by saying they are going to do something. The federal EPA has been the same way. They always say they are going to do something. They never wind up doing it, but we are going to make sure that they do what they are supposed to.

I am going to conclude with saying that I have really worked hard for the environment, for about thirteen years. I finally re-

ceived one of the highest awards that anyone could receive, from President Bush just before he left—a gold medal.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Josh Getlin, *Fighting Her Good Fight; Hazel Johnson Battles Those Who Want to Turn Her Chicago Housing Project Into a Toxic Dump*, L.A. TIMES, Feb. 18, 1993, at E1. The President's Environment and Conservation Challenge medal is the nation's highest such award. *Id.*