

Margie E. Richard¹

USA (1942-)

One beautiful day in 1973 a woman living in Margie's neighborhood, called the Diamond neighborhood, in Norco, Louisiana, was having a nap inside her house. Her name was Helen Washington. Next door, 16-year-old Leroy Jones was cutting the grass with a lawn mower. At the Shell plant nearby, a pipeline was leaking gas. A spark from the lawn mower caused the gas in the air to explode. Helen Washington's house caught fire, and burning gasses surrounded Leroy. Both of them died.

The citizens of Norco eventually became convinced that they had to do something. By this time, Margie had married and moved to a nearby town, but she visited her family in Norco frequently. As she told one reporter: "My inner spirit began to say "Something must be done, for generations behind us as well as for my family." (2004, KQED Living on Earth interview)



Margie Richard
From: AARP, 2006

Life Before and After the Refinery

During the 1940s and 1950s, when Margie was young, the Diamond neighborhood (a four-block area), was surrounded by green fields and flowers, and it was a peaceful pleasant place. The families in Diamond were close. Margie's family had lived there for four generations. They had their own school, churches, and community groups. Margie's grandfather and father made a good living farming the rich soil nearby.

They were used to the oil refinery which Shell had built in the area in 1929.

Then, in the 1950's, Shell purchased the land her father was farming. They built a chemical plant on it, to transform their refinery wastes into products they could sell. Over about 10 years, the plant expanded until it was right next to Margie's house. (You can see in the pictures how close it was to houses and playgrounds.) Gradually the plant ruined the Diamond district as a place to live.

But the families of the neighborhood did not want to leave their friends and relatives; and also many of them could not afford to move anywhere else. So they stayed. Twenty-four hours a day they saw, heard, and smelled the plant. The fumes coming from it burned the back of one's throat, causing terrible coughing, or stung the eyes until tears came. At night the fumes collected close to the ground. People put towels under their doors to keep the fumes out of their houses, or they put wet towels over their heads so they could breathe.

¹ Pronounced Ri-shard

Shell did provide jobs, which was a good thing, but the best ones went to the white people who lived in Norco. The black citizens of Norco could only get jobs such as janitor, or maintenance worker. Shell provided a swimming pool and bowling alley for their employees, but people in Margie's neighborhood couldn't use them because in those days, blacks and whites were segregated. It was the law in most of the southern United States until well into the 1960s. For example, black people sat at the back of a bus, in the back of a theater, couldn't use the same drinking fountains as whites or the same swimming pool or bowling alley, and on and on. The annual outdoor party that Shell had for employees was on a different day for whites and blacks.

An Unhealthy and Dangerous Place to Live

The people in Diamond began to notice that more and more kids had asthma. More and more older residents had to rent oxygen tanks so they could breathe. The formerly rich soil became so contaminated that people could no longer grow tomatoes. All her life Margie heard people say Shell's plant was making people sick. Margie's own sister died from lung problems, and her daughter became very ill.

All this caused plenty of suffering. But it was the accident of 1988 that made people start talking about moving the community, because after this accident, no one felt safe. It happened at 4 am. A part of the refinery blew up, killing seven Shell workers. Forty eight workers and residents were injured. In Diamond, windows broke, and doors came off their hinges. Over 4000 people living in the area were evacuated. Millions of pounds of toxic chemicals went into the air.



Residents of the Diamond area of Norco saw, smelled, and heard this 24 hours a day.

From: Motavalli, 1998

The Citizens Organize

A group of Norco women met to discuss what to do. They decided to call themselves Concerned Citizens of Norco (CCN), and they elected Margie as president. She was a retired middle school teacher known to be energetic, tough yet caring, and unafraid to plainly speak her mind. She was unafraid to challenge, but she also believed in the importance of communication. The goal CCN set was to get Shell to pay for all the members of the Diamond community to relocate together to a new place.

In 1998 they started testing the air. They became part of the Bucket Brigade (you can search this name on the internet to find out about this organization). The name comes from the "bucket" that they use for getting and saving some air in a special bag inside a bucket. The air can then be taken to a laboratory to see what chemicals are in it.

Margie and others produced their own report on Shell showing that every year Shell was releasing more than two million pounds of toxic chemicals into the air. (Goldman Prize Website, 2004)

To advertise their complaints about Shell they led a picket line² for years. They started their own website (www.shellfacts) about Shell. They included a page where people could see the refinery blasting poisonous chemical into the air at any time, night or day. This came from a web camera that Margie had installed on her home.

Margie and CCN also contacted environmental organizations, and many of them helped CCN with money, information, ideas about what to do, and in other ways. Through workshops given by Dr. Beverly Wright from the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice, in New Orleans, Norco citizens learned that their situation was/is not unique. (For more about environmental justice, see References.)

Eventually the EPA (Environmental Protection Agency of the US Government) investigated Shell and found the refinery was emitting more chemicals than their official reports showed.

Some Diamond residents became Shell shareholders. This way they had the right to attend shareholder meetings, which they did. They wanted to tell the other shareholders what kind of a company they had put their money into.

All this time they also kept communicating with Shell officials in Norco, but were getting nowhere. So, they went to Holland, the home of Royal Dutch Shell/Shell Group to speak with top Shell officials. They took a bucket of Diamond's terrible-smelling air with them, and opened it up in front of some Shell officials to show them what their neighbors had to breathe every day.

The End of the Diamond Story

In 2002 Shell finally agreed to buy the homes of those Diamond residents who wanted to relocate, and to reduce emissions by 30%. Most residents took Shell's offer and moved. However, the Diamond community did not stay together as they had wanted. Nearly every home in Diamond was destroyed, and the community disappeared.

Margie Receives the Goldman Prize

In 2004, Margie Richard received the Goldman Environmental Prize. This prize is given to leaders all over the world who are leaders of local efforts where "positive change is created through community or citizen participation in the issues that affect them. Through recognizing these individual leaders, the Prize seeks to inspire other ordinary people to take extraordinary actions to protect the natural world". (<http://www.goldmanprize.org/theprize/about>)

Margie is no longer president of CCN, but she continues to work with Shell to improve conditions in Norco, and gives advice to other communities who are fighting pollution from other corporations. She is also helping organize international groups to meet with Shell.

“I've always said this (about dealing with industry): 'We're in this together. We need each other. So we need to come together to solve these problems. Because if you keep on oppressing and depressing me, it's affecting everybody. So I think... the only way we can solve these problems is to listen to each other' ”.

Margie Richard
KQED, Living On
Earth interview ,
2004.

² People with signs walking back and forth

Global Campaign for Environmental Justice

You can read more details about the Diamond fight in a book by Steve Lerner, *Diamond: A Struggle for Environmental Justice in Louisiana's Chemical Corridor*. In this book, Steve Lerner shows how this local environmental battle became part of a global environmental justice campaign.

Environmental justice means that all communities, regardless of affluence or ethnicity, have the same right to clean air, water, and soil. Cities and corporations have in the past put plants that poison the air, water and/or soil in areas where poor people live, because it was cheap and convenient. Now these communities are learning to organize and insist on justice.

Margie Richard was part of a group that went to the UN Human Rights Commission meeting in Geneva in 1999. There they promoted the idea that the environmental injustices suffered by people of color in the United States are human rights violations.

“We had a right to enjoy where we live, work, and play, just like anyone else, and in the beginning we were not heard. We were turned away. We were treated as if we were not human beings. That hurts more than anything”.

--Margie Richard
--KQED, Living On Earth
interview, 2004

References and Further Reading

- AARP Magazine, 2006. *Margie E. Richard, Pollution Fighter*. January & February, 2006, page 68.
- Doyle, Jack 2002 *Norco, Louisiana. One community's history with Royal Dutch Shell*
Available at the Global Community Monitor website:
<http://www.shellfacts.com/article.php?id=153> In: *Riding the Dragon*. Royal Dutch Shell and the Fossil Fire, by Jack Doyle. Environmental Health Fund publications, Boston, Massachusetts.
- Dudley, David 2006 *Margie E. Richard, Pollution Fighter*. AARP Jan/Feb 2006 and online at: http://www.aarpmagazine.org/people/impact_awards_rich.html Accessed 4/12/2008
- Global Community Monitor, April 19, 2004 *Margie Eugene Richard of Norco, Louisiana Campaigned For Justice Against Oil Giant Shell and Won Relocation for 300 Families from Toxic Releases* Refinery Reform Campaign Press Release.
<http://www.gcmonitor.org/article.php?id=195> Accessed 4/12/2008.
- Goldman Prize Web Page 2004 *Margie Eugene Richard*
<http://www.goldmanprize.org/node/100> Accessed 4/12/2008 There is a video at this link.
- Greene, Ronnie. 2008 *Night Fire: Big Oil, Poison Air, and Margie Richard's Fight to Save her Town*. Amistad (Harper Collins)

- KQED Living On Earth 4/23/2004 Interview with Steve Curwood, a downloadable MP3 file at: <http://www.loe.org/shows/shows.htm?programID=04-P13-00017> Accessed 4/12/2008
- Lerner, Steve, 2005 *The Rosa Parks of the Environmental Justice Movement: Margie Richard*. . Common Ground Online Magazine, March 2005. : <http://commongroundmag.com/2005/03/margierichard0503.html> accessed 4/12/2008
- Motavalli, J. 1998 *Polluters That Dump on Communities of Color Are Finally Being Brought to Justice* In E/The Environmental Magazine Vol IX, No 4 July/Aug 1998 <http://www.emagazine.com/view/?250>
- Nijhuis, Michelle 2004. Grist: Environmental News & Commentary *Shell Game* At: <http://www.grist.org/news/maindish/2004/04/20/nijhuis-richard/> Accessed 4.12.2008
- Rosen, Ruth *Toxic Terror*, Six-page review of *Diamond: A Struggle for Environmental Justice in Louisiana's Chemical Corridor* by Steve Lerner, MIT Press, 2004 From Commonweal website: http://www.commonweal.org/pubs/diamond_review.html Accessed 4/12/2008

Discussion or Essay Questions

When you talk or write, please try to use some of the new words you have learned in this reading. Also, if you have noticed new grammatical structures, try to use them, too.

1. Do you agree or disagree with the idea that a healthy environment is a human right? Explain your answer.
2. Is there a problem with air pollution or water or soil pollution in your neighborhood or city? Describe the problem. What do you think could be done about it?
3. Do you think of yourself as an environmentalist? Explain why or why not.
4. What is the biggest environmental problem your country faces, in your opinion? Explain why you think this.

Notice to Reader

This is one out of fifteen stories written especially for English-learners featured in [*Extraordinary People From Around the World*](#), by Patricia F. Neyman, © Patricia F. Neyman, 2008, except for any pictures therein included. You may make copies for yourself, your class, or your school, but may not reproduce it for profit.

I welcome feedback about this story. Compliments and helpful suggestions are especially appreciated. You can find the email address at the page linked to above.