

## OUR WESTERN NEW YORK HERITAGE

WNY is known by many as the birth place of the Environmental Justice movement. What is Environmental Justice or EJ? It is defined by the US Environmental Protection Agency as:

*"The fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies. EPA has this goal for all communities and persons across this Nation. It will be achieved when everyone enjoys the same degree of protection from environmental and health hazards and equal access to the decision-making process to have a healthy environment in which to live, learn, and work."*

Typically, EJ refers to the impact of industry or development on the health of people who have little voice in preventing it. Racial minorities, low income families, and citizens in developing countries often are more negatively impacted by pollution or other environmental changes than are others in a community or region. These undesired situations can include the inability to access or afford healthy or culturally important food, as well as unusual or undue exposure to waste and pollutions, and even toxics such as lead and radon. Frequently those exposed to these unjust situations do not have the ability to simply pick up and move to avoid the problems.

The very concept of environmental justice first emerged in the late 1970s in a Niagara Falls neighborhood built over a toxic canal that had been buried in the 1950s. This community, known as Love Canal (originally named for its developer, Henry Love) consisted of blue-collar workers with an average annual income of \$10,000-\$25,000. The majority of people worked in local industries, many of which were chemical plants. Residents near 99th street began to realize that their children suffered from an unexplainable number of birth defects and illnesses. In time, it was uncovered that 20,000 tons of toxic waste was buried throughout the neighborhood and under a nearby school—causing widespread contamination.

In 1978, there were approximately 800 private single-family homes and 240 low-income apartments built around the canal. The elementary school was located near the center of the landfill.. From the late 1950's through the 1970's, people repeatedly complained of odors and substances surfacing near or in their yards and on the school playground. The city, responding to these complaints, visited the area and covered the "substances" with dirt or clay.

Niagara Falls resident Lois Gibbs was frustrated by what she saw as a lack of action, and she took to the streets – going door to door to rally support and uniting the community to take a stand. After years of complaints, the New York State Department of Health (NYSDOH) began collecting air and soil tests in basements and conducting a health study of the 239 families that immediately encircled the canal. The Health Department found an increase in reproductive problems among women and high levels of chemical contaminants in soil and air.

On August 2, 1978, the New York State Department of Health (NYSDOH) issued a health order that recommended the 99th Street School be closed, that pregnant women and children under the age of two be evacuated, that residents not eat out of their home gardens and that they spend limited time in their basements. A few days later, the state agreed to purchase all 239 homes in the first two rings of homes closest to the canal.

The tragedy of Love Canal was responsible for sparking a revolution in local citizen activism leading to the development of Superfund legislation and forever changing public perception about the serious threat that hazardous chemicals pose to human health, safety, and welfare. Because of Gibbs' efforts, roughly 800 families were eventually relocated out of the toxic site and national attention was given to the situation. This very same grassroots spirit, similar to that of the civil rights movement, is a common undertone in the fight for Environmental Justice.

## ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE TODAY

WNY has a long legacy of industry and pollution and much of that legacy plays out in distressed communities across the region. The issues are varied and there is significant crossover between issues that can be classified as environmental justice and the other issues described in GrowWNY.org. Many different organizations work passionately to engage people and neighborhoods, politicians and policymakers for change—especially where environmental health is concerned. Their rallying points include the removal of toxins from residential neighborhoods, reducing air pollution and its impact on health, and increasing low income families' access to fresh food.

### Removing Lead from an East Side Neighborhood

The address 858 Ferry is not just a toxic waste site on the east side of Buffalo; it's a story of a neighborhood's courage and success against long odds. The original plans for clean-up ground to a halt and the site went unfenced, untended and without adequate signage for a long stretch of the '90s. During this time, residents used the field as a short-cut and, as with other vacant lots, additional waste and garbage accumulated there. However, 858 East Ferry was far more dangerous than the average vacant lot; it held large quantities of gray ash contaminated with Polychlorinated Biphenyls (PCBs), and lead hazardous waste, known causes of cancer and brain damage in children.

This site would have continued a silent threat if it were not for the attention of Rev. Darius Pridgen of the True Bethel Baptist Church, who had purchased a site nearby that was also contaminated. Rev. Pridgen's concern drove community activists in the Toxic Waste/Lupus Coalition to develop an inventory on toxic waste sites and types of pollution. They identified local exposure pathways, mapped specific clusters of lupus in affected neighborhoods and evaluated the methods used to clean up toxic sites in Buffalo. Pooling resources of the Toxic Waste/Lupus Coalition, the Minority Health Coalition, the University of Buffalo and the Systemic Autoimmune Disease Research Center, the project pinpointed additional clusters and developed a registry of citizens affected by autoimmune diseases.

The NYS Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC), the agency responsible for clean up, believed that contamination was limited to a small area, while residents believed the problems extended far beyond those boundaries. To convince the DEC to move faster and clean up a larger area, residents worked with University of Buffalo Chemistry Professor Joe Gardella, who trained residents in taking their own soil samples and having them tested by an EPA-certified laboratory. As a result, the DEC spent approximately \$10,000,000 to clean up a site much larger than originally intended.

The story of 858 East Ferry carries the defining themes of environmental justice: a low income community of color, few protections for vulnerable residents at risk of serious illnesses, unresponsive government bureaucracies, and a demand for hard evidence of neighborhood impact. The principal defenders of this East Side community continue their vigilance and activism in the Environmental Justice Action Group

(EJAG), which released the first Greater Buffalo Children's Environmental Health Report in 2006. The themes above are also echoed in the story that follows.

## **Reducing Air Pollution and its Impact on Health**

Tonawanda is home to over 50 industrial plants in close proximity to each other. These plants are surrounded by neighborhoods with a 40% poverty rate and an average income below the national average. Residents long believed that their health problems stemmed from poor air quality caused by area smoke stacks, but had no scientific proof to back their claims.

The Clean Air Coalition was founded by residents of Tonawanda who worked with university scientists to design studies, purchase equipment and train residents to monitor air tests. Their results showed cancer causing chemicals, six of which were far beyond normal levels. As a result, the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation funded a technical study which showed benzene levels, predominantly from the Tonawanda Coke facility, were 75 times higher than state guidelines permit. Benzene has been known to cause anemia, leukemia, lymphoma, and other deadly diseases.

Since 2009, the Clean Air Coalition used multiple strategies to gain the attention of government regulators, including letter writing and mass calling campaigns, public protests on location, and meetings with elected officials. Consequently, the EPA has charged Tonawanda Coke air, water and hazardous waste violations at the plant. If the company does not make the mandated changes they face up to \$35,000 per day they are out of compliance. Judith Enck, EPA Region 2 Administrator said, "I wasn't aware personally of the problems until it was brought to my attention by a local citizens group."

## **Increasing Low Income Families' Access to Fresh Foods**

Buffalo has the unfortunate distinction of ranking among the least healthy cities in the US. The rate of obesity is three times the national average and twice the state average. Healthy eating is a factor in disease prevention and is important for people trying to maintain health while battling illness. Many low income neighborhoods in Buffalo have limited access to grocery stores and are dependent on corner stores for food purchases. Typically, corner stores offer little or no fresh produce and a very limited selection of healthy food overall. Over 77,000 people and nearly half the young people under 18 in Buffalo live in poverty and are at risk for poor access to fresh food.

Several organizations have responded to the desperate need for access to wholesome food based on two major assets: an increasing number of urban farms and a strong agricultural industry nearby. Urban farms have been expanding in number and in size, and City government is earnestly trying to adjust policy and zoning to permit agriculture inside City Limits. Meanwhile, agribusiness is the region's largest employer – well over a thousand food and food processing companies make their home here. New York is the third-largest dairy producing state in the U.S., and much of that industry is concentrated in Buffalo Niagara. The challenge at hand is making these two assets work for low-income communities.

Given our city's new urban farms and our county's agricultural heritage, everyone should be able to access and enjoy fresh, healthy food. Many organizations are working toward this goal from various perspectives and locations, including:

The [Community Action Organization \(CAO\)](#) - Best known for its antipoverty programs and Head Start Centers, the CAO has begun a Green Entrepreneur Program to assist residents in developing urban farms

to sell produce in targeted neighborhoods and to area restaurants. This effort includes significant technical assistance in farming and hoop houses that grow crops year-round.

[Buffalo ReUse](#) - a social enterprise providing neighborhood sustainability by salvaging building materials and providing them to the community for rebuilding the City's aging housing stock. In addition to these services, ReUse administers a number of community gardens located on Northampton Street near their headquarters. Some of their gardens include the Children's Vinery, a brightly colored artsy garden growing a large variety of fruits and vegetables, a flower teepee, as well as the Patchwork Garden, where community members can purchase a bed and grow their own produce with the assistance of ReUse staff.

[People United for Sustainable Housing \(PUSH\)](#) - is committed to making affordable housing a reality in Buffalo by increasing property ownership among low-income residents, decreasing the rate of housing abandonment, redeveloping vacant housing, expand local hiring opportunities and leading action campaigns for economic justice in Buffalo. PUSH has taken the lead in directing numerous campaigns against corporations and government agencies whose practices contribute to high poverty rates in the neighbourhoods they serve. PUSH offers a number of opportunities to volunteer on influential projects, for additional information on how you can help click [here](#).

[Massachusetts Avenue Project \(MAP\)](#) - The Massachusetts Avenue Project's (MAP) mission is to nurture the growth of a diverse and equitable community food system, to promote local economic opportunities, access to affordable, nutritious food and social change education. Located on Buffalo, NY's West Side, MAP implements its mission primarily through its Growing Green Program, an urban agriculture and job training program for youth, focused on sustainable food production and regional food system development. Since 2002, Growing Green has provided green job training to hundreds of inner city youth, ages 14-20, increasing their knowledge of food sources, how to grow, process and market organic food, as well as the impact food has on their health and that of their community. As part of their training, Growing Green youth plant and harvest organic food at our urban farm, running two aqua-ponic greenhouses, and producing vegetables, herbs, eggs and fish for the Buffalo area throughout the year. At Growing Green Youth are trained using the popular education model as full participants in community and civic life. In addition to the urban farm, Growing Green hosts a youth-run social enterprise, a Mobile Market, provides educational workshops for schools and community groups, and policy initiatives to address healthy food access and support local farms.

[New York Sustainable Agriculture Working Group \(NYSAWG\)](#) - NYSAWG fosters and promotes sustainable agriculture practices and sustainable local food systems. Their goal is to ensure equitable, affordable access to fresh, nutritious foods for all people at all times in New York State. NYSAWG builds the trading linkages and networks that make the production and exchange of local food both possible and profitable for all trading partners and the people they serve. In addition, they manage an innovative marketing campaign for local food called Buy Fresh, Buy Local and they offer education and training for farmers to serve local markets.

[Grassroots Gardens of Buffalo \(GGB\)](#) - Grassroots Gardens functions largely as the liaison organization between the City of Buffalo administration and the city's enthusiastic community gardeners. Primarily, GGB establishes leases with the city and indemnifies the properties, enabling gardeners to take on the challenges of establishing and maintaining the gardens without the added burden of liability for gardeners and visitors. In addition, whenever possible, GGB assists the gardeners' efforts through modest financial support and other resources including the distribution of plants, seeds and bulbs and other supplies. Not all community gardens address food access, but many enable residents to grow their own food.

[Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus \(BNMC\)](#) - BNMC is a consortium of the region's premier health care, life sciences research, and medical education institutions, all located on 120 acres in downtown Buffalo, New York. The BNMC is dedicated to the cultivation of a world-class medical campus for clinical care, research, education, and entrepreneurship. One of its goals is to promote healthy eating and active living in low income communities.

[State University of New York at Buffalo \(UB\)](#) - UB is the flagship campus of the SUNY system, and is the largest and most comprehensive campus in the 64-campus SUNY system. UB is a premier, research-intensive public university dedicated to academic excellence. Several distinguished faculty actively work on environmental justice issues from university units such as the Department of Chemistry and the School of Architecture and Planning.

## HOW CAN I MAKE A DIFFERENCE

### Know Your Rights and Advocate

If you experience something that doesn't seem right, such as an inability to access food or unexplainable health issues in your community don't be afraid to speak with your neighbors about your experiences. Block clubs can be especially helpful in sharing common environmental concerns. The [Clean Air Coalition](#), [Environmental Justice Action Group](#) and others can provide advice and counsel on understanding environmental issues and in organizing your community for change.

### Get Involved

The Clean Air Coalition is now offering opportunities to learn how to become effective advocates for environmental change.

The Lois Gibbs Fellowships provide training in community organizing, messaging, social media and more. See the links listed below for more information.