

*The 12 lessons in environmental activism that project managers can learn from the Love Canal situation and why, if we haven't, we are in deep trouble!!*

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In March 2000, two decades after Love Canal became the first polluted site on the newly created Superfund list, Federal officials deemed it clean enough to remove from the list. Hundreds of families were evacuated from this working-class neighborhood near Niagara Falls, NY after hazardous chemicals started oozing through the soil in the late 1970s. The neighborhood sat on top of a 19<sup>th</sup> century canal where a toxic mix of more than 80 different industrial chemicals had been buried. The clean up project took 21 years and cost \$400 million.

A review of the project reveals how the communications, public relations, public involvement, community relations and political influence impacted public perception, which will be used for years to come by regulators, principal parties, residents, engineers, risk communicators, ethicists and environmental activists groups.

**BUILT IN 1890 FOR A HYDROELECTRIC PROJECT IT BECAME THE INFAMOUS DUMP, WHICH IS KNOWN AROUND THE WORLD AS THE ORIGIN OF THE 'SUPERFUND'**

The 70-acre Love Canal Superfund site is an inactive industrial landfill located less than one mile from the Niagara River in Niagara Falls, NY. The landfill was originally a canal excavated by William Love in the 1890s for a hydroelectric project that was never built. In 1942, Hooker Chemicals and Plastics, now

Occidental Chemical Corporation, used the canal to dispose of 21,000 tons of hazardous wastes. Hooker stopped using the canal for waste disposal in 1952.

The dump was eventually covered with topsoil and the property was developed into a "dream community" of small bungalows and single-family homes. Complaints of foul odors and chemical residues, first reported in the 1960s, increased during the 1970s, as heavy rainfall caused the groundwater to rise, flooding area basements. More than 900 families were forced to leave their homes so that the site could be cleaned up.

The problems at the site were publicized nationally and considered a major factor in the passage of the Superfund law in 1980. The site was officially placed on EPA's list of hazardous waste sites needing cleanup in 1983.

EPA worked with the state to cap the land to prevent rainwater from reaching the waste, build a system to clean water draining from the site, clean out debris from the sewers and surrounding creeks, and remove polluted soil from nearby schools and residential properties. Because of the cleanup, EPA declared the site as safe and has returned it to productive use.

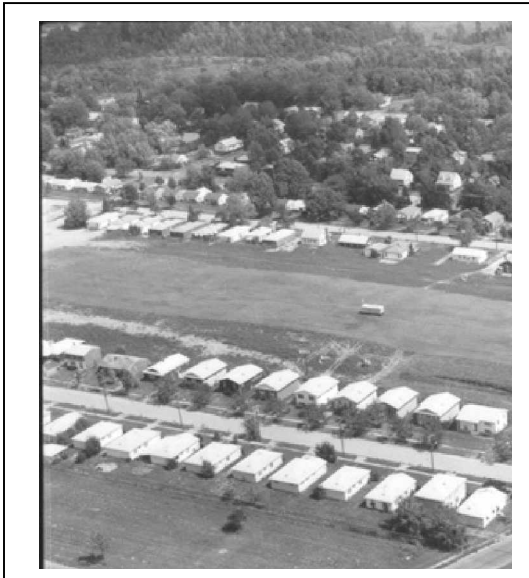
More than 200 new homes have been sold, creating an environmentally safe neighborhood on land once contaminated.<sup>1</sup>

At least that is the government's take on the situation at Love Canal.

However, Lois Gibbs, a former homemaker who came to national prominence as an environmental and social activist because of her actions at Love Canal, might see things differently. Gibbs doggedly pursued resolutions to this problem and became a national celebrity and organizer for grassroots environmental causes.

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[www.epa.gov/superfund/programs/recycle/success/briefs/ny\\_brief.htm](http://www.epa.gov/superfund/programs/recycle/success/briefs/ny_brief.htm) 2004.



The southern portion of Love Canal, facing east. The LaSalle Expressway is visible at bottom. (1980)  
Source:

[http://ublib.buffalo.edu/libraries/projects/lovecana/aerial\\_photos/aerial\\_1980.html](http://ublib.buffalo.edu/libraries/projects/lovecana/aerial_photos/aerial_1980.html)

## THE EMERGENCE OF A NEW YORK HOUSEWIFE AS A MAJOR 'ACTIVIST'



In 1976, 25-year old Lois Gibbs, a resident of Niagara Falls, read a cost-benefit analysis about the [Love Canal](#) project. She has since credited her reading of that

report as a seminal moment in her transition from homemaker to environmental activist. Gibbs came to realize that many of the health problems affecting her family, friends and neighbors were caused by the 20,000 tons of chemicals buried in her neighborhood. She emerged as a powerful voice for treating "hazardous wastes" as something truly hazardous that can't just be "thrown away"

without a terrible price to be paid by people and the environment.

Her transition to activist took another important step after her son was hospitalized with pneumonia. The school he attended was actually built on top of a waste dump where the Hooker Chemical Company, whose successor is Occidental Petroleum, had buried known toxics such as chloroform, dioxin, trichlorethane, tetrachlorethane, the banned pesticide Lindane and benzene. Gibbs admits she felt angry with Occidental Petroleum and with the U.S. government for allowing them to create such a dangerous environmental problem. Yet, she also felt angry with herself for not speaking out sooner and trying to get her neighbors to join together and take action for the community.

After her son was released from the hospital, she did what she felt was the only thing she could do. She went door-to-door with a clipboard and a petition saying, "My name is Lois Gibbs. I'm concerned about the 99th Street School. I want to know if you are concerned as well."

And indeed her neighbors were concerned. They only lacked someone to organize them and voice their concerns in a way that would bring about the necessary changes.

Gibbs and her neighbors formed The Love Canal Homeowners Association and called on government at all levels to close the school and relocate the entire neighborhood. The group was opposed to Occidental Petroleum and the government at all levels. Because both the private sector and the government argued that the neighborhood health problems had nothing to do with the 20,000 tons of toxic chemicals buried beneath the community.

However, truth, as so often happens, won out in the end. In October 1980, President Jimmy Carter issued an order allowing the paid evacuation of the 900 families living at Love Canal and started the process that has become known as [Superfund](#), to clean up other hazardous sites across the country.

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In the course of her struggle at Love Canal, Gibbs received encouragement from people all across the country, who were suffering from similar problems. In 1981, she responded by creating the [Center for Health, Environment and Justice](#), formerly known as the Citizens Clearinghouse for Hazardous Wastes, an organization that has assisted thousands of other community groups in their own efforts to organize, gather information, and lobby for preventative or corrective action.

Gibbs continues her fight for a cleaner, safer America in her role as Executive Director of the Center for Health, Environment and Justice. She has been awarded an honorary Doctorate by the State University of New York at Cortland, New York, the 1990 Goldman Environmental Prize, the 1998 Heinz Award and the 1999 John Gardner Leadership Award from the Independent Sector.<sup>2</sup>

#### 2004 MARKED A SIGNIFICANT ANNIVERSARY

2004 marked the 26<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this environmental issue that laid the groundwork for today's environmental and social justice movement. The crisis at Love Canal awoke the nation, and to a lesser extent the world, to the hazards of toxic chemicals in the environment.<sup>3</sup>

People nationwide began to realize that toxic chemicals dumps such as Love Canal were not isolated incidents but actually existed throughout the United States, and many of them were located directly next door to subdivisions filled with families.

The citizens' fight at Love Canal grew from a small movement initiated by two women. Their fight against Armand Hammer's multibillion-dollar Occidental Petroleum Corporation and the Federal government showed clearly that ordinary citizens can develop the necessary muscle to win against the giants when they are organized, committed and passionate.

This movement, which at first was dismissed by much of the government and some of the mainstream media, has grown to the point that activists at many different socioeconomic levels have engaged the government to cleanup the soil, air and water throughout the United States.

While the traditional environmental movement is led by lawyers, scientists, lobbyists, and public relations types, the grassroots movement consists of homemakers, farmers, blue-collar workers, ranchers-urban, suburban, rural, low-income people and communities of color.<sup>4</sup>

Yet, what's ironic if not incomprehensible to this author is that the "big" guys still don't seemingly understand what they should have learned from the Love Canal experience.

This paper examines those lessons learned and serves as a window into the strategy and tactics that were used 26 years ago to forge a grassroots movement that still burns brightly to this day.

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### Lesson One

*People in grassroots environmental organizations don't believe that the environmental and public health threats they face are due to random placement of industrial complexes or waste disposal facilities.<sup>5</sup>*

Simply stated, these communities believe the corporations targeted them and that they were to be sacrificed in the name of economic growth and profits. Unfortunately, history and a growing amount of evidence suggest this may indeed have traction.

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<sup>2</sup> [www.ecotopia.org/ehof/gibbs/](http://www.ecotopia.org/ehof/gibbs/)

<sup>3</sup> 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition Love Canal – The Story Continues, Lois Marie Gibbs, New Society Publishers p1, 1998.

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<sup>4</sup> 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition Love Canal – The Story Continues, Lois Marie Gibbs, New Society Publishers p1, 1998

<sup>5</sup> 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition Love Canal – The Story Continues, Lois Marie Gibbs, New Society Publishers p2, 1998.

# ARMSTRONG and Associates

## BEHAVIORAL PUBLIC RELATIONS

Even more alarming is the insensitivity that the government and corporations have toward the families within these affected communities. Mounting evidence shows that originally these communities were targeted as siting areas for waste-disposal and industrial growth based on their original demographics and the assumption that there was not enough community-based power to stop the actions of the developers.

Two reports written in the 1980s by two public relations firms lay the foundation for understanding how the activists' community could believe this assumption. Both studies discussed the political issues faced with siting waste sites:

*The Political Difficulties Facing Waste-to-Energy Conversion Plant Siting* prepared for the State of California by Cerrell Associates, Inc.,<sup>6</sup> a public affairs firm in California and a report prepared for Chem Nuclear Systems by Epley Associates, a PR-firm hired by and paid for by the North Carolina Radioactive Waste Management Siting Authority.

What is unique about both reports is that they outline criteria for "communities least likely to resist" such sitings.

The conclusions reached are symptomatic of where issues exist today. They suggested that sites in the southern, Midwestern or rural areas demonstrate an "openness" to promises of economic benefits, the residents are older in age, with high school or less education, low income and not involved in social issues.

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<sup>6</sup>Cerrell Associates has been involved in numerous advocacy efforts to set public policy. Recent projects include land use and entitlements, environmental hazards and remediation, regional air quality, mass transportation systems, and healthcare issues. They reportedly communicate with the news media, government leaders and opinion-makers to affect change. Cerrell Associates is a member firm of the Worldcom Public Relations Group, the world's largest consortium of independently owned public relations counseling firms.

The Epley report even went as far as to categorize the housing in these areas as "shacks" and refer frequently to the local population as the "black community."

In 1988, the *Los Angeles Times* broke the story of the Cerrell Report and the immediate response by public relations officials in the corporate and government world seemed to have been coordinated—the spokespeople referred to this situation as a "unique example, which didn't represent the industry's norm in siting criteria."<sup>7</sup>

Then in 1991, the Epley report was leaked. It also used the same demographics as the primary criteria for industrial siting.

An example in the past few years of the use of this demographics approach can clearly be seen, according to some activists, in the plan by Shintech, Inc.<sup>8</sup> to construct a polyvinyl chloride (PVC) plant in St. James Parish, La., a predominantly African-American, low income community. St. James Parish is located in an already heavily polluted area that has become known by the public and the media as "Cancer Alley."

### RECOMMENDED READING

- Love Canal: The Story Continues by Lois Marie Gibbs
- The Road to Love Canal: Managing Industrial Waste Before EPA by Craig E. Colten
- Evaluating Scientific Research: Separating Fact from Fiction by Fred Leavitt
- Deceit and Denial: The Deadly Politics of Industrial Pollution (California/Milbank Books on Health and the Public, 6) by Gerald Markowitz
- Voodoo Science: The Road from Foolishness to Fraud by Robert L. Park

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<sup>7</sup>*Los Angeles Times*, January 1988.

<sup>8</sup>Shintech is a US subsidiary of Japanese diversified chemicals giant Shin-Etsu Chemical Co. that produces PVC. Based in Houston, Shintech has plants in Freeport, Texas and in Louisiana. Shintech services the North American market for Shin-Etsu but also exports its product throughout the world.

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## Lesson Two

*Government bureaucrats, elected officials and corporate management fail to understand that although these communities maybe low-income and lesser educated, these impacted stakeholders are willing to speak up and speak out, to put their lives and their families on the line to stop the developments or to insist on cleanup of the problems after the fact.*

These impacted stakeholders are much like the character in the movie Network News, "They are damn mad and they ain't gonna take it any more."

The families in these communities and their homes are lifetime investments and their children are their lives.

Do you think this is hyperbole? That only the most dedicated activist would do such things?

In September 1982, families in the low-income, African-American community of Warren County, N.C. literally laid down in the middle of their streets to stop trucks filled with PCBs from being dumped in their neighborhood.

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### THE WARREN COUNTY NORTH CAROLINA CAPER AND THE EMERGENCE OF AN EPA 'WHISTLEBLOWER'

*Opponents of a Warren County PCB landfill said yesterday they will continue to fight it, and an EPA official who joined the protesters said hazardous waste dumps are built on "hope, not engineering, not science."*

*William Sanjour, head of the agency's hazardous waste implementation branch, spoke at a rally held by the landfill opponents.*

*In an interview, Sanjour said he came to express his personal view that the PCB will leak out.*

*That view is not shared by the EPA, which maintains that the landfill will be safe.*

*Meanwhile, the leader of a Warren County citizen's group said protests against the landfill will continue today in an effort to block the recently opened facility.*

*"We'll march, I'm sure of that," said Ken Ferruccio. "I can guarantee you you're going to continue to see resistance build."*

*There have been 277 arrests -- most for blocking traffic -- since the landfill opened Sept. 15 as a disposal site for dirt contaminated when PCB was illegally dumped along 210 miles of North Carolina highways more than four years ago.*

*"We'll never stop" lying in front of trucks heading for the landfill, Ferruccio said. "That is the spirit of the thing here."*

*Sanjour said he came to Warren County as a representative of the Citizens' Clearing House for Hazardous Wastes.*

*"Basically, hazardous waste landfills don't work, and the decision to build them is purely political and not based on technology," he said.*

*"It's hope, not engineering, not science -- hope," Sanjour said.*

*The landfill is made up of a bed of clay covered by plastic sheeting. Another layer of plastic and clay, followed by a layer of soil and grass in order to prevent leakage, will cover the contaminated soil.*

*However, Sanjour said the cap would "subside" or erode, exposing the plastic liner to deterioration and allowing the PCB to escape. He also said the clay bed under the landfill could settle, causing cracks or holes that would allow the toxic chemical to escape.*

*Once the landfill is completed, Sanjour said, he doubts it would receive any maintenance to prevent leaks. "I think they'll just forget about it. If it's hard to find money to maintain roads, how are you going to find money for a landfill?" he said.*

However, Bryant Haskins, a spokesman for the state Department of Human Resources, said the state will provide maintenance.

"If there is erosion on the topsoil, we'll go in and repair it," he said. He added that he doubts that will happen and pointed out that the soil and grass top layer will be sloped like a football field to allow water to run off.

Haskins said there are systems built under the landfill to collect any materials that leak.

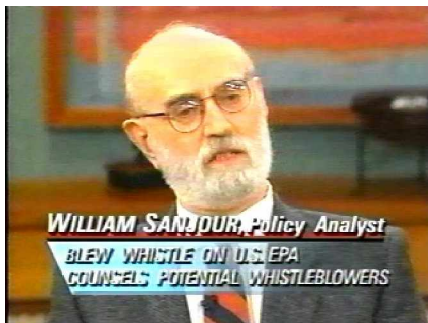
He said he expects cleanup work to continue today at the landfill, despite heavy rains that fell over much of North Carolina yesterday.

"If it's not puddling and not pouring down rain, we can pick up like we normally do."

Any rainwater that becomes mixed with contaminated soil would be pumped into a special holding pond, mixed with a cement-like substance and allowed to harden for disposal, Haskins said. <sup>9</sup>

You would think that such actions would indeed help educate the media, the bureaucrats and the corporate managers about how important such issues are to these stakeholders. You would think yet sometimes the voice of reason comes from an unexpected contributor.

CONSIDER HOW THE MEDIA RESPONDED TO THE COMMENTS OF AN EPA OFFICIAL ABOUT THIS INCIDENT IN THIS EDITORIAL FROM THE WINSTON-SALEM JOURNAL, WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 29, 1982.



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<sup>9</sup><http://pwp.lincs.net/sanjour/warren2.htm>  
Winston-Salem Journal, Wednesday,  
September 29, 1982.

William Sanjour should have known better, but he evidently didn't.

Sanjour, the chief of the federal Environmental Protection Agency's hazardous waste implementation program, had no business speaking at a protest rally in Warren County the other day. Yet speak he did, and in the process helped inflame a situation that's already grown too hot.

The situation involves the dumping of more than 35,000 cubic yards of dirt that had been contaminated by toxic PCBs. The soil had been contaminated back in 1978 when PCB-laden. Oil was dumped along more than 200 miles of roadsides in 14 North Carolina counties. After a great deal of discussion and examination, the state decided that the best way to dispose of the soil was to bury it in a landfill. A landfill near Afton in Warren County was chosen as the site.

A hue and cry arose in Warren County. That was understandable--nobody wants hazardous wastes dumped near home. But the controversy soon took on political rather than environmental overtones. Indeed, the landfill dispute has become a cause celebre attracting just about anyone who has a bone to pick with the state of North Carolina.

Enter Sanjour. He went out of his way to say that he was speaking only for himself, and not for the agency that employs him. Then he began playing to his audience. "I'm here to tell the people about hazardous landfills," he said, "I know they don't work." Yet, in his address, Sanjour offered no realistic alternatives to the landfill.

He went on to describe landfills in general as being political rather than environmental issues. Then he prophesied that the establishment of the PCB dump would be a "wedge" that would allow the creation of other hazardous waste landfills in Warren County.

By doing so, Sanjour did nothing but play to his audience's fears. Why did he do so? If Sanjour believes that hazardous waste landfills don't work, he has every right, even duty, to present that case to the public. However, he doesn't have any excuse for making that case, which he didn't make

*anyway, at an emotionally charged political forum such as the one in Warren County. He doesn't have an excuse, even given his caveat about speaking for himself and not for the EPA, for injecting himself into a local dispute. That's simply not the sort of conduct one expects from a public official.*

*Indeed, Sanjour's conduct was most unbecoming. A public official, including a non-elected public official such as an EPA official, is supposed to further the public interest. By playing to the fears of his listeners, Sanjour did nothing to serve the public interest. In fact, he did just the opposite. He stood before a crowd of already agitated people, and made them even more agitated.*

*Sanjour had no excuse for what he did. He should have known better than to say what he said. Sanjour clearly stepped beyond the bounds of acceptable conduct for a public official. It's up to his superiors to rein him in before he does any more damage. He's already done more than his share.<sup>10</sup>*



Local concerned citizens assert their rights to protest the Warren County Landfill. Source: [http://www.ncwarn.org/images/WarrenCounty\\_1.jpg](http://www.ncwarn.org/images/WarrenCounty_1.jpg)

It is evident that when families and their children are at risk, people will do things they wouldn't ordinarily do to protect them—even if it means lying down in front of trucks carrying PCBs. EPA manager William Sanjour spoke his truth and placed a great deal of this issue into a perspective that the grassroots activist could grasp. Eventually he became a whistleblower at EPA prior to his retirement.

*Although the landfill in Warren County was ultimately built, it is said that this protest publicly combined the issues of poverty, race and environmental health as never before and thus, the Environmental Justice (EJ) movement was born.<sup>11</sup>*



*"He who wants change without struggle," Fredrick Douglas, the abolitionist and statesman said, "are like the farmers who want crops without having to plow."*

Clearly, history and experience has demonstrated to many activists that to effect change you must work within and outside the government systems and the plowing takes more than just one pass among the rows.

Reports such as those of Cerrell and Epley have resulted in grassroots movements growing into more than 8,000 known grassroots groups and some 27,000 activists throughout the United States.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>[www.pwp.lincs.net/sanjour/Rein.htm](http://www.pwp.lincs.net/sanjour/Rein.htm)  
Winston-Salem Journal, Wednesday,  
September 29, 1982.

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<sup>11</sup>[www.apcd.org/permit/t5tutorial/t5ej/tsld003.htm](http://www.apcd.org/permit/t5tutorial/t5ej/tsld003.htm)

<sup>12</sup>20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition Love Canal – The Story Continues, Lois Marie Gibbs, New Society Publishers p5, 1998.

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## Lesson Three

*People power and common sense are the most valuable assets the activists have.*

For some reason unfathomable to this author, as activists emerge and grassroots movements evolve around an issue, government and corporate managers exemplify Voltaire's view that "Common sense is not so common anymore."

Corporate and government managers seem to isolate themselves from the grassroots activists at the outset. For example, the impacted stakeholders often can't hire legal or technical expertise yet they can and do stop, look around and know when something is wrong.

The Love Canal activists used their common sense to observe and document disease in their community--they saw dead vegetation, they smelled chemicals and they tasted bad water.

These activists intuitively knew and understood their health and that of their children was at risk and they had a strong sense of and belief in human rights and justice. These are powerful drivers that can and will affect change in society when combined with persistence and a savvy understanding of how to engage the media in your campaign.

Activists believe that no one has the right to make their families sick, and that they shouldn't have the burden of proving that their exposure to chemicals caused their health problems, while the chemical companies are presumed innocent.<sup>13</sup>

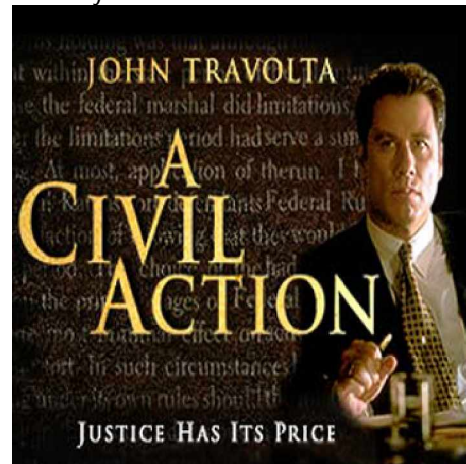
And while the impacted stakeholders sit and wonder how long they must be exposed to a hazardous chemical, the government and chemical companies argue over how much exposure is too much. However, they will not be stymied by such needs. Grassroots activists

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<sup>13</sup>20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition Love Canal – The Story Continues, Lois Marie Gibbs, New Society Publishers p5, 1998.

have become skillful and sophisticated health investigators.

Perhaps the government and corporate managers should consider that on almost every single instance the hypotheses drawn by local people about health concerns has later been proven accurate by the professional community.



The environmental incident in Woburn, Mass. ended up being the basis of a national best selling book and a movie starring John Travolta. *A Civil Action* made all public relations practitioners stop and take pause and in many ways changed the way the Commonwealth of Massachusetts provided for public involvement in its remediation programs. Source: [http://pesz.tar.hu/a\\_civil\\_action-front.jpg](http://pesz.tar.hu/a_civil_action-front.jpg)

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Take Woburn, MA., where mothers of children first observed in 1979 a cluster of leukemia cases among neighborhood children. Although state and local authorities investigated they came to the conclusion there was no connection between local drinking water and the clustering of the disease. Yet, the parents persevered and began making maps--one showing where the cancers were occurring and another clearly showing that these families were all using the same waterlines coming from a contaminated well. They distributed these maps to politicians, corporate and government agency managers, to anyone who would listen. Years later, the Center for

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Disease Control would vindicate the parents, confirm the cluster and close the well.

Throughout this process, the corporate and government managers responsible for investigating frequently stonewalled the grassroots activists using legal and regulatory actions. The case ended in court and eventually was awarded the largest single environmental settlement in the United States—all because grassroots activists were concerned enough about their families and their children to stand up and fight .

In San Jose, CA., parents sharing conversation at a local playground discovered that many children in their neighborhood were born with identical heart birth defects. They believed the health problems were connected to their water supply. They pushed and fought with government officials for years before they were successful in shutting down a contaminated well when their “common sense” findings concerning the heart defects were confirmed by CDC.

Again in Brownsville, TX, parents found a cluster of children being born with brains outside their skulls. In Tucson, AZ, citizens uncovered a large number of young boys at the same elementary school with testicular cancers. Although in each case the parents raised these issues with government authorities, just as often they were dismissed. Government officials failed to use “common sense” and listen to the complaints. Instead in most cases, they simply dismissed the issues as coming from “uninformed” or “hysterical” or “trouble-making” citizens.

It was the abject insensitivity and the failure of those in authority to subjectively investigate the complaints that in every case incensed and drove the citizens to public confrontation. Man is not by nature a confrontational creature. Yet, when ignored and spurned, when not listened to, or when outright rejected, grassroots activists will find a way to communicate their concerns.

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## Lesson Four

*Grassroots activists have learned how to use the media and the media have learned how to use them for a story.*

Over the years, grassroots activism has grown exponentially as the government and corporate world has gone through the cycles of engaging and disengaging in the public participation and public involvement process. Simply stated, grassroots activism is here to stay whether managers like it or not.

The movement has connected throughout the United States, sharing ideas and lessons learned, holding workshops, and offering support. In some cases, grassroots activists have teamed with paid activists and larger environmental organizations. In other cases, they have stayed working locally as effectively as they can for their causes.

The media is a major player in the success of grassroots activism. Most grassroots activists initially have little understanding of how the media works, but they quickly learn and many today are experts at effectively using the media.<sup>14</sup>

One of the primary reasons activists are much more effective at using the media than are government or corporate managers is their sincerity and their humanness. It is hard to ignore the woman holding the child who is simply asking for answers; or the woman looking across her property at barrels of liquid seeping out of the ground and asking why; or the farmer inspecting dead cattle and wondering about his own health.

Corporate and government managers may be more technically experienced at media relations and yet it is the emotional appeal and concern that translates to empathy and that connects with the audience.

During the media flurry at Love Canal in 1979, Lois Marie Gibbs, Executive Director of the Center For Health, Environment and Justice, was asked why the citizens at Love Canal felt

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<sup>14</sup>Dr. L. Darryl Armstrong in speech to Paducah, KY Rotary Club, January 2000

the need to "work outside the system" and "exploit the illness of their children."

She replied, "Only a person who has never sat with a sick child, tried to work with unresponsive government bureaucrats, faced huge corporate relations campaigns could ask such a question."



Activists have learned the art of using "sound bites" to their benefit.

And that, my reader, is the basis for a "sound bite." The activists have become near experts at using sound bites to communicate their messages while all too often government and corporate "managers" feel insecure and incapable in condensing their messages into usable quotes.

Consider these "sound bites" from a recent grassroots activist in Florida:<sup>15</sup>

*"We have been left sitting atop of a virtual time bomb. This cannot and should not continue."*

*"We all have had migraines, we have all had bronchitis, we have had all had diarrhea. Is that a coincidence? I don't think so."*

*"We are frightened, we are torn, we are feeling misplaced."*

*"As you and other county officials are aware and have been for sometime now, the spill or spills in our residential area occurred and were reported to you as far back as 1999. No one felt compelled to inform us, the community. It has now been 13 months. We need answers and we need assistance now."*

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<sup>15</sup>Bradenton Herald, Bradenton, FL, January 2005

## Lesson Five

*Many successful activists are amiable and expressive, know how to use emotion to convey their messages and make their points, and they use these traits intuitively to their benefit.*

Many corporate and government managers have a serious problem being able to empathize with the grassroots activist who sees their property values plummeting, their children's health at risk, and their community at odds over an environmental issue.

And yet those managers who understand that this is "personal" for the activist, that manager who can empathize, listen and respond honestly, simply and in language that is congruent with the receiver, can help avert serious conflict within the community.

In our review of conflicts and the personalities associated with them, we have found corporate and government managers who are so highly technical and analytical in their styles that when faced with amiable, expressive activists they literally are intimidated into submission.

Lois Marie Gibbs remarked repeatedly about government managers working the Love Canal project who she felt were "good men...trying to do the right thing."<sup>16</sup>

Yet again and again, these managers were unable to relate to the emotions of the activists, unable to generate empathy and genuine understanding of the various concerns and fell victim to being seen and perceived as insensitive and unconcerned.

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<sup>16</sup>20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition Love Canal – The Story Continues, Lois Marie Gibbs, New Society Publishers, 1998

## Lesson Six

### *"No" means "NO" to grassroots activists.*

True grassroots activists in this movement are not willing to "compromise" on issues such as a "little chemical exposure."<sup>17</sup> Compromising means sacrificing the health of their families, the value of their property, and the viability of their communities.

These activists will not go quietly into the night. They will use every conceivable and legal means to stop the inequity they believe they are experiencing. Their value systems have been infringed upon and they are value based.

Yet, as time has shown, many are willing to find ways to "make it right" and will give the corporate and government manager latitude at the outset while attempting to arrive at a mutually satisfactory solution.

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## Lesson Seven

### *Raise enough attention to an issue and you can even get Congress (Governor, Legislature) to pay attention to your problem, if it meets their political agenda.*

Beginning with the Love Canal situation in 1979, grassroots activists have been instrumental in helping promulgate such laws as the Superfund (CERCLA, 1980) and its amendment in 1986. They drove Congress to pass "right-to-know" laws and emergency planning regulations.

Because of the efforts of these grassroots activists, citizens today throughout the United States know what chemicals are being stored, transported and disposed of in their

communities. Hundreds of garbage incinerators have not been built; thousands of

landfills were closed. Recycling is now a household way of life, not a novelty. Corporations nationwide have significantly reduced the use of toxic chemicals.

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## Lesson Eight

### *Come together in a common cause and keep your strategy simple and your tasks focused.*

In 1982, grassroots' leadership nationally coalesced and met in roundtables across the country to develop a strategy to stop corporations from the land filling of hazardous waste.

The strategy was to increase the cost for corporations wanting to bury their hazardous waste.

Three distinct tactics were outlined:

- 1) Close existing hazardous waste landfills
- 2) Stop construction of new landfills, and
- 3) Increase transportation costs.

Whenever new proposals were launched by the waste industry to locate a new landfill, the grassroots activists came together to oppose it. With the exception of one in Colorado, through 1998 the grassroots movement had defeated all proposals.<sup>18</sup>

A large percentage of the existing landfills were shutdown, which left a handful of existing landfills for use by the industry. This meant that companies had to pay more to transport their wastes and insurance rates skyrocketed.

Today, commercial land filling of hazardous and toxic wastes has ground almost to a halt while waste reduction, chemical reuse and

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<sup>17</sup>From Love Canal to Environmental Justice, Thomas H. Fletcher, Broadview Press, 2003

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<sup>18</sup>20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition Love Canal – The Story Continues, Lois Marie Gibbs, New Society Publishers, 1998

chemical substitution has grown exponentially. There is no Federal law preventing commercial burying of hazardous waste. The people--grassroots activists nationwide--simply won't allow it to happen.

In 1987, grassroots activists designed a campaign to stop the use of Styrofoam packaging and targeted the fast food giant McDonald's Corporation, a company sensitive to public opinion. The activists believed that if they could get enough McDonald customers to force McDonald's to stop using Styrofoam that other fast food restaurants and businesses would follow suit.

The campaign was launched in the environmentally friendly state of Vermont and encompassed school children, religious institutions, county governments and those faced with the potential siting of landfills and incinerators. The effort was broad-based which in and of itself greatly expanded the movement. As school children adopted the campaign, others came on board. Finally, on November 1, 1990, McDonald's banned Styrofoam use in its restaurants.

The victory went beyond McDonald's and spread to counties, churches, restaurants and schools throughout the United States--all of them banning its use.

This campaign set the stage for the next generation of activists as school children and others who worked this issue began to see the power behind the movement of a group of dedicated people.

*"The Wells, Maine environmental remediation project's success was directly related to the excellent pre-planning for community relations and public involvement that Armstrong and Associates did for us. They also did an exemplary job of developing products for use in the community and preparing me to deal with the media." [Dr. Paola Macchiaroli](#), TRC Inc. or 1.781.875.1881*

## Lesson Nine

*Environmental justice and human rights are themes that resonant with the common man.*

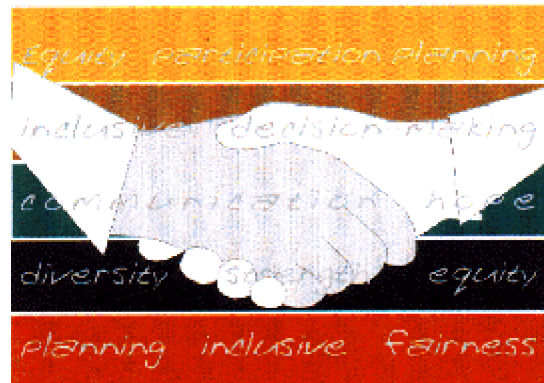
In the years following the 1982 Warren County protest, countless stories emerged of communities living adjacent to industrial facilities that were fighting to close or clean them up. But there were few organized

national movements to help these communities of low income and/or color.

However, some companies and a few state agencies began to voluntarily develop and establish programs to reach out to the residents living near industrial plants and open a dialogue with them. It became apparent to

the more enlightened management in the corporate world that such efforts were critical for future working relationships.

## Environmental Justice



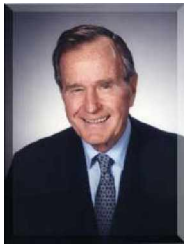
Focus on environmental justice, as it is now known, and the human rights associated with the environmental movement, began in earnest in October 1991 when the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit was held in Washington, D.C.

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At this summit the attendees agreed to these basic principles:

- Environmental laws must be enforced equally and that action be taken to reduce high levels of pollution in their communities, and
- Access must be gained to the negotiations between state regulators and companies regarding the cleanup of a dirty plant, the siting of a new facility, or other projects that affect the day-to-day lives of residents.<sup>19</sup>

The summit brought together many diverse cultures and communities that were interested in political and spiritual growth.<sup>20</sup>



Following the People of Color Summit, President George H. W. Bush and the EPA took note of the EJ movement and in 1990 ordered EPA to form an Office on Environmental Equity to address this issue.

In 1992, the EPA Office on Environmental Equity published a report “Environmental Equity: Reducing Risk for All Communities,” which reviewed existing studies and basically confirmed what the EJ movement had been saying all along.



Then in 1994, President William Jefferson Clinton embraced the environmental justice cause by signing Executive Order No. 12898, which created an interagency Federal Working Group on

EJ. This executive order gave national priority to what had previously been a community-based, grassroots movement.

This order acknowledged some of the obvious: that communities of color and low-income

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<sup>19</sup>[www.apcd.org/permit/t5tutorial/t5ej/tsld005.htm](http://www.apcd.org/permit/t5tutorial/t5ej/tsld005.htm)

<sup>20</sup>20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition Love Canal – The Story Continues, Lois Marie Gibbs, New Society Publishers, 1998.

communities receive more than their fair share of waste generating industries and waste sites. The order provides guidance for federal and state agencies to examine whether communities of color or low-income areas are deliberately targeted by waste generating industries over alternative sites.

Further, it suggests reviewing whether the cleanup processes proposed or implemented are different in the communities of color than in other communities.

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## Lesson Ten

*Find an issue that resonates with all the people. Build a campaign around it to inform and educate the general public.*

For many years people believed that the Love Canal situation was an isolated event. In 1980, the EPA took a closer look and found 30,000 other potential Love Canals spread across the United States. Yet, the majority of the population still felt relatively safe—as long as they didn’t live near Love Canal or another similarly targeted community. They were not worried.

In 1994, EPA shattered that presumption of safety when it released a draft report on the health effects of dioxin. According to the Agency of Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) and related research by the Center for Disease Control (CDC), dioxin can cause cancer, depress the immune system, cause developmental problems such as early pubescence in girls, and undersized penises in boys, infertility, diabetes and skin disorders. Dioxin also crosses placenta and can cause learning disabilities, attention deficit disorder and birth defects.

In that same 1994 study, EPA advised that on the average Americans had accumulated enough dioxin in their bodies such that any additional exposure could cause adverse health effects in some people.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>[www.cqs.com/epa/health/](http://www.cqs.com/epa/health/)

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As recently as December 2004, the dangers of dioxin poisoning were further exposed. Doctors from the Rudolfinerhaus clinic in Vienna say "there is no doubt" Ukrainian opposition leader Victor Yushchenko was poisoned with Dioxin. Yushchenko's body had about 1,000 times more than the normal concentration of the toxin.<sup>22</sup>

Families exposed to dioxins at Love Canal, according to Lois Marie Gibbs, and at other contaminated sites have passed the safe contamination thresholds, as have many Vietnam veterans who were exposed to dioxins through Agent Orange.<sup>23</sup>

The general public continues to be exposed to low-levels of dioxins through our food supply. Dioxins come from incinerators burning household, medical and hazardous wastes. They exist in paper from pulp mills that use chlorine in bleaching; from plastics and pesticides and from cement kilns. When dioxins are released into the environment through smokestacks, they travel great distances and fall onto grains and fields where they are eaten by livestock. Drinking milk, eating beef or chicken, fish and shellfish expose people to dioxins.

The exposure of the entire nation's population to a deadly chemical set the stage for the opportunity that the grassroots activist movement was seeking. It provided the basis for common ground, and it impacted not just those people living near toxic sites but all people. Thus, the grassroots activists seized the opportunity to expand their movement nationally by taking on the issue of dioxin exposure.

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<sup>22</sup>[http://en.wikinews.org/wiki/Ukraine\\_opposition\\_candidate\\_Yushchenko\\_is\\_suffering\\_from\\_a\\_Dioxin\\_intoxication,\\_doctors\\_say](http://en.wikinews.org/wiki/Ukraine_opposition_candidate_Yushchenko_is_suffering_from_a_Dioxin_intoxication,_doctors_say)

<sup>23</sup>20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition Love Canal – The Story Continues, Lois Marie Gibbs, New Society Publishers, 1998.

## Lesson Eleven

*Find a champion that can finance the movement. Integrate the principles associated with the grassroots environmental movement and be persistent at all levels in making change. Find political support on both sides of the aisle.*

In 1995, the Stop Dioxin Exposure Campaign was launched at a roundtable meeting that brought together forty grassroots leaders. The campaign's main goal is to strive toward a sustainable society in which there is no dioxin

in our food or breast milk because there will be no dioxin formation, discharge or exposure. The Center for Health, Environment and Justice (CHEJ) rallied the activists and took on the responsibility for championing the cause.

The campaign is working with a diverse array of people and professions: nurses, parent-teacher groups, unions, physicians, churches and religious groups, organic farmers and of course those who live near toxic discharge sites.

In March 1996, 600 activists attended the Third Citizen's Conference on Dioxin held in Baton Rouge, LA which led to the formation of a national steering committee. Out of this meeting several goals were met, including a final draft of a publication addressing strategies for the seven key sources of dioxin as outlined by the EPA in their source inventory. In September, as an outgrowth of the Baton Rouge conference, representatives from 35 organizations met to develop a nationwide campaign—Health Care Without Harm, which was designed to transform the health care industry so that it's no longer a source of environmental harm by eliminating dioxin emissions in health care practices. There remains tremendous overlap between Health Care Without Harm and the Dioxin Campaign. In December, CHEJ coordinated the publishing of "Taking Action: Strategies to Stop Dioxin Exposure" and distributed over 1,000 copies to grassroots communities across the United States.

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In 1997, The Stop Dioxin Exposure Campaign started a regular newsletter, *Dioxin Digest*, which is regularly distributed to over 1,000 dioxin activists nationwide. The goal of the Digest is to provide activists with important updates on dioxin policy and provide them with opportunities to get active by writing letters, participating in local events, and calling their elected officials. As part of its coordination role, CHEJ established a Steering Committee for the campaign made up of key leaders from impacted communities. The Steering Committee had regular strategy meetings via conference calls.

In 1999, CHEJ released a peer-reviewed "America's People's Dioxin Report." This report consisted of three parts, including health effects, policy recommendations and technical support documents that provide a comprehensive report on the health effects of dioxin. They developed this document using the data in the EPA's 1994 draft along with the scientific literature on dioxin produced since that time.

On June 5, 2000, CHEJ placed a print advertisement in the New York Times that listed the names of more than 150 groups calling on President Clinton and Vice President Gore to formulate a national elimination strategy. On June 9, A National Day of Action for Dioxin was held. Thirty-eight local press events took place in communities across 24 states. This included communities where dioxin-emitting facilities were located and resulted in more than 200 press hits.

In August, CHEJ played a leadership role in planning and coordinating the International People's Dioxin Action summit in Berkeley, CA where 350 dioxin activists from 25 countries came together to craft collaborative strategies for the elimination of dioxin. In November, people from 32 communities in CHEJ's network, including organic farmers, health-impacted individuals, Vietnam Veterans and indigenous people testified at EPA's Science Advisory Board review committee of the Dioxin Reassessment.

In 2001, CHEJ sent a letter to President George W. Bush with 413 signatures urging him to make protection of public health from dioxin exposure a top priority during his

administration. On March 12, seven grassroots dioxin activists flew in from around the country to meet with representatives of the EPA and CEQ, a meeting arranged in response to CHEJ's sign on letter. At that meeting, activists urged the Bush administration to support the EPA's efforts to complete the Dioxin Reassessment along with subsequent policy documents. CHEJ produced a report entitled "Behind Closed Doors," which outlined the influence and impact the chemical industry lobby has had on the reassessment process and on the Stockholm Convention.

On August 2, forty-one Members of Congress, led by Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D-CA), called on the Bush Administration to finalize and release a landmark report on the health effects of dioxin. CHEJ watchdogged the SAB's review of the Dioxin Reassessment, including providing testimony at the SAB Executive Committee meeting where they recommended that the EPA release the reassessment "expeditiously."

In February 2002, CHEJ staff and campaign partners testified at a second NAS meeting by presenting the committee with personal stories of people living in 31 contaminated communities.

On May 5, CHEJ helped to coordinate Blue Vinyl screenings, which is a documentary about the link between PVC and dioxin, in 84 locations. This provided the opportunity for regional dioxin communities to network, organize and educate the public. In August, 66 members of Congress co-sponsored by three House members: Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D-CA), Rep. Barbara Lee (D-CA) and Mike Ferguson (R-NJ) called on the Bush Administration for the second time, demanding they shift the focus from researching the Dioxin Reassessment to actually implementing policies to protect the American people.

And in 2003, CHEJ continued the watchdog the process and pushed for the completion and release of the EPA's Dioxin Reassessment. Campaign partners actively introduced policies on the state and local level

aimed at eliminating dioxin and other persistent toxic chemicals.<sup>24</sup>

The grassroots leadership and CHEJ conference annually and the latest strategies outlined include:<sup>25</sup>

- Stopping all forms of incineration including burning medical, municipal, hazardous and military waste;
- Exposing and challenging all dioxin assaults on low income and people of color communities;
- Phasing out industrial uses of chlorine including its use in pulp and paper manufacturing and in PVC plastics;
- Including provisions for workers;
- Identifying more clearly the many sources of dioxin;
- Determining the levels of dioxin in food and breast milk;
- Promoting safe alternatives, jobs, products and technologies.

Thus, a grassroots movement that touches all lives was born and it articulates daily.



Many of the lessons learned discussed in this document were applied at the Portland Bangor Waste Oil Site in Wells, ME.

<sup>24</sup><http://www.safealternatives.org/dio2003.html>

<sup>25</sup><http://www.safealternatives.org/dio2003.html>

## Lesson Twelve

*Don't be deterred in your cause. Persistence will pay off if by no other means by simply "wearing them down."*

Grassroots activists have learned the hard way that government and corporations move slowly in making change, embracing new ideas, and yes sometimes in even "doing the right thing."

*Yet, as Margaret Meade the great sociologist so succinctly and aptly stated, "Never doubt that a small group of people can change the world, indeed, it is the only thing that ever does."*

**ACTIVISTS ACROSS THE COUNTRY HAVE LEARNED THE LESSONS WELL FROM THE EXPERIENCE AT LOVE CANAL. - BUT HAVE WE AS COMMUNICATORS DONE THE SAME?**

Corporations and government agencies are still learning. In some cases, that learning has included the expenditure of massive amounts of money in a court of law defending their previous actions and the recent discovery that making room at the table for the activist may create a workable solution.

Until corporate and government managers can truly open their minds and their thinking and understand the mindset of the activists, they will continue to be at a disadvantage. They will continue to be frustrated and claim that the "activists" are simply out for their own "selfish" agendas.

Yet, when corporate and government managers eventually tire of litigating these issues and decide to genuinely sit down and find actionable alternatives and ways to work with the activists we will all have a better environment in which to live and work.

## Consultant's recommendations

This author, as a life member of the International Association of Public Participation (IAP2), suggests the following IAP2 principles for public involvement<sup>26</sup> could be a set of actionable values that could be adopted by all managers seeking to effectively work with grassroots activists.

When managers adopt such actionable values and "walk their talk" when using them they can leave the community at the end of the project with the community speaking as well of the corporation as possible. They can stay out of the court of law and money draining litigation and they can win in the court of public opinion.

Those principles are:

*The public should have a say in decisions about actions that affect their lives.*

*Public participation includes the promise that the public's contribution will influence the decision.*

*The public participation process communicates the interests and meets the process needs of all participants.*

*The public participation process seeks out and facilitates the involvement of those potentially affected.*

*The public participation process involves participants in defining how they participate.*

*The public participation process provides participants with the information they need to participate in a meaningful way.*

*The public participation process communicates to participants how their input affected the decision.*

Companies such as TRC, Lockheed Martin, McNulty Real Estate, Martin Marietta, Arcadis, Shaw Engineering and other for profit and nonprofit clients we have worked with over the years that have adopted these principles and developed plans around them to implement them have succeeded.

We recommend the reader seriously contemplate similar strategies, programs and efforts for the communities in which they plan to work.

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*"Every now and then you get to work with professionals who go beyond the expected and venture into the extraordinary. Professionals, who will provide you a sound plan of action and the skills necessary to help you succeed in your work. Darryl and Kay Armstrong are two such professionals. We have nothing but the highest regard for their work and their services. If they tell you they will do it, it gets done right the first time." [Gail Rymer](#), Director of Corporate Community Relations, Lockheed Martin Corporation, Tel. 1.800.449.4486*

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*"Armstrong and Associates assisted ARCADIS and its client in implementing a public communications program for a large state Superfund site on Long Island. The guidance we received from both Darryl and Kay was instrumental in focusing on the critical issues and shaping the public presentations so that we could communicate complex data in a simple and understandable fashion. The program ultimately resulted in strong community support for the remedial actions the client wished to implement." [Nick Valkenburg](#), Project Manager, ARCADIS*

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<sup>26</sup><http://iap2.org/>

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