

# Diane Hebert

## Public Health Activist

*Diane Hebert has been a social activist since 1978. After her ex-husband was exposed to radiation in the workplace, Diane focused her efforts on public health risks associated with her home town's biggest employer, Dow Chemical. Diane has worked with local and national organizations and with citizens and attorneys to clean up dioxin contamination in Midland County, Michigan. NELC interviewed Diane this spring.*

### **What is the greatest challenge you face in confronting Dow Chemical?**

Getting the truth out. Dow spends so much time and money cultivating its image—the company contributes to universities and local organizations, not to mention working overtime on public relations—and people believe what they say, or are unwilling to challenge those things they do not accept. My greatest challenge is to get the truth out so that people have accurate information to counter Dow's claims. Often people don't know the right questions to ask and they just accept Dow's propaganda. I'm forced to constantly counter their myths.

### **Has the PIRGIM lawsuit helped at all in these efforts?**

Absolutely. The lawsuit drew a lot of press coverage and really aired out the issue. It gave us an opportunity to raise the issues that concerned us, and to provide the people of the Midland commu-

nity with information they might otherwise never have been exposed to. The bottom line is that any time you put the spotlight on Dow, the company begins behaving better. I have learned over the years that companies like Dow will never voluntarily enact pollution prevention measures. It takes a combination of lawsuits, media attention and law enforcement to ensure that they clean up.

### **What impacts have Dow's practices had on you, specifically, and on your community, more generally?**

The suit has changed my life forever. You start because you're concerned about a problem and you think you'll get it fixed, and then you realize that you have to be constantly involved because the government agencies just aren't protecting us. They need a helping hand: public pressure, media attention and, yes, lawsuits too.

I've learned that decisions are often made behind closed doors, and without regard to good, sound scientific fact. And what I've found—and the impact those findings have had on my life—has set me apart from many of my friends, and even my family, because I will never, ever be the same. This has been a real education for me, one that has been frustrating and eye-opening, but also inspiring and invaluable.

Over the course of the last several years, I've discovered that Dow has been trying to weaken standards forever so they don't have to clean up dioxins in the Midland community, and I know that the work we've done will help my community by eventually ridding it of the toxic substances that have caused so many to suffer.

### **Why is there recent concern about dioxin contamination in the areas downstream from Dow?**

Because the contamination levels are 80 times above the state cleanup standard and because evidence suggests that the pollution comes from the Dow plant. People are still living on top of highly contaminated soil, and that's a pretty big reason to be concerned, I'd say.

### **Do you have any advice for people or communities that find themselves in circumstances similar to the ones that you face with Dow?**

Find as much support as you can. I think it has really helped to network with other groups. I worked with the local Lone Tree Council, the state, Greenpeace, the Ecology Center and several other organizations as well as with citizens from around the world. We shared information and built support from people in similar circumstances and the help they gave me was invaluable. ♦

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