

## Interview

# Shay Clark

## St. John Citizens for Environmental Justice

*Shay Clark is an active member of St. John Citizens for Environmental Justice (SJCEJ), a grassroots environmental organization in St. John Parish in southern Louisiana and a co-plaintiff in NELC's Clean Air Act lawsuit against Bayou Steel in LaPlace, LA. Ms. Clark has been pursuing solutions to environmental problems in her St. John community for the past decade.*

### **How did you first get involved with SJCEJ?**

The group was organized by a young LaPlace woman who was working for Tulane Environmental Law Clinic in New Orleans. She called my husband and me and invited us to start a group to address several environmental issues.

### **What kind of issues has SJCEJ worked on?**

Louisiana offered \$448 million in tax breaks to Formosa Plastics to entice it to build the world's largest rayon plant in St. John Parish. We brought to light Formosa's bad record on pollution and testified in favor of alternative economic development options. Formosa withdrew its permit application. We've also successfully opposed the siting of a new medical waste incinerator here and convinced the state to limit the amount of hazardous waste from outside the community that Du Pont can burn in the parish.

### **What led you to file the**

### **lawsuit against Bayou Steel?**

In the late 80s, Bayou Steel showed up on the Toxics 500 list.<sup>1</sup> In 1993, SJCEJ wrote a letter to the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality complaining about Bayou Steel's air emissions. Near the Bayou Steel plant, people talk about the finish of their cars being eaten away by pollution. There is one lady in particular who says that the pollution is so bad that she is afraid to leave her house.

When we learned in 1995 about the possibility of joining a suit against Bayou Steel, we eagerly joined in. We are really glad to be a part of it.

### **How has Bayou Steel responded to citizen complaints about its pollution?**

They either deny that there is a problem or they ignore it. The most you can ever get out of them is a statement that they've already cleaned it up—that it's not a problem anymore. Meanwhile it seems like everyone in the parish has some kind of sinus or respiratory problem or asthma.

### **How has the LaPlace community responded to this lawsuit, in light of the jobs Bayou Steel creates?**

Early on, you heard a lot about jobs versus the environment. You don't hear that so much anymore. People are beginning to realize that you

can't buy bottled air. I think Bayou Steel workers are now sensitive to the problems that they are facing. Workers have been instructed to ignore the alarms signalling air pollution violations at the plant. An EPA inspection found three inches of dust inside the shop. That's three inches of dust containing heavy metals. I think the workers are supportive of anything that will make the company obey the law.

### **How has it been working with NELC?**

They are fabulous. NELC is a tremendous national resource. I am so impressed by Josh [Kratka] and David [Nicholas], and I appreciate their commitment, care, attention to detail, good sense and good humor. When it looked for a while like Bayou Steel was going to try to come after me personally, Josh and David gave me every assurance that NELC would protect me. These are guys who could undoubtedly get jobs with big firms, and their commitment to this kind of work is just awesome.

### **What do you hope to achieve in this lawsuit?**

We would like Bayou Steel to obey the law. But beyond that, we would like them to become a positive contributor to the quality of life in St. John Parish, not just somebody who has been forced to comply with the law. ♦

*"Near the Bayou Steel plant, people talk about the finish on their cars being eaten away by pollution. There is one lady in particular who says that the pollution is so bad that she is afraid to leave her house."*

<sup>1</sup> The Toxics 500 list was produced in 1989 by the National Wildlife Federation. Using data gathered through the Toxics Release Inventory, the list catalogued the country's top 500 dischargers of toxic chemicals.