

Interview Teresa Mills Community Activist

Teresa Mills is a community activist in Ohio. She has worked on a variety of toxic substance issues and was one of the people who called NELC's attention to the Laidlaw hazardous waste facility near Columbus.

How did you first get involved in environmental issues?

I live on a court of 14 homes and a while back it seemed like there were a lot of strange illnesses. My neighbors and I got together in our little court, had a meeting, and came to the decision that this had to be something that was affecting everyone.

We started doing investigations around our immediate area. We all decided to stop using lawn care products, then we started broadening our investigation.

It turned out that Grove City, where I live, was using a landfill illegally. We found underground storage tanks that had never been properly removed. We found a creek bank that had black material on it where nothing was growing—eventually it had to be remediated and taken out.

And then we started working on the trash plant run by the City of Columbus. We worked on that for approximately two years; it's now been closed for two years.

In your experience as an

Ohio activist, what other environmental problems have you seen in the area?

Where to start . . . I've worked on problems all over the state. I've worked on a case in North Royalton, OH where a woman's water catches on fire. She lives right beside an oil field.

I've worked on all the trash incinerators in the state which are now closed—Akron, Dayton, etc.

I've worked to close down or clean up magnesium refineries, medical waste incinerators, landfills, and hazardous waste landfills.

So you obviously think it's important for citizens to be involved in the community. How did your first neighborhood group make the jump from meeting together to actually working for change?

It really started at our original meeting. Two city councilmen attended our first meeting, and told us to drop the issue and not talk about it, because we would decrease our property values.

That angered us. The councilmen were more concerned about property values than our health.

In the long run, after we started doing more and more research, we found that people had medical

bills that were higher than their property value.

So why be quiet? Isn't it better to bring the problems forward and handle the situation? Then the health risks are taken care of and everyone's property value goes up because it's a cleaner environment.

After we had worked on that first issue for quite a while, we realized that nothing ever gets done unless citizens do it themselves.

Too often, elected officials—the people who are supposed to be protecting us—are actually protecting the companies.

Do you think citizen lawsuits, working in tandem with citizen organizing, will help improve the waterways in Ohio?

Citizen lawsuits are an important tool. I always encourage citizens to get involved in local cases.

But I also remind citizens that it takes citizen pressure to stop pollution. Citizens have to make it totally "politically incorrect" for the pollution to continue before something will be done.

We have to make sure that companies understand that there are people watching—we're not going to stand back and let our neighborhoods be polluted. ♦

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