

## Interview

# Maria Michalski Activist and Lawsuit Plaintiff

*Maria Michalski is one of the plaintiffs represented by NELC in the lawsuit against PMC, Inc, a Chicago company charged with polluting the Little Calumet River and contributing to air pollution in surrounding neighborhoods.*

*Maria is a member of the Illinois Public Interest Research Group and Citizens for a Better Environment, two grassroots environmental organizations that are also plaintiffs in the lawsuit. She monitors pollution on the Calumet River for the Cook County Clean Streams Committee.*

**NELC: How did you get involved in environmental issues?**

**Maria Michalski:** I was raised on the South Side of Chicago, close to Lake Michigan. When you grow up close to the water, you think of it as your own. I always thought of it as my lake, my river.

I kept seeing all of the problems that factories dumping onto the lake cause: garbage washing up on the shore, oil slicks on the river, PCBs accumulating in the fish. People care about these problems. We staged a clean-up march and wrote letters to try to get things fixed.

**NELC: Describe your present role with the Cook County Clean Streams Committee.**

**Maria Michalski:** The Cook County Clean Streams Committee members are each assigned different lo-

cal waterways to monitor, to check for dumping and serious erosion.

I own a boat that I have used on the Calumet River for many years. Because of my familiarity with the river, I was assigned to monitor it. I inspect the river for pollution problems twice a month and send reports to the Committee.

**NELC: How has the Calumet River changed since you first started using it?**

**Maria Michalski:** With my family, I used to take a small boat down the river, catch a fish, pull over to the riverbank and fry it for lunch.

Now I don't do that because I don't want to come into contact with the water. I don't have picnics on the riverbank because they are covered with dead vegetation and slime.

I see pollution in the river every time I travel by boat. Frequently, the water emits a foul-smelling odor. Sometimes it smells like chemicals, other times like raw sewage. The water is dark and murky. Sometimes oil slicks float on its surface.

The pollution is worst in front of, and downstream from, the water treatment facility into which PMC discharges its waste.

**NELC: What do you feel are the prospects of cleaning up the river?**

**Maria Michalski:** It's an



Maria Michalski, citizen activist and plaintiff in the lawsuit against PMC, Inc.

uphill struggle to get anything to happen. The big businesses that pollute the river, like PMC, care more about their profits than our environment, and the politicians are often too busy with their own agendas to stop them.

That's why it's really wonderful when we get help from an organization like NELC. As residents, we know these companies have to stop polluting our river. NELC, with its access to the courts and its ability to do research, can make that happen.

**WHAT YOU CAN DO:** NELC has helped residents in many communities across the country battle illegal polluters and win settlements that have forced the polluters to comply with the law and pay penalties to help restore and preserve the areas they have damaged. If you suspect that your community may be threatened by illegal pollution, contact NELC at (617) 422-0880. ♦

*"As residents, we know these companies have to stop polluting our river. NELC can make that happen."*