



The Activist Files Episode 14: Combating Corporate Contamination in Cancer Alley Podcast Transcript

Pam:

Hello, my name is Pam Spees and I'm a senior staff attorney here at the Center for Constitutional Rights, and we are very fortunate and honored to be joined by some of our colleagues from Louisiana, Sharon Levine and Lydia Gerard, who have emerged as leaders in their communities who are fighting different arms of the petrochemical industry in Louisiana. They both hail from towns in Louisiana that are situated in what has been known as Cancer Alley for a very long time. In Cancer Alley is an 85 mile stretch of river between Baton Rouge and New Orleans, which is heavily populated with oil and gas, petrochemical companies that have been situated in largely African American communities. And there have been struggles for environmental justice dating back decades. Once it became clear that there were very serious and negative health impacts on people in the communities along the way. And Lydia and Sharon are leaders who've emerged who are continuing that decades-long struggle.

Pam:

And so we're very fortunate to have them here. They're here with us in New York because there is going to be a screening, the premiere of a series of short films that they and five other women have done to tell their individual stories that also paint a broader picture of what's going on right now in Cancer Alley.

And we're doing this at a time. It's where are we? It's Thursday, April 18th, 2019. We are four days away from Earth Day. There's a lot of discussion about climate change in the world and now there's discussion of a Green New Deal. And yet these folks in these communities, for them, the climate changed a long time ago and they've got a story to tell as people are thinking about these issues. And so my first question to both of you is why did you decide to start to tell this story now and make these films and what do you hope to see happen with them?

Sharon:

My name is Ms. Sharon Levine and I'm from Saint James, Louisiana. I started to work with this when I found out that a \$9.4-billion industry was coming a mile and a half from where I live. That's when I became angry because we are already bombarded with 10 chemical plants within a seven-mile radius and I feel like adding another one to where I live? I just couldn't take it. And after my grandson was sick, when he couldn't breathe, that started me to fight even more and my granddaughter couldn't breathe. And as I would pass next to one of the chemical plants there would be a smell in the air and it would make my stomach upset. And whenever you pass by that plant, like one, two o'clock in the morning, it's like a white fog that's over the highway. And I was told that whenever we have an odor or smell in the air, they gave us a toll free number to call. I've called that number so many times and nothing has happened. And one of the reasons why I started this is because of health issues. So many people have died from cancer. So many people are still dying from cancer. Not knowing what caused the cancer rates in our area, but after I started working with an organization and started to learn more about this, I feel like it's coming from the chemical plants and that's one reason why I started the fight.

Lydia:

My name is Lydia Gerard and I'm from Saint John the Baptist Parish, and my fight increased with the death of my husband, Walter. Last year in June of 2018 from kidney cancer. We started going to meetings and learning about the high emissions of chloroprene from a plant in my area. Four streets from where I live is the Dinka plant and as Sharon said, when you look around, there's so many people that's died of cancer are suffering with cancer. It makes you stop and wonder what's going on. Where's this coming from? Not only cancer. There are other types of illnesses that people have that sometimes unexplainable. You know, kids with so many respiratory problems and finding out the information that we did at the high emissions of this one particular chemical, not even studying the others, they're 29 chemicals that are being released from this one plant. Chloroprene was the last one that

they classified as a likely carcinogen. So that's the one that we've been focusing on for the last two and a half years to get the plant to reduce emissions

Pam: And then Dinka, the facility there that is emitting this chloroprene. The EPA has said that the exposure risk is what, 800 times?

Sharon: 800 times. Our area has the highest cancer risk in the country and that particular plant, that's the only one in a country that produces this particular, the neoprene, which uses the chloroprene in their production.

Pam: And what has the EPA set in terms of how it can regulate or affect this?

Lydia: Not a lot. There's a standard of 0.2 micrograms per cubic meter. That's supposed to be a safe level, but they're telling us that even though that's a recommended standard, they can't enforce it. So the plant is always saying they're in compliance. Which they are when the EPA is telling you they can't enforce that standard. The plant has also admitted that they will never be able to get down to 0.2 micrograms per cubic meter. So it's a sad situation, but we're not giving up. We're going to continue to fight because it's supposed to be, what is it, environmental protection? You know they're supposed to be protecting the environment. So we're going to hold them to that.

Pam: Now a lot of times I know you all get questions about, well, if it's so bad, why don't you just leave and what are your answers to people when you get those questions? And I'm particularly interested in what your family histories are in that area. Can you speak to that, Lydia?

Lydia: Uh, yes. We were there before the plant got there. The property that my great grandfather left for me is my legacy. So why should I give it up? Why should I be the one to move? They came there and found me there. There's a rich history of my family being in that area for generations. So I'm not going to leave.

Pam: How about you, Sharon?

Sharon: Over in Saint James? My grandfather, the property that I live on right now, that was from my grandfather, that's the land that he bought and had gardens and raised chickens and animals. And I feel like that's ancestral land. And the land that I grew up on,

my father bought that land. We have about 20 acres over there. Then the other part of Saint James, which is Convent, my great, great grandfather bought that land back in the 1800s and I feel like they left the land for us and I'm not going to give it up. I feel like Lydia feels. Why should I give up the land that my great, great grandparents left for me? And I want to leave it for my children and my grandchildren so I'm not going to give it up. Just like she said, I was there first, so why should I have to leave to let them come in and take what we have. The land has already depreciated. They're polluting us and they expect us to just pack up and leave? I don't think so.

Pam:

Just for listeners who aren't familiar with that area, and just to be very clear, this was land along the Mississippi River that was run by plantations during slavery. Right? And so you have land in your family that goes back to the 1800s. And so there's a deep historical significance there and it's very profound, the struggle that you're waging. What has been the response of state officials, for instance, if you've called on the governor, others, have you been raising these issues with state agencies and the governor and what has been the response from the state so far? For instance, in Saint James you mentioned the \$9.3 billion plastics plant, which is the Formosa facility. What has been the response when you all have been raising these concerns?

Sharon:

Well, the organization that I'm in right now, we wrote a letter to the governor and to the Louisiana LDQ and also to president Trump. We haven't gotten an answer yet. The organization that I'm in, we are trying to make awareness of what's going on and we are trying, we're still trying to reach out to the governor. We are trying to have our meeting with him just to explain to him how we feel about our land. And asking him not to let this \$9.4 billion industry come into our town, which is Saint James and we haven't gotten a response yet. So we're planning to have a march on May 30th for five days and we're hoping that the governor would speak with us. On the fifth day, we plan to lobby on the steps of the State Capitol asking them to speak with us and we hope that we'd be successful with that March. But that march is to bring awareness to what's going on from St John Parish to East Baton Rouge Parish and we're asking people to come out and help us and support us with the march. We think that the march would be an impact on what we are trying to do . Hoping it'll be successful.

Pam:

And Lydia, in Saint John the Baptist parish with the Dinka facility. You all have been fighting that for what, three years

now? What has been the response of the head of, for instance, the Department of Environmental Quality in Louisiana?

Lydia:

Well, Department of Environmental Quality. Mr Chuck Carr Brown has called us in open meetings, fear mongers, but the EPA and LDEQ came out to our parish in 2016 had a meeting with the community and told us about the high cancer risk in our area because of this facility and because we are spreading the word and getting the word out to the people in the community, letting them know what's going on. He calls us fear mongers. Well, I'm always saying wouldn't you be fearful, if you live here and this is what you found out, and for him to openly, you know, call us names, I think that was very disrespectful and I don't appreciate it. I don't think anybody else in that area did either. There's been no help from him. While the LDEQ and the Dinka facility came into agreement for an order on consent to put in more processes that would reduce the emissions from the plant.

Lydia:

They voluntarily did that according to them, but had not been for the organization that we formed as a result of that meeting and called Concerned Citizens of St John. I don't think anything would have been done that soon, if anything, because we were told that some of the equipment, a thermal generator, they had one just laying around in the yard and they decided to put it in, you know, up and running. Well, if you had this equipment and you knew it could help, why didn't you install it years ago? You know, and had it not been for the group, and I truly believe this, I don't think anything would have been done. Not even that. And they don't plan to do anything additional is what they say. And all their correspondence, the EPA, they've also told the EPA that they could never reach that standard. I'll admit that readings have gone down some, but nowhere near what the EPA has suggested that it should be. It's like they just don't care. And the local officials, they're looking to the LDEQ. LDEQ is calling us names. So it's like they're calling us names. You know, we have only one of our local representatives that actually is standing up with us. The rest are just being silent.

Pam:

And so even with that process, they put in place the levels and the risk of exposure are still the highest in the country.

Lydia:

They're still high and that's the only plant in the country. There's more that can be done. You know, I'm not a scientist or an engineer or doctor, you know, they always say, well you can't prove that the cancer or the other illnesses are because of our facility and the emissions. Well you can't prove that it's not. So I think it's your responsibility that some medical monitoring, you

know, is done. Do some studies over a 70 year period of exposure. Well, Walter was 67 when he passed away, the plant came in 69 he was 18 years old. So that's a long time. That's almost that 70 years span. Yeah. So look what happened in that seven year span. Yeah.

Pam: So you have the march coming up in May, you are going to be calling on the governor to take some action. First of all, can you tell us who is involved in that March and how are you organizing it and then tell us about what some of your demands are for Cancer Alley.

Sharon: Well we formed a coalition called coalition against Debt Alley. The leaders of the March are Ri Saint James and Concerned Citizens of St John. You have other organizations that came along to help us with the march and we are asking the governor like for Dinka to lower the emissions and we are asking the governor to not let Formosa come in to Saint James and we have what we have about three or four more demands.

Pam: So Formosa's one new facility that's come in, and I should say that the Bayou Bridge Pipeline, which is connected to the Dakota Access Pipeline Network and it's run by the same company, Energy Transfer Partners, is running from the town where I'm from, Lake Charles, Louisiana. In fact, it runs along the end of the road where I grew up and a mile from where my mom lives now and it's ending right in your backyard Sharon. And it's going to be pumping an additional 500,000 barrels of oil a day into Saint James, which means it's going to bring more industry, right?

Sharon: Yes.

Pam: And so that fight is still ongoing, although the pipeline is complete at this point, but there's still some legal battles being fought around that. But what you're seeing now is for most, the \$9.3 billion plastics plant trying to come in and you've got how many more lined up behind them trying to come in?

Sharon: On the West Bank we have another one called SENGAS that's supposed to come in also. The Louisiana methanol plant, they are waiting, I'm kind of permit, I heard. And we have one on the east side is called WANO. That one is trying to come in. We have a meeting on the 29th, so they're going to vote for it or against it. But our parish council already voted for Formosa come in. So you have to go to the meeting on the 29th to see what they're gonna do. The Planning Use Commission people voted for our SENGAS to come in and then they're gonna vote for WANO. So

we're still protesting against that. We are doing a petition asking them not to vote for WANO to come in and then we're doing a petition also not to give a permit to SENGAS. So that's going on now, as I speak, in Saint James Parish.

Pam: And what are you calling for at this point in Saint John the Baptist parish? Lydia, with regard to Dinka

Lydia: For almost three years now, we've been asking them - well demanding - that they reduce emissions to safe levels. There's a school, well a couple of schools that are only 1500 feet from the plant and it's little kids. Just this year. The ages are the, the grades would change from kindergarten to eighth grade. Now it's the babies that are there from pre-k to fourth grade. So these kids are being exposed daily. And not only that, the school is so close, they live in the vicinity as well. And the school board has told us that after two months study - I don't know what kind of study they did - but they said there's no place in the parish that's safe. Okay, so you stop at that. So what are you doing about that? They're not taking a stance either. So we want them put up or shut up at this point, you know. You put in place what you need to get the emissions down. Or you shut up and get out?

Lydia: It was Dupont and then they sold to Dinka in 2015 - the end of 2015. Well, Dupont was given standards that they had to meet when they were in Kentucky producing 60% of the neoprene - the chloroprene and Saint John Parish, it was 40%. When they closed down in Kentucky, now we have 100% that they're producing. They won't cut production because that was stated by head of LDEQ at one of the council meetings that that was possibly still on the table. And the next local publication that came out, Dinka stated emphatically that we are not cutting production, being the only company in the country. What reason do they have to cut production or to reduce anything? They're making money. They don't care about us. That community has been there for over 150 years or more because we celebrated a few years ago, 150 years.

Lydia: The Catholic Church that's right there on the fence line practically is over 80 years old. That community has been a thriving community for all these years. Dupont came in in 1964. They started the production of the neoprene in 1969. We were there before you came. You should want to be a good neighbor, but they have no incentive to be good neighbors. Nobody's forcing them to. Well, we're going to stand up and be heard. You have to do better. So now it's time you have to do it. You know, there are certain demands that we're making now. We

didn't initially start with the idea of close down the plant. We know it's people's livelihoods. We don't want to take food off of anybody's table. But you have to be responsible to do what's right.

Pam:

So back to this March. So the march is starting where you are on Saint John the Baptist Parish. Going up to Baton Rouge, which is the state capital, which is the northern point of Cancer Alley. And you've got women with you here who are from Baton Rouge, both ends of Cancer Alley and then some in between. So you're going to be calling on the governor and you're going to be calling on the state agencies and trying to raise awareness about this. Make folks do the right thing. But stepping back from that for a minute, you've talked about your family histories and these communities and why this is such an important fight and struggle for you and your families. Can you say a little bit about what you would like to see for the future in your communities? If you could see them beyond the struggle and if you've solved these problems and you've successfully challenged and changed hearts and minds, what does your community look and feel like in the future?

Sharon:

I would like for the fifth district in Saint James Parish to be rebuilt. I would like for the church that had been going to ever since I was a baptized to stay open. The church that I go to, the St. James Catholic church, it has been there for 252 years and I feel if the industry takeover our town and we have to move out, we can't go to the church because we have to move far away for the church would eventually close. But I feel like if we fight and everybody would get on board with us in Saint James, I think we can help restore our community, and my daughter that moved away because of her headaches, she might be able to come back to Saint James and I would love that. And I love when they all come home and are out in the yard playing, on the green grass and picking pecans when it's pecan season.

Sharon:

I loved that. I would like for it to be flourishing again. I would like to be out in the open space and make our gardens again. Plant our fruit trees again. Because all of that has been destroyed. So I would life for it to come back to the way it was before the industry came. Because the first industry came in 1969, I think. My daddy welcomed the industry because he thought it would bring jobs, production, not knowing in the future it would be harmful to our health. So we want to restore our health, we want to restore our community and bring people back to live back in Saint James. That's what I would like to see.

Lydia: The state's called "the sportsman's paradise". That's what's on our license plates. But I don't think it's that anymore. They're pumping all kinds of stuff into the wells, into the water, the air. So how can you go out and fish and hunt and do these things when the water, air and soil is being destroyed by these companies? So you know, like she said, there's always room for progress and we're not saying that the plants that are there now, we want them to disappear. We know there's no way they're all going to disappear, but be responsible and be good neighbors. Look at the effects that what you're doing, what you're exposing the people to, you know, the quality of life is not what it once was. And as Sharon said, the plants come in and you're looking at that all. There's going to be jobs for people in the community.

Lydia: And when you look at it, you see cars coming in and cars leaving out. The people that have the jobs, the majority of them don't live in the areas. They come in and go to work and then leave and go home. They don't have to stay here and breathe the air that we're breathing, being exposed to. They may get exposure in the plant, but that's a price they have to pay. That's on their conscious of, you know, I have to work here and they have to do what's best that they think for their families. But that's not what's best for my family. I can't sit in my yard and throw trash and burn and throw dirty water into my neighbor's property. I would probably go to jail. So why are they allowed to do the same thing to their neighbors?

Pam: So I think that's all the time we have. But it's been great speaking with you and we appreciate your time and that you came all the way to New York to help tell the story and get the word out and wish you the best of luck with the films and hope they get seen by many, many people and that your message gets out far and wide. And we look forward to stay in touch on these developments in this March. That's a long time coming. And we were just talking earlier about there was a march back in 1989 raising these same issues and the health impacts of these industries on people living in this area. And now here we are 30 years later and you're carrying the fight forward and we wish you the best with it and look forward to staying in touch as you move this fight forward. Thank you.

Lydia: Thank you.

Sharon: Thank you.