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## We Speak For Ourselves: Grassroots Movements in the Struggle for Environmental Justice

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# We Speak For Ourselves

## Grassroots Movements in the Struggle for Environmental Justice



By Christopher O'Brien  
Global Studies Capstone Thesis  
Spring 2009

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*Spring 2009*

In light of everything that has culminated into this project over the past year, and truly over the past four years of college, I must thank a few friends first.

First and foremost, I have Jim Tull and Tom King to thank for sparking my interest in everything that is not already questioned. I would not be a Global Studies major if it were not for their introductory class.

Although I have not known him long, Nick Longo has been an inspiration in both helping me come to my final product and guiding my path for the future. To him I am indebted and greatly thankful.

And finally, I can never forget Dr. Susan Griffiths-Grossman for being a friend, mentor and wonderful teacher. The world of grassroots organizations would have never been opened up to me in such a wonderful light if it were not for her. Thank you.

## Abstract

This literature review and thesis examine two main issues, one on grassroots and community organizing and the other discussing the implications of environmental racism. The paper examines the nature of why low income and minority communities experience a disproportionate amount of environmental injustices, and what can be done at the grassroots level to combat this. Through a review of literature on both community/grassroots organizing and the prevalence of environmental racism within the United States, along with experiential findings through a community partnership, the issues of remedying environmental racism and the effectiveness of the remedies are explored. Environmental racism is a pervasive problem which is far from over, let alone even recognized as a legitimate social problem by many opponents within the United States. Many grassroots organizations have formed to address this problem. The case study for the effectiveness of grassroots organizations in combating environmental injustices is Clean Water Action Rhode Island, a nation-wide non profit working toward promoting healthier, more sustainable communities. Through their work within Providence, Rhode Island to specifically combat high levels of diesel pollution, it is concluded that they effectively employ organizing methods of well-know community organizing models. Furthermore, their effectiveness from the grassroots level is evident, (as opposed to a top-down bureaucratic approach,) and they have successfully gained a power base of membership and constituents within the state of Rhode Island to combat further cases of environmental racism and inequities.

## Introduction

I can still remember the feeling I had when the world and power of grassroots movements was opened up to me little less than a year ago. Prior to my experience with the international social work movement, I had relatively little knowledge about the breadth, pervasiveness or effectiveness of grassroots organizing. In my view, it is essential to re-evaluate the effectiveness, or lack thereof, of top-down, bureaucratic institutions. And yet, it was only through the passion for, and faith in grassroots initiatives from my professor, Dr. Griffiths-Grossman that I truly came to see the benefits and sensibility of social movements from the ground-up. Through numerous examples of the empowerment of third world communities in the face of oppressive odds, such as a community-run and regulated motorcycle ambulance service in a Kenyan village, I was enthralled and enlightened at the possibilities of bottom-up, community organized movements. Not only are these communities experiencing an increase in their basic human needs being addressed at the local, community level, but also an increased sense of empowerment and confidence for self-sustainability. The power of the organization of a community in this sense cannot be overlooked, and this is why I continue to be amazed at the possibilities of small groups of people uniting to address problems that larger organizations cannot or will not. It is surely no secret that there is a growing despondency and disillusionment to multinational corporations and bureaucratic government institutions to meet basic human needs at the local level.

Grassroots and community organizing are the fundamental driving force behind the remainder of my thesis topic on environmental racism. Given a cursory glance, these

two topics are seemingly unrelated. But through my initial drive to focus on the effectiveness of grassroots movements, I found a subject to focus my energy and passion, and also provide an example of how such a pervasive local and global problem could be addressed and combated through grassroots efforts. In all honesty, I had never encountered the topic of environmental racism or the environmental justice movement prior to my research on grassroots movements. It seemed a moral crime to me though, that in light of the vast numbers of environmental groups and NGOs I have encountered throughout my studies, that none have addressed the issue of toxic dumping on minority populations. Thus it is my goal to try to illuminate the efforts and effectiveness of grassroots movements which have begun to organize and advocate for themselves, when their own leaders and governments have not. Through the influence of grassroots and community empowerment, there are multiple movements internationally and domestically, which are standing up to corporations which are taking advantage of their perceived powerlessness, and fighting to regain a healthy, sustainable environment in which they may live, work and play.

Through my research I have come to realize that legitimately proving environmental racism exists is a hard fought case. Because so many powerful corporations have so much at risk, be it to clean up refuse, systematic waste removal from contaminated neighborhoods, or compensation settlements, they often get into the semantics of what environmental racism really is. I have also come across sources which believe that people of color and lower socioeconomic status have placed themselves in at-risk situations and therefore racism does not exist, because it is their own fault. These

arguments are few and far between compared to the literature which highlights the devastating effects of toxic dumping on communities and truly shows the pervasiveness of environmental racism or environmental injustice at home and abroad. Based solely on the sheer number of grassroots initiatives which have formed in the past two decades to combat the abuse of different populations' ecologies, there is no doubt in my mind that environmental racism is a very real problem. Through providing both research examples and local examples of the effectiveness of certain grassroots campaigns to limit the abuse of land through illegal dumping practices, industrial encroachment and other forms of environmental inequities, I hope to both show the power of bottom-up approaches to community problems and prove that environmental racism is a very tangible and oppressive domination system at work.



## Grassroots and Community Organizing

### Seeking Empowerment through Community

Grassroots organizing is a slippery topic. Because there are so many dimension and elements to grassroots initiatives, in the sense that there are grassroots movements addressing almost every social topic, it is sometimes hard to pinpoint the cause, process and successfulness of a grassroots movement. It is essential to see how such movements come about, and especially with community organizing, to understand how people are catalyzed by their peers to act and join together in solidarity. The sheer power of grassroots movements is something which is incredibly pertinent in our world today. There is a certain sense of disenfranchisement which has plagued the nation of the United States in the past thirty years. (Putnam, *Bowling Alone*; *Nation of Spectators Report*) Grassroots and community organizing movements have provided people with the tools to take back some power, and believe in their own ability to change.

It is highly pertinent to address the importance of community organizing in light of the domination systems we face today. It is also empowering to see the recent success of grassroots movements in the political victory of incoming President Barack Obama, as he used his background in community organizing to win the 2008 election. The realization that community organizing is an intrinsic part of American society, and not limited to either political party, is recognized by Yossef Ben-Meir in his op-ed article on community organizing, entitled "Community 101; a lesson in leadership." It underlines the importance of community organizing in the history of the United States. Alexis de

Tocqueville and John Dewey inspired some of the first community initiatives which arose in urban settlements in the late 1800's. Community organizing and development, according to them, has intrinsic links to the identity of the U.S. (Ben-Meir, 2008)

At the heart of such movements is the ultimate goal of a just, democratic nation. This is something which people have become disillusioned by, with power being held by so few powerful leaders at the top. This leads to a feeling of helplessness and cynicism that ground-up initiatives can work, but Ben-Meir finds that these movements are essential to democracy. He believes, "Facilitators of, and participants in, well-organized community development initiatives are empowered in a way that diminishes feelings of alienation and the kind of discontent that can lead to violence" (Ben-Meir, 2008, pp. 1-2). Politicians should not be critical of such unifying and powerful movements, rather, embrace them for the empowerment and self-sustaining philosophies they initiate. There is an impetus for a better understanding that many global problems need to be solved by locally driven initiatives, when one has a community organizing background. Furthermore, there is urgency now more than ever for coming together at the local and global level which Ben-Meir posits, saying, "...community organizing is about rallying people's participation, which is needed to deal with the range of domestic and international issues facing the United States today" (Ben-Meir, 2008, p. 1). Contained within this cursory look at community organizing are messages of success and hope for the future of grassroots movements and bottom-up initiatives.

Grassroots organizing contradicts the theory of “the power of one.” In the face of oppression, one person may be able to catalyze a response to oppression, but without a strong constituency working together, the one who stands alone has little power. Social organization is one of the greatest tools for social change. When people organize together, they vastly augment the ability to get things done and make change happen (Staples, 2004).

Most often groups that face oppression are minorities and people from low socio-economic backgrounds. These groups often face seemingly insurmountable odds to change policy or institutions or problems of everyday existence. According to Lee Staples, author of Roots to Power, and a community organizing expert who has worked widely with ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now), problems exist because, “people do not control the institutions that affect their lives, because there is an unequal distribution of power, money, and prestige in our society” (Staples, 2004, p.1). This type of oppression, in the case of the five faces of oppression, powerlessness, is something which causes the type of disenfranchisement and alienation from a community Yossef Ben-Meir cited in his call for community organizing (Young, 1990). To re-establish a sense of community and empowerment, organization at the most basic level must be established in order to even begin thinking about fighting the faces of oppression. Staples comments on equalizing the power relationship of the current domination system at work when he writes:

The fundamental source of power lies in organized action taken by large numbers of people in an ongoing struggle to equalize power

relationships. Little issues are connected to bigger ones which in turn are linked to still larger ones. There is no final issue. There is no ultimate campaign. The goal isn't simply to win one special reform or institutional change from a particular power structure, but to develop a stronger power base with greater capacity to win other issues in the future (Staples, 2004, p. 3).

The impetus towards creating a lasting power base from which to springboard into future issues and problem solving is a crucial element for empowering communities and creating a vision of success for the future. Only through a solid foundation can grassroots movements move towards solving problems. Without organization, individual efforts are sporadic efforts to tackle such institutionalized problems such as environmental racism. Staples, along with Saul Alinsky and Si Kahn, provides the framework for community organizing, which will lead to a better understanding of the failures and successes of various movements to combat environmental racism.

### Methods for Organizing

Before any true movements can get underway, there must first be an organized constituency. There is no random order whereby people simply get together and get things accomplished. Organizing is not a process of a select few projecting their analysis and prescriptions of and for a societal problem, rather, "A range of people must be brought together and helped to create their own goals for social change. There has to be real faith in people's basic judgment, intentions, abilities and instincts" (Staples, 2004, p. 4). The notion of trust and faith in one's peers is an underlying and unifying thread

between the organizing philosophies of Staples, Alinsky and Kahn and is crucial for any movements to sustain their effectiveness.

Staples lays out a systematic approach to organizing which serves as a blue print for an effective campaign. This particular methodology is highly relevant to the movements which will be discussed concerning the confrontation of governments and corporations by small communities of people fed up with toxic dumping and pollution due to their perceived powerlessness. The characteristics of Staples' organizing model are applied in a broad sense and can be tailored to a specific movement. These general characteristics include constituency, issues and tactics, membership, leadership, structure, finances and staff. (Staples, 2004)

Like the movement against environmental racism, the model provided by Staples is geared towards the populations of low and moderate- income people. To increase the effectiveness of tactics and tackling issues, the key is that issues should arise from the people who are being organized, not the organizer him/herself. Because many times people join a grassroots organization out of self-interest, it must be reconciled how to address a multiplicity of issues. Staples' model is designed to emphasize direct action on a multi-issue, multi-tactic basis. Membership is an important characteristic of grassroots initiatives, but there are many roads to follow. Lee Staples discerns the difference between his method, and that of the late social activist, Saul Alinsky. The type of membership Staples addresses is called a direct membership organization, which people join as individuals, families or concerned community members. This seems to be the

more common strand of organizations which have come together in the face of environmental racism, in which systematic recruitment of individuals and door-to-door contacts are formed. This membership contrasts to Alinsky's model which emphasizes the formation of a permanent neighborhood coalition, or an organization which is made up of pre-existing organizations. A crucial methodology in leadership, according to Staples, is the selection of an indigenous leader in order to develop the constituency's power and feeling of self-ownership. (Staples, 2004) Such indigenous leadership is indicative of the environmental justice movements at home and more increasingly, abroad. (Bullard, 1993) The structure is arguably more important than the remaining two characteristics, finances and staff. Democracy is stressed, as it has traditionally been with community organizing since the 1800's. (Ben-Meir, 2008) Within Staples' model though, the emphasis is on local structure, as all too often, most social problems, "Flow from political and economic policies that are made far above the neighborhood level" (Staples, 2004, p.17). Keeping structure and leadership at the local level is crucial to keeping a grassroots identity.

Saul Alinsky's tactics are different and perhaps more radical, hence the title of his powerful book, Rules for Radicals. The underlying message is greatly similar though, in that regaining power from the elite few at the top is essential to giving meaning to life for so many who have become disenfranchised by the current power structure. Alinsky says outright, "*Rules for Radicals* is written for the Have-Nots on how to take [power] away" (Alinsky, 1971, p. 3). His seminal work typifies the attitudes of those hoping to get down to the foundation of making change happen and empowering oneself to implement

changes. Alinsky explores the nature of power holders and the powerless, the power holders being government and corporations who incorporate economic means to hold the powerless down. What Alinsky is getting at, though, is that people possess the power within to get together through community organizing and put grassroots pressure on large organizations.

An important aspect of Alinsky's rules comes in the section on tactics for constructive and lasting social change. To Alinsky, tactics means doing what you can get done with the resources you have. Some simple but relevant rules for a better illustration of organizing tactics come with an analogy to the face. With the eyes, if you have organized a well-run movement with mass amounts of people, you may parade your power before the targeted enemy. With the ears, organizations that are small need to assert their prowess and perceived power by making a clamor so that the listener believes the organization wields more influence than it does. And with the nose, "if your organization is too small for noise, stink up the place" (Alinsky, 1971, p. 126).

Furthermore, Alinsky outlines thirteen rules of power tactics. It can be easily seen how they would be highly applicable to a grassroots movement's effectiveness, especially in the effort of fighting the enemy of environmental racism. Alinsky's rules will be denoted in italics, followed by a description where necessary. Rule number one for the Have-Nots taking power back into their own hands: *power is not only what you have, but what the enemy thinks you have*. Rule two: *never go outside the experience of your people*. This results in confusion, fear and lack of trust. Rule three: *wherever possible go*

*outside the experience of the enemy. Rule four: make the enemy live up to their own book of rules. Oftentimes this is impossible, and takes away from their legitimacy. Rule five: Ridicule is man's most potent weapon. Rule six: a good tactic is one that your people enjoy. Rule seven: A tactic that drags on too long becomes a drag. When things become ritualistic, they lose their zest. Rule Eight: Keep the pressure on. This applies to using different actions and tactics too. Rule nine: The threat is usually more terrifying than the thing itself. Rule ten: The major premise for tactics is the development of operations that will maintain a constant pressure upon the opposition. Rule eleven: If you push a negative hard and deep enough it will break through into its counter side. A prime example of this is Mahatma Gandhi's passive resistance tactic which turned a negative into a positive. Rule twelve: the price of a successful attack is a constructive alternative. Finally, rule thirteen: pick the target, freeze it, personalize it and polarize it. (Alinsky, 1971, p. 127-130)*

Alinsky hesitates to apply specific situations to each of the rules, for he believes people, patterns of change and patterns of power are variables; variables which are in a constant state of change. Instead, it is the principles which must be stressed, using a group's imagination to apply the principles tactically to a specific situation. (Alinsky, 1971) In addition to laying out tactics, Alinsky calls for a movement from the middle class, citing the fact that this is where the power for social movements and community organizing lies. The discrepancy with this notion is that Lee Staples argues low to moderate income, not middle class citizens are the ones who possess the power because they have mass numbers of people. Whether or not this is a more viable option for



grassroots organizing is debatable, but the constituents of the environmental justice movement tend to be of the low to moderate income class bracket. Alinsky's point seems to be a bit cynical about the organizational skills of low income populations, but what he is saying is that they need to join forces. According to Alinsky, they "Would have to do what all minority organization, small nations, labor unions, political parties or anything small, must do – seek out allies. The pragmatics of power will not allow any alternative" (Alinsky, 1971 p. 184).

## Environmental Racism

### Environmental Justice Movement

In contrast to much of Saul Alinsky's writing on the organization of the middle class in tackling social issues, the start of the environmental justice movements has its roots in the civil rights activism of low-income African Americans. Many authors such as Luke Cole and Sheila Foster cite the beginning of the Environmental Justice Movement with various catalyzing events. One of the most prevalent seems to be the protests by African American residents in 1982 in North Carolina fighting against the placement of a toxic dump in Warren County. (Cole et. Al., 2001) Robert Bullard, a well known sociologist and activist against the continuance of environmental racism, cites the student protests over the drowning of an African American girl in a garbage dump in Houston in the year 1967. Still many others believe MLK Jr. is responsible for catalyzing the environmental justice struggle when he supported striking garbage workers in Memphis in 1968.

In the book, From the Ground Up, the authors posit that the African Americans involved in the Civil Rights Movement in the Southern U.S. took on environmental justice as one of their focuses, and experienced empowerment through grassroots activism. This type of empowerment led to the strong support from the African American community in the 1980's, still with strong roots in the Civil Rights philosophies, and helped organizations such as the United Church of Christ's Commission for Racial Justice gain footing and momentum on the national scene. Based on their study in 1987,

*Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States*, they brought to the fore the idea that people of color were the primary targets of environmental racism (Cole et al., 2001).

### Anti Toxics Movement

The grassroots efforts of the anti-toxics movement is based in communities long resisting hazardous waste facilities, landfills and incinerators. This particular vein of the Environmental Justice Movement has its roots in the late 1970's when Jimmy Carter Declared the Love Canal in New York a disaster area and evacuated residents of a housing development which was built on a former toxic waste dump (Levine, 1982). This story epitomizes the many thousands of other struggles throughout the past decades which were catapulted into action to defend communities, families and overall health. Grassroots efforts at the local level and the persistence of activists, "...transformed toxic waste from a nonentity to a full-fledged issue" (Cole et al. 2001, p. 21).

In contrast to the civil rights movement though, as explored in From the Ground Up, the leadership of the grassroots anti-toxics movement was characterized by no prior political organizing experience before any given toxic struggle. This is indicative of what Lee Staples strives for in his manual for grassroots organizing. Namely, the most important leaders are those who are indigenous to where the struggle is taking place (Staples, 2004). Likewise, Sheila Foster and Luke Cole cite various tactics of the anti-toxics movements which brought power linking them to the larger Environmental Justice Movement. They write:

Like the Civil Rights Movement, the grassroots anti-toxics movements also brought the experiential base of direct action into the Environmental Justice Movement. It further contributed both the experience of using (and, when need be, discrediting) scientific and technical information and the conceptual framework that pushed pollution prevention and toxics use reduction as policy goals. Anti-toxics groups also had built national networks by linking *local* activists, an experience that they brought to the movement. Anti-toxics leaders focused on corporate power and the structure of the U.S. and the global economies and on strategies for changing that structure (Cole et al. 2001, p. 23).

Like Lee Staples' in this approach, 'direct action' is the foundation of the environmental justice movement. Staples calls for direct membership through individual and family participation in social movements, but also direct action by actually getting out into the community and going door to door, thus directly engaging the community. (Staples, 2004) This will later be illuminated in one of the most successful community organizing campaigns in environmental justice history, the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative.

### Academic Movement

From the Ground Up cites the academic arena as having a significant influence on the broader Environmental Justice Movement and the recognition of the early signs of environmental racism. In the 1960's academic researchers began to see patterns of environmental hazards as having a disproportionate impact on people of color and also low-income people. The academic role in helping the environmental racism movement

gain momentum is four-fold according to Cole and Foster. For one, academics researched and published various studies which empirically demonstrated the disproportionate impact of environmental hazards on minority populations. Secondly, they coalesced together and affirmed the environmental justice leaders' knowledge that environmental racism was part of a greater domination system and that there was a national pattern going on within the United States. In addition, academics provided expertise and guidance with advocacy issues to local struggles. Lastly, the authors posit that academics have influenced policy change on environmental issues at the local, state and national level. Such issues would not have caught the attention of national leaders, they argue, if it were not for the help of cultural and empirical research on environmental injustices (Cole et al. 2001).

### A Challenge to Community Development

One of the greatest problems within the environmental justice movement and addressing environmental racism is the lack of equity in community development. Because environmental racism most often occurs in areas of low economic status with mostly minority populations, there is an uphill battle for redistributive justice of the environment. What many minority communities already have is very little. It is hard to shift the system from a sense of powerlessness to a sense of empowerment and ownership. But this is part of the continual evolution of community organizing and fighting for local rights

As cited by Collin et al. in a study on the challenges of community development in the face of environmental racism, the primary problem is powerlessness. There is a huge disparity in power between community planners and the minority, mostly black population. Collin states, “Consistent with the historic struggle by African Americans for justice and fairness in a society that has been hostile to their development, denial of opportunity by planners has created mistrust and frustration between the planner and the Black community” (Collin et al. 1995, p. 358). This type of mistrust is exactly what discourages community development and grassroots organization. Furthermore, there has historically been a lack of environmental and community planners who are people of color (Collin et al, 1995).

To combat the type of planning injustice in neighborhoods of color, which often leads to environmental degradation, Collin et al suggest, like Staples and Alinsky, that coalition building is the key to gaining power in neighborhoods around environmental issues (Collin et al, 1995). One such example of this is the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative which took place in the late 1980’s in Boston’s Roxbury neighborhood. The neighborhood of predominantly Latino, black and Cape Verdean residents was facing environmental racism, with waste companies targeting the vacant lots of the neighborhood, illegally dumping trash and using the lots as trash transfer stations without any neighborhood consent. Robert Putnam, a well known community activist and writer, explores the restoration of the American community in Better Together. Through grassroots initiatives, the Dudley Street neighborhood in Roxbury took the issue of environmental racism and degradation into their own hands. Just as Collin, Staples and

Alinsky suggest, they formed an indigenous coalition of neighborhood residents. This innovative grassroots initiative continues to build on earlier success. The first campaign empowered the neighborhood and gave them the realization that if they worked together they could demand the attention of the city and the media. One trustee observed of their collective action, “It’s about getting people together who could speak as a group. That gave them enormous political power. That was more important than the cash” (Putnam et al. 2003, p. 85). This type of empowerment at the neighborhood level - with the committee made up of an equal number of Latinos, blacks and Cape Verdeans typifies the growing resistance to environmental racism and promotes bottom-up solutions. A selection from Better Together concludes:

Sometimes there is this elitist attitude that only the professional planners know how to get anything done....I’ve seen professional planners screw up more things than you could shake a stick at, and I’ve seen a lot of projects that have been unsuccessful because they were jammed down people’s throats in the neighborhoods. This is a very different kind of project. This is bottom-up (Putnam et al. 2003, p. 87).

This type of initiative brings together all aspects of community organizing, promoting democracy, unity and grassroots movements to combat environmental injustice.

### Opposition movements

In light of the successes of early initiatives within the United States, there has been a strong wave of grassroots initiatives to ‘get the waste out’ of communities like the Dudley Street neighborhood. When people band together in such an empowering fashion

and are able to see the results of their commitment to a just cause in the face of oppression, they build a sense of momentum. Even small victories along the way tend to give a psychological advantage to community organizing. Robert Bullard explores the nature of such movements both within the United States and the global arena. In his book, Confronting Environmental Racism; Voices from the Grassroots, Bullard provides numerous case studies of successful grassroots movements from Virginia to Alabama to Colorado (Bullard, 1993).

An often forgotten but undeniable part of the environmental justice movement is the influence of the Native American population on the environmental justice movement. Because of such a long history of oppression against unequal environmental and land distribution, the Native American population has been well equipped with the tools for combating environmental racism. According to Cole and Foster, Native Americans are some one of the most disenfranchised minority populations in the United States (They have brought centuries of experience to the forefront of the environmental justice struggle.) With a history of exploitation by oil companies exploring for minerals on their land, Native Americans have struggled for self-determination. This is another important aspect of the struggle for environmental equity and such solidarity has given rise to the credo of the Environmental Justice Movement, "We speak for ourselves." This brings a new angle on grassroots organizing, but is nonetheless a powerful tool in the eyes of Cole and Foster, citing the Native population as decisive in combating state and federal environmental policies. (Cole et al. 2001)



A further case study from one of the oldest African American neighborhoods in America gives hope to communities which have faced illegal dumping and toxic waste disposal by large multi-national corporations. Based on a report by Betty Anne Bowser as part of PBS online transcript, a neighborhood initiative suit against the oil company Chevron for \$500 million was brought about by concerned citizens who dubbed the neighborhood “death row” because of the incredible amount of cancer experienced within the neighborhood. They argued that Chevron had intentionally sold the land to developers who were intending to build houses for African Americans without cleaning up the land which had been contaminated by crude oil, and consequently tainting the water supply. One argument which countered such claims of environmental racism came from Lynn Blais, professor of law who said this could not be considered environmental racism since it was a systematic process which had occurred over a period of decades. But the heart of the environmental racism argument is that it is institutionalized within our society and this is precisely the part of the environmental equity movement which needs to be addressed (Bowser, 1997).

### Environmental Racism Re-evaluated

It is important to bring to the discussion of environmental racism not only the efforts of grassroots movements securing a new power relationship with corporations and government, but also counterarguments to environmental racism. One of the strongest arguments against the case of environmental racism comes from Professor Lynn Blais, who was a part of the Chevron case, arguing that environmental racism did not occur because it was a systematic process. In her 1996 article she suggests that while many

argue that the distribution of waste facilities in communities of color versus those of white communities is unfair, they fail to state why the practice is unfair. She emphasizes personal responsibility and believes that residents of communities of toxic sites should move away. Ultimately, it is their own fault that they are being poisoned because they choose to stay. In sum, she supports the market theory that real estate agents, not corporations or governments, are to blame for directing people of color to buy homes in areas with inordinately high amounts of toxic facilities (Blais, 1996).

## Conclusions

First and foremost, the power of grassroots movements and community organizing is highly prevalent based on the writings of Staples, Alinsky and Kahn. These leaders in the grassroots and community organizing field lay out their methods for organizing succinctly and effectively in their organizing manuals and manifestos. They describe the principles of organizing which can be traced to grassroots efforts of communities within the United States and their effectiveness in combating environmental racism.

The issue of environmental racism is one that is real, and still prevalent within the United States and the globe. Although it has been an uphill battle to prove instances of environmental racism and a loss of power in minority communities, grassroots efforts continue to give strength and hope to the Environmental Justice Movement. Although many of the cases of grassroots organizing were taken from the early days of the equity movements, they are still highly relevant in that they provide a stepping stone for future movements. Their success cannot be stagnant, as other groups must learn from their successes, but also use organizing techniques such as Alinsky's and Staples' to further their effectiveness in getting their voices heard.

In addressing the problems of environmental racism the question of permanent recognition of such inequities comes to mind. Will such blatant disregard for minority populations continue into the future? When will such movements as the Native American or grassroots African American movements gain long-term legitimacy on the national

level? These are questions which can be used to guide the exploration of environmental equity movements of international proportion. The problem of environmental racism is not one which is contained solely within the boundaries of the United States. Rather it is one that is particularly seeping into third world nations. In fact, Wendy Scattergood argues that environmental racism is a being exported to third world nations by way of industrial encroachment (Scattergood, 2003). With further case studies within my community partner I hope to further deepen the understanding of how widespread environmental racism truly is, along with efforts to address environmental racism using grassroots community organizing.

## Methodology

The research methods which I have implemented between researching and writing my literature review last semester, and now, have varied greatly. Much has changed in the way of topics researched and the direction in which my community engaged aspect actually turned out. My conception of what my final project would be is vastly different from what I had pictured at the outset of my research. This is primarily due to the fact that my thesis topic diverged from a focus on purely community and grassroots organizing methods to a synthesis of environmental racism and grassroots movements which have mobilized in the face of this oppression.

Because I had originally hypothesized that I would be working on a primarily community organizing level, my original scope was wide and far-reaching. This was not conducive to finding sufficient literature though, as I found it was incredibly hard to focus my energies on such a broad topic. Grassroots organization of what, I thought? Finding a community partner under this proposed thesis topic proved to be incredibly difficult, as I had no way to narrow my search for an appropriate community partner. The method in which I conducted the rest of my research on grassroots organizing led me to both a synthesized topic of grassroots organizations and environmental racism and my community partner, Clean Water Action Rhode Island.

My initial methodology with which I gained a basic foundation for my literature review and thesis was a traditional research method. This was not difficult for the community organizing/grassroots initiatives part, since there has been a great deal of

literature published on the topics in the last 30-40 years. But because the term 'environmental racism' itself was not used until the 1980's in the publication of the United Church of Christ's *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States*, the literature is not as vast on the subject of environmental racism. (Loh, 2002) Furthermore, there are some camps who don't believe environmental racism exists, further impeding my ability to find sufficient or credible information on the subject. After finding a sufficient amount of information and encountering recurring names within the environmental justice movement, similar stories of environmental inequities and case studies began to arise, solidifying my research and enabling me to move forward towards more engaged methods of research with my community partner.

I fortunately entered into my community engaged aspect of my thesis at a highly important time for my partner, Clean Water Action, RI. Since Clean Water Action is a locally based group, I was able to be a part of some of their recent initiatives within the city of Providence to limit diesel pollution. After emailing briefly with Annie Costner, the head of the Diesel Pollution Initiative in the state of Rhode Island, we decided to commence activities in March. I was able to have a hands-on approach to my community engaged aspect, visiting the Clean Water office on Westminster Street in Providence a few times. This was essential to getting a feel for how a non-profit grassroots organization functions. Through initial observations, I was able to detect a close knit community of workers, and got a taste of what their methodology includes. There are, I found, many components to organizing within the community and was able to see both the advocacy section of Clean Water Action through media coverage and emails and the

canvassing process. Seeing first hand how an organization such as CWA worked to promote community involvement through advocacy, media coverage and canvassing was a great help in crystallizing the effectiveness of grassroots organizations and efforts in the environmental justice realm.

Further work with my community partner proved greatly beneficial in tying together aspects of my research on both community organizing and facing environmental inequities in a local community. One of the first highly effective methods which I used in my research was participant observation. Annie Costner invited me to a city council meeting on the Diesel Pollution Initiative. This meeting was designated to either pass or reject a proposed ordinance which would limit diesel emissions from construction vehicles in the Providence area. In this meeting I was able to see the potential power of grassroots organizing, as they were already carrying much needed momentum from a previous ordinance in December which fitted all public school busses with diesel-reducing exhaust pipes. But more importantly, I was witness to the process of dealing with a bureaucratic institution, and how frustrating that can be for grassroots organizations such as Clean Water Action, and the Environmental Justice League of Rhode Island, who were also present. For over two hours, I was witness to the passions and effective campaigning of Clean Water Action in rallying support for clean air in Rhode Island. Although I was a silent observer, I took note of the strategies imposed, including community support through bringing people out to the city council meeting from affected neighborhoods in Providence. The power of the people in support of the Diesel Pollution Initiative was evident, as the room was full of supporters. On the

opposing side, there were only two representatives from the construction industry, creating a sense of illegitimacy on their part. On the other hand, it was evident through both the people power of Clean Water Action, and the vast data collected on the harms of diesel pollution in Rhode Island that the concerned citizens were greatly empowered through a great collection of knowledge and support. Throughout the meeting, I observed the reactions of the city council to both the construction reps. and the advocates for the Diesel Pollution Initiative. The overarching feeling was that because of Clean Water Action building relationships within the community and getting their message out through prior media coverage, that they had a much more legitimate argument. Because of this I began to conclude that touching human emotion and affecting policy is much more effective through organizing communities and promoting policy change through grassroots methods.

Another highly effective mode of gathering information which I implemented was face to face interviews. I set up a meeting with Annie Costner from Clean Water Action and with Amelia Rose from the Environmental Justice League of Rhode Island. This interview was conducted in person between the three of us at the Clean Water Action headquarters on Westminster Street. I found through my previous encounters and email communications with Amelia and Annie that a more casual environment would be the most effective. I had contemplated recording the interview, but I concluded that this would take away from the fluidity of the language and free flow of ideas. Therefore I came into the meeting with a general outline of questions and inquiries, but allowed myself and them to digress from the topic at hand, if it was pertinent to either community



organizing or environmental inequities. From these interviews arose a great free flow of ideas and became more of a conversation of great import, rather than a structured, rigid interview. The product which came out of it was multiple pages of handwritten notes on a plethora of topics (See appendix A). Setting a time frame for the interview was something that I also decided against, and proved to be a good decision. I did not want to limit the possibility of in-depth answers or cutting short the wealth of knowledge which was provided to me by both Annie and Amelia Rose. Furthermore, actually sitting down face to face with my interviewees was a great bonus, as I was able to connect on a more emotional level than I would have been able to either over the phone or through email contact. Because the interview took place in a Clean Water Action office during regular hours of operation, I felt more at ease, as people came in and out of the room, occasionally addressing Annie, adding to the informal nature of the interview. I found that through providing a stress-free environment, both myself and the interviewees were more relaxed and thus able to formulate our thoughts more precisely and with more depth.

Finally, after interviewing Ms. Costner and Ms. Rose, I was able to take what they had given me in a personally engaged setting and apply it to the research which I had done prior to our meeting. Covering these broad areas, in addition to the participant observation I used at the city council meeting, gave me a much better scope with which to view my research and weave together recurring themes and verify some of my hypotheses.

## Findings

It is hard to judge the effectiveness and reliability of sources that are purely second-hand sources such as online databases, opinion based articles and books. This is partly because it can be argued, in the case of proving environmental injustices that certain authors or advocacy groups have a certain agenda which they hope to prove or proliferate in their research and findings. To fully gauge the effectiveness of grassroots movements aimed at mitigating environmental injustices, it is essential to provide a broad spectrum upon which one can point out flaws and successes. Consequently, one can measure the percentages of effective movements through both looking at effects of movements over time and the lasting power which they either retain or lose. It is not until literature is compared with actual case studies of environmental injustices that one can conclude the overarching success of grassroots initiatives. In my initial findings on a purely literary level, I concluded that bottom-up approaches to community problems were effective, based on the huge amount of grassroots advocacy which are prevalent just within my topic. Additionally, I had a strong sense that there was a looming dominating system at work which was systematically affecting minority communities by way of environmental hazards and inequities. Although this was evident in my review of literature and research of vast databases and articles, I still felt as though I lacked legitimacy through actually seeing such forces at work in everyday life. This is why it was essential to engage myself with a locally based organization. Through my work with Clean Water Action I was able to synthesize my initial findings with real, tangible problems in and around the City of Providence to provide a concrete answer to my initial

questions of the effectiveness of community organizing and prevalence of environmental racism.

In my quest to find a pertinent community partner, I came to the realization that it is often very difficult to pinpoint the cause, process and successfulness of various grassroots movements. Based purely in the environmental justice movement, it is hard to gauge the successes of movements in the long run, as the environmental justice advocacy groups have only been in action since the 1980's (Cole et al., 2001). Nevertheless, I found a certain amount of legitimacy and importance of grassroots movements through larger victories within the U.S. The most recent and lasting example of grassroots organizing which swept the nation with force and gusto was the recent election of President Barack Obama. Obama's campaign provides a template for successful community organizing strategies and has breathed new life into the use of such strategies for the struggle against environmental racism. Yossef Ben-Meir addressed this in his article on community organizing and posited that community organizing is essential to bringing back a sense of empowerment to the American people (Ben-Meir, 2008). Because there is so much power concentrated within the top few powerful leaders and corporations, the essential quality of democracy is lost somewhere along the way. This is exactly the problem with communities who face cases of toxic dumping, pollution or other environmental inequities. In light of Barack Obama's successful campaign since my review of literature, the legitimacy of grassroots organizing on not only a local, but national scale is illuminated. This type of empowerment subsequently provides hope and legitimacy for smaller, community-oriented movements, such as anti-pollution campaigns

in Rhode Island. Again, Ben-Meir accentuates the success of such ground-up organizing when he says, “Facilitators of, and participants in, well-organized community development initiatives are empowered in a way that diminishes feelings of alienation and the kind of discontent that can lead to violence” (Ben-Meir, 2008, p. 1-2). Providing such hopeful messages about grassroots initiatives can, in the future, dictate the path in which both large and small communities will follow. Barack Obama seemed to be proven right in saying we have a change at hand that we can believe in. Through rallying grass root support on a nation-wide scale, Obama provided a great tool for social change.

There are multiple community organization advocates who support the same type of change which was implemented by President Barack Obama. Through working at the small level and being able to crystallize both cause and effect of locally based issues, it is far easier to move upward and tackle greater challenges. When President Obama was elected, there was a sense of optimism that swept the nation, and one which I must admit I felt strongly too. If grassroots organizing can bring a man to the most powerful post in the world, then it must also be able to solve problems at the local level like stopping environmental hazards to our health. Again, Lee Staples confirms this optimism when he writes:

The fundamental source of power lies in organized action taken by large numbers of people in an ongoing struggle to equalize power relationships. Little issues are connected to bigger ones which in turn are linked to still larger ones. There is no final issue. There is no ultimate campaign. The goal isn't simply to win one special reform or institutional change from a particular power structure, but to develop a stronger power

base with greater capacity to win other issues in the future (Staples, 2004, p. 3).

Staples brings an interesting idea to the forefront which is an essential element to finding greater legitimacy in grassroots movements' effectiveness. He cites that one can't measure the success of an organization purely through one victory over a bureaucratic institution for instance. The true measure of legitimacy within the grassroots sector is to gain continuous momentum for the future. As I mentioned before, only through a solid foundation can grassroots movements move towards solving future problems.

Through my work with Clean Water Action, I found Staples' mantra on gaining momentum through continuous successes to be proven true. Between the time of my review of literature and my current writing, I was witness to Clean Water Action gaining footing and momentum through a huge anti-pollution victory when the city required all public school busses to be retro-fitted with cleaner exhaust systems, limiting diesel emissions. The power base which they gained through this successful campaign has now carried over into their current initiative on limiting emissions from all construction vehicles in Rhode Island.

### Successful Methods for Organizing

By combining my review of a great amount of literature with my actual work under Clean Water Action, I was able to deduce that they had a real power base in Rhode Island; one of the first steps to a successful grassroots campaign. Because they are a nation-wide non-profit, they have greater public recognition, but nonetheless, they have

gathered a constituency of trusting and faithful peers within the Rhode Island community. Once again, the notion of trust and faith in the constituency of a potentially successful grassroots movement is a unifying thread between some of the most well know community organizers such as Saul Alinsky, Lee Staples and Si Kahn.

Staples provides a great template for which Clean Water Action's own successes and initiatives can be compared. Through my interview with Annie Costner from CWA and Amelia Rose from the Environmental Justice League of Rhode Island, I was able to find many correlations between Staples' broad organizing philosophies. Generally, these tactics or characteristics for a successful organizing model which I discussed with Ms. Costner and Ms. Rose were constituency, issues and tactics, membership, leadership, structure, finances and staff (Staples, 2004). Some of these characteristics were of great pertinence and strength to Clean Water Action and the Environmental Justice League, while others could be seen as drawbacks or shortfalls.

With the current Diesel Pollution Initiative movement in Providence, started by Clean Water Action, they have implemented much of the same ideologies and methods for organizing that Lee Staples writes about. As Staples says, the most effective campaigns arise out of issues that are brought about by the people who are being organized, not the organizers themselves. This constituency of people is exemplified through Clean Water action's DPI campaign, as Annie Costner noted, with the main thrust of the current campaign arising from local health concerns. There was a concern, (mainly within low to moderate-income residents of Providence,) that asthma was

disproportionately affecting neighborhoods located near busy thoroughfares and I-95, the site of recent construction. Clean Water Action took these people's concerns and societal issues to the forefront and organized them around the issue of cleaner air and less diesel pollution (Appendix A). This is just one example of a forward step towards a successful grassroots campaign.

After this base of affected community members is formed, they have the power to move forward through employing tactics and take on more membership. Staples provides these models, first with addressing the issues at hand. He calls for an emphasis of direct action on a multi-tactic basis (Staples, 2004). Clean Water Action most certainly follows this model, taking the Diesel Pollution Initiative directly to the source of the diesel pollution, the construction companies. I was able to witness their multi-tactic approach when I visited the Clean Water Action office in Providence, as certain people were designated to spread the message to the media and surrounding communities, while others, like Ms. Costner, were dealing directly with the legislative push of the initiative and taking the movement to city council. Membership is addressed through a direct membership organization, which, I found, Clean Water Action also implements. This type of organization includes people who join as individuals, families or concerned community members. Furthermore, these organizations largely build their membership through systematic recruitment of individuals and making contacts through door to door advocacy. Within Clean Water Action, this method is known as 'canvassing' (Appendix A).

Additionally, Staples' method of community organizing calls for keeping structure and leadership at the local level to retain a 'grassroots' identity. This is highly pertinent to the current Diesel Initiative Campaign, as it is rooted in local people and local concerns. As Staples' notes many problems, "Flow from political and economic policies that are made far above the neighborhood level," thus bringing the leadership and structure of an organization back down to the people, away from bureaucratic institutions, is of great value (Staples, 2004, p. 17).

Although Staples does not put a great emphasis on financing of campaigns and staffing movements, these are two things which greatly affect Clean Water Action and other grassroots organizations such as the Environmental Justice League. Through my interview with Annie Costner and Amelia Rose I found that lack of financing can be a major drawback to the successfulness of a campaign. Ms. Costner noted that the Diesel Pollution Initiative would not have taken flight without initial funding. This was confirmed by Amelia Rose who noted that the Environmental Justice League required a grant to start the wheels of the organization moving. I did note though, that both organizers believed in the strength of man power over money power (Appendix A). Actually getting out into the neighborhoods and listening to what concerned community members have to say is far more important than monetary value.

Alinsky's method for community organizing in Rules for Radicals is not incorporated into the organizing model of Clean Water Action as much, but there are elements which are retained. Alinsky explores the nature of power holders and the



powerless. Within the Diesel Pollution Initiative, the initially powerless citizens affected by the diesel emissions are trying to gain power back from the powerful construction corporations in Rhode Island. Alinsky stresses the importance of small organizations such as CWA keeping the pressure on large organizations (Alinsky, 1971). I found this to be true in the mantra of Clean Water Action, as in one of their recent DPI emails it reads, “**We need to keep the pressure on**” (Appendix B). Such powerful construction representatives within Rhode Island such as local unions, the Department of Transportation and Teamsters to name a few, are feeling the pressure of the Diesel Pollution Initiative being pushed on them. In Alinsky’s community organizing book he even outlines verbatim this mantra from CWA in his ‘thirteen rules of power tactics.’ In his eighth rule he says, “Keep the pressure on” (Alinsky, 1971, p. 127-130). This is employed by Clean Water Action’s weekly meetings, letters to media sources in Providence and unwillingness to back down from the construction industry’s threats.

Although Clean Water Action does not specifically employ methods of either community organizer, there are certainly strong elements of each in their processes of organization. Clean Water Action, based on their organizing methodologies and the strength of their Diesel Pollution Initiative, provide a successful model of community and grassroots organizing. Certainly, if Staples’ and Alinsky’s methodologies are any indication of the right path to follow, Clean Water Action is headed in the right direction.

### Grassroots Movements in Action

The Environmental Justice Movement has its roots in the 1980’s and has experienced magnanimous growth since. Struggles against corporations toxic dumping

and overall environmental racism sprung many groups into action to defend communities' health. Grassroots efforts at the local level and the persistence of activist, "transformed toxic waste from a non-entity to a full-fledged issue" (Cole et al. 2001, p. 21). Like many of their predecessors, organizations like Clean Water Action and the Environmental Justice League of Rhode Island have evolved out of a need to protect community rights and fight against environmental injustices (Appendix A). The history of the Environmental Justice Movement, which both organizations are considered a part of, have their roots in the anti-toxics movement, and, as I have found, carry many similarities. Movements which started at the small local level breathed life into the larger Environmental Justice Movement, just as Clean Water Action and the Environmental Justice League have contributed to environmental justice in the United States as well. To this line of thought Sheila Foster and Luke Cole write:

Like the Civil Rights Movement, the grassroots anti-toxics movements also brought the experiential base of direct action into the Environmental Justice Movement. It further contributed both the experience of using (and, when need be, discrediting) scientific and technical information and the conceptual framework that pushed pollution prevention and toxics use reduction as policy goals. Anti-toxics groups also had built national networks by linking *local* activists, an experience that they brought to the movement. Anti-toxics leaders focused on corporate power and the structure of the U.S. and the global economies and on strategies for changing that structure (Cole et al. 2001, p. 23).

Clean Water Action, for example, brought its experiential base of their recent victory in the school bus campaign to the aid of their current campaign, the Diesel Pollution

Initiative. Also, having a local base of activists and community organizer from their previous campaigns greatly benefited their current diesel initiative.

Part of putting a movement into action includes coalition building cited by Collin et al. and Lee Staples as well. Coalition building is the key to gaining power in neighborhoods around environmental issues (Collin et al., 1995). By making community connections, Clean Water Action has been able to champion their cause of the Diesel Pollution Initiative. Annie Costner cited the importance of neighborhood parents, professionals and minority members such as Anna Vargas, a single mother of two from Providence, as of incredible importance to their cause (Appendix A). The prevalence of these community members and the strength which they brought to the recent city council meeting I attended was evident. Not only were the council members willing to hear what they had to say, but were empathetic to their cause. Furthermore, this strong coalition allowed for the Diesel Pollution Initiative to move forward, with construction members agreeing in the past weeks to work with Clean Water Action towards an agreeable policy. A letter from Clean Water Action revealed:

“The meeting revealed that they [Construction representatives] are willing to work with us on a policy that will prevent diesel pollution from government jobs, in a timely manner, both at the local and state levels. This is a HUGE step for the DPI, City of Providence and all Rhode Islanders who stand to benefit from clean diesel policies” (Appendix B).

Such success illuminates the power of grassroots movements in the struggle against environmental injustices. For such a small grassroots organization, Clean Water Action

gained major momentum and footing for future successes in the Environmental Justice Movement.

## Conclusions

The road that has led me to my ultimate conclusions has been seemingly one with no end. Knowing whether or not I was on the right track or just making a shot in the dark was sometimes the overriding feeling of this project. But finding the proper tools in both my research methodology and engaging my community partner ultimately led me to the place I am now. I had never anticipated truly coming to the conclusion that my community partner would be the one to make my project complete, but working with Clean Water Action ultimately gave me a broad spectrum with which I could step back and view the effectiveness of grassroots movements in the face of environmental injustices.

To that end, both my participant observation with Clean Water Action and my interviews with Ms. Costner and Ms. Rose were crucial. These methodologies proved to be the most effective in gaining a real human emotion perspective on an issue which could not be viewed otherwise. To actually see people affected by environmental racism stand up in front of the city council in Providence brought my entire review of literature to life. This element is the driving force behind grassroots movements, and the power of the people, especially in the instance of the Diesel Pollution Initiative, cannot be denied.

Environmental racism is a real and prevalent problem in the United States. I needed look no further than my own city to see that these problems are out there. But the salvation to this message is that there are organizations who are working with communities to regain a sense of empowerment which has been lost through years of bureaucratic policy making without the consent of the people. Clean Water Action has brought this power back to its constituents, and through implementing successful models

of community organizing laid forth by Lee Staples and Saul Alinsky, they have gained a powerful base in Rhode Island. As Staples has forewarned though, the core message in community organizing is not striving towards one victory or one end. Each victory gives momentum towards the next; in essence the work is never done. But with the power of the people, such as those like Anna Vargas helping Clean Water Action along the way, there is an overriding sense of optimism for the future which cannot be denied. The success of campaigns like the Diesel Pollution Initiative will continue to depend on the people. I see though, a rising trend in citizen engagement, which also breeds optimism for the future. With our new President Obama, who made his way to the Presidency through community and grassroots organizing, he is a shining beacon of hope for grassroots carrying on into the future. And as the mantra of the Environmental Justice Movement will eternally ring, the people say, "We Speak for Ourselves."

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## Appendix A) Interviews

**Organization(s): Clean Water Action RI, Environmental Justice League of RI**

**Interviewee(s): Annie Costner from C.W.A. and Amelia Rose from the EJJL.**

**Date: 3/31/09**

**Format: Person to person interview, summary of answers.**

- Role of Community Organizer

A.C. - The organizer essentially connects resources with communities. (Gives example of farmers market in Lawrence, Mass.) Citizens and attendants of farmers market were concerned with diesel produce trucks idling all day to keep produce fresh. Community came to consensus with help of local organizers that ‘diesel electrification’ for the produce trucks would greatly minimize the effects of diesel particulate matter in air. Just one example of community coming together with organizers.

- Organizers are there to “bring people out.”

A.R. – One role of organizer is to “cause a ruckus!”

A.C. – Organizer is also essential in building relationships. (Gives example of single Latino mother, Anna Vargas, who is a major proponent of the Diesel Pollution Ordinance.)

A.R. – The Organizer is there to facilitate leaders. The organizers are not necessarily the best fit to be leaders. Organizers bring people out to forums. Organizers help people to trust themselves. (Gives example of citizens using their own experience with diesel pollution in their communities and trusting their experience to make a difference.)

- (Gives another example of how the Environmental Justice League was formed.) Their roots are in the Reservoir Triangle area of Providence. City was looking for cheapest site possible to build new schools (Alvarez H.S. and Springfield St. Schools). A local lawyer got involved and rallied the support of local residents. Area used to be site of Springfield Dump. Residents saw lead slag from old factories. They trusted themselves to address the issue. An example of one of the forms of power people can wield.

A.C. – With the Diesel Pollution Initiative the main thrust was health concerns. Asthma was running rampant in Providence. Clean Water Action went to Hasbro Medical Center to make community connection. Saw those citizens who were disproportionately affected by diesel pollution. (Emphasizes importance of making community connections.)

- What is the next step after making the community connection?

A.C. – It's a combination of both grassroots efforts and legislative efforts. Rally support through something people can identify with such as disproportionate numbers of people being affected by diesel pollution.

- (Gives the example of parents getting involved for their children's safety.) Once people are involved, one issue like the Diesel Pollution Initiative can be an entry point for others or a jumping off point to working with the community on other issues. "It's not as though we [Clean Water Action] have been building our base around one issue." (Notes that regulation on issues can change.) It is important to have continuity in general. People know they can come back to the CWA community for more than one issue.

- How do you cope with changing issues?

A.C. – There are multiple ways to keep getting issues across to people. There is the grassroots piece, the legislative piece and the media piece.

A.R. – The Environmental Justice League is broadening their scope to deal with multi-issues like Clean Water Action.

- The consistent part is always building power. Have a powerful voice on at least one particular issue. Important to have a strong base to always show your power vs. politicians. An organization is always seen as more credible with lots of information. (Gives the example of a cardiologist who provided health statistics at the last city council meeting for the Diesel Pollution Initiative which provided greater legitimacy.)

- How do you build power?

A.C. – There are two types of power. People power versus money power. (Identifies benefits of people power, but doesn't get into aspects of money power.) People power is the voice of the community. There is great power in numbers. Clean Water Action has 30,000 members in Rhode Island alone. "Numbers give credibility too." Having legitimate community leaders is another example of people power. Letter writing really influences politicians as well. "A few letters really makes an impact." (Annie notes that politicians are used to dealing with people who know what to say. The element of surprise can throw them off balance.)

- How important is funding to organizing?

A.C. – Basic funding is obviously necessary just to exist as an organization. Organizers with non-profits such as Clean Water Action get paid to organize and rally support for issues.

A.R. – For the Environmental Justice League, a new coalition in RI, it took a grant to get things up and running. Funding is important, but it is more important to talk with people, and listen to what they have to say.

A.C. – The Rhode Island community is a special case. There is a tight core of environmental groups. For the Diesel Pollution Initiative, two organizations are funded. One is Clean Water Action, the other is the American Lung Association.

- If you are funded to work on an issue, such as the DPI, you can dedicate more man power.
- Of the 40 coalition partners in Rhode Island, it's a core group of people. Funding allows for greater support of fellow coalition partners and a wider scope of issues.

- Do you see Environmental Racism at work in RI?

A.R. – Is it the economy? Believes it is more the physical layout of cities in general. People are being separated more and more. Low income areas are the communities next to I-95 and feeling the effects of diesel pollution. Poor people are being marginalized.

- (Gives example of Native Americans in the U.S.) It is the separation from society that often makes them a target for environmental injustices. You become more cognizant of environmental discrepancies, whether or not populations are being deliberately targeted. Government has a responsibility to communities. Government has to enforce laws, provide jobs for people.

- How do construction companies defend environmental abuses/problems?

A.C. – They argue that ordinances such as the Diesel Pollution Initiative are “prohibitive to a thriving economy.” Using the ‘polluter pays’ model, companies argue there is no way to put an appropriate price tag on environmental issues. Their argument is that protecting the environment hurts the economy. The newer model for coping with companies who defend their polluting practices is putting a price on the environment. Even if businesses don't agree, you have to treat the environment with rights.

A.R. – The environment is, in fact, tied up with the economy. (Gives the example of downtown Providence.) The river provides great revenue for the city and it is essential to protect environment.

- Also, community must be built for a better environment and protection of it. (Gives example of Bucket Brigade to raise awareness for environment in RI.)

## Appendix B) DPI Emails

Hello Diesel Champions!

Note, we **will not have a hearing for the Providence Clean Diesel ordinance on this Monday, April 6.**

But, the campaign marches on!

Yesterday I met with more than a dozen representatives from the construction industry, local unions, the AGC, Teamsters and the Department of Transportation who have opposed the policies promoted by us, the Diesel Pollution Initiative.

Strikingly, the meeting revealed that they are willing to work with us on a policy that will prevent diesel pollution from government jobs, in a timely manner, both at the local and state levels. This is a HUGE step for the DPI, City of Providence and all Rhode Islanders who stand to benefit from clean diesel policies. I will be meeting with that same group on a weekly basis throughout the month of April to develop policy language everyone can live with.

In the meantime, **we need to keep the pressure on.** Rita Kerr-Vanderslice from our office will be conducting pollution patrols and looking to get press attention on these. If you are interested and want to be involved, call our office (401) 331-6972. In addition, we need **Letters to the Editor of your local paper**, and [Letters to decision makers](#), like the City Council, State legislators and the Governor. We need your help to ramp up the noise on diesel and make sure we pass strong local and state policies this year!

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Rhode Island is ahead of other states where this policy is concerned, so we have the chance to set an example about how government at all levels must be diligent and responsible with the public money they spend. Diesel pollution has a solution and we can start here!

Keep up the good work. We have much to be proud about,

Annie

[www.cleanwateraction.org/ri/](http://www.cleanwateraction.org/ri/)