

Communities of color have long been targeted for toxic facilities, including dumps and incinerators. Not only are they fighting back, but they're also creating sustainable alternatives.



Sheila Holt-Orsted with her family in front of their Dickson, Tennessee, home. Their farm sits 54 feet from a landfill leaching highly toxic trichloroethylene. Pictured from left to right: Sheila's sister Bonita, Sheila Holt-Orsted, her brother Patrick, her mother holding a photo of her deceased father, and her sister Demetrius. Photo by Steve Jones.

Environmental Justice for All

What happens to our country's garbage isn't only an environmental issue. It's a human rights and health issue, too. And for some communities—particularly working class communities of color—it's also a life or death matter.

"Today, race is still the most potent factor when predicting where toxic waste facilities are located, more important than income or other socio-economic factors," says Dr. Robert D. Bullard, one of four professors who worked on *Toxic Wastes and Race at Twenty: 1987-2007*, a study commissioned by the United Church of Christ (UCC). Bullard, widely known as the "father of environmental justice" for his more than 25 years of tireless work on behalf of targeted communities, is Ware professor of sociology and director of the Environmental Justice Resource Center at Clark Atlanta University.

And so, across the US—from the South Bronx, an area riddled with waste treatment facilities and incinerators; to Chicago's "toxic donut" of clustered hazardous waste landfills; to Louisiana's "Cancer Alley," where oil refineries and chemical plants pump foul air over the Mississippi shoreline—communities of color are bearing the toxic burdens of our industrial way of life. Neighborhoods near toxic facilities often suffer debilitating health effects from the harmful chemicals released by these facilities—chemicals often linked to birth defects, hormone disruption, diabetes, heart disease, and cancer.

That phenomenon has a name: environmental racism. The term was coined in 1987 when two separate studies—one by Dr.

Bullard that focused on Houston, and the first *Toxic Wastes and Race* national study commissioned by the UCC—painstakingly documented how toxic facilities are much more likely to be located in areas based on race and class.

Why is that the case? Any company that has tried to site a landfill or an incinerator in any given community is well-acquainted with the NIMBY attitude: property owners who come forward and protest, "Not In My Back Yard." To circumvent the NIMBY effect, companies and government agencies target those who are least equipped to resist toxic facilities—namely, working class black, Latino, and Native American populations mired in the problems of day-to-day economic survival.

But the good news is that these communities are fighting back, and in many cases, they're winning. They're also coming up with healthy, sustainable alternatives that are promoting a green economy and justice for all.

A FAMILY ON THE FRONT LINES

Where does our trash go? Just ask Sheila Holt-Orsted. She and others who live on Eno Road in Dickson, Tennessee, believe they know all too well where their city's garbage ends up: right in their backyards. And they say the toxins leaking from the Dickson County Landfill are literally killing them. But Holt-Orsted is determined to get justice for her family and to ensure that what happened to them never happens again.

When slavery was abolished, the newly freed African-American men and women of Dickson settled on Eno Road, which remained a predominantly black neighborhood for the next 200 years. In 1968, it was this black community that Dickson County officials chose to host its main landfill, which now sits 54 feet behind the 150-acre farm owned by the Holt family for the last 70 years.

“It’s not just that one landfill on Eno Road,” notes Dr. Bullard. “Besides the sanitary landfill, there’s a construction and demolition landfill, a garbage transfer station, and a recycling center. You have to ask, in a county that’s less than five percent African-American, why does every permitted solid waste facility happen to be located on this one little road that’s predominantly black?”

It wasn’t a question that Holt-Orsted ever asked until 2002, when her father, Harry “Highway” Holt, founder of the Dynamic Dixie Travelers gospel group, was diagnosed with prostate cancer. A few days after returning to Dickson from her home in Virginia to be with her family, she found out that her aunt, who lives next door, had cancer, too.

She put it down to coincidence ... until her mother mentioned that two of her cousins who lived next door also had cancer, as did a neighbor who lived up the road.

“And then I thought, ‘Wait, this is not normal,’” she says.

So Holt-Orsted, a young, healthy personal trainer who had been teaching up to five aerobics classes a day, went to the doctor. The diagnosis: breast cancer.

That’s when she got angry. Operating on a “gut feeling” that something, somewhere had made her family sick, she became consumed with finding out what it was and making it stop.

Two years earlier, the state had taken the Holts off the well water their family had been drinking for decades, saying that it was merely a “precaution” because of the landfill nearby. And she recalled that back in 1988, the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) had sent the family a letter saying it had found contaminants in their well water. But in that letter, EPA officials assured the Holts the presence of chemicals “may be due to a lab or sampling error.”

So she started making phone calls, trying to figure out what the contaminants in the well water had been: “I went to the state. I called my local officials. I called my state senator and representatives. I went to the mayor. I went to everybody.”

With a tenacity that left many of her bemused family members scratching their heads, she uncovered numerous memos and reports detailing how in the 1960s and ’70s, local companies had dumped their hazardous waste in the landfill behind the Holt farm—and this was before 1991 federal rules went into effect, mandating landfill safety precautions like protective liners and leachate collection systems. The Dickson landfill was not much more than a hole in the ground.

And into that hole, Scoville-Shrader, an automotive company that’s now the Scoville-Saltire subsidiary of Alper Holdings, had dumped barrels of trichloroethylene (TCE). TCE is classified as a known carcinogen by California’s Proposition 65 and a “highly likely” carcinogen by the EPA. Environmental Defense’s Scorecard.org puts it in the most toxic ten percent of chemicals that exist. Other health effects linked to TCE exposure include liver disease, heart disease, diabetes, kidney disease, gastrointestinal disorders, and birth defects, according to the US Department of Health and Human Services.

Even through her illness, which would put her through six

surgeries and several rounds of chemotherapy, Holt-Orsted didn’t stop digging until her parents’ home was filled with bins containing over 900 pages of documents. She learned it was TCE that the EPA had found at borderline levels in the Holt well in 1988. In 1990, the EPA had tested the Holts’ well again and found TCE levels at 26 parts per billion (ppb), five times above government-mandated maximum levels of five ppb. No one told the Holts that year that their water might be contaminated.

It was a pattern that Holt-Orsted discovered had repeated itself many times over the next few years. The EPA tested the Holt well again in 1990 and in 1991. At that point, the agen-

“Addressing environmental justice for all makes us healthier, stronger, and more secure as a nation.”

cy found low TCE levels, so it sent the Holts another letter telling them their water was safe.

However, around that time, memos started flying back and forth between the EPA and Tom Moss at the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation (TDEC), who noted that Dickson County’s porous limestone foundation could cause TCE levels to go up and down at the Holt farm, and their water could still be toxic. Neither agency ever informed the Holts, and from 1991 to 2000, neither tested the Holts’ well again.

What troubles the Holts, Dr. Bullard, and the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, which is handling a discrimination lawsuit on the Holts’ behalf, is that as those memos were being written, the EPA had found that the Dickson County landfill was most definitely leaching TCE—and a state dye-tracer test showed that it was flowing directly toward the Holt farm.

In 1993, TDEC officials tested the wells of several white families who lived near the landfill and found unacceptable levels of TCE. Forty-eight hours after back-up tests detected TCE at 18 ppb, TDEC told eight white families to stop using their wells and made arrangements to put them on city water.

And they passed over the Holts, who drank water liberally laced with TCE for seven more years.

“Some of the families lived miles away from the landfill. We were 54 feet away, and they skipped over us,” says Holt-Orsted.

EPA Region 4 representatives said they were following the



Sheila Holt-Orsted walks on her family’s farm, where the Dickson County Landfill is fully visible behind her, 54 feet from the Holt property line.

Steve Jones



Dr. Robert D. Bullard is widely considered to be the “father of the environmental justice movement” for his pioneering work in the field.

state’s lead when it came to the Holts. TDEC memos indicate it was following the EPA’s lead when it stopped looking into TCE exposure on the Holt farm in the early 1990s.

When asked whether the EPA would investigate TDEC’s conduct under Executive Order 12898 on Environmental Justice, EPA Region 4 Superfund director Franklin Hill replied, “We’ve had discussions with TDEC, and what they’ve done in terms of characterizing and addressing the site seems to be appropriate.”

Dr. Bullard disagrees. “With the white families, there was immediate, well-documented attention to getting them off contaminated water within 48 hours of finding TCE, but they all claim ignorance with the black families,” he says. “It’s horrific.”

The EPA finally tested the Holts’ well again in 2000 and found that TCE levels had skyrocketed to 29 times legal limits. At that point, the agency finally notified the family and put them on city water.

“They told the white families, ‘Don’t wash your clothes, don’t water your lawn, don’t shower in or drink it,’” says Holt-Orsted. “But even after [the tests in 2000], the state told us they were putting us on city water as a ‘precaution.’ They didn’t tell us not to shower in it. And experts later told us that showering in TCE is three times worse than drinking it.”

After contacting university experts and reading up on TCE herself, Holt-Orsted discovered that in addition to being a carcinogen, TCE is also linked to the other ill health effects that have plagued her family—her daughter’s speech impediment; her niece’s chronic rashes; her mother, brother Patrick’s, and sister Bonita’s arthritis; Patrick’s immune disorder; the diabetes that afflicted her father and sister Demetrius.

“My father tried to talk to our county commissioners about what was happening to us, but he was so soft-spoken, nobody paid any attention,” Holt-Orsted recalls. “So I went in and said, ‘You’re not going to ignore *me*. You’re going to *deal* with me.’”

Today, she’s still trying to make local and national government officials deal with her, instead of turning a blind eye to the still-leaking landfill she says is poisoning Dickson. She shuttles between Capitol Hill, her home in Virginia, and Dickson, seeking justice for her family, and she says she won’t stop until someone takes responsibility and takes care of the family—pays for their medical bills and legal fees, and cleans up their now-worthless 150 acres of land.

One thing no amount of reparation will replace: Holt-Orsted lost her father in January of this year to cancer. “He was such a good man,” she says. “He had 450 people show up at his funeral—standing room only. Everybody loved him.” She pauses for a moment. “And he was treated like garbage.”

So far, no one has stepped forward to offer the Holts reparation. Their discrimination, property damage, and personal injury lawsuits against state and local agencies and Alper Holdings are all pending (their claims against the EPA were dropped

What You Can Do to Support Environmental Justice and a Green Economy for All

Work with Co-op America to promote environmental justice, green-collar jobs, and a green economy for all:

- **Join our campaign to support the Holt family:** Send the postcard next to p. 14 to call for stronger environmental justice laws, so what happened to the Holts never happens again.

- **Support the environmental justice movement:** Clark Atlanta University’s Environmental Justice Resource Center, headed by Dr. Bullard, is a one-stop shop for everything related to environmental justice: the latest studies, detailed information and news on the Holt case, and plenty of resources for anyone needing to mobilize and fight off toxic facilities: www.ejrc.cau.edu.

- **Support Green Worker Co-ops and ReBuilders**
Source: To help ReBuilders Source open its doors and start showing the South Bronx and the country that positive alternatives to dumping trash on communities exist, contact Green Worker Co-ops, 718/617-7807, www.greenworker.coop.

- **Support the Oakland Green Jobs Corps:** For news about and opportunities to donate to the budding Oakland Green Jobs Corps—as well as information about the Green Jobs Act moving through Congress—contact the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, 510/428-3939, www.ellabakercenter.org.

- **Read our expanded interviews with Van Jones and Dr. Robert Bullard online:** Exclusively on our Web site at www.coopamerica.org/go/zerowaste.

- **Sign up for our e-mail newsletter:** We’ll send you breaking news on all of our campaigns, including any updates on the Holt family case and the environmental justice and green-collar jobs bills moving through Congress. Sign up at www.coopamerica.org.

- **Join Co-op America’s 1% in Community campaign:** Co-op America’s community investing program has helped move over \$19.6 billion into community investing institutions, which provide loans, technical expertise, and needed financial services to low- and moderate-income communities in the US and around the world. Community investing loans have helped low-income people start their own locally based businesses, and often those businesses are also environmentally sustainable. Visit our Web site, www.communityinvest.org, and read our guide to *Investing for the World*, www.coopamerica.org/PDF/caq67_000.pdf.

- **Support Co-op America’s Solar Catalyst program:** We’ve been working behind the scenes to drive down the price of solar so it becomes more affordable—which will create green-collar jobs in droves. To find out more, visit our Web site, www.solarcatalyst.org.

- **Hear Van Jones and Omar Freilla speak at the Green Festival:** To hear more about the green-collar jobs movement in person, come to one of our festivals, where Van Jones and Omar Freilla are regular speakers: www.greenfestivals.org. You can also hear their past talks on the site, via “Green Festival Radio.”

**SUPPORT
THE HOLTS:**

Send in the postcard next to p. 14 today, calling for tougher environmental justice laws, so what happened to the Holts never happens again.

due to a legal error by their previous lawyer). The Natural Resources Defense Council sent a notice letter in June giving Scoville-Saltire, EPA, TDEC, and the city 90 days to clean up the landfill, after which point it will be able to file a federal lawsuit.

Holt-Orsted's cancer was in remission, but she recently learned it has returned. But even her grief over her father and fears about her health haven't stopped her from continuing her battle—or from doing her best to ensure that what happened to her family doesn't happen to anyone else.

"I'm going to Georgia as soon as I figure out what's happening with my health. There's a black community in Gainesville where they want to put a landfill—and the whole community gets their water from a local watershed that would be right underneath it." She sighs. "It's horrible to hear story after story. But I just want people to know that they have to fight and fight hard. I want to help them do what they can."

PRESCRIPTION FOR PROGRESS

Toxic Wastes and Race at Twenty showed that what happened to the Holt family isn't an isolated case: Today, neighborhoods with clusters of polluting facilities within a two-mile radius contain an average of 69 percent people of color, primarily African Americans and Latinos.

"The way it works is that when a community gets one facility, it's easier to give it two. When it has three, it's easier to give it four," says Dr. Bullard. "There's nothing in our laws that creates a threshold, where we can say, 'This community has had enough, and there should be no more toxic loading.'"

Toxic Wastes and Race at Twenty put forth several policy recommendations that would help the government address such toxic loading and other environmental inequities in the US. The study noted that reports from the US Government Accountability Office and the EPA Inspector General have stated that Executive Order 12898 on Environmental Justice, issued by President Clinton in 1994, wasn't being adequately enforced. The order required the EPA to take the lead in combatting environmental racism.

"If the government would actually enforce that executive order, we'd be well on our way toward addressing a lot of our environmental justice problems," says Dr. Bullard.

That was the message he emphasized as he testified in July at the first-ever Senate hearing on Environmental Justice, chaired by Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-NY). He also told the Subcommittee about the Holt case and put forth his study's findings and policy recommendations.

"Achieving environmental justice for all makes us a healthier, stronger, and more secure nation as a whole," he told the subcommittee during his closing comments at the hearing.

"The subcommittee took EPA to task on why it's been 13 years since the Executive Order was issued, and EPA's still dragging their feet," says Dr. Bullard. "I'm hopeful that Congress is beginning to move."

Senator Clinton has since put forth bills to increase federal accountability on environmental justice and establish a clearinghouse that would help connect affected communities to technical experts who can help them avoid the clustering effect. On August 1, Clinton introduced the "TCE Reduction Act" to require the EPA to set tougher regulations to protect the public from exposure to TCE.

GREEN-COLLAR JOBS: A NEW HOPE

Omar Freilla says that the predominantly black and Latino residents of his community, the South Bronx, wouldn't be surprised by the 2007 UCC study findings. "The South Bronx has been a dumping ground for decades. I'm talking garbage transfer stations, wastewater treatment plants, sewage sludge processing," he says.

Over the years, South Bronx residential neighborhoods have been sliced and diced by highways, waste facilities, power plants, and one of the largest food distribution centers in the world. Thousands of trucks rumble in and out of the area every day, and toxic facilities send clouds of pollution into the air. As a result, the area has one of the highest rates of asthma in the country. And, since manufacturing jobs were lost many years ago as companies outsourced to China and Mexico, it's also the poorest urban county in the US, says Freilla.

As Freilla thought about how to deflect additional toxic facilities, he found himself reflecting on where all the waste comes from, and asking: What if we didn't throw anything away?

"We can set up our society so we don't produce anything that needs to be thrown away, and we don't throw anything away, but keep it in circulation. And when you do that, you reduce waste, create new jobs, preserve natural resources," says Freilla, describing his epiphany. "If we can go zero waste, we can actually shut down the waste facilities."

And then, he knew, everyone could live in beautiful, healthy communities, regardless of what socioeconomic class they belonged to, or what color their skin happened to be.

So Freilla started Green Worker Cooperatives, with the idea of moving the city toward zero waste and creating jobs for South Bronx residents. He saw the huge amounts of waste being generated by the building industry—in the form of dumpsters in his neighborhood filled to the brim with kitchen cabinets, drywall, bricks, and other building materials that could have been reused. And so he had his first goal—starting a worker-owned cooperative in the South Bronx that would collect all of this wasted stuff and resell it to individuals and contractors, Home-Depot-style.

He chose a cooperative model because "co-ops empower their workers and keep the wealth within in the community, instead of having it go to the owner who more than likely wouldn't be a resident."



Omar Freilla stands in front of the brownfield near his proposed site for ReBuilders Source in the South Bronx. Freilla won the 2007 Jane Jacobs Medal for his work in starting Green Worker Co-ops. He donated his prize money to ReBuilders Source.

Mary Witenburg

Having no experience with co-ops at first, he read up on the subject and talked to several experts. He learned enough to start the Green Worker Academy to train future worker-owners, to educate South Bronx residents about local environmental justice issues, and to explain why green worker co-ops present a viable alternative to toxic facilities. And he started raising the money he needed—\$900,000, to be exact.

Today, Freilla says the organization is \$70,000 short of its goal, which it expects to meet this fall. At that point, ReBuilders Source will open its doors.

“They tell us that the waste transfer stations and other garbage facilities they want to put in our neighborhoods are going to create jobs,” says Freilla. “We wanted to be able to say we don’t need any more transfer stations, and here’s the alternative—ReBuilders Source.”

Across the country, Van Jones, president of the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, is working on a similar alternative. In Oakland, CA, where the Center is located, the population is predominantly working class people of color, with lots of pollution-based industries and high asthma rates. In nearby Marin County, wealthy communities enjoy all sorts of green products and services, from organic restaurants to green clothing retailers. It’s a classic case for the environmental justice books, and Jones calls it “eco-apartheid,” where you have ecological haves and have-nots.

“What people don’t realize is that if 20 percent of the economy is sustainable, that means 80 percent is not sustainable. And that undoes the work of those who are trying to create a green economy,” he says.

So to foster eco-equity instead of eco-apartheid, you need to have a green economy that isn’t just for those who can afford to pay a premium for solar panels or a hybrid car, says Jones. “You have to have a green economy that is strong enough to lift people out of poverty, where the green benefits are spread widely. What does that look like? It looks like green-collar jobs for people who might otherwise be displaced.”

Green collar jobs are high-quality jobs that will naturally form out of the booming green economy, jobs installing solar panels, maintaining wind farms, or repurposing used construction materials, as with Freilla’s ReBuilders Source, for example, which by their very nature have to be local. Jones says that if we could move people from at-risk, underserved communities that are often the victims of environmental racism into dignified, uplifting green-collar work as green industries expand, we’d truly create a healthy society for all.

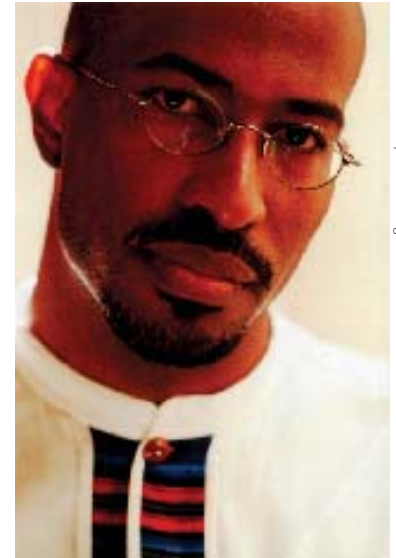
To that end, the Ella Baker Center is set to launch a Green Jobs Corps in Oakland, working with the local community college system to create green job training programs. They’ve secured about \$250,000 in city funding. By this time next year, Jones says the first students should start going through the Corps.

“What I’m excited about is that this is going to be the birth of an environmentalism that’s rooted in creating opportunities

for working class people. If you can imagine an environmentalism with a hard hat and a lunch bucket and the sleeves rolled up, we can fix America,” says Jones. “And that worker is every color under the rainbow and every gender and faith and sexual orientation. That’s where the environmental movement has to go.”

ECO-JUSTICE AND GREEN JOBS

Thanks to innovators like Jones and Freilla, the green collar jobs movement is starting to capture the imagination of US lawmakers. This past summer, Jones got a hastily scribbled message from what he thought was a “Nancy Pulosky,” who wanted to talk to him about green collar jobs. With his jam-packed schedule, Jones wasn’t able to get back to her right away. When he finally did so, he found out she was actually Nancy Pelosi (D-CA), the Speaker of the House and the third most powerful person in US politics.



Van Jones, founder of the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, is creating a Green Jobs Corps.

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Pelosi’s staffers had heard Jones—who’s been called one of the “preachers” of the environmental/social justice movement for his impassioned public speaking style—talking about the Green Job Corps, and Pelosi invited him to a meeting with several others for a roundtable on global warming. Jones RSVPed with a mere two days to spare, and the time he spent at that meeting “speaking from the heart” resulted in Rep. Hilda Solis (D-CA) putting forward the Green Jobs Act of 2007. The bill would set aside funding to train 35,000 people across the country per year in green-collar work, with a special emphasis in pulling some of those people from marginalized populations.

Between the Green Jobs Act, the TCE bill, and future actions that may come out of the environmental justice Senate hearing, it may be that we are, at last, on our way toward making environmental racism a thing of the past. To keep the momentum going, we all need to reach across communities, across cultural and socioeconomic differences, and across political differences to create a sustainable alternative to dumping our waste into anyone’s back yards.

“The only solution to all of these problems is eco-equity,” says Jones. “In other words, equal protection from the worst of global warming, but also equal access and equal opportunities to the best of the green economy. That is the moral agenda we have to embrace as we move forward.” **CAQ**

—Tracy Fernandez Rysavy



WEB EXCLUSIVE: We put our in-depth interviews with the inspiring Dr. Robert Bullard and Van Jones online. Learn more about the environmental justice movement from Dr. Bullard, the “father of environmental justice,” and discover why Van Jones has has audiences on their feet whenever he talks about green-collar jobs by visiting our Web site at www.coopamerica.org/go/zerowaste.