



# THE CHANGE AGENT

Adult Education for  
Social Justice: News,  
Issues, and Ideas

## Fighting Contamination in a Chicago Neighborhood

Elvia Saltillo

### Playing in Contamination

When my children were little, they played in the alley behind our house. The alley was wet and moldy. When it rained, the dirty moldy water came into the garage and yard. Sometimes it came into the basement. The kids were playing in god-knows-what contamination.

The children got rashes. The rashes were so bad. Sometimes the children looked like they had cigarette burns on their legs. Other parents had the same problem with their children. But there was no where else to play. All the parents took their kids to the doctor. But the doctor didn't know where the rashes came from. We didn't know what to do, so we didn't do anything.

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### STAYING SAFE IN A TOXIC WORLD

**STORIES FROM THE HOME** look at baby bottles, lead poisoning, hand soap, and "real cool stuff": pp. 3-7; **CIGARETTES** are toxic and addictive: pp. 8-9; **STORIES OF PEOPLE MAKING CHANGE**: pp. 27, 28, 30, 32-33, 37; **ORDINARY PEOPLE FIGHT AND WIN!** pp. 12-13, 16-18, 19, 48-49; **MATH PRACTICE** (fractions, percents, and ratios): pp. 9, 14, 15, 16, 26, 32-33, 34, 45, 49, 52; **PICTURING A PART PER MILLION** (and *verysmall* units for measuring contaminants): pp. 4-5, 26; **IDLING ENGINES** and diesel pollution: pp. 22-23; **APPLES, ORANGES, AND STRAWBERRIES**: pp. 15, 32, 34; **RECIPES**: pp. 7, 27, 39; **TAKING ACTION** at work: pp. 36-37, 48, 53; **QUIZ**: p. 39; **COAL MINING**: pp. 40, 41; **ALL ABOUT TRASH**—from chicken litter to packaging to the Gulf oil spill clean-up: pp. 42-53; **GARBAGE STINKS** (landfills to zero waste told in pictures): pp. 46-47; **SMART MOVES** for doing math: p. 35; **GLOSSARY**: p. 54; **SURVEY!** Tell us what you think of this issue: p. 55.

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### A Meeting of Neighbors

In 2005, I saw a flyer about a meeting in my community. The meeting was organized by Little Village Environmental Justice Organization (LVEJO). They told us that the Celotex factory had operated in our neighborhood from 1914-1984. The factory was closed now, but they left behind a lot of contamination.

The contamination could be spreading to our homes and yards. At the meeting, we decided to

**The children looked like they had cigarette burns on their legs.**

ask the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to come and check. They found out that the Celotex factory was

contaminated with PAHs. (See box.) So we asked them to check all the yards in the neighborhood.

### Forcing Celotex to Clean Up Their Mess

Illinois State Law says that the soil should not have PAH concentrations of more than 0.001 ppm. We found out that many homes in the neighborhood were contaminated. It was interesting that the homes farthest from the site had some of the highest concentrations of PAH, in some cases 100+ ppm. (See box below.)

### PAH and ppm stand for...?

**PAH stands for** Polynuclear Aromatic Hydrocarbons. They are by products of burning oil, coal, and garbage. Celotex made roofing products, asphalt and other items that created PAHs. Some PAHs may cause cancer in humans. PAHs have also been linked to birth defects and low birth weight in lab animals.

**Ppm stands for** parts per million.



*Neighbors meet in the living room of an LVEJO member.*

LVEJO held lots of meetings and organized many neighbors to fight for the Celotex owner to clean up the contamination. By 2008, we succeeded in making Celotex clean up all of the 155 homes that were contaminated.

At my house, they replaced the top 3 feet of soil. They put in clean soil.

Now we are trying to get the city to build a park on top of the abandoned Celotex site. We want them to cap the polluted soil and put in clean soil. We want the area to have a playground and a community center.





*LVEJO activists go to a hearing on the Celotex clean-up.*

## Change Happens Little by Little

Even though my kids are grown, I care for the children growing up around here. I want them to have what my kids never had. I want them to have a clean park, not a contaminated alley. When my kids were little, we didn't have information. We didn't know any better. Now that we know better, we must try to improve the things that we can.

I have a lot of neighbors that did not want to get involved. They didn't want to bother. But I said, "No. Someone has to get involved." We must try and try and try until we are heard. Sometimes

I feel discouraged. Sometimes things take a long time. I go to the houses, I talk to the neighbors. I tell them, "If we don't get involved, we will never be heard." So then the neighbors start coming to meetings. They see that change can happen if you work for it. It happens little by little.

I know it's going to take a lot. We're going to have to work hard. We're going to be doing the same thing: working hard to get what we need.

I like being a community activist. I'm going to be 75. I can't do hard work, but I can work with my mind and my presence. And my mouth! Whatever is within my reach, I can give it to my community so it can be a better community. When you find out that something is not right, find out what you can do about it.

*Elvia Saltillo is a 75-year-old grandmother and an active member of Little Village Environmental Justice Organization (LVEJO).*



*Doña Elvia Saltillo*

## Take it Further

**The law says** PAH concentrations should not be greater than 0.001 ppm. But some people's yards had concentrations of 100 ppm. How many times greater is that?

**Write about a change** in your life that happened little by little. How did you respond to challenges and celebrate victories?

**Write a letter** to Elvia Saltillo c/o LVEJO, 2856 S. Millard Ave., Chicago, IL 60623

**What if you decide** to take steps to clean up your community? What government agency might help? See <[www.nelrc.org/change-agent/extras](http://www.nelrc.org/change-agent/extras)> for a listing of local and national agencies.