

# What Makes a Mom an Activist?

*An Interview with Lois Gibbs*

Over thirty years ago, Lois Gibbs was a 27-year-old mother and housewife living near Love Canal in upstate New York. Her children began to get sick, and she wondered if their illnesses were related to the fact that the local grammar school was built next to a toxic waste dump. She decided to talk to her neighbors. It was 1978, and with those first steps going door-to-door in her neighborhood, Ms. Gibbs went from being a housewife to a community activist. She is currently the executive director of Center for Health, Environment and Justice.

**Can you describe the events that made you go door-to-door in your neighborhood?**

My son and my daughter got very sick. I found out that their illnesses were related to the chemical waste that was buried near our house and right next to the school where my son attended kindergarten. The Board of Education called me a hysterical housewife. I realized that if I was going to protect my children, I only had one choice, and that was to find other parents with sick children and to close the 99th Street School.

**Why did you decide that going to your neighbors was the first thing to do?**

Because every single government door was slammed in our faces and the health officials said, "Yes, your son has all these diseases but you prob-



*Lois Gibbs with her daughter Melissa during the early days of organizing the Love Canal protests, 1979.*

ably have bad genes." But my children's illnesses obviously were related to Love Canal. Benzene was leaking out of the toxic waste dump. Benzene causes leukemia and blood disorders, and my daughter had a blood disorder. There were toxic pesticides on the playground where Michael played. These pesticides cause seizure disorders, and Michael had a seizure disorder. You don't need to be a medical expert to put those together.

**What was it like to go door to door?**

Going door to door was probably the most frightening thing I did. I believed that when I knocked on the door, everybody was going to tell me that I was crazy. It took a lot of courage to begin to talk to people. But then people were receptive. They told me stories that were similar to my story. Their children were sick; their husbands were sick; their wives were sick; they had different colored chemicals coming into their basements.

**What is the biggest obstacle to organizing?**

Fear is the biggest obstacle. If you are organizing in your community, it is probably because you



tried to go the authorities—the people that are supposed to be the experts—and you have been told that you are wrong. So you start your organizing with a sense of insecurity. You think maybe you really are nuts.

**How did this work become a lifetime pursuit?**

After Love Canal I received calls from people all over the country, who said, “I’ve got a dump just like that. How do I clean it up? How do I get some medical testing of our community?” I saw there was a need out there. I didn’t have *all* the answers, but I had *some* of the answers. I could help people figure out how to organize. I’m still angry. Here in the richest country in the world, we are supposed to be the home of the free. But it isn’t so. The poorer you are, the more “of color” you are, the less you get from society; it really makes me angry.

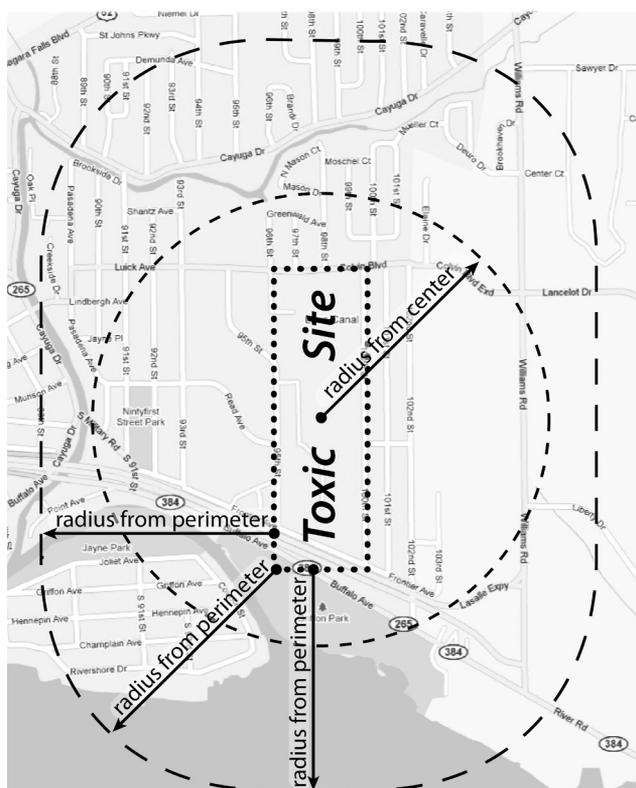
**What issues are you focusing on now?**

We are looking at children and environmental health. There are many schools built within a half-mile radius of Superfund sites or even being built directly on top of toxic waste sites. I look at them and say, “Oh my god, it’s like Love Canal all over again. It’s like the 99th Street School being put next to a dump site. Why would people do that?” We are also working on Dioxin, which is one of the most toxic chemicals known to man, and it comes from the manufacture of plastic, which has chlorine in it. We are working to try and eliminate that type of plastic from the market place.

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Lois Gibbs (left) protested at the Eagle Rock Mine Project in Michigan in 2010. Photo courtesy of Greg Peterson.



A news report might talk about people who live “within a half-mile radius” of a toxic site. A radius might make you think of a circle. On this map, the inner circle is a half-mile radius from the exact center of the toxic site. The outer shape is a half-mile away from the perimeter of the toxic site. If you lived in this neighborhood, which shape would you want to use to describe people who live “within a half-mile radius” of the site?

**How Close are You?**

Visit <<http://toxmap.nlm.nih.gov/toxmap/main/index.jsp>> and input your location to find out how close you are to toxic releases or hazardous waste sites.