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## Conclusion

“What a difference it is to get up in the morning and to hear the birds sing instead of the roaring of the Shell plant next door,” said Margie Richard as she sat in her comfortable home removed from the sounds and smells of the refinery and chemical plant. Against the odds, Richard and Concerned Citizens of Norco won a victory that will be remembered in the annals of the environmental justice movement. “If we would not have spoken up it would have been the same old status quo,” she observed. Instead the main goal of Concerned Citizens of Norco has been realized: Diamond homeowners who wanted to sell their homes and leave are now able to do so. “Now those who wanted to move are happy. I can see it in their faces. They are decorating their new houses,” said Richard.

Was Diamond a big win? “Very much so,” replied community consultant and chemist Wilma Subra. “It was for the betterment of the community not to live on that fenceline.” It would have been very hard to raise enough money privately to be able to relocate the Diamond residents who wanted to move. “I think it is a very big win,” Subra concluded.

On July 5, 2002, there was a victory celebration for those involved in the Diamond struggle for relocation. Representative Maxine Waters spoke. “You get kind of jaded in Washington,” she told the assembled residents of Diamond and their nonprofit allies, “and you begin to believe that you can’t win sometimes, that sometimes the corporations are so powerful or the money is just so much, or that it is hard to win for the people. But I want you to know that you inspire me. I came here and I stood in the playground [right near the chemical plant last summer] and I listened to what was going on, and I stood in the shadow of the plant. This is a small victory. This is a little light shining through the tunnel that says it is possible to win if you are committed to the struggle, if you are committed to the fight, if you have no

fear, if you won't let them stop you at the front gate, if you keep on going you can win."

Despite Waters's rousing rhetoric and despite a clear sense among Diamond residents that they won a long and hard-fought struggle with Shell, the celebration was muted because many residents see themselves as caught in a double bind: they need to move out to protect their health, but they know that they will never again enjoy the kind of close community they leave behind in Diamond. Anne Rolfes, who worked closely with local activists since 1999, felt this keenly. The victory in Diamond is a bittersweet, she says. "It is a sad day because this beautiful, historic community will soon be a bunch of vacant lots."<sup>1</sup>

One can still hear a plaintive note coming from Diamond residents who wish the problem posed by exposure to Shell's emissions could have been solved without requiring them to move. But in practical terms, residents recognized that demanding that the Shell facilities be relocated rather than the people who lived next to the plants was not feasible economically or politically. They might be able to convince Shell to buy them out, but they could never marshal the backing to get Shell to decamp.

However, a third possibility—moving the *whole* community to another location all at once—was lost in the protracted struggle for relocation. Other communities have been moved wholesale away from plants, and it has worked reasonably well. But this was one step too far for a community with few resources. Residents of Diamond came to believe that it was going to be hard enough to get an agreement on a buyout plan, much less to convince everyone to agree on a plan to move the whole subdivision. That could add years to the process while people were suffering today.

The failure to seriously consider moving the whole subdivision was a significant loss because the close relations among the residents of Diamond were not only of sentimental value, they were also important at a very practical level. The ability of working parents to leave their children in the care of neighbors while they went to work meant they did not have to pay for after-school child care. And the ability of family and friends to pick up groceries for elderly relatives or take them to the doctor made it possible for the elderly to live in a non-institutionalized setting. Now that this intricate web of community relationships has been broken, many Diamond residents find themselves bereft not just of their family and friends but also of the practical support that the neighborhood network provided. While many are

thrilled that they will be able to move away from the fumes from the Shell plants, they will nevertheless mourn the destruction of Diamond. With this in mind, Margie Richard is already organizing a fellowship picnic so that former residents of Diamond can come back to their community and share memories of living there. She also wants to build a Diamond museum. She is asking current and former residents to gather their old photographs of what life was like in Belltown and Diamond. "We can still visit Diamond," noted Richard, who goes there frequently. "Most of us have cars and live only about 15 minutes away," she continued. Richard recently went to look at a hundred-year-old oak tree that she is fond of and to pick oranges from a tree her father planted. She also takes students through Diamond and explains to them its history now that Diamond, like a number of other communities overtaken by industrial development, is ceasing to exist.

### Homecoming Service

A bulldozer piled up scrap near the smoldering remains of a house that had been demolished on Cathy Street, a few blocks from the Greater Good Hope Baptist Church in Diamond. Here was visible evidence that yet another neighbor had fled to safety. As the bulldozer tore at the wet sod, mourners arrived at the church for a funeral. They picked their way carefully along the street trying not to get their shoes muddy.

It was early February 2002, and the mourners were paying their respects to Margie Eugene Richard's mother, Mabel Smith Eugene, a woman known by everyone in town. Born in Belltown, she had been evicted and displaced to Diamond when Shell decided to build its chemical plant on the land where her father had an extensive farm. After moving from Belltown to Diamond, Eugene worked for years as a cook in a local restaurant that had two entrances: a door for "whites only" and a window for "coloreds only."

Years of living on the fenceline made Eugene so chemically sensitive that she was a virtual shut-in in her house because going outside would trigger an asthma attack, Richard explained. She died only a few months after moving out of Diamond to a house with a beautiful rose garden. Unable to garden in Diamond because of the pollution from the Shell plants, Eugene had a few months to tend her roses in the backyard of her new home. Now she lay in an open coffin inside the Greater Good Hope Baptist Church.

Within months, nearly every home in Diamond was bulldozed, burned, or disassembled as residents took Shell up on its relocation offer and moved to safety. The residents had won their struggle, but their beloved community was transformed into another fenceline ghost town. It was a victory for the residents to have won the relocation offer from Shell, but it was a bittersweet victory that meant the end of their community and the severing of their ties with the land, their neighbors, and their churches.

### **The Goldman Award**

On April 19, 2004, Margie Richard was awarded the Goldman Environmental Prize for the 13 years of work she did in Diamond organizing a grassroots relocation campaign. The \$125,000 award is given every year to six “ordinary” people from around the world who make an “extraordinary difference” protecting the environment. The award is widely seen as the Nobel Prize for grassroots environmental activists. First presented in 1990, the award, which is given to environmental heroes from six continental regions, has been bestowed on 101 recipients. Richard is the first African-American woman to receive it.

The day of the award ceremony, Richard found herself far from the trailer on the fenceline with the Shell Chemical Plant. Rather than enduring the toxic fumes that waft into the Diamond community, Richard sat in the front row of the Herbst Theatre at the San Francisco War Memorial Opera House and watched a video of her early days carrying protest signs on the fenceline in Diamond, heard a speech by Jane Goodall about protecting the earth for all species, and listened to Kenny Loggins and the Oakland Youth Chorus. Finally, it was time for Richard to climb up onto the stage, give a short speech about her work in Norco, sing one of her favorite spirituals, and receive a bronze “ouroboros”—a sculpture of a snake with its tail in its mouth—which is a symbol of nature’s powers of renewal.

Richard was in good company. Other 2004 Goldman prize recipients included two women from Bhopal, India—Rashida Bee and Champa Devi Shukla—who mounted protests in the wake of the Union Carbide gas disaster that killed thousands of residents; Libia Grueso from Colombia, who secured 5.9 million acres of territorial rights from Afro-Colombian villagers; Rudolf Amenga-Etego from Ghana, who fought the privatization of water and championed access to water as a human right; Manana

Kochladze from Georgia, who struggled to mitigate the damage done to the ecologically fragile valleys endangered by the world's biggest oil export pipeline; and Demetrio Do Amaral de Carvalho, who promoted sustainable development of war-torn East Timor. Richard's relocation campaign in Diamond/Norco was acclaimed as "a landmark environmental justice victory" and "an inspiring example for activists nationwide battling environmental racism in their own backyards."

About her award, Richard said "This is a great victory for every community living along the fenceline of toxic industrial facilities seeking respect and justice." Richard went on to credit prayer for helping her achieve her goals: "I consider myself an environmental evangelist. All my stances on environmental protection and preservation are based on the principle that the Earth is the Lord's." In addition to prayer, Richard said she also sought help from science by contacting experts who could interpret air quality reports and provide facts that could help her win her community's struggle with its industrial neighbor.

Margie Richard's campaign in Diamond "really was a David and Goliath story," said Lorrae Rominger, director of the Goldman Environmental Prize. "Through her persistence and her leadership, she has shown us that environmental victories against great odds can be achieved. . . . She just never gave up. She spent 13 years of her life and she won. It's certainly about the victory but it's also about the struggle."<sup>2</sup>

Rather than resting on her laurels, Richard said she would continue to carry the struggle for environmental justice beyond her home town. To this end, she has become a consultant to other African-American communities, such as the neighborhood of Westside in Port Arthur, Texas, where residents lived next to the giant Premcor refinery. She also planned to press Royal Dutch/Shell officials to "take responsibility for its dirty industrial practices and the medical costs associated with treating environmental illness" at the company's annual meeting in London two weeks after receiving her award.

Richard's environmental prize was no doubt somewhat awkward for Shell officials. The woman who fought them for over a decade and lobbied successfully for Shell to pay for relocating 300 families in her community was suddenly making national headlines. A statement issued by Shell headquarters in Houston tactfully said "Margie [Richard] has served as a leading advocate on environmental and sustainable development issues in

Louisiana and we are pleased she has been recognized for her tireless work in the Norco community.” Upon hearing Shell’s statement, Richard responded that she had never been the enemy of industry: “I know that industry can operate cleaner, smarter and cheaper.”

For the tenacity with which she fought for relocation in Diamond and for her ongoing outreach to other fenceline communities, Margie Richard may well be the Rosa Parks of the environmental justice movement. Picked as the “person of the week” by ABC News, interviewed on National Public Radio, and written up in the *Wall Street Journal* and other newspapers, Richard has come to personify the environmental justice movement. The face of this schoolteacher from Louisiana reminds us of the devastating health problems that result from unwise land use decisions that place people too close to heavy industry.