

What we have learned within our grass-roots group

Palmerton Citizens for a Clean Environment has the dubious honor of having the longest continuously active TAG in Region III, and possibly the nation. 12 Years. When we first organized, people from Sierra Club and the Federal and State agencies told us that grassroots environmental groups usually have a lifespan of 3 years, because the tasks demand so much time and dedication and energy that you burn out. Our stories were more than tails of struggles to grow grass in a polluted town; we traveled the journey which led to growing a grassroots movement that significantly changed the landscape of Palmerton.

After 12 years on the front lines we know:

A common concern brought us together as a group. Many times, we were very far apart as to how to approach a situation, or even in the wording of a letter. Through discussion and compromise and the democratic process, we always ended up with a plan or letter we all felt comfortable with, and in most cases, made even more of an impact than if we had been more radical or passive in our approach. It was a very powerful strategy.

The power is in education. Don't leave the task of learning about your site to the TA and EPA. Whether you realize it or not, you have "local knowledge" just by living in a polluted community. In our case, for instance, as women and homemakers, we knew without scientific knowledge that living at the base of a dying mountain, and the barren soil our children were playing in was somehow connected to the smelter. We were continually washing black soot from our cars, our porches, our windowsills, and even our wash lines several times a week. The diminished bird, wildlife, and even insect populations were a constant reminder that sometimes it is not just what you see but what you don't see that tells the story.

The polluters will attempt to dismiss your claims.

It is important to read all that you can and write to appropriate agencies. Ask questions, and demand answers. Bring as much attention to your cause as possible. You and your families are the effected people. No one is going to care as much about you and your community as you do. That in itself gives you authority. Staying silent only empowers the polluter.

With the scientific knowledge, came credibility. The information and education made available through the technical assistant paid by the TAG gave us a unique place in the process by understanding the science and associating it to the knowledge we had through personal experience.

Expect intimidation tactics and lots of controversy. We learned how vital it is to respond as quickly as possible when demeaning accusations and attempts at intimidation are directed against your group, in our own experience, we saw a lack of debate about the issues. The RESPONSIBLE PARTIES strategy was to attack us personally. At times, that in it self was empowering, as it showed they were afraid to address the issues. The merger of a democratic group using the TAG to obtain the scientific documentation needed, created a voice in a company town where silence was expected put us in a position of civil authority that had not existed before. With our own education, we saw the need to 're-educate' the community.

Because of our association with PCCE, I believe we have become stronger individually. It is impossible, once you are involved, to ever passively sit on the sidelines again.

What we have learned in our experiences with the community

Not everyone in Palmerton sees EPA's involvement as a positive

step. Even now, after 12 years of tireless efforts to educate, the community is still sharply divided. Whether they just aren't paying attention, or the victim of apathy.... Who knows. But we have found that a five-minute one-on-one explanation usually is all it takes to enlighten. From the very beginning of Palmerton in the late 1800's, the company controlled the town. From the design of the town itself to the absolute influence over the people.

Overwhelmingly non-English speaking immigrants, the citizens were told how to think, and in some cases, how to behave. The company played a parental role. Because of loyalty to the company, which gave thousands of jobs and money over the years, some people did not want to believe there was a problem. The company was successful in helping the community to believe that if you supported EPA's presence and believed there was a problem, you were also anti-industry. We learned exactly what the sociology of a "company town" is.

Due to our efforts to educate the Palmerton community, we came to the attention of Dr. Robert Hill. His doctoral thesis called "GROWING GRASSROOTS; ENVIRONMENTAL CONFLICT, ADULT EDUCATION AND THE QUEST FOR CULTURAL AUTHORITY" is based in large part upon his interviews with PCCE members This educational dissertation has been presented around the world discussing the dynamics of contaminated communities and people's responses. The controversy over the necessity of cleanup in Palmerton has made it difficult for residents to actually understand what needs to be done. There has been great apathy and confusion for many. Our educational newsletters, delivered twice a year with information and updates have been vital in keeping our issues before the residents. Newspaper articles are good, but to deliver your message, your newsletter is really the only forum to control the dialogue. We do not use TAG funds to print or distribute these newsletters, but man a food stand for 3 days at our community festival as a fundraiser. This also gives us the exposure and direct contact with people as an integral part of the community.

What we have learned through our experience with

PRP's

One of the first strategies is to form and fund an opposition group; a group that claims to represent the community.

He issue for our RESPONSIBLE PARTIES has always been about power and money. They need power to control the outcome of the cleanup in order to minimize their financial obligation. To that end, the Responsible parties are able to generate their own studies and data designed to minimize contamination in the community. Citizen's groups are not allowed to use TAG money to generate data.

Economic blackmail is always a tool of the responsible parties by threatening to lay off employees because of the environmental situation. They even go as far as blaming the layoffs on the citizen's group, further inflaming workers who were also members of the community. Threatening adverse economic situations was enough to frighten retired workers that their pensions could be in jeopardy. And so they either stayed silent, or

were vocal in favor of the industry. It certainly wasn't a situation that invited environmental reform.

Litigation by the RESPONSIBLE PARTIES serves a direct purpose. It is well worth their cost. They also consider it a cost of doing business. Litigation drags out the cleanup process and time is truly on their side. It is their hope that the public will get bored and less passionate about the issues. It also gives them time to lobby to get the laws changed.

The RESPONSIBLE PARTIES also use the legal system to inconvenience and frighten the citizen's groups. A RESPONSIBLE PARTIES at our site subpoenaed PCCE board members for intimidation purposes. They claimed (unfoundedly) that PCCE was working with, and were being paid by HRD's competitors.

The RESPONSIBLE PARTIES have strong lobbyists in Washington DC and many more dollars to spend than grassroots environmental groups. The responsible parties may establish a fund that distributes money to area groups like the school booster club or boy scouts, fire companies, libraries, and such in an attempt to obligate the community to them.

The Responsible parties will attempt to discredit you individually and personally. They will launch a propaganda campaign of misinformation themselves, and through their puppet group.

Expect the responsible parties to attack the data. Claims of "bad science", faulty testing methods, and claims that there is no evidence of health affects.

What we have learned through our experiences with EPA

The bureaucracy of the governmental agency creates major delays in release of studies and decision-making. Palmerton has been on the superfund list since 1983. It took until 1994 for EPA to have an 'emergency action' cleanup of homes with children where soil and dust levels tested high in heavy metals. Now, in 2003, we are finally anticipating a final cleanup of residential properties, due to start this spring. Twenty years of inaction should not be acceptable to anyone!

The Responsible parties are busy denying there is a problem. The citizens group is busy trying to attract public attention to the problem. EPA uses this situation to their advantage. The citizens group is then seen as "radical" and EPA is in the comfortable middle. Without such positioning, EPA is radicalized, and usually facing strong opposition. This is evidenced by comments made to Dr. Robert Hill during research for his thesis while interviewing an EPA official who asked not to be identified. " IF PCCE disbanded, life in Palmerton would be much harder for us. We're in the middle now, and that's good. If we were seen as the radical fringe, our job would be difficult" . The official further expressed

gratitude that “PCCE had not radicalized EPA, but put them in the middle” . This standpoint helped to nullify the community feelings that the agency was extremist.

We believe this is the strategy used by EPA when it cooperated with the RESPONSIBLE PARTIES puppet group, the “Palmerton Environmental Task Force” (PETF), which significantly weakened our voice in the community. Through this cooperation, EPA ensured the “Task Force’s position as the “official” community spokes group. This cooperation helped the task force put the focus on lead paint instead of the industry’s heavy metal contamination. It further helped to confuse a community struggling to understand the issues, and reluctant to speak out against a company who had made all the community decisions for almost 100 years. The data generated by the RESPONSIBLE PARTIES-funded task force required our time and money to have our technical advisor review the data, so that we could comment to EPA. Despite the PETF’s focus on lead paint, EPA continued to report on progress at the monthly meetings held by the Task Force. This was a strange alliance in view of the fact that EPA, for the very first time, had to give what they called “contribution

protection” to homeowners who participated in the “emergency action” cleanup in 1994. This protection was necessary because the RESPONSIBLE PARTIES were threatening to sue homeowners, blaming them for contributing to the heavy metals contamination with their lead paint. This particular task force, using PRP money, generated their own studies, which concluded that lead paint was the major contributor to Palmerton’s contamination, which EPA then used to make clean up decisions. Because of this, lead and lead paint are driving our cleanup; not taking into account the arsenic and very elevated cadmium in our soils; not looking at the cumulative affect of high lead, high cadmium, and high arsenic in household dust. The use of composite sampling in the homeowners yard, our opinion, has artificially lowering the test results, once again reducing the number of homes requiring cleanup, and leaving the community at risk. Our protests have fallen on deaf ears. Comments we have submitted through our technical advisor over the years challenging EPA’s decisions or conclusions, usually resulted in the response that EPA would take it under advisement. That would be the last we would hear on the subject. This left us feeling frustrated and believing that no

matter how valid our argument, EPA's decisions were pre-determined with the view of keeping them comfortably in the middle.

What we have learned in our experiences with the technical advisors

Good technical advice is imperative. It is also extremely important that the technical adviser has the ability to interpret and communicate the data into laymen's terms, so members of the group and intimately the community are able to understand the complicated site related scientific data and its implications.

Do not expect your Technical Advisor to develop your strategy.

The technical advisory team does not approach the environmental problems with the same passion as the affected residents. This can be a very good situation because it brings objectivity to your struggle. PCCE has used all of its TAG monies for technical review and presentations. No member of our group is paid to manage the TAG. Everything is voluntary. To date over the 12+ years, we have managed \$275,000. We have had the same technical advisor since the inception of our group. Because of this, after 12+ years, our technical advisor has site-specific knowledge not possessed by the vast majority of EPA representatives assigned to Palmerton due to turnovers in the agency.

And a final, important lesson from our group to yours...

For 11 ½ months each year for almost 13 years we have struggled with the fears of our contamination, frustration with the delays of a lengthy process, balancing family, work, and volunteer time like jugglers, seriously pursuing the issues, raising money, writing and distributing our newsletters and having an average of 18 meetings a year.... But then, comes our Christmas party and the reward we give ourselves with the gift of laughter. We've had poems, songs, charades, cartoons, and even a board game called "getting to superfund cleanup" we have been irreverent and sarcastic about each person and issue that bedeviled us during the year. Laughing ourselves silly and keeping ourselves, we hope, mentally healthy as we often weighted our limitations our challenges and our possibilities. So we would remind you to laugh when ever you can. You are all are doing good work. And let us share with you the quote from Margaret: Never doubt that a committed group of individuals can change the world, indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.