

Environmental Justice Work in Chicago Shows Importance of Advocating for Change

A Q&A WITH PEOPLE FOR COMMUNITY RECOVERY'S EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR CHERYL JOHNSON

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Contributor to *Health Progress*

Cheryl Johnson, the sixth of seven children, grew up on the far south side of Chicago, tagging along with her mother as she went to community meetings. “I grew up in a period where whatever your mother said to do, you do it,” Johnson said.

And so she did. Johnson was there as her mom investigated the industrial waste facilities surrounding their public housing complex and demanded attention for community health concerns. Hazel Johnson came to be known as the “mother of the environmental justice movement” for her work helping to launch grassroots efforts to address environmental issues in the United States.¹

Cheryl Johnson, now 62, worked alongside her mother from the earliest days of People for Community Recovery, the organization her mother founded in 1979 and of which Cheryl is now the executive director.²

Johnson still lives in Altgeld Gardens, the neighborhood where she grew up and where her mother lived until her death in 2011. Her mother coined the term “toxic doughnut” to describe how the community was surrounded by more than 50 landfills, an incinerator and other waste sites and factories. People for Community Recovery won many environmental battles over the years, including a moratorium on new landfills, getting new sewer and water lines installed, and cleaning up hazardous substances like lead and polychlorinated biphenyls.

Now Johnson wants to see her mother’s legacy celebrated even as she trains the next generation

of environmental leaders. A mother of two and a grandmother, she still has concerns about the health of her community — and tips for how conscientious health care providers can help.

Johnson spoke to *Health Progress* about her family’s place in the environmental justice movement and where it can go in the future.

Why was your mother so motivated to be a community leader?

My mother was an orphan at the age of 12. Her mother, father, sisters and brother all passed away. She stayed a year in the orphanage, and then she moved with her aunt to California, then back to New Orleans. But my mother’s friends always took care of her and helped her along the way to be the woman she was. They were always giving to the community. So, as I grew up, my mother was always active and doing community service.

Your father died of lung cancer at age 41 after your family moved to Altgeld Gardens. Was that why your mother started questioning pollution in the area?

He died of a progressive lung cancer. She assumed that it was job-related because he did a lot of construction work, and he didn’t have personal protective equipment. The air quality where



Photo courtesy of People for Community Recovery

Cheryl Johnson

we lived, you could cut it with a knife. It was that thick. But what struck her most was two little girls under the age of 2 who lived in the neighborhood. One of them was so small, you could put her in a shoebox. They had multiple counts of cancer. She just felt that it was abnormal to be in a neighborhood where so many people had cancer. And then she made the connection about my father.

Your mother did her own research on the industrial facilities surrounding your neighborhood, and she surveyed residents about their health concerns. She met with national environmental organizations and toxicologists back in the 1980s. How hard was that to do at the time?

Many people were shocked to see a widow and mother of seven living in public housing concerned about the health of our community and the environment. The highest education my mother had was a sophomore in high school. She was able to demonstrate that you don't have to be educated or have all the degrees to be concerned about pollution in your neighborhood.

People for Community Recovery achieved many victories, and your mom was recognized as a national environmental leader. She was even there when then-President Bill Clinton signed an executive order in 1994 on environmental justice. What would you say is her legacy?

Her major legacy is that she wanted people to be aware of the environmental inequalities in poor neighborhoods, or in any neighborhood. Back then when she started 45 years ago, there wasn't conversation about these landfills or underground tanks, sewage treatment facilities, chemical companies or the emissions from leaded gasoline. You just knew that it wasn't right and that it had to change. We're still facing this struggle today. But we play a major role in that, too. We have to take responsibility because of our consumerism. We generate waste and we need to learn how to manage our waste streams much better or not create it.

The term "environmental justice" has become more common. What does it mean to you?

It means equal environmental protection for all of us and not to expose other folks to harmful things that can damage their quality of life. It means that we have to do more using precautionary principles: Before stuff gets started, we should know more about it so we can decide to do it or not do it. And most importantly, environmental justice means that we all should be treated equal as human beings because environmental pollution just doesn't affect one community — it affects all communities.

The environmental justice movement is our life. And until we understand that, we're gonna always have these growing pains. But any movement that we ever had in this country took 40 years or longer, starting with the civil rights side, the right to vote and women's rights. It always took somebody's sweat and equity and death to get us to where we are today.

What are your goals for the organization going forward?

The school building that I attended in first grade in Altgeld Gardens has been threatened to be demolished. It's been vacant for years. So, my mission now is to get this building renovated and name it the Hazel Johnson Environmental Justice Institute. This center would serve as an open environmental lab — as my mother used to call it — bringing government, the academic community and businesses together to solve some of the environmental problems that we have. A vision has always been to create what we call an environmental remediation workforce.

Most importantly, environmental justice means that we all should be treated equal as human beings because environmental pollution just doesn't affect one community — it affects all communities.

What are the biggest issues today in your community in terms of environmental health?

We still have a high incidence of cancer in our neighborhood. I see a whole lot of lupus. We still have a lot of asthma, people with respiratory problems and skin disease.

What could health care providers do to help?

One of the things that the medical community can do is not just look at your vital signs, but ask in-depth questions. What do you live around? Do you live around the train tracks where there's leaks and spills? I'm more for prevention. Treatment doesn't just mean giving me an inhaler. You should treat me so I won't have to use an inhaler. We should just have universal health care. The health care industry wasn't created to make a profit, and treatment shouldn't be based on your race and income.

Anything else we should keep in mind?

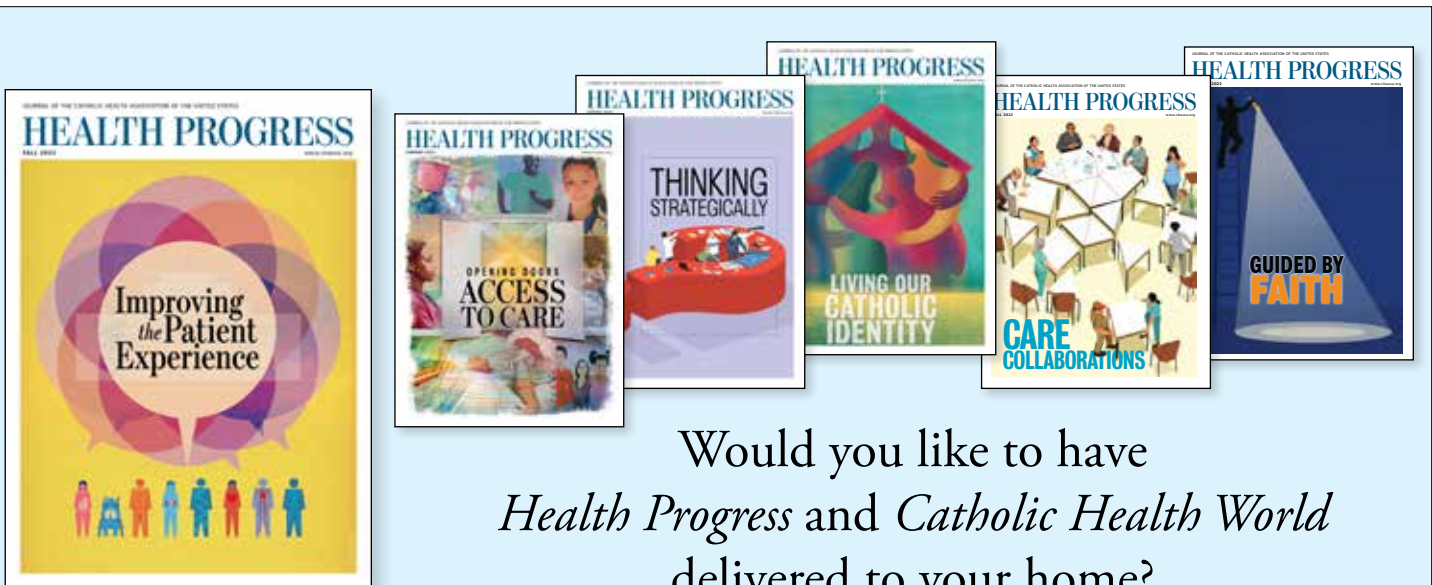
We should have more emphasis on valuing life and health. We value a basketball player

over a nurse, but that's just recreation. Nurses save lives. We should honor them. Why are we so sick today? Because of all these chemicals we use — we don't need them. I learned this decades ago, and I say it a lot: Pollution don't go to heaven. We got to find an alternative to what we doing now.

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NOTES

1. Beth Loch, "Hazel M. Johnson, 'Mother of the Environmental Justice Movement,'" Chicago Public Library, October 6, 2018, <https://www.chipublib.org/blogs/post/hazel-m-johnson-mother-of-the-environmental-justice-movement/>.
2. People for Community Recovery, <https://www.peopleforcommunityrecovery.org>.



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