

In September 2004, the Louisiana Bucket Brigade (LABB) received its first grant from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development to document air quality and hold polluters accountable to environmental laws. One year later, hurricanes Katrina and Rita brought devastation to the Gulf Coast, depositing toxins into the soil and exacerbating the environmental problems that once only distressed those who lived or worked near polluting factories and refineries. The environmental legacy left in the storms' wakes will become clearer with time, but the increased hazard to which they exposed the Gulf Coast makes the work of LABB all the more important.

A Change Is in the Air

THE LOUISIANA BUCKET BRIGADE HELPS COMMUNITIES ACHIEVE TOXIN-FREE ENVIRONMENTS

BY BETH GRIFFIN

Sometimes bad odors are fleeting and forgettable wafts. Maybe they're from trucks passing through the neighborhood, or they're caused by an accident or other short-lived project. But sometimes, they're beyond quick and bad: they're chronic and toxic.

In southern Louisiana, neighbors of industrial odor-producers complained about choking smells, but they didn't get relief until they banded together as members of the Louisiana Bucket Brigade (LABB). Using a \$50 sampling bucket developed by a California group, LABB members collect air samples that are then analyzed by a laboratory to determine what chemicals are in the smelly air and how their concentration compares to legal limits.

Anne Rolfes, LABB Program Director, says, "We're able to translate a very vague complaint, like 'It smelled bad last week' into 'This is a violation of the state benzene standard.'" She adds, "The neighbor who smells the odor and takes the sample also provides quality



Photos courtesy of LABB

LABB MEMBER PERCY HOLLINS PREPARES TO TAKE AN AIR SAMPLE IN HIS NEIGHBORHOOD, THE DIAMOND COMMUNITY OF NORCO, LA.

control information, such as the time of day and the direction of the wind. When the lab returns the data, we share that with the sampler, who can then associate odors with particular chemicals. It also helps them become more comfortable with the language of science and using it when they speak with the media." The sample data is used in meetings with factories and refineries to urge them to reduce emissions to acceptable levels.

One quarter of the nation's petrochemicals come from Louisiana, Anne says, and many of the refineries are in minority and low-income neighborhoods. "In Louisiana, more than half of the people who live within three miles of a refinery are black," explains Anne. "People should not be living there, but they don't have

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FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Dear Friend of CCHD:



At the beginning of this new year, I was appointed Executive Director of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development. I am honored and humbled to lead this wonderful organization, where I have worked since 1970. And I am deeply grateful to my superiors here at USCCB for their votes of confidence that my appointment reflects. CCHD's empowerment approach to ending poverty, as well as its efforts to educate our Catholic people, are goals near and dear to my heart, and I look forward to directing our efforts in the years ahead.

Six months ago, the twin hurricanes Katrina and Rita wreaked catastrophic devastation throughout the Gulf Coast region of our land. Even now, long after the flood waters have subsided and plans for rebuilding are in development, the long-term environmental impacts of the disaster, especially to soil, water, and air quality, are just beginning to be grasped.

This newsletter features the work of a community group that found a unique use for buckets long before last summer's storms. Members of the Louisiana Bucket Brigade (LABB) use specially designed buckets to monitor the levels of chemicals in the air of their Louisiana neighborhoods. Many poor and low-income people live near petrochemical plants, where the cost of living is more affordable, but the impact on their health can be significant. Ken Ford, a leader with LABB, has experienced the negative health effects of the plants as well as the positive gains won through community organizing.

CCHD's support of community organizing and economic development initiatives is not possible without your involvement. I am deeply thankful for your partnership with us in our mission.

Gratefully yours in Our Lord,

Timothy F. Collins
Executive Director

WHAT IS CCHD?

Through the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Catholics and friends of CCHD across the country help poor and low-income Americans to help themselves and their communities out of poverty.

Since 1970, the Catholic Campaign has contributed over \$270 million to more than 7,000 low income-led, community-based projects that strengthen families, create jobs, build affordable housing, fight crime, and improve schools and neighborhoods. CCHD requires that projects develop community leadership and participation so that their solutions to poverty will be long-lasting and effective, and so that CCHD's investment in people will help break the cycle of poverty. CCHD also educates Catholics about the causes of poverty and seeks to build solidarity between poor and non-poor persons.

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CCHD just released its sixth **Poverty Pulse** survey. Nearly two thirds of Americans fear that poverty in the United States will increase in the next year, and 63% fear that they themselves could become poor. You can see the full results of the Poverty Pulse at www.usccb.org/cchd.



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many options.” She says that refineries are central to the local economy, but they also have a responsibility to reduce their impact on the shared environment.

Louisiana’s Low-Income Residents Organize for a Breath of Fresh Air

Anne, a Louisiana native, started LABB after working in west Africa with the Peace Corps and another nonprofit organization. “I was working on pollution issues in Nigeria, and it became clear that my own state suffered from the same toxic issues.” When she got home, she attended a training session with a group in California that had developed the sampling buckets. It was a transformative experience, she says, because having the actual chemical readings to correlate with the bad odors puts people in a position of power. After Anne tried unsuccessfully to get other established organizations to adopt the bucket, LABB was ultimately incorporated in 2000.

LABB meets with neighborhood groups who are interested in securing a cleaner environment. It helps them organize to identify their resources, determine their priorities, and bring public attention to their concerns. “People want the refineries and chemical companies to be accountable for their actions,” says Anne.

She notes that the best opportunity to organize groups is after an accident, such as a huge oil spill in Chalmette, or in the wake of a disaster, such as Hurricane Katrina. “We are working through the Environmental and Public Safety committees of St. Bernard’s Parish right now and using those government channels to develop buffer zones around two refineries, place air monitors, and phase out the use of deadly chemicals,” says Anne. “It’s definitely the ‘silver lining’ in this disaster.”

Community Leaders Show Fortitude in Pursuit of a Safer Environment

LABB has used grants from CCHD to strengthen its organizing and outreach efforts. Anne says, “I appreciate that the local CCHD director, Tom Costanza, took the time to get to know us. In addition to the financial assistance, CCHD has helped get us local recognition through public service advertising, and we have been able to use the CCHD grants to leverage other support.”




LABB WORKED WITH ST. BERNARD CITIZENS FOR ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY TO DOCUMENT WHERE THEY HAVE COLLECTED AIR SAMPLES THAT CONFIRM HUNDREDS OF VIOLATIONS OF STATE AND FEDERAL AIR STANDARDS.

Tom Costanza explains, “Anne is rational, passionate, and credible, and *her* credibility translates into organizational credibility. She is a professional. She has really good people skills and has been able to pull groups together.” He continues, “LABB is totally citizen-based and grassroots. People who have lived their entire lives in the community are part of the organization and LABB empowers them to work to improve conditions.”

Both Anne and Tom speak of the fortitude required of the local leaders. “When the people in the communities start to speak out about the content of the emissions, some of the companies really up the stakes,” explains Anne. “One company offered each neighbor \$2,500, six days before Christmas, if they would agree to drop their complaints!” Tom says that a refiner that had been making grants to a summer program run by the Archdiocese of New Orleans was very uncomfortable upon seeing CCHD public service announcements supporting the work of LABB. “They took offense, but we weren’t out to shut them down—we just want them to improve their refinery.”

Anne says, “It’s important to strengthen the leadership in the community. LABB can validate them, get them into the media, and help them meet leaders in other communities, so they know they are not alone.” LABB will convene a Louisiana Fenceline Neighbors conference to bring together leaders of different neighborhood environmental groups in southern Louisiana. “Ultimately,” says Tom, “the refiners and the neighbors both want a good relationship and a safe environment.”

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Catholic social teaching emphasizes that we have a responsibility to care for God’s creation. CCHD has provided nearly \$2 million in grants to groups like LAAB working on environmental justice issues. 

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—Anne Rolfe

MEET KEN FORD

***From Lethal to Legal:* Residents Work with Refineries to Change Emissions Levels**

Ken Ford is the first to tell you that his Chalmette neighborhood is hurting. The retiree and his wife are living in a trailer in their front yard. Floodwaters had filled their home to the roof before receding. An engineering report recommends that the house be bulldozed. Only six of the 40 families on the block have come back. And this neighborhood was hurting even before Hurricane Katrina. The homes are in the shadow of an oil refinery. Many of the 40 families have lost a member to cancer, and Ken has been treated for both lung and bladder cancer.

So why is he smiling? Because in some ways, conditions have actually improved since he joined forces with the Louisiana Bucket Brigade. As president of the St. Bernard Citizens for Environmental Quality, Ken says, “We knew that we had a lot of environmental problems and we were scratching at the issues and not getting anywhere.” Anne Rolfes and the LABB “showed us the proper way to get things done, with teamwork and diplomacy, not complaining,” he explains. “Our group had gotten apathetic, but we reorganized when Anne came along. We discussed our problems, studied the environmental laws, and took a close look at what was going on in our community.”



“The issue here is humanity,” says Ken. “We need the refineries. In the past, we thought we just had to tolerate the pollution. When we proved that there were chemicals in the air, we came to an understanding with the refineries, and we are working together to resolve our problems. I am very well satisfied with what

we’ve achieved.”

Ken credits local CCHD director Tom Costanza with being thoughtful and supportive. “Tom didn’t come across and just tell us to do something,” Ken says. “He listened and did his homework and weighed the situation before giving a grant to LABB.”

There is much more to do, Ken says. For starters, he and LABB are sharing soil samples they’ve taken from an area behind his home, where the Federal Emergency Management Agency is planning to install 180 trailers. “People need a place to live,” says Ken, “but settling people on contaminated land could create a big problem.”

Ken is also determined to stay in the neighborhood and improve it. “We’ve been here for 43 years and raised our family here. I hope that in another 40 years, what LABB is doing now will make this a good place to live again.”

HOW YOU CAN HELP

You can donate your time, talent, and treasure to CCHD in many ways. Consider supporting CCHD with a stock donation or a matching gift from your employer, or remember CCHD in your estate planning. For more information about CCHD, or to discuss ways to support our mission, contact Mary Mencarini Campbell at 202-541-3365/ mcampbell@usccb.org. Visit our website at www.usccb.org/cchd, or explore the state of U.S. poverty, made up of 37 million Americans, at www.povertyusa.org.

WHERE’S MY MONEY GOING?

All CCHD funds received are used solely for the support of CCHD’s anti-poverty mission. CCHD abides by the charitable standards set by a leading donor advisory service. Our funds are divided as follows: 86% is assigned to CCHD’s core program mission of community empowerment, economic development, education programs, and supporting services; 3% is allocated to coordinate the annual appeal; and 11% is assigned to administrative costs.

We thank you for helping to break the cycle of poverty through your ongoing support of CCHD.