

CHAPTER
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Section 4

PRIMARY SOURCE *from Love Canal: My Story*
by Lois Gibbs

After discovering that her son's elementary school was built over a toxic waste dump, Lois Gibbs went door-to-door with a petition to see if other parents felt as angry as she did. Read this excerpt to find out about Gibbs's gradual awareness of the environmental crisis brewing in her own backyard.

As I proceeded down 99th Street, I developed a set speech. I would tell people what I wanted. But the speech wasn't all that necessary. It seemed as though every home on 99th Street had someone with an illness. One family had a young daughter with arthritis. They couldn't understand why she had it at her age. Another daughter had had a miscarriage. The father, still a fairly young man, had had a heart attack. I went to the next house, and there, people would tell me their troubles. People were reaching out; they were telling me their troubles in hopes I would do something. But I didn't know anything to do. I was also confused. I just wanted to stop children from going to that school. Now look at all those other health problems! Maybe they were related to the canal. But even if they were, what could I do?

As I continued going door-to-door, I heard more. The more I heard, the more frightened I became. This problem involved much more than the 99th Street School. The entire community seemed to be sick! Then I remembered my own neighbors. One who lived on the left of my husband and me was suffering from severe migraines and had been hospitalized three or four times that year. Her daughter had kidney problems and bleeding. A woman on the other side of us had gastrointestinal problems. A man in the next house down was dying of lung cancer and he didn't even work in industry. The man across the street had just had lung surgery. I thought about Michael; maybe there was more to it than just the school. I didn't understand how chemicals could get all the way over to 101st Street from 99th; but the more I thought about it, the more frightened I became—for my family and for the whole neighborhood. . . .

I continued to go door-to-door. I was becoming more worried because of the many families with children who had birth defects. Then I learned something even more frightening: there had been five crib deaths within a few short blocks.

I was still getting people's cooperation and interest, but I was soon to learn that not everyone

felt the same way I did. The woman on 97th Street who had done some organizing never provided any help. We never argued; in fact, she never said anything. One day, while I was knocking on doors, I noticed her riding on her bicycle. She seemed to be watching me. I was both puzzled and intimidated mainly because my self-confidence wasn't yet all that high. I thought we had a common problem, that we should be working together. But she had tried to organize the neighborhood; therefore, it was her neighborhood, her territory. Maybe she felt I was stepping on her toes.

I finally got up my courage and walked over. "Hi," I said. She was in front of her house. A tree in the front yard was wilted. It looked sick, as though it were dying. We stood in the yard and talked. She told me she couldn't use her backyard, that everything there was dead. She asked what I was doing, and I told her. Her voice suddenly turned cold. She warned me about rocking the boat, telling me not to make waves. She had already taken care of the problem. She had been working hard, talking to a number of politicians, and she didn't want me to undo what she had done.

I was taken aback. I explained that I didn't want to "undo" anything, that I wanted to work *with* her. It was a very hot day. . . . There we were, standing in the hot sun, with the only shade coming from a dying tree, and she was telling me how everything was all right. I didn't know what to think. I had to go home and figure this out. I went home, but not because I was frightened. I just needed time to think, to figure out what was happening.

from Lois Marie Gibbs, Love Canal: My Story (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982), 15–17.

Discussion Questions

1. How did Gibbs's neighbors respond to her when she went door-to-door with a petition?
2. What different health problems did Gibbs's neighbors experience?