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A Grassroots Movement for Clean Air: Bucket Brigades

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Communities across the U.S. are taking environmental justice into their own hands and organizing for clean air. Residents are forming “**Bucket Brigades**” to measure their community’s air quality and fight for healthy environments.

As a Bucket Brigade, residents use the Bucket – a tool devised to collect and test air samples and use the data to advocate for stricter environmental protections. A group now known as Global Community Monitor (GCM), which works to support grassroots movements, developed the concepts of the Bucket and Brigades. GCM helps communities develop and implement effective campaigns to win strong environmental protections.

GCM began working with the predominantly African-American Diamond community in Norco, Louisiana in 1999. The neighborhood spans four street blocks and is also home to a large Shell refinery. Diamond grabbed the attention of the larger environmental justice movement during that time. Activists wanted to exemplify Diamond as a model of why environmental justice was needed in communities across the country.

“A lot of us in national groups realized that this was...the flash point,” said Denny Larson, GCM’s founder. “The face of the environmental justice movement [were]...the residents of Diamond. That was how to make this struggle real to other people.”

The Diamond community has had a long history with Shell. The company purchased land near Diamond in 1916 and expanded into the community. Residents were forced to relocate so Shell could build its chemical plant. In the 1970s, Diamond residents started to organize protests and demand Shell buy them out. They believed fumes from the Shell plant were causing headaches, nausea, dizziness, congestion, and difficulty breathing.

The grassroots movement against Shell continued into the 1980s and '90s. The deaths of two residents from two Shell plant explosions further catalyzed the community to organize. Working with many partners including GCM, the Louisiana Bucket Brigade and the [Deep South Center for Environmental Justice](#), residents tested air samples and found cancer-causing chemicals at levels that violated Louisiana environmental standards.

Under increasing grassroots scrutiny and media pressure, Shell eventually negotiated with Diamond community leaders. In June 2002, Shell [agreed to pay](#) for a \$5 million community development fund and residents' relocation costs.



Louisiana Bucket Brigade tables at New Orleans Earth Day Festival & Green Business Expo. Photo courtesy of Daniel Paschall

The Diamond community's victory is an example of how grassroots air quality monitoring and movement building can hold industry accountable and promote public health. But the victory came at a cost to the community. Residents got a powerful company like Shell to meet their demands, but the battle tore apart the vibrant African-American community. For more details on the Diamond community's resistance, see [Diamond: A Struggle for Environmental Justice in Louisiana's Chemical Corridor](#).

Other communities across the U.S. have employed similar strategies. In Claymont, Delaware, residents used GMC's Bucket tool and methodology and found high levels of lead and manganese, which can cause nervous system damage, heart disease, and other health effects. The results of the GCM study

grabbed then-Senator Joe Biden's attention. His involvement generated local media attention, placing added pressure on the steel plant.

In August 2010, Claymont won a major victory when the Delaware Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control ordered the plant to reduce its emissions or face fines. A week later, the community filed a lawsuit against the plant for its failure to reduce emissions. After a decade of community action, Claymont residents won their final victory; the plant closed in December 2013. Even high school students are using the Bucket technology to improve their community's environment. With the help of GCM, students at EXCEL High School in West Oakland, CA found toxic levels of metal fumes close to a recycling business. Upon the students' findings, the community organized for the relocation of the recycler. In 2009, GCM [sued](#) the company on behalf of the community. According to KALW radio, the lawsuit is in the final stages of settlement.

The successes of the Diamond, Claymont, and West Oakland cases demonstrate that grassroots air quality monitoring and movement building can be effective – but only with persistence and strategy. In the case of Diamond, residents achieved their goals after decades of negotiations with Shell and advocacy with the EPA. Passion and the belief in a better quality of life drove community activism. In addition to passion, grassroots activists were strategic and used technology, data and communications to get their message across. West Oakland and other communities across the U.S. will continue to build on the Bucket Brigades' victories and advocate for their right to clean air.