

LINKING ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE WITH COMMUNITY REDEVELOPMENT

ReGenesis
Spartanburg, SC

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ReGenesis
710 S. Church St. #2
Spartanburg, SC 29306
Phone: 864-583-2712
Fax: 864-583-2713
Email: regenesi@bellsouth.net

SUMMARY: Spartanburg, South Carolina was once known as "the Devil's triangle" for its two abandoned industrial sites and a 30-acre dump. That was before Harold Mitchell, along with a team of community elders and neighborhood residents, **connected the three-site contamination zone with alarming rates of asthma, cancer and other diseases.** Now, the **whole area is undergoing cleanup and revitalization.** Mitchell's organization, ReGenesis, funnels economic and technical assistance to small businesses, enabling them to benefit from the community's redevelopment. Their approach includes the following:

- **Engage Civil Rights Veterans:** When Mitchell, a former high school football star, first suspected that the high rates of disease in his family and community were caused by the polluted sites, he reached out to former coaches, teachers and mentors for help. Most, like W. Dewey Dullis, a local businessman, were veterans of the civil rights movement. It proved to be a powerful dynamic, and according to Dullis, "It's the only way to use an old wreck like me."
- **Build Locally, One to One:** ReGenesis activists overcame their neighbors' initial skepticism by going door-to-door and church-to-church. They gathered information about the patterns of disease, as well as recollections of a yellow residue of pollution that fell when the industrial sites were operating.
- **Build a Base of Residents, Knowledge, and Political Contacts:** Of 4,700 residents in the affected area, 1,500 joined ReGenesis during its startup. In building the case for clean-up, members have studied the layers of regulatory bureaucracy. They have established relationships with their U.S. representatives, as well as with those in city and county government.
- **Link Redevelopment with Environmental Justice:** When the city of Spartanburg launched a downtown redevelopment plan, Mitchell and his colleagues saw an opportunity to include their surrounding neighborhoods. They drew on their close and positive political ties and have helped win millions of dollars for a connector road, small business incubator, farmers market, new manufacturing plant, housing and technical assistance for local entrepreneurs.

Mitchell and his colleagues describe their efforts in the following case example:

CLEANING UP A COMMUNITY; IT TAKES GENERATIONS

ReGenesis

Writers: Javier Valdés and Jonathan Walters

Co-researchers: Harold Mitchell (Award Recipient); and Javier Valdés (NYU/LCW)

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"Oh My God, They've Got Us"

With hundreds of people packed into a Spartanburg, South Carolina, meeting hall in 1997, the upstart environmental justice group ReGenesis made its case to a gathering of federal regional regulators from Atlanta, along with their state counterparts. The group presented ten slides outlining what ReGenesis saw as the clear and clearly devastating health effects of two abandoned industrial sites and a 30-acre abandoned dump, all located in and adjacent to their neighborhoods.

The group was sure that the case they made would spur officials to action; that these neighborhoods had been at risk from pollution for generations while the sites were operating, and that they would be at continuing risk until the sites were cleaned up. But in quick succession, the regulators used their own slides to refute ReGenesis's case, arguing that the land and facilities in question had never presented a health hazard, and certainly didn't now. "And the lights came on and I thought, 'Oh my god, they've got us,'" recalls ReGenesis founder and C.E.O., Harold Mitchell.

The room sat in stunned silence, until one person got up, an elderly gentleman and a former employee at one of the factories. "He was one of the last survivors who had worked at the plant," says Mitchell. "And he came down the aisle with his cane and he told the government officials, 'You can take that crock back to Atlanta!'"

Overcoming "We Can't"

Some called it "the Devil's triangle," an abandoned factory, an abandoned fertilizer manufacturing facility, and a 30-acre landfill suspected of being tainted with, among other contaminants, hazardous medical waste, all near the predominantly African American neighborhoods of Arkwright and Forest Park in Spartanburg, S.C. But most residents never suspected how sinister the convergence was. At least they didn't until Harold Mitchell, a local high school football star, started asking questions.

Mitchell's inquiries were initially of a very personal nature. Mitchell had come down with mysterious symptoms that doctors at first diagnosed as cancer. He couldn't understand how he, young and healthy, would have come to be sick. After nine months of tests and worry, Mitchell's symptoms cleared up, he didn't have cancer. But his worry lingered, and it got him wondering about the other people in his community whom he knew had become sick—many with cancer and many of whom had died. What he learned was alarming. Several people on his street had died of the same type of rare cancer, including his mother and his sister.

Mitchell initially had no intention of transforming his personal journey into a cause. "I had no concept of starting an organization. I didn't know anything about environmental justice. I was just trying to figure out from where the health problems we were having had originated." But as he learned more and more about the past history of the plants, and about the cancer, the asthma, and the other diseases that afflicted

Spartanburg at alarmingly high rates, he felt more and more compelled to take his case to the broader community.

But while Mitchell might have begun to see the pattern, getting others in his community to join an effort to investigate it would prove difficult. For one thing, there was a generation of community members who had worked in the factories and considered them "as good as gold," including Mitchell's father. Others told Mitchell that he was simply "on a witch hunt," looking for something that wasn't there. Even some who were inclined to listen to Mitchell's concerns and believe that the community's widespread health problems might be related to nearby pollution, expressed skepticism that the two neighborhoods could actually make any progress at all in pushing local, state, and federal officials to agree to look at the sites. "One of the things that people kept saying," says Mitchell, "was, 'We can't.' It was always what we can't do."

"An Old Wreck Like Me"

Schooled neither in political activism nor public health or epidemiology, Mitchell understood that he didn't have the organizing or technical skills to galvanize a community around the harm he was convinced was being done by the three-site contamination zone. So he reached out to some old friends he thought might be able to help: community elders, including former coaches, teachers, and mentors, all of whom were veterans of civil rights battles and all of whom had gone on to a variety of professions, ranging from high school teacher to medical researcher.

It was an unlikely lineup of old warhorses, but it was Mitchell's best hope for cracking the community consciousness. One of his early advisors, W. Dewey Dullis, a local businessman and former civil rights activist, says that he saw his role in the seminal effort as "bringing my experience, because of what I've learned. It's the only way to use an old wreck like me." Mitchell also recruited his old high school band director, Richard Gibbs. "That was the really the birth of ReGenesis," says Gibbs. "A guy who wasn't going to quit who found some people silly enough to follow him."

But the generational connections provided by "old wrecks" like Dullis and mentors like Gibbs would prove to be among the most powerful dynamics in building the organization. Among the seasoned hands recruited to the cause was W. Freda Wilson, who had spent years in the health care field before moving back to Spartanburg and signing on to ReGenesis, and who represented the generation between people like Dullis and Mitchell. She says she learned about community activism from a previous generation; when she was a young girl, her father would take her to civil rights meetings. "He would take me to meetings and sit me under a table and I'd just listen. I didn't realize it until later, but he was teaching leadership. He was teaching strength. He was exposing me to ideas. And what I learned was that it takes all of us to change the world. And I see the generation of Mr. Dullis and Mr. Gibbs, they're like the seeds and I'm like the bridge."

Growing Clout

Gradually, Mitchell and his band of veteran activists began making progress. They went door-to-door, church-to-church, community meeting-to-community meeting. They had hundreds and hundreds of contacts and one-on-one discussions. –Eventually, neighbors began to get interested in Mitchell's quest. And as he traveled through the community, more stories came out. Residents told tales of the yellow residue that used to coat their clothes over the course of the day, or of the film that would fall over the roofs of their houses and on windowsills when the fertilizer factory was operating.

In 1997, ReGenesis held its first official meeting, which drew an astounding 230 community members. The idea of that initial meeting was to discuss the health impacts of the contaminated sites, continue to investigate possible patterns of disease, and to think about ways to make the case for and pursue a clean up.

The gathering did more though, than boost ReGenesis's push for knowledge and participation because it also got the attention of elected officials. Spartanburg's mayor himself an African American, noted at the time that it had been years since he'd seen such a large group of black activists coalesce around a single issue.

As ReGenesis's community base and political profile grew, so did its sophistication. ReGenesis activists began learning about the multiple layers of local, state, and federal regulatory bureaucracy that might be called on to act in cleaning up the triangle. And with their growing local power base, they also started making political contacts at the local, state and federal level, even electing one of their own members to the Spartanburg city council.

Using Community Clout

In 1997, ReGenesis contacted the regional office of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) with their findings. The organization had found unusually high incidences of everything from cancer to asthma in and around the Arkwright and Forest Park neighborhoods, and the group wanted the EPA to investigate. The EPA agreed to survey the neighborhoods, and it was the results of that initial survey that the EPA presented in response to ReGenesis's 10-slide argument for action, the same meeting during which Mitchell thought the whole effort might be unraveling before his eyes. But if Mitchell's group of seasoned collaborators had learned anything from past experience, it was persistence. "I've been knocked down a lot of times," says Freda Wilson. "But you get back up and you redo the game plan."

Part of redoing that game plan involved reaching out to politicians with clout in Washington, D.C. ReGenesis made contact with U.S. Senator Fritz Holling's office and also their congressman, demanding an investigation. "We basically brokered a fight," says Mitchell. "Because somebody was trying to sweep things under the rug."

At the same time, ReGenesis was in the midst of brokering another fight, this one with city and county officials, none of whom was willing to accept responsibility for the dump site. Unwilling, that is, until ReGenesis packed a city council meeting and demanded action.

As ReGenesis started flexing its political muscle, that muscle continued to grow. Out of an effected community of 4,700 people, nearly 1,500 joined the organization. It was too much of a groundswell to ignore.

In 1999, the EPA, prodded by Senator Hollings and a Congressional Representative, conducted tests at the industrial sites and found toxic metals and other contaminants. In some cases, contamination levels were three times what would be required to trigger a Superfund Site designation, one that was quickly made upon finishing the toxins survey. In the wake of the designation, the owners of the fertilizer factory, which had been actually been shut and torn down, placed protective covers over the acreage deemed to be the most toxic. At the same time, city and county officials started working with ReGenesis to deal with the mess in the landfill.

Breaking New Ground

As real progress was being made in cleaning up the former fertilizer and factory sites, and the landfill (this work is still ongoing), ReGenesis activists quickly realized that the cleanup was only half the job.

It was when the city and county proposed a downtown business district redevelopment and a road project through the abandoned industrial sites that Mitchell says it dawned on him. "I kind of had an out-of-body experience," he says. "On the one hand I'd been dealing with the environment, but on the other I start thinking about redevelopment." Why, thought Mitchell, should the redevelopment and road project be limited to just the downtown and a highway, and not also to improving the surrounding neighborhoods?

Because of the close and positive ties that ReGenesis had made in city and county government in their battle over pollution, Mitchell and his supporters had ready access to officials to whom they could make the case, which was pretty simple. In Dewey Dullis' words: "If you don't redevelop all of Spartanburg, Spartanburg is going to be gone."

"That's what got the wheels turning for us," says Elena Rush, Director of Community and Economic Development for Spartanburg County. "That we couldn't plan for just one little parcel in this whole neighborhood area. We had to find other money to plan for the whole place, not just this 30 acres in the middle of the neighborhoods."

The collaborative effort was dubbed "ReEnergize" and focused on funneling economic and technical assistance to small businesses and other local entrepreneurs in the neighborhoods so that they could benefit from the city's revitalization effort. Among the work that ReEnergize has been pursuing: invest in redeveloping the former factory sites for housing and businesses. To ensure that community members benefit from the investment, ReEnergize has embarked on such efforts as helping small local contractors coordinate in order to bid on big jobs. "There are a lot of independent business owners out there with a good mindset, they just aren't big enough," says Robert Henderson, Jr., a consultant to ReGenesis on its economic development push; "four or five employees, all successful plumbers, electricians, contractors."

At the same time, says Henderson, ReGenesis continued working with a host of other small businesses, from retail shops to restaurants, on business plans, marketing, and financing in order to help them become contributing parts of the area's revitalization. The idea, says Henderson, was "to inspire these small businesses to do more, to put them in a position to succeed."

In all, ReEnergize has helped draw \$20 million in U.S. Housing and Urban Development money for 500 new housing units on the formerly contaminated industrial sites; \$2 million for a new connector road through the sites; a small business incubator, a farmers market and even a fairly big fish: a new plastics plant that will offer community members high-end manufacturing jobs.

"This Is What We've Done"

The struggle to help a whole community heal has been intense and very personal, says Mitchell. From the early days of widespread community skepticism, to the long days when Mitchell actually found himself comforting some of those who had doubted him early on. "Some of the ones who cussed me, saying, 'Get the hell off my porch,' were the some of the same ones whose hands I was holding as they were dying in the hospital," says Mitchell.

But among the most moving and satisfying aspects of the ReGenesis and ReEnergize efforts was getting to reconnect with old friends and old mentors, says Mitchell. Those mentors, in turn, say they appreciate the opportunity to rekindle some of the spirit and the action that they were involved in a generation ago during the civil rights struggles. "It's not often you get the chance to be involved in such things," says Dewey Dullis. "To help people. To say, 'This is what we've done.'"