

ENVIRONMENTAL & REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE

# Old Evil, New Twist: Environmental Racism

By Richard Leiter

Sheila Holt-Orsted was a very healthy young woman. An aerobics instructor and fitness trainer, she was named Miss Tennessee Bodybuilding Heavyweight and Mixed Pairs Champion in 1991. When she was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2003 she asked herself, as so many women do, "What did I do to get this?" What's unusual in Sheila's case is that she found an answer, one that involves the EPA, the state of Tennessee, the town and county of Dickson, and an insidious system of social injustice that Sheila is working very hard to correct.

The Holt family owns 150 acres of rural Tennessee acreage that they've lived on and farmed for four generations. They're part of a small African-American community—only 4.5 per cent of the otherwise white population—in Dickson, Tennessee, about 35 miles west of Nashville. Sheila's childhood was in many ways idyllic; she ate fresh corn and apples from the family orchard and drank cool, sweet water from the family well.

In the 1960s, the town leaders of Dickson converted the city's only park in a Black neighborhood, located next to the Holt farm, into a landfill. Into this landfill went decades of untreated industrial waste, including three to four truckloads a week of the carcinogen trichloroethylene (TCE). The TCE was used by automotive manufacturer Scovill-Schrader—now named Saltire Industrial—and, as was the practice at the time, was simply collected in oil drums and dumped in the landfill along with all the rest of the town's toxic waste. Sheila was first exposed to the TCE-tainted water in 1964; she was three years old.

With the groundswell of environmental interest in the late 1980s, the Holts' well water was tested by the Environmental Protection Agency and found contaminated by TCEs. It was subsequently retested twice and labeled "safe"—even though the EPA found that the TCE levels were dramatically above safe guidelines. The Holts continued to drink what they had been assured was the safe water from their well. But Sheila, returning to her home on family visits, began to notice some alarming coincidences. Her father fell victim to, and died from, prostate and bone cancer. Her aunt who lived next door got cancer. Her uncle died of Hodgkin's disease. Three cousins who lived nearby got cancer. And then, in 2003, Sheila was diagnosed with HER2+ node positive breast cancer.

During her treatment, Sheila and her young daughter returned to Dickson for the support of still-healthy family members. Even though she had in hand the letters from the EPA and the town of Dickson assuring her family that their well water was safe to drink, she couldn't accept the impossibly high cancer incidence, localized in her community, as coincidence. In 2003, sick with the side effects of chemo and radiation, she dragged herself down to the state environment and conservation offices in Nashville and requested information on water testing in her city. She was casually handed a cardboard box filled with paper, and what she found astonished her.

At the same time that the county of Dickson was mailing letters to Black families assuring them that their well water was safe, the same officials were sending letters to white residents warning them to stop drinking their well water and to switch to the municipal water supply.

Sheila knew she had to do something, but she didn't know what. She'd been trained as a bodybuilder, not an environmental activist. Trying to be supportive, her husband gave her a video of the film Erin Brockovich, and emulating the Julia Roberts-portrayed main character, Sheila talked to any expert who would listen: college professors, chemists, engineers. They all pointed her to one man: Dr. Robert Bullard, director of the

Environmental Justice Resource Center at Clark Atlanta University and one of the nation's leading experts on environmental racism.

Sheila tried reaching the busy environmental activist for six months but got no response. Finally, on a fluke, Bullard picked up the phone one evening and heard her story. At first he was disbelieving. No official, he said, would be foolish enough to leave a paper trail of racism. But he was wrong; Sheila had photocopies of the actual letters that had been sent to both the white and the Black families.

Bullard, finally convinced, joined the fight. Sheila had found an ally who would uncover a systematic abuse of environmental guidelines, civil rights laws, and simple human decency. Not only had the county whitewashed the risk to Black families, but it had paid to switch over the white families' water supply to the municipal water system and delivered bottled water to them in the interim. In 1991, a state water official discovered the potential for toxins in the Holts' water supply and alerted the EPA to the danger. The federal agency

pooh-poohed the state's concern and Tennessee went along with the EPA's conclusions, even as more and more tests confirmed that the level of TCE in the Holts' water supply was 24 times the EPA's recommended level.

Beginning in 2003, attorneys filed lawsuits on behalf of 12 Holt family members against the city, county, and

state for negligence in not warning them of the man-made dangers in their water. And in 2007, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund filed an amended complaint claiming discrimination as well. Last year Sheila added Hillary Clinton to her long list of supporters when the senator invited her to Washington to testify before the first-ever environmental justice congressional hearing.

The Holts have clearly suffered at the hands of public officials. In addition to the sickness and death from various diseases, their longtime family home and farm has become worthless. To make matters worse, Sheila recently experienced a recurrence of breast cancer and underwent a mastectomy.

But all this seems to make Sheila Holt-Orsted's passion burn even hotter. She has converted her minivan into a mobile activism center and—when her treatment schedule allows it—is in constant battle with the status quo: "We were the wrong complexion for protection," she states, echoing Robert Bullard's rallying cry. "But all that's going to change."

Breast Cancer Action applauds Sheila Holt-Orsted in her commitment to reversing social inequities on behalf of not only her family but all of us.

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