



FOUNDER OF WE ACT, PEGGY SHEPARD.
PHOTOS BY BROOKE HAVLIK, WE ACT.

THE JUSTICE DEPARTMENT

Peggy Shepard was ahead of the game when it comes to fighting to protect the environment. For thirty years she has been championing a cleaner, healthier Manhattan.

By MEREDITH SPENCER

“People ask, ‘How did you do it?’” says Peggy Shepard of the environmental justice organization she founded in 1988. “By working and thinking about it 24-7. In the first 15 years, there was not a moment I was not thinking of WE ACT FOR ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE.”

As the executive director, Shepard leads a 17-person team of “over-achievers” devoted to creating healthy communities in northern Manhattan through advocacy, research, and grassroots organizing. This encompasses community-driven campaigns

ranging from pushing for clean-air initiatives and planning for natural disaster to evaluating the impact of household toxins and processed foods on the community.

WE ACT is also recognized as a leader in the national environmental justice movement. In 1991, the organization joined the first People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in Washington, D.C., establishing the guiding principles for the movement to combat environmental racism. And in 2008, WE ACT organized the

Environmental Justice Forum, a nationwide alliance focusing on climate justice: climate-change issues that disproportionately affect communities of color and low-income communities nationwide.

Peggy Shepard reflects on the early years of WE ACT.

From Journalist to Activist

It's a matter of seizing opportunity. I came to New York City to be a magazine editor; that was always my goal since high school. I had achieved that goal and was about to become an editor of a new magazine. We were just a month away from launching, and the publishers killed the magazine. Imagine being on top of the world one second, and the next, all of it's gone. That was a big disappointment, but it was an opportunity to think. I thought I'd be writing articles on social justice, but the magazines were not ready for those topics in the '70s. And so I then became a lifestyle editor. And you think, Okay, I'm not able to write about social issues that affect women and our communities, and I'm writing about decorating your apartment. Is that really where I want to be?

I decided to take a job as a speechwriter. And that put me in touch with politics and people who were political activists. One of my colleagues told me that David Dinkins was about to start the Jesse Jackson campaign for president in New York. I went to a meeting and ended up becoming the PR director for the Manhattan campaign. The first Jesse Jackson campaign was very, very exciting. Every progressive person in New York City was involved in that campaign—getting together and meeting one another. Those people are still my friends and still strong activists to this day—half the people I know in New York City I can date back to those early political days.

A Turning Point

My political mentor Bill Lynch said, “Do you want to be producing other people or do you want to be upfront with your own ideas?” And that was really a moment. You have to recognize opportunities and you have to make a judgment on taking that risk. I was the quiet person who sat in the back of the room and didn't raise my hand unless I knew the answer. The idea of being upfront

was a little frightening, but I also felt that it was something I needed to do and wanted to do—I did have ideas about what should be happening.

[Working on the Jackson campaign] gave me the chance to go from neighborhood to neighborhood and get a sense of the benefits and challenges in those areas. When I was asked to run for office as a Democratic district leader, I really took that challenge. I'd just moved to West Harlem. It was really an old boys' network. They saw it as a real challenge for someone like me to be running.

The First Campaign

As I was running [for Democratic district leader], people came to me and said, "Do you know there is this sewage treatment plant being developed? You need to get us jobs there." [Co-district leader Chuck Sutton and I] got people hired, but when the plant began operating, the odors and emissions began making people sick. This was totally unexpected. I didn't know anything about environmental issues. The people who had helped me get elected said, "You've got to help us get this fixed and educate the community on what these issues are."

And so, we began an eight-year organizing campaign to get the city to fix the plant.

A lot of these things are about political moments. Mayor Ed Koch kept saying there was no problem. When David Dinkins became borough president and then mayor, he had lived uptown and he committed \$55 million to fix what was a new plant—one that won all kinds of engineering awards. It took another \$55 million and five years to get it fixed. We filed a lawsuit to ensure that if David Dinkins was no longer mayor (and he was a one-term mayor) that we had a mandate for the plant to be sustainable. It was settled for a \$1.1 million environmental benefits fund. WE ACT and the Natural Resources Defense Council (our attorneys) became monitors of the five-year fix-up plan. We had to sign off at the end of the five years to certify that things had been fixed, and we were given money to hire an engineer to provide us with that expertise. That was our first campaign.

You become intimately aware of neighborhoods. Once your eyes are open, you really begin to see. We



realized that another bus depot was going to be built [uptown], and we did a little research and found that out of seven depots in Manhattan, six were uptown. So we went to work.

Dumping Dirty Diesel

We filed a lawsuit against the MTA, but we were not able to stop the new depot from being built; in New York City, transportation facilities are exempt from environmental review. We then began to work in partnership with the Columbia University School of Public Health, measuring the air quality in neighborhoods through air monitoring and publishing a number

of scientific papers in first-rate, peer-reviewed journals. We were willing to get in the fight around air quality.

We filed a Title VI Civil Rights complaint against the MTA in 2000. Title VI says that federal funds cannot be used to discriminate. There is a lot of funding for that authority [at the state level], and ostensibly Title VI says all those funds can be taken away. Now, I don't think that's ever happened. If you talk to environmental justice folks, [Title VI] is not served well. But it did get us a lot of publicity. We got another *New York Times* article on it. All of that is pressure

against the MTA. [We were also] continuing with an impact study at Columbia Children's Center that required the pregnant women participants to wear backpack air monitors. And we were realizing that the air toxins transferred from the placenta to the fetus. Children were born sensitized in utero to those toxins. Science-based campaigns are very important for credibility and effectiveness. Being able to use that kind of research that was ongoing in the community at the same time we were fighting the MTA made it even more credible and viable.

It took a long time. Our campaign on the bus issue ended after 18 years, when the city converted the bus fleet to hybrids.

Lessons Learned

I learned that government was not accountable. That government did not always tell the truth. For example, Mayor Koch said, "There's no way there could be emissions coming from the plant because all the controls were there." Then David Dinkins came in and appointed a real environmentalist as head of the

department of environmental protection; they found there had never been odor equipment put into that plant.

I think the other thing I've learned over the years—when I look at [West Harlem Piers Park] and when I look at the buses—is that what might seem to be a small neighborhood issue can impact the whole city if you create change. We wanted the buses to be cleaner—but the city's not going to just clean up the buses in Harlem; they're going to clean up every bus in every borough in New York City. With the West Harlem Piers Park, we had a parking lot on our waterfront and it was totally trash-strewn—it was terrible. When people came up the greenway along Riverside Park, once you got to 123rd Street, there was nothing [between there and] 145th Street. By creating the park, we created the missing link. Now there's a continuous parkway all the way up to the tip of Manhattan. You might think, Oh, gee, all this money spent on a teeny park in West Harlem. But it serves everyone in Manhattan using the bike and pedestrian walkways.

This essay has been condensed and edited for clarity and length.

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