

The Power of One

Mrs. Gutierrez Sees the Problems

Cat Stevens sings a song called “Where Do the Children Play?” Have you ever heard this song about the building over and cementing of children’s play areas in cities? Juana Beatriz Gutierrez is a woman who truly cares about where the children will play. She lives in East Los Angeles, California and has been working to improve her neighborhood since 1979. She first organized a neighborhood watch program when drug dealers and gangs moved into a park near her house. She and her husband also made sure there were activities for their children and others in the neighborhood.

But Mrs. Gutierrez didn’t stop with getting rid of drug dealers and organizing children’s activities. She realized that there were other dangers in East Los Angeles. This is a low income area with a large population, and it seemed to be a building ground for a lot of factories, **toxic** facilities, and **incinerators**. Added to these health dangers, there are a number of heavily traveled freeways around this neighborhood that add to the pollution in the air. Mrs. Gutierrez became very concerned about the health of the children in East Los Angeles. She knew that doctors and health researchers are concerned about the damage that air pollution does to lungs.

Mrs. Gutierrez Solves Problems

Mrs. Gutierrez heard that an **incinerator** was to be constructed one mile from her home. This incinerator would burn up to 125,000 pounds of **hazardous waste** each day. There would also be a lot of toxic ash created by the incinerator. Mrs. Gutierrez and an organization she helped start, Las Madres, stopped the construction of this incinerator.

This wasn’t the only pollution causing project that companies wanted to build in East Los Angeles. Other projects such as oil

pipelines and chemical treatment plants were planned for the area. Companies just assumed that this low income neighborhood would not fight against pollution causing projects. But they were wrong! Mrs. Gutierrez and Las Madres stopped the companies who wanted to build dangerous projects in their neighborhood. Mrs. Gutierrez believes that while the people of East Los Angeles may not be rich in money, they are rich in friendships. They care about each other and are determined to keep their community safe and healthy.

Environmental Justice

The problems of East Los Angeles can be found in other low income areas of U.S. cities and developing countries. A man named Jonathan Kozel has written about the effect that polluted air has on children who live in the city. He is very concerned about the health of children, and the construction of dangerous factories in inner city neighborhoods.

Some companies feel that the residents of low income areas may not be aware of the dangers of pollution. Companies also may be able to get real estate for a lower cost in an inner city neighborhood. These are two reasons why pollution causing projects might end up in inner city neighborhoods.

Mrs. Gutierrez and Las Madres show that people have the power to stop unsafe and unwanted construction. Working together for the good of the community is another important way to stop air pollution.

You're an Expert!

1. Listen to the song, "Where Do The Children Play?" Design a poster that illustrates the ideas presented in this song.
2. Write a conversation that might take place between Jonathan Kozel and Mrs. Gutierrez. Find two students

who are willing to present this script as a reader's theater for others.

3. Imagine that you are a child with asthma who lives near a toxic incinerator. Write a diary entry describing your feelings and emotions.
4. Read the short story, "A Sound of Thunder", by Ray Bradbury. Write or explain how the idea in this story relates to the work of Mrs. Gutierrez.

Taking Action...

1. If you live in a city, find out if there are polluting industries located near residential areas. If you don't live in the city investigate the nearest city. Make a model of the city so you can show others just what harm these toxic facilities could do.
2. Find out if there is someone like Mrs. Gutierrez in your community. Write he/she a letter asking how you can help.