

US EPA ARCHIVE DOCUMENT

LOIS GIBBS

Environmental Activist—Love Canal
and Founder of the Center for Health,
Environment and Justice

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Location: Falls Church, VA



EPA Interviewer: This is August 11, 2005, and we are interviewing Ms. Lois Gibbs in her office in Virginia for the 25th anniversary of Superfund. Thank you again for agreeing to participate. We'll start with the real beginning of how things started. Do you want to give a background from where you came from and how you got involved in Superfund?

Gibbs: Yes. I got in Superfund before Superfund, and my community was the impetus for the establishment of Superfund. I got involved when I lived in a community in western New York and Niagara Falls, and it was called the LaSalle District of the city of Niagara Falls. Everybody now knows it as Love Canal in Niagara Falls, but that's not the true name, and I moved in with my husband into a house and my one-year-old child, and I just absolutely loved this neighborhood. There was a school that was three blocks from my home, an elementary school. The river was one block south, and you could go and actually stand by the edge of the river, the mighty Niagara River in all of its beauty. We had two churches in our community and it was a community that was sort of starter homes. So it was just alive and vibrant. In those days the children walked to school in the morning and walked home for lunch, walked back to school after lunch, and walked home after school. So it was a very young community where there was constantly people with strollers and little kids walking back and forth to the school all day long. So it was just really, really beautiful.

So I am living there sort of the American dream, and my husband worked for Goodyear Chemical. He was a chemical operator. And my son, who was perfectly healthy when we moved in, became very sick, and he developed one disease after the other. It started with asthma and then it moved to epilepsy, to seizure disorder, then he had a urinary tract problem, and a liver problem, and I kept on saying to my pediatrician, "What is going on? You know I am perfectly healthy." I figured at one point actually it was my husband's fault, but I checked his gene pool and he did not have these diseases in his gene pool, so it's like, "What is going on?" And I went to First Presbyterian Church. I was very active in the church, and the leadership of the church said that God just gave you this child because he knew that you are the type of person who could care for a child like this. I'm like, "No, this is not—I mean, it's right, it's true and I would, but—this just doesn't seem right."

And then I gave birth to my second child, Melissa, who was small. She was only six pounds where Michael was seven-fourteen, but she was perfectly healthy, and then later she, too, got sick and developed a rare blood disease where her body interpreted her

platelets—that's what clots your blood—as a virus and essentially was destroying itself, and you know, where did that come from?

And it wasn't until after I had lived at Love Canal or LaSalle that I found out about the dump site. I opened the newspaper one day. Michael Brown, who worked for the Niagara Falls Gazette had written a story about the hazardous waste sites in the city of Niagara Falls, and one in particular he looked at was the Love Canal site, which was located between 97th and 99th Street. And I read this with interest—passing interest, not really detailed interest—because in Niagara Falls you have two sets of numbered streets divided by a road called Pine Avenue. So when I read this, I thought for sure they were talking about the other set of streets—that it wasn't the 97th and 99th Streets a few blocks from my home because I knew there was no dump there. There was a school and there was a playground. There was an open field at either end of the school, sort of in the center of this large rectangular area. We were told there was going to be a ball diamond in the northern end, and they were going to put a drinking fountain in there for the children. On the southern end was going to be sort of picnic tables and a playground. So, you know, it just never occurred to me that what he was talking about was my own backyard.

So the following day was another part of that several part series, and it started talking about the 99th Street school and how the school was on the perimeter of the site. Initially, they tried to build it in part over the Love Canal dump site. But they moved it to the perimeter of the site and the playground was over the top of it. And then it talked about, and I am sure the first article did too, but as I said, I just sort of briefly read that one, it talked about 20,000 tons of chemicals being buried there, and it had a whole list of lots of different types of chemicals, most of which I could not pronounce. And I am looking at this saying, "Oh, my God!" Where does this... I mean, this was just really, really scary.

And some of the stories that Michael included in these articles talked about one of the families, the Schroeder family, whose swimming pool was an in-ground pool, and they lived right on the perimeter of this rectangular toxic waste site, and how the pool had popped, I mean literally popped out of the ground. It was a cement pool, but it literally popped out of the ground, and how the trees were dying.

[Michael] talked a little bit about some of the chemicals in workplace exposure, and I am just reading this thing, saying, "This is what's making Michael so sick, and this may be the reason that Melissa was born so little, and so forth." So I took it over to my brother-in-law, who is a biologist who taught at the State University of New York at Buffalo, who was married to my sister—who was also into all of these environmental things—did a lot of work on the Great Lakes and the pollution of the Great Lakes and the fishing bans on the Great Lakes, and stuff like that. And I said, "Wayne, what does this mean?" I mean, I watched his children, his child. So his child was at my house everyday. They dropped him off in the morning. And he's like, "Well, what this means is if you are exposed to these chemicals you're losing thousands of brain cells everyday." I'm like, "What are you talking about?" And so he went on to talk about some of these chemicals are neurotoxins and some of them are, you know, like benzene and stuff like that. And so I'm just looking at this thing saying, "Oh, my God, so what do we do? How do you deal with this thing?"

In the meantime, Michael is writing articles about other sites across Niagara Falls, and so I went to meet with Michael Brown at the Niagara Falls Gazette to say, “Michael, tell me some more. Tell me what you know about this, and tell me where I can find more information.” And he was incredibly helpful; he pointed me to the Calspan Report.

EPA Interviewer: And Calspan was?

Gibbs: Calspan is an independent consulting firm in Buffalo, NY, actually located out by the Buffalo Airport. And in 1976, the City of Niagara Falls, the County of Niagara, the State of New York, and EPA to a certain extent did a study of Love Canal to determine what was in the site, what was leaking out, and what the health risks were associated with that. And again, all of this is before Superfund. And so Calspan looked at that, and what they said in their initial finding is that Love Canal was incredibly toxic. It had some very serious chemicals at very serious levels that do pose a health risk to the community, especially if the families walked across the canal or came into contact with the canal proper.

There were places on the Canal where we used to call it the Beverly Hillbillies. And I know the younger generation has no clue what we are talking about, but there were barrels that were buried in Love Canal, and when the barrels would rust out and collapse, the top of Love Canal (which was like a crust on a pie) the top of the Love Canal, the crust part, would collapse inside. So you would have these holes on the surface of Love Canal that were a perfect circle the size of a 55-gallon barrel, and if you stuck a stick into those holes, you would pull out some stuff that looked like black, thick oil. Now I don’t know exactly what it was—it was a combination of 240 different chemicals, clearly, but we used to call it the Beverly Hillbillies. You know we struck gold, and we would sing the song but never really thinking about it as being a health risk.

So the Calspan Report actually said that those areas are very dangerous. On the surface there were some other chemicals—I think lindane and a number of other very toxic chemicals. They also looked at the homes that immediately surrounded Love Canal. No homes were built on Love Canal. But their backyards abutted the land proper, and some of those homes had these same chemicals on the surface. Some of the homes had these chemicals in the air of their basement, and some of the levels in some of the homes were above OSHA standards, the workplace standards for a 160-pound male. And we had pregnant women and young children. Again, this was a very young community.

So the Calspan Report made some suggestions of what could be done. One of the suggestions was to put fans in the basements of windows and suck the air out, because lots of people had sump pumps to control water underneath their homes, and so the opening to the sump pump would allow more chemicals to evaporate into the air, especially during the winter months when the heat was on. And it talked about fans in the window and fans sucking the air from the indoor to the outside. And I’m thinking, “We live in Buffalo. Let’s talk about something practical.” They talked about putting a clay cap over the top of the proper of Love Canal so that we wouldn’t have this human access to the actual hard chemicals. There was just a whole bunch of short-term, immediate emergency responses that could have been done.

The estimated cost of putting the cap on a number of other things was \$20,000,000, according to this report. And this was done in 1976, so this was two years before I knew about Love Canal, which really, I'm Irish by nature and I have a temper and I really got angry. It's like, "How come they knew all of this two years before? Why didn't we know about it?" I was a mom who was taking not only my children, I watched other children including my sister's, over to this playground. The kids were playing on the stuff. You know, I wouldn't have taken them there had I known this. My son was in elementary school. He had more seizures in school than he did at home or when we were away on vacation. So, you know, was that aggravating his seizure disorder? Had I known that, would I have moved him? Well, clearly, I would have moved him, because that's one of the things I tried to do, to another public school. I was just furious at all of these levels of government from the Federal Government all of the way down to the city and county [who] knew this was going on and there was no warning to any of the families.

And children—on the surface of Love Canal, there was also what we call hot rocks, and they were actually phosphorous rocks, and the children would pick up those phosphorous rocks and throw them against a hard surface and they would pop them like a fire cracker. We didn't know how dangerous those rocks were. As parents we knew they were dangerous because they could hurt the children by, you know, getting in their eyes, or some of the children would put them in their pockets and then they would run and when they would run, they would rub against each other and blow up in their pockets and start their clothing on fire. So we knew sort of those types of hazards associated with it, but we didn't know just them having them in their hands and then, children being children, putting their hands in their mouths, posed any risk. And so, I just really, really got angry.

So one of the things that I did was I was hoping somebody would come to my door and tell me what to do, but of course there was nobody. So one of the things I did was to do a petition around the neighborhood asking that we close the 99th Street school because it posed a risk to the children.

In the meantime, Michael Brown continued to write these articles, and he started writing articles about the school and about how sometimes children would fall into these chemicals, not the pits that I talked about, but chemical spills or eruptions from the ground, and that they would rush them into the shower, strip the kids down, shower them off, and call their parents for clean clothing, and then take this clothing and either throw it away or try to explain to their parents how to clean it. I didn't know that was going on. The school board never... I mean, the things that I learned, it was just appalling. I mean, you grow up thinking that the health authorities, more so than the environmental authorities, because I was never really into environment, but the health authorities, the ones who are looking at immunizations, the ones who are looking for infectious disease, I mean these health authorities understand human health risks and should have raised the flag. And our default was that it couldn't have been that dangerous because they would have done that, and they didn't.

So I went door-to-door to try to close the 99th Street school, and in doing so what I found out was that most of the people had a story to share—either a story about themselves, or a previous owner of the home, or a neighbor. Stories like 12-year-olds who had hysterectomies due to cancer, 21-year-olds who died of crib death. You know, stories about

children getting burnt, children falling into these pits where they were like the barrel, the barrel crust thing, and losing their hearing. I mean just bizarre. Women who were having miscarriages, women who had children with birth defects—identical birth defects, even though they weren't genetically related to each other. They just lived next door to each other. And I was just appalled and I realized...and everybody signed my petition, by the way.

EPA Interviewer: So you were well received?

Gibbs: I was. I was very nervous about people slamming the door in my face because 90 percent of our community worked in the chemical industry. Some of them worked in Allied industry, some in Goodyear, like my husband, some in Occidental Petroleum, who was being held responsible and accountable for this situation. I think there were 24 different industries in Niagara Falls, and the vast majority of people worked in those industries. So when I first went door-to-door, I assumed that I was going to get some doors slammed in my face, and the jobs versus environment sort of argument. But actually only one door was closed, and it was this very timid, frightened woman who said if she talked to me her husband would just be furious. So she slammed the door and wouldn't speak to me. But everybody else was very receptive, and I thought one of the things that was, in hindsight, very helpful was that all of these people worked in the industry. Because they understood the threat from these chemicals, and this one gentleman said to me, "You know, Mrs. Gibbs, the chemical that's in the backyard is a chemical when I use it in the plant. It is called 'High Hazard Area,' and I get paid 25 cents an hour more on the shifts where I work with that chemical, and there's no way I would ever put my family at that risk." So because of the work with mostly organized labor and helping these workers understand what they're being exposed to, there wasn't a whole lot of a learning curve.

You know, the curve that we had to overcome was that it can affect adults who are being exposed at lower levels. There was an automatic default that if it hurts adults, it's going to hurt children, so there was no real need to talk to people much about that. But women who were in the community who were complaining of cancer, stuff like that, there was sort of this question, about well, they're below many cases, most cases actually, they were below OSHA standards, so could it really be affecting you? Could you really be having [pause] there were 12 women in one area who all had breast cancer on one street, and could it really be related to the chemicals? So that one was a little more difficult for people to embrace immediately, but most of the other stuff was.

So we did this petition. I learned so much about my neighborhood. I learned so much about what was going on, and then we were taking this petition to Albany, NY. Albany is our state capital where the health department is. And because the city has refused to close the school, the school board Dr. Long, who's a nice one to interview—I don't know if he's still alive, he was an old fart then. Dr. Long refused to close the school because of liability issues. If it's unsafe for my child and unsafe for other children then it's a potential liability there.

So we took it to the state health department and when we got there on August 2nd—we began to doing this in April, so it took us quite some time to knock on all those doors—when we got there in August, it was after the health department had done some of their own studies. They had done some environmental studies in homes, and around homes, and their study results were in as well. So we arrived with our little petition and to hear what their

results were—their preliminary results. When we arrived at the state capital, it was myself, my husband, and one of our leaders who also was a high school friend of mine, Debbie Cerillo. When we arrived at the capitol, we were told to go down to the auditorium and I said, “No, we’re just supposed to have a small meeting. I think the Health Department’s confused. Maybe they thought we were bringing all these people, but it was just the three of us were coming.”

“No, you have to go to the auditorium. That’s where the press conference is.”

It’s like, “Press conference? No, we’re just coming to find out, give them our petition, and find out about their preliminary [results].”

“Please go down to the auditorium.”

So we walk into the auditorium, and there is more press than I have ever seen in my life. Course I’m brand-new at this. But there had to be dozens of cameras, dozens of journalists. So I walked up and I said, “Is this where the Love Canal meeting is?” And one of the cameramen said, “Yeah, yeah, yeah. Who are you? Are you Lois Gibbs?”

I’m like, “Yeah.”

And he says, “Well, we want to talk to you.”

It’s like, I said, “I don’t think so, not now.”

And so we went to the front of the room, refusing to talk to any of the media, and that’s when Commissioner Whalen, who was the New York State Health Commissioner, came onstage and explained that the levels of chemicals they found were extraordinarily high in many places [and] that posed an imminent health hazard and that he was declaring an emergency situation at Love Canal, and recommending that pregnant women and children under the age of two in the first rows of homes that encircled the rectangular dump should be moved, and they should move immediately.

And we were just like, “Oh my God!” I mean we were literally speechless. And then he started talking about their preliminary [results]. I don’t know, but we weren’t listening anymore. We were now engaged in a screaming match because Debbie Cerillo’s daughter was two years, had just turned two years of age a month before, and my daughter had just turned two years, too, so even though I was outside of that perimeter anyhow. But it eliminated the children that, you know, it’s like, why is two years a cutoff time? We were furious. And we just stood up and screamed and cursed and all I could think of all the way home, driving 500 miles back to Niagara Falls, was, “My mother is going to kill me. She’s just going to kill me. She brought me up better than that, and all I was doing was cussing.” And I think the thing that really propelled Love Canal, and I think the public awareness around Love Canal, which was the impetus for Superfund, was that first event.

When we got back to Niagara Falls on August 2nd ’78, in the street were people who were panicked, absolutely panicked. They sent no health people to talk to the neighborhood. They didn’t even send a public relations person to talk to the neighborhood. They made this

announcement 500 miles away without a soul to explain, not that people could really hear, but to explain what was going on. So when we drove up to my house, my mother, who was watching my children, came out and said, “Lois, go to 99th Street.”

It’s like Ma—I just drove 500 miles. I had the worst news in my life. I got to go in, and she convinced us to go over to 99th Street. So we parked the car and walked over, and it was just like something out of a movie. There were barrels that had fire in them along 99th Street, and Tom Heisner, who was one of our local residents, had a microphone, a makeshift microphone set up, saying, “Come burn your mortgages, your houses are worthless!” and just yelling that kind of stuff. And people were just hooting and hollering back, “Yeah, that’s right!!” There were pregnant women who were standing and their husbands in part holding them up, who were just hysterical. “What does that mean?” “I’m in my sixth month.” “I’m in my eighth month.” “Has something happened to my baby?” And then there were other parents with little toddlers who were just looking at their toddlers. I mean there was just panic. I mean it’s just very hard to verbalize.

[*Interruption*]

EPA Interviewer: So, before we got interrupted, you were talking about how upset you were at the different levels of government and how on 99th Street people were burning their mortgages.

Gibbs: Right, and it was literally something you would see in a movie. So, walking over there, [we were] listening to these women who were pregnant or women with small children. The other thing is the Love Canal community is like many working class communities where the culture of the men is they’re the protectors and the providers. That’s who they are. And we accept that as women in these communities, and it’s OK. We know better, but pretend. And so you had these burly men who suddenly couldn’t protect their wives who are crying hysterically, or their children. So the intensity, just the emotional intensity of this whole scene was just overwhelming. And they were like, “We’re supposed to be moved out to where??! How do we get there?”

My husband made—and it’s pretty representative of much of the community—my husband made \$10,000 a year, and we had a mortgage and a car payment. So you can’t just go rent an apartment somewhere. Or you can’t just go get a hotel room somewhere. You just don’t have that disposable cash. And Melissa’s hematology clinic cost us \$90 a week, out of pocket, cash. So this is the financial position.

So these people are told that they should leave the area. There’s nobody to tell them exactly why. There’s no resources available for them to do that. And it was just chaos. The result of the chaos was that lots of news media came down obviously to cover this, because it was a first. And it was on the 6:00 nightly news, and it was on *Good Morning America*, and the *Today Show*, and literally all the news channels—*60 Minutes* did a piece. And as a result it raised the issue of hazardous waste disposal and human health risk to a national level where it just propelled into the national knowledgebase. And people were just, “Oh my God, what’s going on?” And it was a lively story. It had all the drama of the news stuff.

So that's what really brought about this understanding. That was the incident that really drove the public concern. The public pressure and elected officials' sense of, "Oh, my God, we need to do something [and] this is a first." So a lot of them, including in New York State, right after that went and did a survey of how many other Love Canal-like sites exist in New York State. And they came up with a huge, hundreds upon hundreds upon hundreds of sites, and so obviously the legislators in the State of New York were very concerned in trying to now play down Love Canal because they see or saw huge dollars that were going to be needed—public dollars—to deal with these things and a whole new science base that needed to be funded, research and testing and all of that stuff. So there was panic in the legislative system at all levels from local all the way up to the federal and in the community. We were just frightened as can be.

So we ended up, a short time after that and in part because of the news media, Governor Hugh Kerry, who was the Governor of New York State at the time and who was also running for reelection, which was kind of convenient for us, decided to evacuate all 239 homes that encircled Love Canal. And so those first 239 families, who were so panicked on August 2nd, were able to leave if they chose to leave. And all but three left.

And then they erected a 10-foot fence. It was a green fence, so it was environmentally pretty, and they began to do some testing and some remedial action. And it, from the community's perspective, is that the fence was seen not as a fence to limit access to the site where the remedial action was going to happen, but as a fence that now separated the contaminated vs. non-contaminated areas. And we weren't convinced that the single fence had some kind of magical force that was going to do that. So the outside of the community became very concerned. And most of the work done at Love Canal from a community perspective happened from those families who lived outside of those 239 homes, because they were evacuated relatively quickly, and so were we actually, because it only took us two years.

So there was a lot of testing done, a lot of environmental assessments done, and there was some blood sampling done, and they were trying to find out what was in the blood of the families at Love Canal. What chemicals were there? And it was kind of weird because it was like: to tell us what? So when they came back with the results and it said there was X, Y, and Z in the blood of your child, it was like, "What does that mean?" and they said, "We don't know." So, I'm like, "Why are we doing this then? Why are we testing?" I mean, lead, I get. Mercury, I get. We also got asbestos, although we knew that wasn't being looked for in the blood, but I mean, those were the common things we would get.

So we began organizing in the outer community and talking to neighbors and what we found was that there were a lot of families who had birth defective children. So we decided to do a health survey. Which we did, and we found that 56 percent of the children at Love Canal were born with birth defects. Now, these are 56 percent of the children in the outer community, because those other 239 families are gone—although some of them came back to help us in our efforts—they weren't really included much in the health survey. And we found women who were pregnant during this study—there were 22 women who were pregnant—and only four normal babies were born out of those 22 pregnancies, and urinary disease. So we put this together and we did a measles map—which you'll find that they did in Woburn, Massachusetts; Penny Newman did it in the Stringfellow acid pits—and what we

found was that the diseases seemed to cluster in certain areas of the neighborhood. And we were like, "Well, why did that happen?" And so we started talking with some of the "old timers" who used to live around there, and they told us about old creek beds that used to run through the neighborhood that were back filled with rubble and other sorts of things, but it's not solid. That's probably an avenue in which the stuff is pooling. It's leaking out of Love Canal and pooling into these, what we call later, a swale.

And so we asked the health department to look at that. The health department said, "No, we're not going to look at it. We don't believe there's human health risk here. We believe it's only inside the fence, not outside the fence. We don't believe in your swale theory. We think you found the diseases and you painted in the swales." And it's like, "No, we have 1940s pictures of these people in these funky clothes by these creeks." So we had to push really hard. We finally got the health department to come in and do a health study and actually, they found exactly what we found. And what they said, however, is, "We found 56 percent of the children were born with birth defects. We agree with the type of defects you found, the extra fingers, extra toes, whatever." And then they said, "But we don't believe it's related to Love Canal." And this was Commissioner David Axlerod, who had taken Commissioner Whalen's position. And it's like, "What do you think it's related to?" "We believe that you are a random clustering of genetically defective people." And he said it with a straight face. And, again, it's not much different than when CDC went in, because it was, again, before Superfund. In Woburn, Ann Anderson and other people were saying, "There's a cluster of leukemic children here," and they were saying, "No, this is just a random clustering of leukemic children," and didn't really make that connection to the drinking water wells, even though Ann Anderson did. And in our community, we did, especially with the swales.

So we fought politically. We really turned it into a political issue, because we realized, by 1979, we realized that this is not a scientific issue. That we have shown how the chemicals have moved out, we had readings, like in my home that had seven different chemicals in the air of the basement. We had demonstrated, we thought, fairly clearly about the connection between where the chemicals potentially were leaking based on old photos and testimony from historical residents, and the clustering of disease and nobody wanted to address it. They didn't want to address it because of the huge cost. If they did something at Love Canal, they're gonna have to do something at the other hundreds of sites across New York, but more importantly across the country. And so we decided we had to fight it politically. That the science is there; they're choosing not to use the science. So we went after Governor Hugh Kerry, who was up for reelection once again, and really turned it into a political fight. And I think everybody who knows anything about Love Canal says, "Well that was a political fight. There really wasn't any hard science attached to it." And the truth of the matter is, it was a political fight, but there was hard science that people just chose to ignore.

By February of 1979, because of our political efforts, even though our science stuff was very sound, the state health department agreed to move families of pregnant women and children under the age of two in the outer community. So you would be living next to a house that had been evacuated because they're either pregnant or have a toddler, and you could have a two-and-a-half-year-old. And there's no difference between their property and your property. It's connected. These are little suburban tiny lots. This is not huge acres of property in between these homes. And that just played on people's emotions and psyche. You walked out and looked at this house that was boarded up next to you, and you saw that

they were moved. A lot of women at Love Canal decided to get pregnant because that was the only way that they could save their families. Which was really very dangerous, giving we had such a huge birth defect, miscarriage, and stillborn rate.

And people just got angrier and angrier. By May of 1980, if you were pregnant or had a child under the age of two, you could leave with financial assistance. Both elementary schools, the 99th Street School, which was on the perimeter of the site, and the 93rd Street School, which was just north of the site, were closed, so your children were bussed out of the neighborhood everyday for school. We were told not to go in our backyard. We were told not to plant a garden, and God forbid, don't eat out of your garden. Women were told—most of us had basements except for 100th Street—if you insisted on doing laundry and going downstairs in your basement, you should go down quickly and throw your laundry in and come back up. These basements were bedrooms and recreation rooms for people. I had a pool table down in mine. There was a whole list of things that we were told that we couldn't do, and then in the end of it they said, "It's perfectly safe to live at Love Canal." Well, how could you live at Love Canal when your children can't go outdoors and you can't go in the basement and everybody who lives in a northern community with forced air heat understands what's in the basement is also upstairs in your bedrooms? It was just unbelievable. There was just so much fear on government's part of setting a precedent that they were just setting up this stuff that was just—it was just impossible to function as a family.

In May of 1980, EPA did a pilot study of chromosome breakages in a small number of residents. There were 36. And what they wanted to do was do this pilot study, [and] if they found something, to do a much larger study of the population. Well, the pilot study came back, and EPA/Justice Department initiated it, and they sat and talked with the 36 people or families that were subjects of the testing. So they met in our Love Canal Homeowners' office, which was an abandoned house, and talked with all of these people, and never again, never addressed the larger population. We didn't suspect that they would give us personal information. We didn't want that. But we wanted to know what the results in general found, and then what is the impact on the rest of us, or what does it mean. Well, they didn't do that. Instead, they met with these people, and then they said if they had any questions (the 36 families) that they would be in a local hotel, and that they would be happy to come out and speak with them one on one.

OK, so that was on Friday. Saturday morning, we pick up the newspaper and it says, "Chromosome damage at Love Canal." The chromosome damage means that the families in Love Canal in general have a higher risk of negative reproductive outcomes, genetic damage, cancer, and genetic damage in their children. So they talked about how, it's not just about me, but it's about Michael and Melissa, and then Michael and Melissa's children who haven't even been born yet. I mean these are little kids. It just freaked people out. It was the straw that broke the camel's back. So when you're talking about harming me, OK. But when you're talking about my future grandchildren that I can't even vision in any sort of way, you've crossed the line. And so as a result, all of these people started coming Saturday morning with their newspapers in hand to the Love Canal Homeowners' office saying, "What are you going to do, Lois? What are you going to do about this?"

I'm like, "I can't do nothing about this!" One thing I learned very early on is that when people are angry they will target the leader, so I always learned that what you need to do is

find another target, so you don't become the target. So I said, "Look, this is what we'll do. I will call the EPA representative. They're in a hotel here. I will call them and ask them to come and explain how much truth is in this newspaper article and what it means. I don't know anything about this. The meetings were all private with people. I didn't talk to the doctors at all about this information." So I called it. The EPA guys didn't give us which hotel they were staying in. Niagara Falls is the honeymoon capitol; we have a thousand hotels, so one of the volunteers...

EPA Interviewer: Do you remember the names of the EPA people?

Gibbs: Oh yeah. It was Frank Lucas. No, it was Frank Nepal and Dr. Lucas. That's who it was. Dr. Lucas was the cytogeneticist, and Nepal was a public relations guy. And so we called and we finally found them.

EPA Interviewer: You just randomly called hotels?

Gibbs: Yeah, just looking [for] where they are because they forgot to tell us. They may have told the individual families. Actually, they just didn't tell us as leaders for whatever reason. So Frank Nepal comes over to the Love Canal, and I'm like, "Frank, what are you doing here? Where's Dr. Lucas?" "Well, he's back at the hotel." "Why is he back at the hotel? We don't want to talk to public relations people; we're done with public relations; finished with public relations. Bring Dr. Lucas here."

So he calls him up. He goes into our office and calls him up, and then when the doctor came in, the families said, "To hell with them. If it's so damn safe to live here, these two fools can live here." And so they literally encircled [the building], and this was ad hoc. It wasn't planned. They encircled the building with 500 people, only bodies. So here I have Nepal and Lucas in this office and a bunch of core leadership and I'm like, "OK, let's clear the inside of this house, only two leadership, [and] somebody call the lawyer, because I think we're going to need bail money, and just clear out the house."

And then the women were like, "Well, what do we do?" I said, "Why don't you go make some sandwiches and make some cookies? Let's get some lunch." It's like, "I don't know what to do here." And I called the White House. We had a contact in the White House that we had been working with and Bob Harris from CEQ we were also working with—he was very involved in it. And so I called the White House and said, "We're holding two EPA representatives hostage here. We thought we would let you know." What else do you do?

And so the woman asked me to hold, and then she went away and then she came back and she said the guy who was calling, who I don't remember—I want to say it was Jack Watson but I can't remember absolutely—that he was in a meeting and that he would get back to me. I was like, well, fine, I don't care. Dr. Lucas was with the Centers for Disease Control. So I hung up the phone, and then Frank Nepal was there, and he was telling us how he used to be involved in the Vietnam War protests, so he thought it was kind of cool, being held hostage. He wasn't at all nervous. Well, Dr. Lucas was going to have a heart attack. The man was just sweating. It's like, "Look, it's OK. We don't have any weapons or we don't have; I mean we have yogurt and oatmeal cookies and bologna sandwiches. Honest to God, there's nothing going to happen to you. I promise nothing's going to happen to you." And he

says, "Well, can I go to the bathroom?" It's like, "Yeah." It's like, "Oh, are you going to go with me?" It's like, "NO! There's 500 people. If you walked out that door, you would be in way more trouble than you are here. You are perfectly safe here."

So he went into the bathroom, and then he wanted to call his wife. Well, we didn't know what to do. We really wanted; I mean people had just had it. And we knew if we let these guys out the door—I mean people had passed that point. There were little old ladies with those pink spongy rollers in their hair on Colvin Boulevard, which runs across the neighborhood to a shopping mall with lots of different stores, and they were stopping cars and rocking cars. These little old ladies with these pink rollers! I'm looking out the window and they're rocking the car and they're saying, "You can't go through here. Nobody in government will say it's dangerous but I'm telling you, it's dangerous! Now you turn your car around and you go the long way around. You're not going."

And I'm thinking, "Oh, my God." And then there was one of my core leaders who was [an] incredibly conservative, fundamental Christian who was out there with a gasoline can writing "EPA" in the grass with gas and lighting it! This was like, "What are you doing?" I mean, that's where they were. It was an incredibly intense and dangerous—and I recognized the danger of what was going on, but I had no clue what to do.

In the meantime, the FBI are on the phone, "Let them go. If you don't let them go," It's like, "You're not helpful. Help me figure out how to get out of this! I can't. I don't know how to get out of this. I didn't create it. It just happened, and how do I get out?" And then we had one of these local residents—every neighborhood has a lunatic, and we had a couple of them—and one of the lunatics comes, and he comes up to the window where the hostages were being held, and he decided I was having a private meeting with EPA to talk about things secretly from the rest of the group. So he puts his elbow through the window and he's having this thing, and our residents just picked him up by under his arm and just plopped him onto the street. Frank Nepal goes and gets a broom and dustpan and cleans up. It was great. He was just fabulous. Barbara Quinby was the other woman who held hostage with me, and she's probably five-foot tall and 99 pounds soaking wet. We were hardly physical threats to these guys. So after a while it was really clear that it was getting dark, that there were people in that audience outside that I didn't recognize, there were beer cans that were floating around, and I knew the situation was going to get out of control if something didn't happen. The hostages seemed fine, and they were a little more [calm]. And Lucas finally chilled a little bit after he talked to his wife and told her he wasn't coming home for supper or whatever the hell.

Across the street were the sharpshooters on the roof pointing guns at our head. And Nepal says, "Hey Lois, you know what? They can pick you off without even splitting a hair on my head." It's like, "Well, thanks, Frank, that was really helpful." So what I had to do was figure out a way to let them go. So I went out. We did everything at Love Canal based on a true democracy. People voted and majority ruled. So I went out on the porch and talked about how Congressmen LaFalce and Moynihan were meeting with the President that evening—it was already some other scheduled event that they were going to be together. That they were going to talk about this, and what we really need to do was give that a short chance, and let's wait until Wednesday at noon to see what happens. If EPA doesn't

evacuate us by then, we will make this hostage holding thing a Sesame Street picnic compared to what we're going to do Wednesday at noon.

And then I called for a vote and was telling people who don't live here, "You're not a resident. You cannot vote." And the voting was 60-50. I don't think I won that vote, but I called it that I won it, because I knew we had to. The FBI was just going to come in and take those guys, and that was just going to create a riot. So we let the FBI come in and take the two EPA representatives.

And actually, Barbara Quinby, somehow she got thrown in the car with the representatives. Now this is how good these EPA guys are—because Barbara has a child with three major birth defects, mentally retarded, I mean just devastating. And she was talking to them about all this stuff. So they went two blocks away and one of the FBI guys turned around and looked and said, "How'd she get in the car?" Because they just sort of pushed everybody in the car, and Barbara was sitting there, she said, "I was just praying to God they wouldn't say who I was."

And they said, "I don't know how she got in the car." And then Frank Nepal said, "Let's let her out here on the corner. She can walk back." And so they opened the door. They let her out and she walked back. So they could have been really nasty people and said, "She's one who held us hostage. We should take her with us," but they didn't. They were just very kind. They understood the situation and understood how things happened and we were trying to make the best. And so anyhow, Barbara comes back in tears, "I almost went to jail." I was like, "I'm really sorry. I didn't know you got stuck in the car."

So after that, Wednesday at noon, we did a lot of sort of, one of the things that worked—and again, a lot of this wasn't organizing, it just happened to fall right—is between Saturday and Wednesday. All the national media stuck around. This was the first domestic hostage holding. So they were interviewing, doing all these human interest things, and the media was just everywhere, which was putting pressure on the White House. [President] Carter was running for reelection at the time, and that just totally helped us. So Wednesday precisely at noon, the White House issued a declaration that people could be moved temporarily until money could be secured for permanent relocation. Anybody who wished to leave could leave.

Later on, in October, October 1st, President Carter came to the Love Canal community and signed the appropriations that provided the funds for everybody to be moved. What I was totally amazed at, I was up on stage with Carter when he did that, is how much President Carter understood Superfund. Because all while this was going on, people on the Hill and some of the environmental groups were working to put together a piece of legislation that would help Love Canal-like communities. And so when we were on stage and one of the "yucky-yucks" were talking, President Carter was telling me how they were going to put this bill together and how it would help residents like Love Canal—that they would have money available to do the immediate testing, the immediate cleanup, and relocation. There wouldn't be a fight with industry because EPA could use this fund, go in and do all the stuff, and fight about who is responsible later—that there was a tax that was going to pay for it. But he knew all the details.

I'm like, "A President shouldn't know these details," is all I kept on thinking! I knew the details, too, but I just thought it was weird that President Carter knew, totally knew the tiniest detail of all of it. He talked about treble damages, and how if they didn't pay up right away they could sue them for three times the amount, and that's going to make the corporations stand up and pay attention.

And so when I walked away from that stage, I felt really good about a number of things. One is that we stuck with it to the level where the agencies and the states saw that there was many of these things, and there was a need for a means to address these problems, whether it was just testing and cleanup or whether it was testing, cleanup, and evacuation. Many of the states in the Federal Government had done a survey by then, Congressional survey. I think they said 50,000 sites that were potentially out there.

And then we also showed that in the United States, democracy works. That local people with a very limited education—most of us had high school or less education, most of us made between \$10,000 and \$20,000 a year—that if you stood up and if you were right and if you were persistent, that you can change things. You can create mechanisms to deal with serious long-term problems, as well as addressing your immediate needs. And I thought those lessons that came from Love Canal are so important. And I think the other lesson that people still have not yet embraced because it's so into our culture is that these issues that involve tremendous amount of money, whether they are Superfund sites or not... [*End of tape*]

[First Interview Ends. Second Interview on August 29, 2005]

EPA Interviewer: Today is August 29, 2005. We're doing the second half of the interview with Ms. Lois Gibbs at her office in Virginia. To start off where we were from the last time we met, we finished talking about Love Canal, the lessons of Love Canal. So the legislation is passed. What were your expectations as the new Administration came in?

Gibbs: Well, I had two. One, I was hoping Superfund would get off on the right foot and do as it was intended. But then I knew Ronald Reagan was not a big friend of the environment and issues like Love Canal. So I had great hopes, but was leery of what was going to happen, because his priorities were not the same priorities as mine. Part of it was we had thousands of people calling us after Love Canal.

EPA Interviewer: Really?

Gibbs: Yeah. Over 3,000 names I had before I even moved to DC, which was in '81, and these people were saying, "I have one of those in my backyard. I think it's a Love Canal." Or, "I have a cluster of disease, but I don't know if there's a dump around here, but yours looked like a field, right?"

This one woman from Texas, her son was dying from brain cancer that she believed totally it was a local dump that was causing the problem. And she wasn't ready to get involved yet, because he was at the end of his life and that she needed to be with him. But when it was over—when he was passed—she was going to take on a struggle to save other

children. Those were the types of calls, and that's where I kept on saying, "Well, Superfund's going to help these folks."

Really, on [the] one hand knowing that it may not be perfect because of who was in office, but on the other hand, just wanting it to be what it was intended to be because of people like this who called up and just told personal stories that would just bring you to tears. They were just awful stories. And I could personally relate, because I know what it is like to hold a sick child. I know what it's like to sit in the emergency room and wait to see what the diagnosis is, whether it is leukemia or something else. And so I could totally relate to these folks.

EPA Interviewer: Is that what led you to create the Clearinghouse?

Gibbs: Yeah. The number of people who called and the realization that although there are a lot of phenomenal organizations out there—the NRDC [Natural Resources Defense Council], Environmental Defense Fund, it was back then, Sierra Club, so forth—none of them actually worked with communities. So when you would call them and ask them what we would do, they sort of said, "We don't know, but we've got this piece of legislation." And so there seemed to be a real niche there that nobody was fulfilling, which is going out, talking with communities, working with communities, helping them figure out what the problems are, providing a scientific backup from someone they trust and they know. That's why I started CHEJ [Center for Health, Environment and Justice], which actually started off as the Citizen's Clearinghouse for Hazardous Waste, and we later changed our name to really just provide that face in the community. Not really [to] work on legislation at any level, but really [to] look at how do we stop this from happening, and how do we clean up the existing sites that were out there?

EPA Interviewer: Were you involved with the implementation of Superfund? Or how were you perceiving that implementation was going in '81 to '82?

Gibbs: There were a number of meetings that EPA held, and other people, to look at public participation and how does the public participate in this new program, and so I was involved a lot in those public participation discussions. I was involved in trying to get Superfund in these communities, lobbying on behalf of communities to get them listed on the site list.

But the first couple of years nothing was happening. I mean literally nothing was happening. Congress had come out with their book where they looked at all the potential Love Canals across the country. I think it was under Senator Gore and [Representative] Florio at the Congressional House side. And that book showed that there were potentially 50,000 other Love Canals. And so we were just going through that book and trying to figure out, connect the dots with the communities we knew and then the sites they listed, because when they put that book together, they didn't really talk to the communities. This was done through some kind of paper inventory within various agencies, and so we would call up people and say, "You're on this list, you know. You're one of the 50,000 sites, so you've got to be bad." So we worked on that, trying to figure out how do they... What is the rating system to get a site from identification to Superfund qualification? And then we worked with a number of the Superfund communities to try and use ground level activity to help shape the program.

EPA Interviewer: As we had [EPA Administrator] Ann Gorsuch in office and [Assistant EPA Administrator] Rita Lavelle. Were you involved in some of those discussions, or were you just watching from the outside?

Gibbs: I was involved from sort of the outside. I wasn't invited inside, but I don't think anybody was invited inside, Rita Lavelle, in particular. The one group that we were working with was Penny Newman's group in Stringfellow Acid Pits, Concerned Neighbors in Action, and now she has changed the name. And so we were working a lot with Concerned Neighbors in Action and Representative Brown, who was from the L.A. [Los Angeles] district, who was trying to get that site on Superfund. And because that was the Love Canal of the West Coast, it got a lot of media attention, and a lot of attention from elected officials. And that was the one that helped uncover what Rita Lavelle was doing. And Congress demanded that she give them 500 sites, because she was so slow. So we were creating the pressure at the ground level, but the Representatives were saying, "Look, my district is like yelling and screaming at me. Give me a list of sites." She gave the list of 500 sites, and then she drew a line at this number, so the sites that she gave were all listed and they were all rated, based on pretty much the existing scoring system. That hasn't changed much, and then she drew a line at 500 [sites]. That became the scoring to get on Superfund.

EPA Interviewer: And are you referring to the Hazard Ranking System when you say scoring?

Gibbs: Yes. So this number wasn't based on, "This is the most dangerous level," or "This is the level in which imminent health hazards exist or don't exist." It was based on the 500th site rated. I forgot what the number is, 26.52? Whatever that number is, and so that became the number that you had to achieve in your scoring to get on Superfund. It was just bizarre, and Penny and I were just pulling our hair out saying, "What is this? I mean, this is like the stupidest thing we've ever seen!" Also, in the investigation, they uncovered that Rita Lavelle was giving funds and assistance to Republican district Superfund sites on that list and ignoring Democratic area Superfund sites. And that's where she got—she and Gorsuch-Burford—got in trouble because there was a clear preference in treatment based on the district's party, and so we sort of helped uncover that. And then when Congress went after Rita Lavelle and Anne Gorsuch for this dirty deed.

EPA Interviewer: Which was—what they were saying, though—was they were withholding information from Congress? 28.5 is the cutoff score under the Hazard Ranking System for placement of a site on the National Priorities List.

Gibbs: Right. And so Rita was being summoned to court, and she had a subpoena, but they couldn't serve the subpoena, because she would never come out of her townhouse, which was on Old Navy Drive here in Alexandria. So on George Washington's birthday, we went with groups from across the country to her condo, and we had signs that said, "Rita, come out," and we all started singing "Rita, come out, come out," and [we] did this protest, because while these legal shenanigans were going on, people were living by these communities. I mean they were forgotten. They were forgotten faces in the whole mess, and they had children who were sick. They had contamination that was seeping into their homes or their water, and they needed help. And all of this stuff—this bureaucratic and legal stuff—is happening on the Hill, while these people were still suffering. So we were really trying to put

the faces back into the Superfund debate by doing that. And we actually—I think we had 35 people there that represented 30 states, we had more media than we had people—we had to have 50 media representatives at this thing, and we're looking around. It's like, "OK, tell the truth. George Washington told the truth. Come out. People have hearts."

So we also played an outside role in trying to bring pressure on Rita Lavelle, too, to come forward, because she really... I mean, Anne Burford was her boss, and Anne Burford wasn't the sweetest person on earth as relates to Superfund, but Rita Lavelle was really the one who was doing the dirty deeds, and not talking about the...if she was uncomfortable, not speaking that she was uncomfortable with doing this.

EPA Interviewer: Eventually.

Gibbs: We have great pictures from that.

EPA Interviewer: Do you? We'd love to see them. Eventually, they do resign, and the justice system works. What were some of your next steps as you tried to work with Superfund as Ruckelshaus came back, Lee Thomas came in. What were your impressions of them, and how were you working on the next steps?

Gibbs: "Thomas' promises," that's what I used to say. I actually liked Thomas. I thought he was good.

Our next step was then to try to get the work done, and so we worked a lot and we actually met on a couple of occasions with Thomas and Ruckelshaus—Ruckelshaus more around the resettlement of Love Canal—and really tried to figure out how to get this stuff—how to get the ranking system right, although we never were able to change that—how to get more public participation and access for local people. We talked way back then about the need for Technical Assistance Grants and something that's not very pleasant, HAG grants, Health Assistance Grants. Nobody would use that name, but that's what we used. We need a HAG down here! We talked about Right-to-Know, because Right-to-Know was then coming up, and whether it made sense to attach it to Superfund or have it a stand-alone, a document or law. And [we] really talked about getting him out into communities to see the faces behind the problems. This was sort of our niche, you know, getting these guys and women to come out into the community to have these hearings to see what's going on and to pressure them to do something at these particular sites. And for the most part they listened, but it moved incredibly slow[ly].

The other people that we met with back then was Congress and David Rall. David Rall was the head of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, and this was when they were talking about the ATSDR [Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry] program. I testified, tried to get David to agree, to move the investigation—the health investigation—out of CDC [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention], and into NIEHS because I just thought it was a better fit. Infectious disease people from what we saw in Woburn and other places before Superfund actually funded them was that they kept on tracking these illnesses as if they were infectious disease. They have this way in which they have been taught in school to investigate clusters. But clusters from contamination work differently, and you don't have that hard—I mean if you are looking at a cluster of HIV, then

you sort of look at who is spreading it to who, and you know what the symptoms of the diseases are, and so forth. With chemicals, you don't know what the symptoms are. You don't know what the chemical soups are. You don't know a lot. I mean, there's just so little we know about chemical exposures. Even today in 2005. And we just thought NIEHS would be a better agency for investigating than ATSDR going into CDC. It is, and we lost that fight.

EPA Interviewer: Were you working with Curtis Moore, some, on the Hill? He was the Republican staffer who was very involved with ATSDR and trying to get the health effects documented and things like that.

Gibbs: Yeah, he was part of it, but I was just—but I didn't do—I still don't do a whole lot on the Hill, so I always left that for NRDC or Environmental Defense or someone to figure out who the players are and who's our allies and who is resisting. What I did was I worked directly with David Rall and [said], "Look, David, you owe me," because he kept on saying, "You've got a card you can play sometime, Lois, around Love Canal."

And I said, "OK, so I'm playing this card." This is like so important. I mean there's nothing wrong with ATSDR. They are great, reputable scientists. I don't have any beef with them. They're just not used to looking at this, and we need somebody who really can look at this and generate, not just the information for the local people, but generate the science we need to figure out our future.

EPA Interviewer: So, this was all around '86? Timed around the '86 amendments?

Gibbs: Yeah.

EPA Interviewer: Talk about the TAG grants. How did you get them in? I assumed you worked with NRDC and your partners to get them in the legislation. Why did you feel that was so integral to do?

Gibbs: I think that one of the most important programs within Superfund is the TAG grant, and when we were at Love Canal we got Stephen Luster. The state paid, and then it was sort of this experience. The state kept coming out with science, as the EPA does under Superfund, for these local communities. Most of these community people are lay people, and so they look at this stuff and they hear that maybe that's not really the way it is, whatever it is that is being presented to them, but they don't have anybody to check, somebody they trust who can look at this and say, "You know what? EPA is right. This is a chemical of concern, but it's not a concern for health problems. It is a concern for whatever, growing grass." And just to be able to validate or provide the science that disagrees with conclusions, by someone people trust, because it was the only way I could see to end this sort of "he said, she said," and sort of this debate and confrontation.

I mean a lot of times EPA was exactly right, that this was not a concern, but people, why would they trust them because they have to pay to clean up blah, blah, blah. But if somebody else came in and said, "EPA was right," then people just sort of took a breath. The other thing is that when EPA could say something that was not debated, it's much more scary than if somebody else who you trust says it.

So when EPA said, you know, “Women should be careful about drinking the water during pregnancy,” and people just get, “How could you take my water away? How could you do this?” and what has already happened. Where if a scientist comes in and says, “We don’t know how much of this chemical in the water can affect your unborn child, and as an ounce of precaution, more so than in immediate danger, but as an ounce of precaution if you are pregnant, you should get a different water supply. It doesn’t mean that if you drink this you are going to have a miscarriage or a birth defective baby, or something is going to be wrong, but it’s a matter of concern.”

So when it comes from somebody you trust, it is taken much warmer, much more sincere. That person can talk at a different level than somebody who is perceived, and then sort of adversary role, which what EPA is often seen as. And so it just made things go better. And I think as a result, I think the TAG grants have done phenomenal. You know it really has given people a voice, a voice in the science. They can sit at the table. They couldn’t sit at the table before, and talk to scientists. Most of the scientists wouldn’t talk to them, because they didn’t understand and they were afraid it would be taken out of context. So people had a representative at all the various tables, if they themselves could not go, as well as a translator and a hand holder.

EPA Interviewer: Have you seen other changes in the community involved in the program, especially from ’86 to now? Ones that you helped institute or you think are good or not so strong from the public participation angle of things?

Gibbs: I think the public participation still leaves a lot to be desired. I think there is more need for community meetings. I think that there was some sociological study that said if we take people and we put them in stations, and have them walk around the stations, the cleanup stations, and talk with the individuals at the station, there will be less advocacy, there will be less or, not advocacy, what is the word I’m looking for?

EPA Interviewer: I know it, anxiety.

Gibbs: Right. And that actually may in fact have reduced the amount of confrontation that you get in a conversation in an auditorium full of people, but what it has done is, it’s reduced the amount of understanding people have. EPA, I don’t know if they have ever studied this, or they don’t care, because in the auditorium, when Mr. Smith raises his hand and says, “I don’t understand why you put the monitoring wells here,” then somebody else understands that there is a question about the monitoring wells, who would have no clue about monitoring wells, and that conversation, although often uncomfortable for those who are on stage, helps to inform communities about this stuff. So you end up having somebody concerned about the monitoring wells in these stations. It only stays in the station, so that [a] person in another station isn’t hearing this thing. That person finds out six months later there is a question about the monitoring wells, so it just creates long-term instability in the community, because people are learning at different times. And that same debate keeps getting re-circled; and each time it’s like the whisper theory. Every time it gets conveyed then somebody adds something to it and by the time, six months later, it reaches this person who is the last one to know about the monitoring well. That person is like, “They put it there deliberately so they couldn’t find anything, blah, blah, blah,” because they haven’t heard the back and forth.

So I think that on [the] one hand it was an effort to try and stop this sort of auditorium screaming match, which is uncomfortable. It is uncomfortable for the community, too. I mean a lot of people are uncomfortable with that, but I think what it did is it reduced the information exchange for the entire community in a way that keeps people close to the same place, and understanding.

EPA Interviewer: Do you think the Community Advisory Groups help with that understanding in broaching some of the separation?

Gibbs: Yeah, I think it does, but the problem with that is that it is just a small group of people, and then their job is to convey the message to the larger group of people, and it really depends on who is sitting there. You know if it is somebody who is really good, and I'm a big fan of communications. You can't say anything enough times to enough people about—I'm just huge on communications, but what you see with these advisory groups is most people get involved in advisory groups and they don't communicate. They don't communicate with the community, and in fact, what happens is the community shrinks. Community participation shrinks to the advisory group level, which then could create problems later, when people say, "I didn't hear," and then EPA says, "Well, we had your CAG da da da." And it's like, "Well, don't blame Mr. Smith. He's working hard. He has six kids, he's blah blah blah."

So, I think it serves a purpose of getting information, but I don't think there's enough emphasis that the information carried from that meeting or those meetings or series of meetings must be translated to the community. That there needs to be that connect. And in some groups, people put people on the advisory committee who are leadership, and as a result, the leadership is missing. It takes leadership out of the community. And so if Lois Gibbs is sitting on the advisory group, she is not communicating with her local community, and I think that's a problem, too.

EPA Interviewer: OK. Were you involved with some of the reauthorization discussions in '94 through '98, and what were some of your hopes for that if you were?

Gibbs: I was. Oh, my God, that was a 100 years ago. We went back to trying to move ATSDR out, back to NIEHS, and David Rall was still alive. He died in a car accident awhile after that. I can't remember—oh, that's when we were really trying to get the HAG grants, Health Assistance Grants. We had a lot of conversation about that, and then we had some conversations about public participation again. You know, there's lots of libraries that don't have a repository like they're supposed to, and what are the steps. I mean the EPA is such a bureaucracy and Superfund in general. It's very hard to understand if Arlington, VA, doesn't have a repository, who do you go to?

Or if you have problems like, there's a problem with one of the representatives in Montana, has been forever. It is so closely aligned with the industry up there; it's very hard to tell the difference. And there were a number of complaints. There was a series in the newspaper about this person, and you know, we called EPA, tried to get this person transferred out of there and get a different person, and it just—we didn't even get a response. You know, so it was like: "What is the accountability?" And that was the other thing, because actually Montana was pretty hot then, and the guy who was working for EPA regional office. I mean, he was just unbelievable. And actually, Suzanne Wells [Chief, Superfund Community

Involvement and Outreach Branch] knows him—because I was always bitching to her about him, “What am I going to do with this guy?!!”

But you know there’s no external, so if you are a community group, and sometimes it’s just personalities, but in this case it was not. But if you are a community group, and you have an EPA representative for a Superfund site who is as much of a problem as a PRP, what is the way you appeal this? I mean, I know we can’t work with this internal employee and all that kind of stuff, but how do you address that? And there still is nothing there that addresses that. I don’t mean the community groups should be able to get somebody fired. I’m not suggesting that, but maybe he could have been moved to the Denver office or a different position within the EPA regional office there. But he would come to meetings and sit in back of the meetings, and there would be somebody up front talking, and one of the environmental groups, the Milltown group or one of the other groups would stand up, and he would say, “You’re wrong!” from the audience, and he would never come up front. You know, it was just bad behavior, and he’s not the only one, but there’s no accountability for these relationships.

EPA Interviewer: I know the Agency has done a lot to try to build the capacity of people’s community involvement skills, employee, staff committee involvement skills. Have you seen a change over the years in some of that, as we’ve made an effort to better educate people about the importance of public participation?

Gibbs: Yes, yes. I think it’s moving, although, again, I really dislike your little stations.

EPA Interviewer: *[Laughing]* We’ll remember that.

Gibbs: But I think that they have learned lots of skills. They’re much more sensitive. I think the hardest part of anybody’s job is it’s not about you. It’s not personal. I’ve done a couple of exercises with some of the EPA folks, especially the risk communicators, to really help them see how difficult it is to be walking in those other shoes. One I did, it was an evening training, and I took a bottle of water and I said I had traveled to all these places and named all these very toxic sites and then I assured them there were five chemicals in there, but the chemicals were perfectly safe. That it’s drinkable, it’s potable. It’s no more health threatening than their tap water, and poured them all a glass of water and then asked somebody to drink it. And, of course, nobody would drink it. And it’s like that’s exactly how the people feel.

But I’m an advocate for health; I’m not going to poison you. I mean think of where I’m coming from. You know, but you have some stranger who’s coming in here, who has an agenda, I have an agenda, who’s telling you this is so, and this is how people feel. That’s what you have to overcome. You won’t drink that water. One woman stood up and said, “I think it’s because you didn’t wash the bottle right. I’m nervous.” I was like, “I have four kids. I know how to wash a bottle. You know, this I can handle.” But it’s that kind of training that I think helps the reps who go out there understand it’s not about you. It’s about what you represent, and there’s no relationship of what you represent, even if you’re the nicest person on Earth and the most honest human being there is. And it’s really hard. It will always be hard.

EPA Interviewer: One of the things we haven’t talked about either today or when I was here previously is the role of industry. When CERCLA [Comprehensive Environmental Response,

Compensation, and Liability Act] was passed, there were a lot of things for industry to figure out, a lot of groundbreaking things with legalities and enforcement. But given all that, I just was wondering how you've seen the role of industry and potentially responsible parties throughout Superfund and the way they—where they are right now?

Gibbs: I think they've had way too much control of the agenda. When Superfund was passed, what excited me more than anything else was that there would be a fund there for abandoned sites, or for PRP sites, where the PRP is resistant and EPA would take those funds, do the assessment, choose the remedy, do the remedy, and then offer for the PRP to settle out of court, and if they didn't then they could do triple damages. That was brilliant, absolutely brilliant, because it allowed EPA to be independent, to come in and work immediately on these sites. And I know that it was under the Reagan Administration a lot of that got shifted. Whether it got shifted in the paper or not, it certainly got shifted in practice where industry began to complain and wanted to be at the table, and that really took the heart out of Superfund, you know, because they were there. They even put together Clean Site, Inc., way back then. We went to their opening press conference. It was great fun. We did a press conference before their press conference at their press conference. *[Laughing]*

But it was, you know, you can't have the murderer sitting at the table negotiating with the victim, or the rapist, or whatever crime you want to use. That you really need to have law enforcement and the jury system and everything else move forward. This is sort of what our country is based on. And the PRPs have got their hands in every single site. They are dictating the cleanup. They are dictating what gets done. They're dictating the dollar amount. They're dictating the assessments that are being done, and that's just wrong. It's like the murderer defining, "OK, this is where we will look for evidence and this is where we won't look for evidence, and this piece of evidence will enter into evidence and this one we'll just throw aside." And that's how people in the field see it as well. That they have no business at that table; that their business is at the later table and they could make their arguments about evidence not being valid, or whatever, but it's just wrong for them to be at the front end. We don't do that with any other liability. Food and drug, we don't do that with any other liability. And why do we want to do it when we have a whole community at risk? It's not an individual who is poisoned by a particular drug or drive-by shooting. This is a whole community, and the future of that community. It's both the economic future of that community [and] it's the health future of that community. And it's just unfair to have the responsible or potentially responsible party sitting there at that table defining it. It's just wrong, and it goes against everything that we as a country believe in.

EPA Interviewer: So, a couple of people that we've interviewed have said that they felt Superfund, especially the liability requirements, has been the one reason why they feel industry has some better waste management practices than in the past. Do you agree with that thought?

Gibbs: Absolutely. If we didn't have the joint and several liability, and theoretically the threat of triple damages, then industry would just dump it everywhere. They would absolutely dump it everywhere. I mean, and that's the big argument now about the refinancing of the Fund, is that it has provided the largest financial incentive for industry to do the right thing. In addition, besides just dumping it everywhere without looking at required sites and so forth, industry's reduced a number of the toxic substances being used, so they don't have to put it even in

those licensed facilities for fear that some day they'll be a Superfund site and they'll be held responsible. So it's changed the entire industry sector, I think, to be much more responsible, much more in tune with what are they generating, what are they using, and what is their waste stream, and really looking at reuse of that waste stream, reduction, substitute chemicals. I just think that... And the Right-to-Know is the other piece that I think added to that shift in industry's perception of what's going on. I think also Lloyds of London deciding they would not fund any Superfund sites or any hazardous waste sites.

EPA Interviewer: I don't know that story. What happened?

Gibbs: I'm trying to think what year it was. I think it was late 80's when Lloyds of London came out and said they were no longer going to insure hazardous waste facilities, incinerators, deep-well injection systems, and landfills. And when that happened it was just huge across the country where people said, "Oh, my God, what are we going to do?" And it made the industry much more liable, because they are no longer going to have that insurance to fall back on, which has a lot to do with Love Canal and Woburn, MA. And you know, some of these sites have really hit headlines and theoretically could have cost them zillions and zillions of dollars if it ever went to court in a jury trial.

EPA Interviewer: In '95 you published *Dying from Dioxin*. And a good part of the book explains how citizens can fight environmental problems. Why did you feel it was important to publish *Dying from Dioxin*, and what were your goals for that?

Gibbs: We had two goals. One was, you know, dioxin was a big issue for us at Love Canal, and EPA had come out with this study, and I say it in the book, but it's really heartfelt and sincere, is that when I moved from Love Canal with my children, I truly believed we were now safer. I understand there is no such thing as safe, but safer. You know, I checked the entire neighborhood. I did everything I possibly could, and then when the EPA report came out on dioxin in '96, and I read that they were eating dioxin in the fat of foods, milk, and cheese, and beef. Well, my youngest son will only eat hamburgers and only drink milk. I mean this is a dioxin king walking around, and I was just frightened and angry, because this doesn't have to be. Because where dioxin generates from the most part, we don't have to have—the incinerators, the PVC plastics—I mean so much of this stuff. And so I wrote it because I figured if this took me by surprise, and I'm in the middle of this stuff, it's going to take a lot of people by surprise, and that EPA was doing—released the report as a draft and was going to do a final. And we thought this was a way to educate the American people about this, but also to get stricter rules and hopefully phase out of some of these dioxin-creating places, like paper mills and stuff. And so we did this whole dioxin tour and talked to people about how dioxin got in their bodies.

We participated in the Science Advisory meeting that they had, which they were quite angry about, because nobody goes to those meetings, and we had 56 people who came. One of them was a Native American woman, and Native Americans don't sit at tables and speak. This is just not their culture. So she was all dressed in her garb and she had this thing, I don't know what it was, and she went into the U of the Science Advisory Board and talked about how dioxins in the fish, which was primarily the food their entire tribe ate. She was from the Fox River, and she started talking to them, and she was just a sweet old woman. She was an old woman. And they just got furious and said they were frightened, and

nobody could come to their Science Advisory Board meetings any more, and all this kind of stuff.

But dioxin is a chemical that does come naturally from burning trees and stuff, but the most dangerous and the largest amount of dioxin comes from these industries that we really have substitutes for. That was our goal, was to try to get that report out and get some substitutes. Also, a lot of the people that we work with that are my age are people who served in Vietnam, or knew somebody in the family who served in Vietnam. So there was already this network of former soldiers and advocates around the Vietnam War, who were also concerned about this and wanted to move on it.

EPA Interviewer: Have you seen progress made on the dioxin issue since you issued the report?

Gibbs: No. No, because they don't want to release it. What Carol Browner said at one point is that the best thing you can do to reduce your dioxin is to eat less fat. That's really all you need to know. Because she had no control, she's trying to be helpful. It was not very helpful, but it was somewhat helpful. The chlorine industry does not want that report to come out. They've now just sent it to the National Academy of Sciences and Food and Drug, because it affects our food supply, and they're very concerned that the American people will panic when they read the report about how much dioxin and what the consequences of dioxin exposure is. So they're tying it up in science places, where they are not really subject to electoral pressure from the House and the Senate, and it's sitting there, and I don't suspect it's going to be out for another year, and then when it comes out of Food and Drug and National Academy, it's just going to go somewhere else. That's what we guess.

In the meantime, we're working to reduce dioxin at the grassroots level. And we've actually done a pretty fabulous job, because we've reduced air dioxin, air-emitted dioxin, by 80 percent in the last 10 years. And that's by closing the incinerators. 2500 medical waste incinerators, we closed. And of the 47 dioxins factories as EPA called them; we closed 45 of them. And so it's reduced the amount of the dioxins from those sources in the air by 80 percent. It's been pretty remarkable.

EPA Interviewer: One of the things that you have talked about publicly is the expiration of the tax on the Trust Fund. Why is that so important to you, and tell us your perspective of the Trust Fund and where it is at now?

Gibbs: The Trust Fund is bankrupt. It is important because if EPA doesn't have money, they can't do cleanups, or the cleanups they do are superficial cleanups, because that's all they can do. The other part of it is there are a lot of communities, especially smaller communities out there, who have toxic sites, who want those sites cleaned up, who don't have the money to do it. For economic development of their downtown area, whatever, don't want to put it on Superfund, because it will take 10 years, and there is no money. So it seems like so much of this cleanup and assessment has just come to a grinding halt. And part of it is because local and state agencies aren't putting them there, and the other part is there is just no money in Superfund.

So you're seeing people, EPA Administrator from 1993 to 2001, get really superficial cleanups that are only temporary, or they are dumping their Superfund sites into the Brownfields program, to use a Brownfields program to clean them up. But the Brownfields program is really not meant for Superfund, and it just cleans up the properties to industrial standards for business use, which is just not appropriate in so many of these communities. Industry, who is supposed to pay for this, pays so little. I mean they're holding the fees at hostage to try and get rid of joint and several liability. That's their game, and they have been very open about it. I haven't seen them try to hide it at all. And they're going to fight the fees until joint and several liability goes away. People on the Hill are saying they're not going to deal with that double deal, but it's a really serious, serious problem.

EPA Interviewer: So how do you respond to the Agency's position that EPA never had direct access to the Fund? Congress always had to appropriate the money anyway, so that it wasn't like we could just write a check against the Fund. EPA had to wait to [get] whatever Congress appropriated.

Gibbs: Right. But there was money there to be appropriated. Right now it is coming out of the general fund; it's coming out of taxes—my taxes, your taxes. Industry is not paying anything. They're getting away scott-free. And I think, with a lot of groups lobbying Congress it depended. How much money EPA got had a lot to do with how many groups came there and said, "We need money." Right now we can go and say we need money, and we can get our friends to line up, but if there is no money to be had—I mean there's just no quarrel any more—because it's coming out of the general taxpayers' money, which also is paying for everything else in this country from roads to healthcare to immunizations for babies, and I think that's a real problem.

EPA Interviewer: Well, industry would cite that 70 percent of the cleanups are paid for, or the money is committed to paying through PRP funds, so that's the majority of the sites that are being cleaned up.

Gibbs: Well, yes, but it doesn't work the way it is supposed to work. The way it is supposed to work is EPA is supposed to have the money, go in, assess the site, fix the site, and then go after PRP. Right now, they're being cleaned up the way PRP wants them cleaned up. And that is not [to] the same level of cleanup that community people want, and it doesn't deal with the abandoned sites. But I think, more importantly, it doesn't put that pot there.

The thing they complain most about is the corporate tax, and how unfair the corporate tax is because it is across the board for anybody who makes \$2 million in taxable income, so it's after they pay everything. The corporate tax is \$12 on every \$2 million. It's the price of a pizza, for God's sake! And it is just bizarre, you know, that they can get away with this argument that the corporate tax. Then you have the oil exemption. So all the oil companies are not feeling pinched at all, even 12 cents per \$2 million. It is just an unfair burden for the taxpayers, and industry is getting their way, cleaning things up the way they want, using their own dollars, which they are going to pay sooner or later, but maybe they are paying \$10 million as opposed to \$25 [million], which it would be if EPA had that pool to draw upon and do it right and assess it right.

EPA Interviewer: In 1990 you received the Goldman Prize for North America, and in 1998 the Heinz Award in the Environment. How did you feel when you were notified that you were receiving these awards and then when you were there getting them? What was that like for you?

Gibbs: It was very, very, very cool. The Goldman Prize was the first big one I won, and...

EPA Interviewer: That was for your work with Superfund, correct?

Gibbs: Yes, that was Love Canal and Superfund. It wasn't CHEJ. It really was about before CHEJ. What it did was, it sort of validated. I know this is really hard for people to believe, but I'm just a housewife, you know, and did all these things, didn't know what I was doing, had a lot of really good helpers around me, listened to their advice, had enough sense to listen to their advice most of the time. And we were very successful, but I always wondered about who I am, and whether I really am credible and whether I, you know, it's just kind of this weird thing. So when I won the Goldman Prize, I was just like, this validates what we are doing was right. That this issue matters and that people like me who speak out from the local level about these issues are credible, respectable people. They're not some dumb housewife or some uneducated woman or all the other terms that they used to use.

So that one had a special sort of validation for me and then the Heinz Award, I actually won with Florence Robinson who is from Louisiana, and we won it together, which was just absolutely fabulous, because she represented the environmental justice community where she came from. And then I sort of represented the rest of the world, and that was just great. We were up there you know it was another validation. But the Heinz Award was a little different, because they give it all across the board for these different areas, and to be standing up there with Florence just said, "Yes. This is a movement. It's made up of women. It's made up of blacks and whites, and our struggles are similar and together we can make change." That's what I felt there. Here we are, two women, although she was a university professor, so she obviously had a higher formal education than I did, and it was just really cool. It's like, this is us, man. We're here and we are changing the world in little bits and pieces here and there that creates a mosaic of change.

EPA Interviewer: So what keeps you going now? What makes you get up and say, "OK, we still have these Superfund sites, and I am still going to work on it." What makes you do that?

Gibbs: *[Laughing]* It's not the pay. I still—we still get these calls all the time from people, and when they call, my mother used to tell us, "Oh, they hit your sympathy button, off she goes." But when they call, you know, you just hear in their voice they need help. When you go and visit the community, you realize what worthwhile work you're doing, and then when you—and I have the great vision of being able to see so many of these people in communities succeed—you know, to be able to look over all of the incinerators for example—the medical incinerators and solid waste incinerators—and say, "Look what we did." You know, we did more in reducing dioxin from these incinerators than a piece of legislation would have done, and this is fabulous. And so it's part that and it is also part that I have four children. You know, what are we going to leave them? And I just think it's really important that we leave this earth in a better place and the communities in a better place than we found them, and we certainly have a lot of work to do in that vein.

EPA Interviewer: What do you think your greatest accomplishment working on Superfund and hazardous site issues has been over the past 25 years?

Gibbs: I don't know. I mean we have had so many. I mean, just the fact that Superfund is there. I think is a huge accomplishment in that we got the extra elements into Superfund, the TAG grants, and ATSDR, and stuff like that. And we forced Superfund to do things that were outside of their program area, like evacuating Times Beach, evacuating Pensacola, FL, Texarkana. So a number of places that really we could move them. And those people have an opportunity to start all over again somewhere else in a safer environment. But I think that just working with all of these people and being able to accomplish even the tiniest victory, and maybe it is a clean well. And I see them as, we saved some lives. We don't know who they are, we don't know where they are, but collectively we saved some lives and some suffering.

EPA Interviewer: Is there something you look back on and you're either disappointed or you say you could have handled that better, or say, "Well, that's what I knew at the time?"

Gibbs: Most of the time I say it's what I knew at the time. But as a fact, you know, it's 20-20. Hindsight is 20-20 vision, and what could I have done differently? What could I [have] done differently earlier on [with] Superfund to really intervene, to figure out how to keep the corporations farther away? We had some opportunities that I just didn't understand how politics worked in Washington. But the whole Times Beach was an opportunity that we might have been able to back industry off of Superfund significantly in retrospect. But I wasn't there.

EPA Interviewer: Where do you see Superfund going in the next 25 years?

Gibbs: Well, we're going to get the fees. Somehow, we're going to do that, and then, you know, I would really like to figure out how we can get corporations to back off, because I think the program itself and 90 percent of the people who work on the program are good, and mean well and do good things. But I think our biggest problem is the industry influence, and if we could figure out a way to move that. We can't obviously do it in this Congress. So it'll take a while. But to get those fees and to get health assessment fees, and I would really like to do something with ATSDR. I'm just not sure what. ATSDR is a problem.

It is interesting for the anniversary of the Superfund bankruptcy, which is the end of September, we put together the faces behind Superfund, so we have profiles from all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico—52 profiles—and we just gave people a survey and asked them to answer a very short one-page survey, and then we turned it into a profile. Every single one of them—their biggest complaint was ATSDR. And I don't think it's because there's bad people working at ATSDR, because I know a lot of them and have a lot of respect for them. I think it's the way ATSDR goes into a community and looks at these health problems in a way that just doesn't communicate with the local people, and it is still looking at infectious-disease-type patterns, as opposed to looking at the other ways people are exposed and other outcomes and stuff like that. So it was just amazing when we looked through them, it was like: "You know what's consistent about this?" Because we asked them what was good about Superfund, and so they articulated that and what would they like to see fixed, every single one of them said, "ATSDR," without exception.

EPA Interviewer: You're the Mother of Superfund. That's how you're known now. Do you have any thoughts on your "child," that you would like to share before we end?

Gibbs: I think my best quote/idea/thought is that, if I'm the Mother, I gave birth to a perfectly beautiful and healthy program, and it was Ronald Reagan who abused the program, so now it's crippled.

EPA Interviewer: OK. Well, on behalf of all of us, I want to thank you for all the time you shared with us and your thoughts and we greatly appreciate it.