This article was sent to you by someone who found it on SFGate.
The original article can be found on SFGate.com here:
http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/g/archive/2005/02/02/greeDTL

Wednesday, February 2, 2005 (SF Gate)
GREEN/Marie Harrison And The Fight For Bayview-Hunters Point
Gregory Dicum, Special to SF Gate

"I think Bayview-Hunters Point is one of the most beautiful places in the entire city," Marie Harrison told me when I visited her. "It is surrounded by water. It sits on a hill; it has a valley and greenery. The trees are now starting to blossom and grow."

Harrison may be the most optimistic person I have ever met. A lifelong resident of the downtrodden district, she knows all too well the harsh realities that come with living there.

"My grandson used to suffer tremendously," she told me, her eyes fixed steadily on my own. "He had asthma attacks and chronic nosebleeds. He would wake up some mornings with his pillow soaked with blood."

One particularly harrowing night in the hospital with him transformed Harrison into an environmental activist. She began to look outside her own family. "In the building where my grandson stays there were four units," she recalls. "Three of those units had children sick with asthma or another pulmonary disease. The other one had an adult with cancer, and the last one had an older child with really bad skin rashes. I thought, 'This is ridiculous.'"

"Up one more level," -- her grandson lived at the base of a hill -- "three families out of the five in that unit had breathing problems. As I went up further, it got even worse. As you get to the top of the hill, you find babies who just got here having skin rashes and a hard time breathing. Babies! Good God almighty!"

Lacking a background in public health but armed with an uncommonly forceful brand of common sense, Harrison quickly surmised that this cluster of suffering is caused by emissions from the Hunters Point Power Plant, which is directly across the street. Further research confirmed her suspicions.

"I became the biggest advocate for shutting down this power plant," says Harrison. "I told them, 'I have a vested interest in seeing this plant close. I will be after you. And if I lose, I'm coming back.'" She smiles. "I became the power plant's arch nemesis."

Harrison had been working in the community for decades, focusing on bringing in basic services other parts of the City might take for granted. Among her notable successes are an effort to bring a community college to Bayview-Hunters Point and the creation of a local credit union.

But her realization that night in the hospital made her shift her focus from what her community lacked to what it had in ghastly abundance: pollution.

"There are very close to 200 leaking underground toxic sites in Bayview-Hunters Point," Harrison tells me, beginning a catalog of horrors that would have the residents of any other San Francisco neighborhood up in arms. "There are two Superfund sites: the shipyard and the Bay Area Drum Co. There is the Hunters Point Power Plant and the Mirant Power Plant. There is the sewage-treatment plant."

These are some of the largest stationary sources of air pollution in the City, "and they're all in walking distance from one another -- and I mean a leisurely walk," says Harrison. "And then there are the two freeways that intersect in Bayview-Hunters Point -- 101 and 280 -- another huge source of air pollution."

Harrison's radicalization renewed her energy and put her at the forefront of the environmental-justice movement. The well-documented, almost intuitive idea that communities with less political power tend to be on the receiving end of the worst environmental problems was first enunciated in the late 1960s. By 1994, it had gained enough credibility that Bill Clinton issued an executive order to address the problem.

Yet, a decade later, little has changed.

A demoralized, poor, underrepresented and poorly educated community is the least equipped to fight for justice in a world of environmental-impact statements, epidemiological studies and litigation. Yet, for these same reasons, these communities are the least likely to get outside help. It's up to the communities themselves to make change happen. That's where Harrison comes in.

Her combination of community organizing and environmental activism has made her a potent force in Bayview-Hunters Point. She serves as a community organizer for Greenaction, an environmental advocacy group, is on the resident advisory board for the Hunters Point Naval Shipyard cleanup, serves on councils for the local community college, the community court and others and is a frequent contributor to The San Francisco Bay View, the area's newspaper. Her leadership and her example are beginning

to transform the neighborhood. But her vision extends far beyond this locale.

"Bayview-Hunters Point is at ground zero," she explains. "The pollution we generate here walks the water all the way to Oakland and beyond if we get a good wind. You honestly think that what's happening in Bayview-Hunters Point is skipping the rest of the City? C'mon! Anything that happens to folks in Bayview-Hunters Point will happen to you.'"

Still, Harrison can get frustrated when people don't see the connections between their world and the life-and-death concerns of her neighborhood. "There are people in San Francisco who are more conscious of the environmental health of their pets than they are of the neighbor who lives across the street from them or around the corner, or on the opposite side of town. Not that a pet doesn't have that right, but don't you find there's something a little backward about it?"

As Harrison learned that her community is awash in pollution from systems whose benefits -- power and plumbing, for example -- are largely enjoyed elsewhere, she came to see that this situation bears all the hallmarks of latent racism. "San Franciscans are supposed to be the most liberal-minded folks in the whole world," she says, "but if we are it, then, oh, boy, is this world in trouble! And I say that not being disrespectful toward San Franciscans. They're not vicious or mean people -- they really aren't. They just don't realize they are racist."

It's making that realization -- and overcoming it -- that lies at the heart of environmental justice in America. And there are signs that this process is starting to happen. Although it has been byzantine and sluggish and has moved at all due only to the persistence of people like Harrison, both the city government and PG&E now say they want the Hunters Point Power Plant closed. (They maintain, however, that the state won't let them shut it down.)

At the end of last year, however, Mayor Gavin Newsom announced the plant would close by 2007. But Harrison has learned from experience not to get her hopes up yet. She points out that the plant was originally scheduled to be shut down in 2001, and, for its neighbors, six more years of operation has meant six more years of poison and suffering. Together with Greenaction and 70 community members, Harrison blockaded the plant's gate in an effort to accelerate the closure.

The official -- though disputed -- reason for the plant's continued operation is to ensure that the City's power demands never go unmet, which implies that using electricity more efficiently may be one way to alleviate the need for the largest single point source of pollution in the

City. "At one o'clock in the morning, why are the lights on at PG&E headquarters, down here on Beale Street?" Harrison asks incredulously. "Why is half of the Financial District lit up after folks have gone home? That's wasteful, and other folks are paying for this."

Yet, as tempting as it must seem after a life on the receiving end of endless industrial indignities, Harrison doesn't spread blame indiscriminately. "A lot of times, we cause harm and we don't realize it," she says. "A person who's going about their everyday business and really, truly does not realize that what they're doing is going to cause somebody harm is not truly guilty. I've learned to understand that."

And this understanding extends to companies such as PG&E, Harrison adds. "They have a moral right to do their business, but it is also their moral responsibility to see to it that their businesses do no harm. So, when someone like me makes you aware that you're doing harm, it is your moral responsibility to do two things: one, find out if it's so -- don't just take us at our word -- and two, do something about it."

This, in the end, is why Harrison is such an optimist. She has faith that people will do the right thing once they know the truth, that together the City as a whole can clean up its act. "Those folks who are in charge need to know that it's not just some poor black folks over there in Bayview-Hunters Point," she says. "It's not about Bayview-Hunters Point -- it's about San Francisco. If we're going to be the leaders that we're supposed to be -- and everyone wants to believe that California and San Francisco really lead the way -- then we need to step up to the plate and lead the way.

"People need to forget their differences -- financial and class, or color, or religion," she adds, "and say, 'Those folks who live over in Bayview-Hunters Point have the same rights that we do.' They need to say it out loud and make sure that everyone around them knows that."

When Harrison speaks, her entire being is focused on her listener. Though she laughs freely -- "I laugh because I have to," she tells me -- her seriousness of purpose comes through as clearly as if she had just grabbed your shoulders and given you a good wake-up shake.

"We have the right to live, work, play and worship on land that is clean," Harrison says in no uncertain terms. "We have a right to breathe air that doesn't have all of the contaminants in it that our air does. Clean land and clean water and clean air is a God-given right. Environmental justice is the free access to that."

Gregory Dicum, author of Window Seat: Reading the Landscape from the Air,

writes about the natural world from San Francisco. A forester by training, Gregory has worked at the front lines of some of the world's most urgent environmental crises.

Copyright 2005 SF Gate