

## *Fight or Flight: A Story of Survival and Justice in Cancer Alley*

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**Abstract:** Grandmother and retired special education teacher Sharon Lavigne lives with her family in St. James Parish, a part of Louisiana called “Cancer Alley” for its notorious rates of respiratory illnesses and other diseases. Home to many predominately Black, low-income communities, this stretch of the Mississippi River has become overrun with industrial plants in the last several decades. As a result, harmful pollutants, including carcinogens, have inundated the air and water of the surrounding neighborhoods and induced staggering rates of sickness and death. In 2018, Formosa Plastics Group announced its plans to construct one of the largest plants yet—the monstrous “fourteen-in-one” chemical facility would stand only a mile and a half from Sharon’s property. Faced with the potentially deadly consequences of environmental racism, Sharon contemplated a difficult choice: should she abandon her lifelong home to protect her health, or stay and organize against Formosa Plastics? Her story underscores the importance of confronting histories of racialized violence as well as the critical relationship between social justice and healthy environments.

### **Introducing Welcome, Louisiana: Before and Now**

In a quiet stretch of the Southeast Louisiana wetlands, nestled alongside the powerful Mississippi River’s edge, lays a small community named Welcome. To get there, visitors peel off from the state freeway onto Highway 18 to follow the man-made levees containing the river’s mighty waters. Beyond the sparse trees and tall grasses, the scenery is a striking mix of residential properties and sprawling industrial plants—one will pass clusters of homes only to notice the daunting chemical facilities flanking them moments later. Looking towards the horizon, onlookers can see the occasional flare in the distance, as it releases unknown quantities and types of chemicals into the cloudless sky. This humble town, dwarfed by its industrial neighbors, is home to 734 people, including lifelong resident Sharon Lavigne (Lavigne 2022).

Though Welcome is no longer the tranquil bayou she once knew, Sharon cannot imagine living anywhere else. Five generations of her family have resided in this unassuming community, beginning with her grandparents’ purchase of a forty-acre property to settle (StoryCenter 2019). This land provided a source of income and a place of shelter for their descendants in decades to come. Sharon helped build the family home now standing on the property, a labor of love that demonstrates her earnest commitment to the area (StoryCenter 2019). Even after the house endured significant damage from the increasingly powerful hurricanes afflicting the area, Sharon made sure to rebuild, knowing that nowhere else would feel like home (S. Lavigne, personal communication, October 2, 2021).

Throughout her adult life, Sharon found fulfillment in dedicating herself to her community, her family, and her faith. She was a special education teacher in St. James public schools for 38 years before retiring in her late sixties (Lavigne 2022). Outside of work, Sharon spent her time tending to her responsibilities as a mother of six, a grandmother, and a loyal member of her church. Deeply religious, Sharon often looks to prayer for guidance when she feels lost, putting her unwavering faith in God's will (Lavigne 2022). She begins every morning by reading Psalm 37 from her Bible: "Trust in the Lord and do good that you might dwell in the land and enjoy security. Take delight in the Lord and he will grant you your heart's request" (Gibson 2020, n.p.).

Before industrial plants dotted the horizon, Sharon grew up enjoying the picturesque and bountiful land that this verse promises. Throughout her childhood, the surrounding bayou provided Sharon's family with their livelihood and way of life. In addition to farming sugarcane, her parents grew fruits and vegetables, raised chickens and cows, and caught shrimp from the river (The Story of Stuff Project 2021). Sharon fondly looks back on her first visit to the great Mississippi River, the vital artery keeping the wetlands so vibrant. She remembers exploring the giant riverside grasses at six years old, playing among the blackberry vines and white spider lilies (The Story of Stuff Project 2021). The outdoors brought joy and prosperity to her family—the well-being of Welcome's residents deeply relied on the well-being of the wetlands themselves.

Sharon's childhood memories of a once healthy community bear little resemblance with Welcome today. The apple trees on her family's land have stopped producing fruit, and the air constantly reeks of chlorine (The Story of Stuff Project 2021). When nearby chemical facilities emit toxins during the night, yellow-colored rain greets residents the next morning (Goldman Environmental Prize 2021). When Sharon's grandchildren play outdoors like she once did, they return home with skin rashes or a burning sensation in their noses (Lavigne and Kairos Center 2020; StoryCenter 2019). The community has also seen drastic physical changes. The high school where Sharon taught students for decades now sits empty after a petrochemical company bought the property (Lavigne 2022). The town continues to shrink as neighbors leave or pass away. The district's only public park will soon border a methanol plant (Lavigne 2022).

In a span of fifty years, residents' relationship with the land has completely changed. Rather than a source of life, the bayou's air and water have become omens of sickness and death, corrupted by toxic chemicals from nearby industry. One night, the stench from a nearby plant was so potent that Sharon's daughter, Shamell, gravely feared for her and her three-year-old's safety (StoryCenter 2019). Shamell remembers praying before going to bed, terrified that she and her family "might not wake up in the morning" (StoryCenter 2019, n.p.). The paradise of the past, in Sharon's words, has turned into "a nightmare of industrial pollution and disease" (Lavigne and Kairos Center 2020, n.p.).

Sharon's experiences mirror the stories of countless others in predominately Black, working-class communities along the Mississippi River. Her town's racial demographics and low socioeconomic status, rather than mere coincidence, are directly related to her and her neighbors' exposure to harmful pollution. Marginalized communities frequently bear a disproportionate share of the ill effects of environmental degradation—a phenomenon commonly called environmental injustice or environmental racism (Banzhaf, Ma, and Timmins 2019). As local histories, health trends, and government responses will reveal, industrial pollution occurs within a structural power imbalance that exploits people of color and perpetuates long-standing inequalities. These forces spurred the evolution of deadly places like Cancer Alley.

### **Cancer Alley: Communities Within an Industrial Dystopia**

The Louisiana wetlands have physically transformed to reflect the region's shifting political and economic landscape. The Mississippi River has long served as a hub of agriculture and commerce, utilized by pre-colonial native groups, European explorers, and eventually the Southern plantation economy (Sioli 2003). Following the Civil War and the abolition of slavery, the national government redistributed plots of land along the river to newly freed families, though many larger plantations remained intact (Allen 2006). By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, amidst new economic demands and opportunities, Louisiana's first chemical and petroleum facilities emerged on these riverside plantation properties (Allen 2006). The region offered industrial companies some key advantages, particularly transportation accessibility and "the assurances of favorable treatment from Louisiana politicians" in the form of state tax subsidies (Allen 2006, 113-114). Low labor costs and the warm climate also attracted swathes of industrial projects until the previously agricultural area was unrecognizable (Allen 2006). Now, over 200 chemical plants and refineries crowd the winding curves of the river between Baton Rouge and New Orleans (Nagra et al. 2021).

Welcome is one of many majority-Black communities in Louisiana burdened with the growing pains of industrial development. St. James Parish alone has 32 petrochemical plants and counting. Sharon lives in District 5 of the Parish, home to nearly one-third of those plants (Lavigne and Kairos Center 2020). Given that 21,000 people live in St. James Parish, one plant exists for every 656 residents, and in District 5 one exists for every 288 (Lavigne and Kairos Center 2020; US Census Bureau 2020). Most of these plants, within or beyond legal limits, contaminate the surrounding air and water with chemicals proven to harm human beings, including carcinogens (Nagra et al. 2021). The industrial toxins primarily impact the small, working-class towns nearby the plants, known as "fenceline communities." Based on the alarming growth of respiratory illnesses among locals that has accompanied industrial transformation, this stretch of land earned an infamous nickname: Cancer Alley.

Petrochemical plants have burdened Sharon's family with more than fruitless trees and bad smells. With constant exposure to air and waterborne toxins, health problems have become a typical part of life in Welcome. Shamell can recall a time when the entire family developed severe skin rashes in response to an unknown chemical in the air (StoryCenter 2019). When doctors failed to provide effective treatments, the family desperately resorted to putting bleach on the rashes (StoryCenter 2019). Shamell also suffers from chronic, debilitating sinus infections, and many of Sharon's grandchildren have developed breathing problems (Lavigne and Kairos Center 2020; StoryCenter 2019). Alongside various skin and respiratory problems, exposure to carcinogens has contributed to devastating cancers and disorders within their family. Sharon's brother, Milton Jr.—who worked at the Shell chemical plant—is fighting prostate cancer after losing his wife to breast cancer (Dermansky 2020b). Doctors diagnosed Sharon with autoimmune hepatitis in 2016, and she is now coping with the discovery of aluminum inside her body (Dermansky 2020b; Lavigne and Kairos Center 2020). Industry has robbed her and her loved ones of their health and sense of safety.

Unfortunately, the Lavigne family's health conditions are far from extraordinary; their illnesses are typical to a greater epidemic plaguing Cancer Alley. Of the places with the ten highest rates of air pollution-related cancer in the U.S., the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) identified seven of them along this eighty-five-mile expanse of the Mississippi River (Nagra et al. 2021). The highest of these cancer rates is in St. John the Baptist Parish, just next door to St. James

Parish, where the risk of developing cancer from air pollution is seven times the national average (Nagra et al. 2021). The EPA cites unsafe emissions from a local petrochemical plant, such as chloroprene, ethylene oxide, and other likely carcinogens, as the reason for sky-high cancer rates (Nagra et al. 2021). The plant agreed to reduce its emissions, but air chemical concentrations remain higher than the acceptable limit (Nagra et al. 2021). Despite the clear link between industrial toxins and poor health outcomes, Louisiana plans to build or expand 100 petrochemical facilities to boost its future economy—a potentially unwise investment, given the current oversupply of plastics on the global market (Goldman Environmental Prize 2021; Mufson 2021). A significant portion of these plants would be in St. James Parish.

It is not an accident that toxic chemical emissions in Louisiana are concentrated near low-income communities of color. As demand for chemical production has increased over time, companies have often placed the most harmful, undesirable sites near people who have the fewest resources to resist them (Skelton and Miller 2016). As a result, the worst living conditions and health outcomes tend to fall on marginalized communities like Welcome.

Environmental injustice has potentially deadly consequences for its victims. If Cancer Alley residents are not battling health problems themselves, they are very likely to have loved ones that are (Curry 2021). In Welcome, Sharon knows over 30 people in the area that have passed away from cancer since 2015 (Lavigne and Kairos Center 2020). At a candle-lighting ceremony hosted by an anti-poverty organization called the Poor People’s Campaign, listing the names of friends and loved ones lost to cancer took over ten minutes (Lavigne and Kairos Center 2020). Further downstream on the Mississippi sits another fenceline community named Diamond, which is similarly situated near a chemical plant and oil refinery (Grunberg 2003). Diamond residents can name dozens of neighbors fighting cancer or respiratory problems, as well as many who died in the process (Grunberg 2003).

Watching the dreadful pattern of sickness and death befall their neighbors, many residents want to move away in the hopes of avoiding adverse health consequences. However, most do not have the financial, physical, or social resources to do so. Sharon’s brother is anxious to escape the “death sentence” of the incoming industrial plants, but residents like him cannot sell their homes for a reasonable price, as the area’s industrial development and pollution sink their market value (Dermansky 2020b, n.p.). Without the capital to afford another place to live, many community members can only dream of leaving. Geraldine Mayho, an environmental activist and dear friend of Sharon, waited for any opportunity to leave Welcome and care for her deteriorating health. She even kept some packed suitcases by her front door, ready to leave at a moment’s notice once she finally gathered the resources to go (Dermansky 2019). Mayho died in July 2019 before having the chance to move away (Dermansky 2019).

Even if residents do have the financial means to leave, many community members are hesitant to abandon their relatives and friends on the river. In a nearby community named New Sarpy, Harriet Isaac says she stays despite harmful pollution to be with her extended family since she wants her children “to grow up having a family background” like she did (Ottinger 2013, 38). Even without family members, small communities offer social support networks that make community members feel safe. Resident Ida Mitchell is reluctant to leave New Sarpy because she knows her neighbors there, and they would always help if she ever “needs somebody” (Ottinger 2013, 47). For many, starting fresh in a new place is an impossible task, so they see no other choice but to stay.

### **Racial Justice, the State, and the Environment**

Private and public institutions have perpetuated environmental racism for generations by placing the worst chemical production and disposal sites near towns with the least social privilege and economic agency. In a political-economic system designed by and for wealthy white Americans, working-class communities of color have severe disadvantages in protecting their communities from harm (Gaventa 1982). History offers countless examples of how class and racial bias influence the distribution of environmental pollutants as well as the success of subsequent protests challenging these injustices. In 1978, North Carolina's state government needed a site to bury 40,000 cubic yards of soil contaminated with polychlorinated biphenyl, a highly toxic industrial compound, after an illegal roadside dumping (McGurty 2009). Officials had two potential landfill sites to choose from: one in a majority white, middle-class area in Chatham County, and the other in a majority Black, working-class area in Warren County. Although Warren County's natural water table was too high to safely make a landfill, the state government still elected Warren County as the preferred site (Banzhaf, Ma, and Timmins 2019). Unlike wealthier, white communities like Chatham County, majority Black communities often lack the free time, financial security, and political representation to protest unwanted projects (Skelton and Miller 2016). The closest town to Warren County's landfill site had no mayor or city council to question the site on citizens' behalf, meaning that residents could do little to stop the landfill besides direct action (Banzhaf, Ma, and Timmins 2019). Therefore, state officials chose Warren County, the place least likely to present political backlash to the landfill. Community members faced an uneven playing field from the start.

Sociological studies have confirmed that environmental injustice is a real, persistent phenomenon in American communities. Researchers began investigating the relationship between racial demographics, class, and toxic environmental sites in the early 1980s, and they discovered that unwanted waste sites were predominately located in non-white, working-class neighborhoods (Banzhaf, Ma, and Timmins 2019). As a result, these communities endured the unpleasant sights, smells, and health effects of these places, in addition to watching their property values sink. Just as political and economic factors shape the social equality of a group, environmental assets and burdens of a place are also "part of the overall landscape of inequality" (Banzhaf, Ma, and Timmins 2019, 188).

As issues with toxins grew more prevalent and visible in the late twentieth century, the national government began addressing environmental crises on a case-by-case basis. However, affected communities of color are often less successful in securing government assistance than their white counterparts, instead facing excessive police action (Skelton and Miller 2016). Warren County residents, for example, fought back when they discovered the fate of their community as a dangerous landfill site. When the first truckfuls of toxic soil headed towards the site in 1982, residents laid down on the roads in peaceful protest, hoping to block the trucks from advancing and gain outside attention (Skelton and Miller 2016). During the next several weeks of demonstrations, police arrested over 500 participants, and the national government offered no help to the people of Warren County (Skelton and Miller 2016). Protestors ultimately had to concede to the construction of the landfill.

Meanwhile, environmental problems in white communities have greater chances of receiving government solutions, particularly when the issue receives media attention. Four years before the Warren County protests, a white, working-class neighborhood in New York named Love Canal made front-page headlines when unknown chemical substances started leaching into their homes (Beck 1979). As the nation watched in horror, residents discovered that a toxic dump

lay just beneath their feet, the source of a variety of illnesses and birth defects in the community (Beck 1979). Love Canal residents adopted radical protest tactics to demand swift government action, including rocking cars in the streets, setting their lawns on fire, and holding an EPA spokesman and scientist hostage in a house for six hours (Greene 2013). Despite practicing more extreme protest strategies than Warren County, no Love Canal residents faced legal consequences, and government officials quickly conceded to demands for relocation (Greene 2013). Pressured by media publicity, the New York governor promised to buy the homes of affected families in August 1978, and President Nixon sent emergency funds to the area the same day (Beck 1979). In the end, the community successfully negotiated the relocation of hundreds of families from the area (Greene 2013).

Given the strikingly different responses to Black and white communities, predominately Black areas like Cancer Alley face greater challenges in obtaining meaningful government intervention. Although some positive reforms have occurred, including the founding of the U.S. EPA's Office of Environmental Justice in 1992, environmental racism clearly persists (Skelton & Miller 2016). Injustices in St. James eerily reflect the story of Warren County. In 2014, local officials quietly decided to change District 5's land-use plan from "residential" to "residential/future industrial" (Dermansky 2020b, n.p.). The choice paved the way for more industrial plants to invade communities like Welcome without their knowledge or consent (Dermansky 2020b). Sharon only found out about this zoning change four years later while doing her own research (Lavigne and Kairos Center 2020). Government institutions and corporations continue to view places like Welcome and Warren County as "sacrifice zones" (Lerner 2010, 2), where the demands of the economy and state outweigh the importance of Black lives.

### **Legacies of Slavery and Civil Rights in the Bayou**

For many centuries on the Mississippi riverbanks, elites have treated people of color as dispensable for the sake of building wealth and power (Dermansky 2020b). Before white settlers occupied and terrorized indigenous peoples and lands, local tribes called Southeast Louisiana "Bulbancha," or "the place of many tongues" (Horowitz 2022, 7). Unjust wars and broken contracts forced native peoples from their land. Today, tribes like the Chitimacha, Houma, and Choctaw remain displaced from their historical homelands and continue to fight for recognition (American Library Association n.d.).

Settlers and their descendants, hoping to monetize the southern wetlands, employed many strategies to systematically dominate the landscape, including slavery. Today, many residents of Cancer Alley descend directly from enslaved peoples that labored on nearby plantations (Nagra et al. 2021). Despite this knowledge, many families cannot visit their ancestors' graves, often unmarked on the old plantation grounds where they worked to death. Forensic architects have identified approximately 1000 sites along the Mississippi River as possible burial grounds for enslaved peoples (Eaton et al. 2021). However, since these sites exist on private property, now in the form of farms and industrial facilities rather than plantations, owners rarely investigate or acknowledge them, leaving these sites unknown to descendants (Eaton et al. 2021). Although Louisiana law now protects any discovered gravesites from development, chemical companies began purchasing plantation properties long before these laws existed, causing many ancestral sites to be lost forever (Eaton et al. 2021). Neglect or destruction of these final resting places is thus another assault by industrial development on locals.

Loss of ancestral sites, political disenfranchisement, and disproportionate illness from pollutants demonstrate that the oppression of people of color is far from over in Louisiana's

wetlands. In the words of civil rights leader Reverend William Barber, the agents exploiting people of color “went from plantations to [industrial] plants, killing people with contamination” rather than outright enslavement (Dermansky 2020b, n.p.). Though economic structures and methods of exploitation have changed over time, unbalanced power structures remain, and Black people’s bodies continue to serve as a means of (or sacrifice for) profit (Dermansky 2020b).

Alongside an enduring legacy of racial oppression, Cancer Alley has also an inspiring history of tenacious leaders challenging the status quo, including Sharon’s father, Milton Cayette. His leadership as president of the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People helped secure significant civil rights protections for voting and equal education (Dermansky 2020b). From her father’s noble work, Sharon learned the rewards and sacrifices of fighting for what is right. In 1966, he escorted six African American students and their mothers to the front steps of St. James High School, successfully facilitating public school integration (StoryCenter 2019). However, following his stand for equal education, Cayette received death threats, lost sugarcane buyers, and had his car set on fire (Dermansky 2020b). In a time of political turbulence, worsened by the assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King, Medgar Evers, and others, Sharon feared for her father’s safety (Dermansky 2020b). Resisting oppression in their community had inherent risks, and Cayette boldly confronted them. However, other systems of exploitation were more insidious, allowing them to go unchallenged.

When the first fertilizer plant arrived in Welcome in 1968, Sharon’s father did not foresee that it would become a source of harm for their community; rather, he and others embraced the plant as an opportunity for economic security (The Story of Stuff Project 2021). Many hoped that the growing stream of chemical plants flowing into the area would bring reliable incomes, retirement plans, and other benefits along with them (The Story of Stuff Project 2021). To their disappointment, industrial projects often hired outside labor rather than community members, as most locals lacked the experience or vocational training needed to work at the plants (Dermansky 2020b). Without widespread employment of Louisianians, industry revenue has done little to compensate for negative health outcomes or improve the local quality of life (Solman 2019). Today, the state ranks 47<sup>th</sup> in household income, 47<sup>th</sup> in food security, and 48<sup>th</sup> in life expectancy (Solman 2019). Hallow promises of economic prosperity disguised the immense burden that industrial plants would ultimately bare on the community.

Locals also lost out on billions in public revenue because of extensive tax breaks granted to incoming plants—a state government practice meant to attract new projects. Under policies like the Industrial Tax Exemption Program, Louisiana gives companies about \$2,800 in subsidies per capita, nearly ten times the national average (Solman 2019). These programs strip communities like Welcome of revenue that could fund community improvements or education. In 2018, the Chinese chemical company Wanhua requested permits to build a facility to produce methylene diphenyl diisocyanate, a chemical that causes respiratory issues (Goldman Environmental Prize 2021). After rezoning the land to allow Wanhua to build closer to residential homes, the St. James Parish Council waived the company’s first ten years in property taxes (Goldman Environmental Prize 2021). Overgenerous subsidies deprive those harmed most by industrial development of its potential benefits. Reflecting on the inequities in her community, Sharon understands that “the civil rights struggle that my parents fought for continues today” (Lavigne and Kairos Center 2020, n.p.).

### **The Sunshine Project, by Formosa Plastics**

As towering industrial complexes continually appeared along the meandering turns of the Mississippi River, the area caught the attention of international chemical corporations looking to develop new sites. Louisiana's favorable political climate, affordable labor force, and low gas prices encouraged plastic conglomerates to dream big—drawing up large, ambitious projects of unprecedented scale (Allen 2006). In 2018, the Taiwanese corporation Formosa Plastics Group, one of the world's top chemical producers, announced its intentions to build a “fourteen-in-one” chemical plant in St. James Parish (Office of Governor John Bel Edwards 2018, n.p.). The massive plant, taking up 2400 acres of land, would produce chemicals like ethylene, propylene, ethylene glycol, and many other products involved in manufacturing everyday plastics (Office of Governor John Bel Edwards 2018). In addition to emitting 13.6 million tons of greenhouse gases yearly, the plant could legally release more than 800 tons of toxic chemicals each year, which would singlehandedly double air pollution in St. James Parish (Simmonds 2021). Democrat Louisiana Governor John Bel Edwards approved the \$9.4 billion project in April 2018, praising the company for bringing economic opportunity and thousands of jobs to the state (Office of Governor John Bel Edwards 2018). In homage to the nearby Sunshine Bridge that connects industry between different river parishes, Formosa named its new site “The Sunshine Project” (Office of Governor John Bel Edwards 2018, n.p.).

Governor Edwards' celebratory announcement failed to mention important economic and environmental caveats of the project. Firstly, the project's massive construction costs and tight profit margins make it a risky investment for the state, with some suggesting that Louisiana ought to “do without it” (Mufson 2021, n.p.). Further, Formosa has a nefarious track record for polluting the environment and harming local communities. In the US alone, Formosa has paid millions of dollars of fines for 68 violations of environmental, health, and workplace safety laws (Smith 2019). When searching the word “Formosa” on the EPA's website, nearly two thousand search results come back, pulling up various documents related to Formosa's citations, court cases, and toxic assessments of plant sites (EPA 2022). Despite paying countless fines and settlements, the corporation's irresponsible behavior continues, and its \$132 billion worth of assets remains intact (Smith 2019).

Louisiana citizens have reason to fear that Formosa's legal negligence will negatively impact their communities. In 2019, a Texas judge branded Formosa “a serial offender” for its consistent disregard for environmental and safety concerns (Smith 2019, n.p.). The judge's statement followed an incident where a Formosa petrochemical plant, located a few hours outside Louisiana, dumped billions of plastic pellets into communal waterways, resulting in a \$50 million settlement (Simmonds 2021). The same plant received more federal fines after several explosions, fires, and toxic chemical releases injured plant employees (Simmonds 2021). The company is responsible for even worse environmental disasters abroad, including the mass death of fish and mercury poisonings in Cambodia and Vietnam (Smith 2019). Formosa's extensive wealth serves as a shield against accountability, as billions of dollars of revenue make government fines trivial. Meanwhile, residents lack the financial means to escape the harm these corporations create.

For residents that already see St. James as a death trap, the arrival of Formosa Plastics symbolized the final nail in the community's coffin—that is, to the few residents informed about the project. Beyond hosting required hearings in distant locations, local representatives make minimal effort to educate citizens of towns like Welcome about new projects, let alone solicit their feedback on them. Sharon would not hear about plans for new chemical facilities until long after local politicians had approved the projects, losing her chance to voice her opinion (Dermansky



2020b). Even for the Sunshine Project, which would operate only a mile and a half from her doorstep, Sharon did not receive any formal notification about it (Dermansky 2020b). As sociologist John Gaventa (1982) theorizes, withholding information is one of many tools at elites' disposal to prevent the political participation of ordinary citizens—a reality that complicates traditional ideas of democracy.

The facility's selected location also testifies to the exclusion of community voices from the planning process. In the site's planned layout, the section of the plant posing the most potential harm to human health would be one mile from an elementary school (Lavigne 2022). To answer the resulting outrage among Welcome residents, Formosa promised to restructure the original plan to remedy this problem, but no changes occurred (Lavigne 2022). With the company undeterred by government fines, legal troubles, or community demands, citizens have few mechanisms to keep the corporation accountable.

### **Facing a Choice: Should I Stay or Should I Go?**

Occupied by her job and family life, Sharon spent most of her adult life unengaged in the local political and advocacy scenes (Dermansky 2020b). She had never attended a public meeting until 2015, when she went to a school board meeting to support a fellow teacher that had been fired (Dermansky 2020b). While there, she happened to encounter members of a locally formed environmental group called Human Enterprise for Loving People (HELP). The association sought to educate community members about the dangers of emissions from nearby chemical facilities and oppose further pollution (Lavigne 2022). Attending future HELP meetings, Sharon began connecting the dots between the illness in her community and the industrial pollutants of the riverside plants (The Story of Stuff Project 2021).

Faced with the harrowing reality of their exposure to toxic pollution, community members failed to agree on what they should do. Sharon felt certain that she couldn't leave her family, church, and community in Welcome (Dermansky 2020b). In her words, "everything [she knows] is in St. James," and she is "too old to start over" (Dermansky 2020b, n.p.). However, many members of HELP could not envision a future left for them among the ever-growing number of chemical facilities. Under the looming threat of sickness and death, many felt desperate to find the means to leave. Hence, the organization believed the best plan of action was negotiating a buyout<sup>1</sup> with Formosa (Dermansky 2020b). Although a buyout is a viable solution for protecting people's health, Welcome would disappear as a result, and much of what Sharon loves about the community would disappear with it. When Sharon suggested that HELP stand up to the construction of the Formosa plant, the organization quickly dismissed her idea as futile (Lavigne and Kairos Center 2020). Members believed that the governor's approval of the project meant "it was a done deal" and Welcome's fate was sealed (Lavigne and Kairos Center 2020, n.p.). If St. James is beyond the point of saving, then protecting their health takes priority over preserving the community.

Sharon could not help but feel dismayed and disturbed by the cynicism that HELP members expressed in the face of Formosa's arrival (Dermansky 2020b). After their monthly meetings, Sharon would leave with a wide range of emotions, frequently weeping when she returned home (Lavigne and Kairos Center 2020). In her eyes, her property was not dispensable for some other place—it is the land that her family has cherished and cultivated for generations, surrounded by her lifelong neighbors and friends. Regardless, the dangers of continuing to live with daily exposure to plant emissions were undeniable. Weighing the needs of her family and community,

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<sup>1</sup> A buyout occurs when a community successfully pressures the corporation responsible for poor environmental conditions to purchase the affected residents' homes, making relocation affordable for residents.

Sharon had to make an agonizing decision: should she stay in Welcome and risk further damage to her and her loved ones' health, or should she find a way to leave Welcome, like other community members? She had never envisioned herself as an activist, much less as being capable of challenging an international corporation and environmental racism (Parker 2021). Should she, having no previous organizing experience, try to mobilize her neighbors against Formosa? Or would this choice, as HELP members claimed, waste the time and energy needed to negotiate a buyout?

Sharon is not the first person to face this choice, and she will not be the last. Environmental degradation and pollution affect a growing number of communities, and families must choose whether to stay, leave, or fight. Citizens of Warren County chose to fight, laying on the road before the trucks of toxic waste that would define their community's fate (Skelton and Miller 2016). Ultimately, their courage and unity were not enough, failing to stop the landfill and spurring hundreds of arrests. Resistance can be very dangerous, yet living near environmental hazards, for some, may be equally so.

### **Epilogue: New Beginnings with RISE St. James**

In 2018, Sharon sat on her front porch with her Bible in her lap, contemplating her unthinkable dilemma (Dermansky 2020b). She turned to prayer for guidance, as she has always done in times of need. To her surprise, a red bird appeared in the distance, and she interpreted the rare sighting as a symbol of change (Dermansky 2020b). "I prayed and I cried. 'Dear Lord, you gave me this land—this home—do you want me to leave?'" Sharon asked (Dermansky 2020b, n.p.). In response, she heard a resounding no. God instead called her to fight for the place that she loved so dearly (Lavigne and Kairos Center 2020). As Sharon's father and generations before them resisted oppression and exploitation, she too would stand up against what she knew was wrong.

Sharon harnessed her new sense of empowerment to organize against the construction of new plants in her community. In October 2018, she invited like-minded friends and neighbors to her den to brainstorm a plan of action, as well as find a name for the group (Lavigne 2022). Sharon's daughter, acting as a secretary, took notes as the ten community members discussed (Lavigne 2022). The humble gathering became the founding members of Sharon's grassroots organization RISE St. James. The faith-based group's primary mission is to "defeat the proliferation of petrochemical industries in St. James Parish" to preserve what remains of their community's health (RISE St. James 2022, n.p.). Members hoped that collective action could protect them and future generations from the harmful emissions of chemical industries.

Since its founding, RISE St. James has been the primary opponent of Formosa Plastics and the Sunshine Project, working tirelessly to foster community awareness and action. Sharon educated and rallied her neighbors to join the cause through door-to-door campaigns, town halls, newspaper ads, and marches (Goldman Environmental Prize 2021). RISE St. James even rented a billboard to draw passersby's attention. Near Sunshine Bridge, the namesake for Formosa's project, drivers see an image depicting a woman holding a baby: "STOP FORMOSA—St. James Parish Council Can Save Our Lives!" (See Appendix A) (RISE St. James 2022). Driving through Welcome, visitors will notice yard signs showing a resident's opposition to the Sunshine Project.

The organization has also resisted Formosa Plastics by increasing its political presence and raising legal challenges. Members of RISE St. James attended critical public meetings regarding the Formosa plant's construction, often in matching t-shirts demonstrating their disapproval (Lavigne 2022). The issue continued to gain traction with locals, and nearly 300 people attended an air quality permit hearing in June 2019 (Dermansky 2020b). Sharon also found allies in other

environmental justice organizations, including Bucket Brigades and Coalition Against Death Alley (Dermansky 2020b). Sharon's ability to form outside partnerships became essential as RISE St. James brought legal action against Formosa. In response to the discovery of potential gravesites on the Sunshine Project site, Sharon utilized legal aid from Tulane's Environmental Law Clinic and Earthjustice to urge the St. James Parish Council to rescind previously granted permits (Dermansky 2020a). Although this attempt failed to stop the plant's construction, Formosa's controversial project began attracting more public attention.

After years of tireless fighting, Sharon's efforts are finally coming to fruition for the people of St. James. In February 2020, RISE St. James filed a lawsuit alongside Louisiana Bucket Brigades, the Sierra Club, and the Center for Biological Diversity against the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality for granting permits to Formosa without properly evaluating the plant's potential environmental impacts (Mitchell 2020c). Due to many weaknesses in the Department's environmental analysis, including the use of ten-year-old air pollution data, the plaintiffs argued that the poor practice "render[ed] the decision arbitrary and the permits invalid" (Mitchell 2020a, n.p.). In response to the lawsuit, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers suspended Formosa's land permit for further investigation (Mitchell 2020b). The Corps of Engineers finally announced in August 2021 that they will perform an in-depth environmental assessment of the Sunshine Project, likely delaying plant construction for multiple years (Mitchell 2021; Valcovici 2021). This announcement is a major victory for RISE St. James—not only does the environmental assessment buy the group more time to organize against the facility, but it also significantly increases the chances of Formosa canceling the project altogether. After previous slowdowns due to COVID-19 and other difficulties, the Sunshine Project has become increasingly expensive and financially risky. Indeed, analysis by S&P suggests that canceling the project would likely improve Formosa Plastics' overall credit rating (Sanzillo 2022). In a true David and Goliath fashion, RISE St. James has halted Formosa's plans, and the Corp of Engineers' announcement may serve as "the nail in Formosa's coffin" (Valcovici 2021, n.p.).

Sharon Lavigne, like other community members of Welcome, Louisiana, once faced a choice between fleeing her community and risking death. With this decision, a quiet mother with little time for politics transformed into a leader of a grassroots resistance movement, boldly challenging a corporation when few others dared. Despite her lack of previous advocacy experience, Sharon's organization has changed her neighbors' lives. In recognition of her admirable work, Sharon has received numerous awards, including the prestigious Goldman Environmental Prize in 2021 (Goldman Environmental Prize 2021). Even with their success against Formosa, Cancer Alley residents are still not free from the toxic emissions of other petrochemical plants. As dozens of new industrial companies contend for a spot in St. James Parish, Sharon has no time to relax and enjoy her success. "If we sit back and allow it, more industry will come in," she says (Lavigne 2022, n.p.). Sharon continues to follow her calling to defend her community from invading industrial giants.

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**Appendix A: RISE St. James billboard image near Sunshine Bridge (RISE St. James 2022)**

