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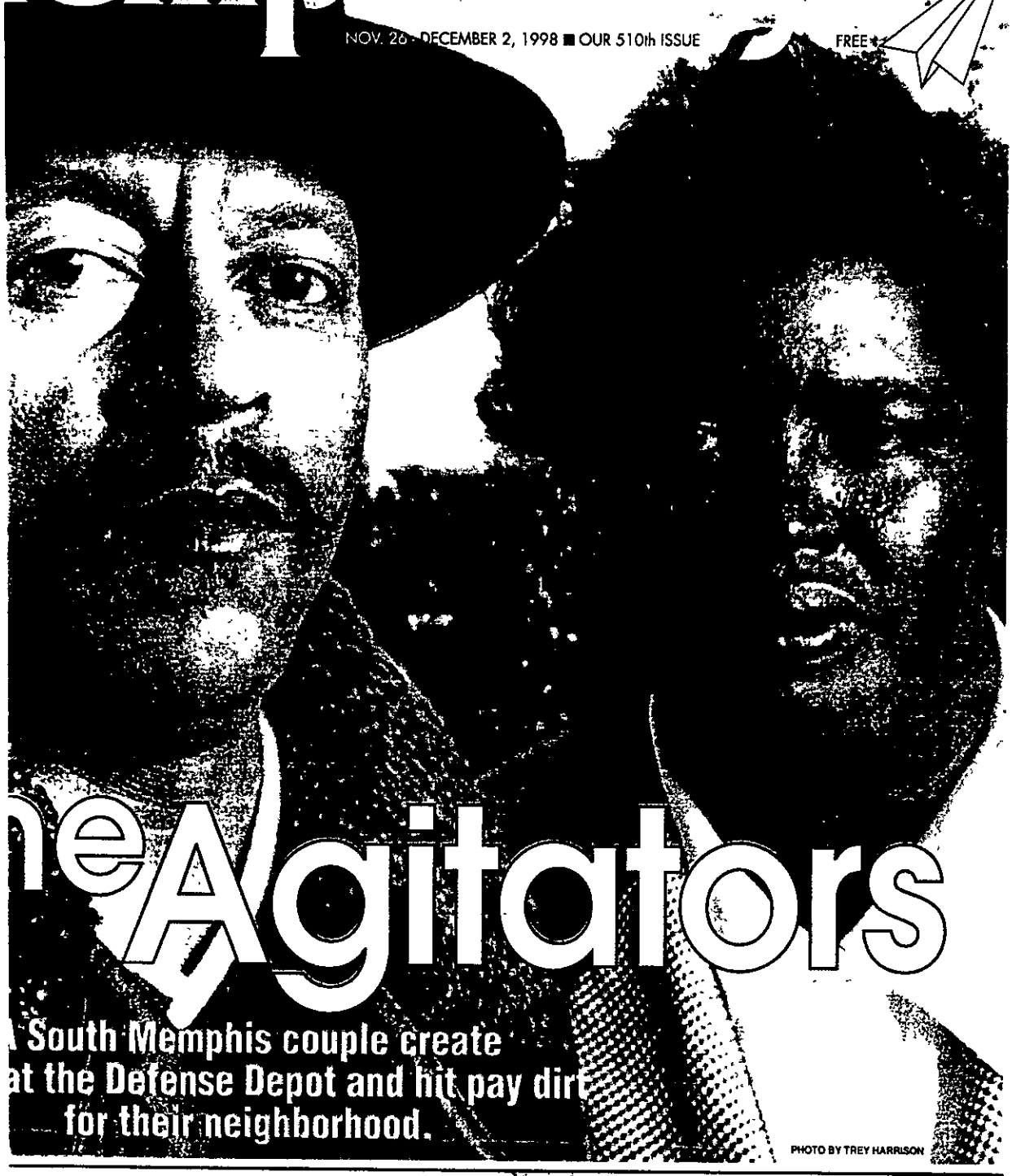

The Agitators

South Memphis couple create
at the Defense Depot and hit pay dirt
for their neighborhood.

PHOTO BY TREY HARRISON

Four Years of Rip-Roaring Football

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The Flyer's Fall Literary Section

Author Philip Gourevitch

The Agitators

by Phil Campbell

A South Memphis couple stir attention and create enemies at the Defense Depot and pull off a major success along the way.

To Doris Bradshaw, the 22 drainage ditches coming out of the Defense Depot are a host of evil metaphors: Snakes slithering out of a sewer. A spider's web, taking in the surrounding modest homes of her neighborhood like helpless flies. The tentacles of a giant octopus, grabbing and coiling menacingly.

Or perhaps a conveyor belt. One that has dispatched toxic contaminants like trichloroethylene (TCE), arsenic, dieldrin, and other toxins onto people's doorstep with ruthless, mechanical efficiency for more than 50 years. Bradshaw is convinced that those contaminants killed her grandmother. Eighty-three-year old Susie Hall died in June 1995 of a cancer which had spread so thoroughly throughout her body the doctors couldn't even diagnose its origin

Doris' involvement with the Depot started with her grandmother's death. She made the association between Depot contamination and cancer when she received a flier in the mail that same year. The flier asked her and her husband Kenneth to attend a public forum on environmental contamination at the Depot and its impact on the community.

Both she and her husband were suspicious. They couldn't get it out of their minds.

"[After some months], for some reason that particular flier appeared back in my hand," Doris says. "I started calling the Depot and wanted answers and no one responded to me. I called, I left messages, and no one responded."

In September, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) in Atlanta issued a health assessment of the Depot community. "I asked Kenneth to read it, to see if he was getting out of it the same thing I was getting out of it," Doris says. "What I didn't understand at the time was that they were saying there was contamination but that [they were claiming that] it wasn't supposed to have hurt anyone in the community."

Two activists were born. An African-American couple, in a poor-to-moderate-income neighborhood on East Mallory, the Bradshaws didn't know anything about chemical problems like hazardous waste, much less sociopolitical ideas like environmental racism. They had only high-school diplomas, having dropped out of college when the financial burden of raising a family became too great. Asking technical questions of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which was in charge of the environmental cleanup at the Depot, was a nightmare. Getting anyone to take the pair seriously seemed impossible.

Yet the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency had put the 640-acre Depot in South Memphis on the National Priorities List in 1992. The city and county governments wouldn't be able to take over the entire property, which is almost twice the size of Overton Park, until cleanup was complete. If millions of dollars were being spent to look at the problem, the Bradshaws reasoned, *something* is obviously wrong at the Depot.

Three years have passed, and the Bradshaws have not stopped seeking answers. The couple has irritated not just government experts, but fellow Depot community members and a noted local environmentalist as well. The government experts largely look down on them as either ignorant or paranoid Others have dismissed them as cranks, bombastic, left-wing activists who do nothing more than stir up feelings for some hidden agenda. Though the Bradshaws do have some followers, for the most part they seem to be on their own, having taken a more suspicious view of the government's intentions than anybody else.

One day this autumn, the Bradshaws stand in front of Dunn Elementary, where a drainage ditch from the Depot goes right underneath the school building itself Kenneth and Doris talk optimistically about the future. "Once we're done here, we may change the mission of the Depot to becoming a network for other environmental groups across the state," says Kenneth He holds his face steadily, waiting for a photographer from this publication to finish taking his picture. "We want to help others do what we've done," he says.

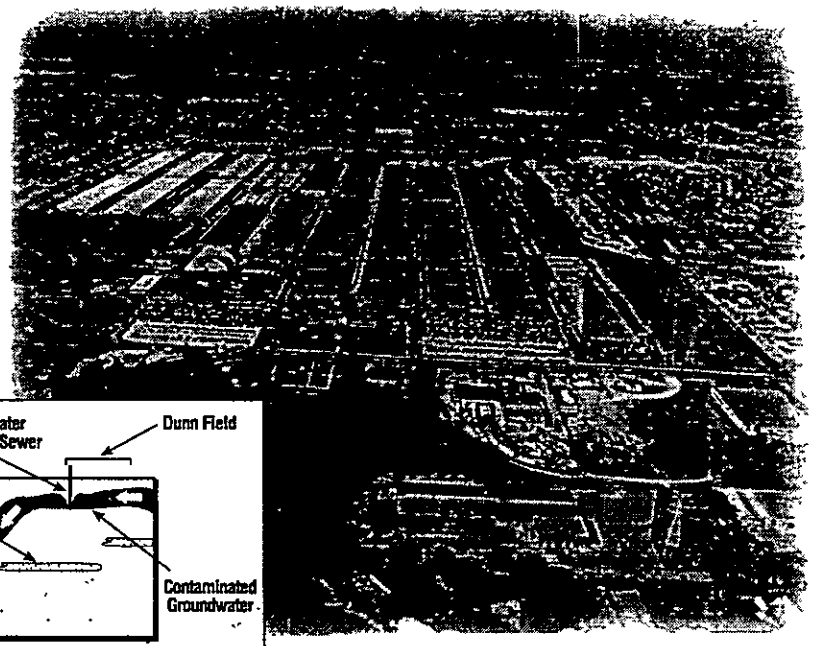
Nothing at the Depot has really changed — the studies continue, and the government experts are increasingly backed by evidence that there is no present health threat to the community. So why do these gadflies think they've accomplished something?

PHOTO BY TREY HARRISON

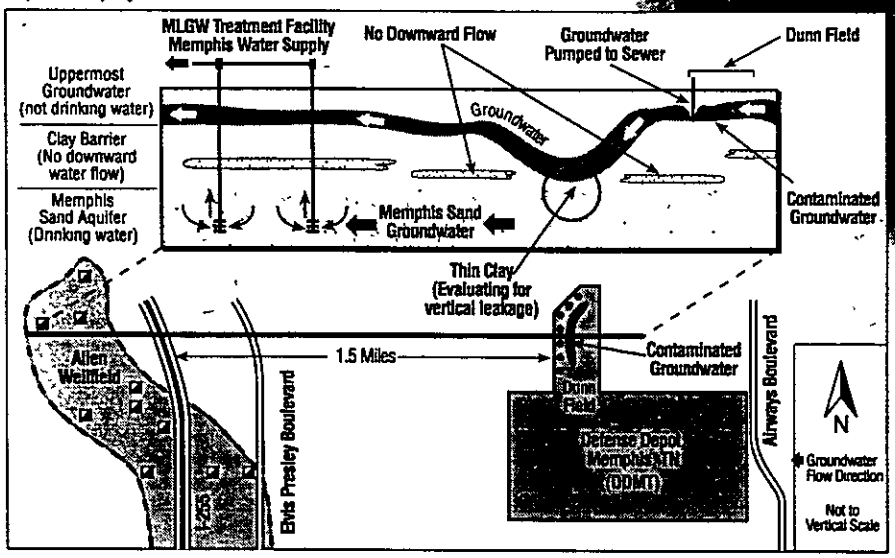
Helping or Hurting?

It's not passion the Bradshaws lack, it's diplomacy and savvy. The media have a hard time with the clumsy name of their organization (DDMT-CCC, standing for "Defense Depot of Memphis, Tennessee — Concerned Citizens Committee"), of which 44-year-old Doris is president. At 49, Kenneth thinks nothing of giving interviews in the middle of the day while he eats cereal and forgoes the use of a shirt. Neither Bradshaw has a problem using phrases like "a pack of lies" in their newsletters and calling for the various resignations or terminations of almost every government environmental technocrat they've encountered on the Depot issue.

Take all of these elements together, and it's easy to understand why *The*



Graph created by CH2M Hill



The Depot's biggest concern involves the entire city, not just the Bradshaw's neighborhood. The toxic solvent TCE is migrating underground toward the city's water supply. Experts hope that a layer of hard clay exists underground to stop the contamination, but they can't say for sure. MLGW officials say they are confident they can filter out the contaminant.

Commercial Appeal has never written about the Bradshaws' environmental efforts.

Kenneth has said a lot of things about the Depot over the years, but much of it can be summed up quickly: "They [government officials] don't even have a dump permit to put paper in there. And because it was a black community, they did exactly what they wanted to do. Everything they did over there, they messed it up. Their cleanup is sloppy. We can sit here all day talking about dieldrin, lead, whatever. You've got to go through the heart of it. They were white and they were operating in a black community." At the end of his monologue, he looks out of breath, though he declines to sit back down.

"I don't believe any of their statistics, facts, or anything," he adds. "They don't have any credibility. If this wasn't a poor community, we could do our *own* testing." If they had the money, they would probably sue the Depot, too, he adds.

Doris' thoughts are more personal. "The only sin my grandmother did was to try to feed her family nutritious foods from her garden," she says. She has plenty of anecdotes about strange, terrible things happening to the community because of the Depot, including one about scores of dogs dying when DDT was allegedly released into the ditches in the 1970s. She knows of other people in the community who are sick, too. She doesn't believe they'd be that way if the Depot had never existed.

Once the pair got started on their mission, they realized they needed money. They could only attract a few hundred dollars from the community, which also meant they had to publish 300 or so newsletters at a time to keep their membership informed.

The Bradshaws received an $11,000 grant from a private foundation in Fort Lauderdale to travel around the U.S. attending technical seminars on environmental issues. They've taken advantage of seminars offered by liberal activist groups such as the Coalition of Black Trade Unions, and by government agencies such as the EPA and the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta (though they say they refuse to apply for citizen-training grants offered by the government because they don't want to appear ethically compromised). Doris travels to seminars about once a month; Kenneth less frequently.

They return from their trips to apply what they've learned, in a way few in authority appreciate. Close your eyes for a moment and try to imagine yourself on the Depot's main building on Airways Road, in a large, stale room with faux-wood paneling, three long tables, and dozens of extra chairs. Commuter and FedEx planes fly overhead every few minutes. Some of the noisiest, roughest public meetings in Memphis have taken place here. Add white government technocrats and bureaucrats in a few of the chairs at the table, black Depot-neighborhood residents in most of the spots, with Janet Hooks of the Memphis City Council and Cleo Kirk of the Shelby County Commission thrown in for local political representation.

The group that meets here on a periodic

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Even in parts of Depot property where toxics of all kinds are above acceptable human-health standards, the chance that it would reach someone outside the Depot (i.e., via surfacewater or groundwater runoff) is slim, say both Phillips and English.

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Kenneth Bradshaw sits with John DeBack of the Depot at a seminar addressing health problems of the neighborhood.

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basis is the Resident Advisory Board, which is supposed to encourage community participation in the Depot's environmental cleanup efforts. Here is where technical ignorance makes full-body contact with state and federal laws, where experts are asked to fulfill the role of both educators *and* colleagues, where the government in all its infamous history of bad decisions and miscommunications is supposed to be made accountable.

These meetings might be dull if it weren't for Doris and Kenneth Bradshaw. They bring their own match and powder keg. They get into fights with both government officials and neighbors. During the last RAB meeting, which took place in October, time was given for public comments and questions. Kenneth pointedly asked if the Depot was using a national-security clause in its clean-up agreement to keep information from the community. As Depot officials tried to reply that, no, they were being open and honest, community co-chair Mondell Williams got irritated and announced that the meeting had gone on past the agreed-upon hour and a half. With only one 'aye' to back him up, he summarily adjourned the meeting.

The Bradshaws even tussled with Larry Smith, probably the city's most notable environmentalist. When he worked at the Mid-South Peace & Justice Center in its heyday, he kept a general eye on all types of threats to the city's air, soil, and water, relying more than any other independent activist on hard facts and data. He sat on the RAB until the work became too time-consuming.

According to Doris Bradshaw, Smith wasn't helpful because he doesn't live in the Depot community; he was lackluster at best during meetings, in secret agreement with government officials at worst. According to Smith, the Bradshaws would make wild assertions, then fail to back them up with proof. One time, he says, Doris claimed to have had maps of Depot property showing that hazardous materials existed where Depot officials had said nothing existed. Smith says he asked for copies of the maps. She never produced.

"Anything she says, ask her for the documentation," Smith warns. "Ask for the documentation and check it out before you run with it. It would serve you well."

Walk around the table among the RAB's current community representatives and you'll get two types of opinions on the Bradshaws. Willie Mae Willett, the principal of nearby Dunn Elementary and an advisory board member, says this about Doris: "I think she has a wealth of knowledge. She lends a lot to all of us. [Pause] Some people just like meetings to be quiet, and to go home. You're not going to have that with Doris." Willett thinks the government has been doing a decent job of informing citizens, but still doesn't believe that everything is known about the Depot.

Then there's Ulysses Truitt, an advisory board member who used to oversee environmental standards at the Depot in the late '70s and '80s. "She and her husband simply want to keep this matter at the maximum height, to gain what, I don't know, to gain publicity. But they get little pieces of data, and they come to those meetings, and you know, they will simply disrupt a meeting with minute details of things that have no bearing on the issue whatsoever." Truitt doesn't believe the contamination poses a health threat. "I live less than a half a mile from the Depot," Truitt says. "If I thought there was any harm to come, I would have moved. I have lived here [in good health] for 32 years."

Two months ago, Doris was unanimously elected to serve as an additional community representative on the advisory board. "I made the motion to put her there," Truitt says. "Hopefully to gain her confidence and quiet her down. I don't know how that's going to work. But the fact of the matter is, the board is moving in due course. Progress is being made. Remedial actions are worthwhile."

Back at their modest, furniture-cluttered home on East Mallory, Kenneth asks Doris if she thinks she can actually make a difference.

"I don't know," she responds, frustrated. "To tell the truth, I don't know if we can make any changes, but I will try, and that's the only thing I can say." The

PHOTO BY PHIL CAMPBELL

Reuben Warren of the Centers for Disease Control, right, wants to make Memphis a model for environmental justice.

RAB is only an advisory committee, with no real authority. Its main mission is to make sure the public is educated as to what's already being done. Doris knows that if she wants to make an impact on this issue, she and Kenneth need to seek another forum for their concerns.

What's the Threat?

Government officials are a little baffled by the Bradshaws. Mistrust of government may be understandable in the past, but how could that exist today? It would take a lot of effort and deviousness for three entirely independent government agencies (the Defense Department, the EPA, and the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation) to coordinate a deception.

Jordan English is the field manager of the local TDEC office. The Bradshaws have called for his resignation more than once. English doesn't want to talk too publicly about their efforts, but he does say their approach can be "counterproductive."

At that same time, English says the Bradshaws weren't the only people to find that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which oversaw the cleanup, weren't the most cooperative people in the world.

"The Army would keep things secret just to show they can," English says. "If you're not hiding anything, what point does it serve?"

These days, the Corps has an environmental engineer to coordinate efforts and to smooth out potential conflicts. That position is filled by 31-year-old Shawn Phillips, a self-described civil servant and a part-Cherokee, part-European "mutt" from North Carolina. Phillips answers questions in a Depot office that is essentially a glorified cubicle with a door, in a mostly empty building that could easily fit most of the employees of city hall, on a piece of property that could easily hide a football stadium or two.

Phillips actually seems to enjoy talking to lay people. "Fox 13 tried to get out here to see some ground removed for dieldrin," he starts our first conversation. "But they didn't make it out in time. The contractor was already laying fresh soil down." He sounds disappointed. Detectable levels of the nasty insecticide have been stuck in grassy areas since the 1970s. It's one thing the Bradshaws and other Depot neighbors worry may be getting into the drainage ditches in the form of surface water runoff. Phillips is convinced that dieldrin isn't mobile enough to cause much of a problem for anybody outside the Depot fence line.

"At the levels we have out there, it is not an acute risk," Phillips says. "If you swallowed a handful of dirt, you wouldn't get sick [from contaminants]. You'd get sick from swallowing a handful of dirt." Even in parts of Depot property where toxics of all kinds are above acceptable human-health standards, the chance that it would reach someone outside the Depot (i.e., via surface water or groundwater runoff) is slim, say both Phillips and English.

The largest potential human-health threat is not to the Depot community, in fact, but to the city as a whole. Environmental contractors for the Depot are trying to determine whether the solvent trichloroethylene (TCE) from the northwest corner of the Depot could seep into the city's drinking-water supply. If the ground beneath the surface is missing a critical layer of hard clay, TCE migration into the drinking-water supply is possible, environmental experts say. The Depot has installed several monitoring wells, and may have to install more to adequately gauge the threat, but not enough information is yet available to say much more (officials don't know, for example where the TCE is originating). So far, officials from Memphis Light, Gas and Water say they have yet to detect any amount of TCE in their pipes. If they do, they say they are confident that they will be able to filter it out long before it reaches private faucets and public drinking fountains.

In the end, the government experts say, the current threat is minimal to Depot residents, but a lot more has to be learned about the extent of contamination before anyone will be able to put a price tag on the cleanup.

If all this is true, where does that leave the Bradshaws and their concerns?

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Pressed on the subject, Turpin Ballard of the EPA will allow that community activists like the Bradshaws may have a point, in one sense: No one knows how much contamination has leaked off Depot property in the past The problem, however, is that neither he nor any other environmental expert will *ever* know "We [the Depot, TDEC, and the EPA] are risk-managing agencies," he says "We manage existing environmental risk, wherever it may be found, as opposed to looking back historically [at health problems] that may have resulted from environmental exposures "

A Cure?

In the end, someone has listened to the Bradshaws. The next important part of this story has its roots in the beginning, but it is a far more pleasant chapter for the activists than the previous ones.

As stated earlier, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) originally got involved in 1995, when it published a health-assessment study that essentially absolved the Depot of any wrongdoing in terms of public-health threats. That study looked only at a present threat to human health instead of the long-term effects of possible contamination The Bradshaws don't trust that report

"Anything she says, ask her for the documentation. Ask for the documentation and check it out before you run with it. It would serve you well."

Doris persuaded Barry Johnson, who heads the CDC's Agency of Toxic Substance and Disease Registry (ATSDR), to come to Memphis to see the problems for himself When Johnson did come in 1997, the Bradshaws took him to the most obvious example of potential danger The drainage ditch that comes straight out from the Depot and runs right underneath Dunn Elementary. Doris says Johnson decided right then to do additional community health assessments

Now, it looks as if the Bradshaws are getting what they wanted, but not in the way they originally envisioned The ATSDR gave a presentation last month at the W.D. Callian Center, a former elementary school on the corner of Hernando and Norris Gathered around several tables arranged in a horseshoe were the Bradshaws, Depot officials, the state's environmental representatives, EPA officials, county health officials, and a public-relations group working for the Depot A handful of people from the public showed up, too. The meeting lasted several hours, and it covered almost every health and environmental topic imaginable. An ATSDR report on cancer rates in the Depot community is expected in the next few months

Dr. Jewel Crawford of ATSDR conducted assessments on some individuals living around the Depot. What impressed her the most is that, of the 100 invitations her agency sent, 100 people showed up That's an astonishing turnout, even if you take into account an aggressive campaign by the agency.

Crawford and her boss, Reuben Warren, were not willing to blame the health problems they encountered on the Depot, but they did have some hard opinions Oddly, the agency that is trying to make people say "environmental justice" instead of "environmental racism" didn't actually seem to care if the Depot was to blame for the health problems or not

"We don't *have* to find out the problems and determine cause and effect," Crawford says. "One of the things that came out loud and clear is that people *are* sick." The problems are varied, but Crawford won't get too specific.

"People in the Depot community have very little access to health care," she goes on. "Although we looked at the statistics [in our original health assessment], nobody has been looking at the patients."

ATSDR wants to make the area around the old Depot a "model" for environmental justice, to show that the government can, in fact, be responsive to the needs of a community Warren has formed a committee, with him and Doris as co-chairs, to look at the health-care access problems for the Depot community. Warren isn't promising anything, but at the meeting he was talking openly about getting a federally funded clinic into the area. The only other such clinic in the city is the Memphis Health Center, which is downtown. A Depot clinic would be different from the first clinic, Warren visualizes; it would be staffed with doctors trained to sniff out environmentally related problems, not just in individuals, but in the trends that appear over time

Chris Wiant was the moderator for the meeting. The head of the health department in Denver, he flew out especially for this meeting. With the gregariousness of an outsider, the lanky Wiant handed out the credit for the apparently successful day. "Mr. DeBack and the Bradshaws — without these two, it wouldn't have happened," he said. John DeBack is Shawn Phillips' boss at the Depot. He and Kenneth Bradshaw quietly sat next to each other all that day. DeBack appeared initially uncomfortable when a reporter started to take his photo with the activist.

Still beaming with optimism, Wiant added privately that Memphis could only be a model "if it works."

Kenneth Bradshaw, looking dapper in a blue and white pinstriped shirt and black derby, puffed on a cigarette on school grounds as people left. "I never thought I'd say that they've made a big improvement over public relations, but they did," he smiled. "I may have to go into my 'act' every now and then, but when we first met with the Depot, it was a strict line of military."

He sighed. "Things are much better now," he said.

Stunned by the optimistic signs for a health clinic, Doris Bradshaw was relatively silent after the meeting. "It's a process, We need to make things better. At least we're getting to talk to each other. I may not agree with everything they say, but it's a start. It's a start." ■

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