A TEI Project

Interview of Penny Newman

Contents

1. Transcript
    1.1. Session 1 (April 14, 2006)
    1.2. Session 2 (September 22, 2006)
    1.3. Session 3 (May 29, 2008)

1. Transcript

1.1. Session 1 (April 14, 2006)

COLLINGS
: OK, this is Jane Collings interviewing Penny Newman in Glen Avon, California in her offices on April 14, 2006. OK, good morning, Penny. How are you today?

NEWMAN
: Doing pretty good.

COLLINGS
: Why don't we start with some just sort of basic family background and talk a little bit about where and when you were born?

NEWMAN
: I'm a native Californian. I was born May 30th, 1947 in Oakland, California. My family lived in Hayward. My dad was a bus driver, of course.

COLLINGS
: So, jumping ahead, was your father politically active in the unions?

NEWMAN
: No, not at all, not at all. And we moved to Southern California in early life. I was probably three or so when we moved down to Southern California. My father took a job as the director of the water conservation district in Coachella Valley, so I grew up my early years in the Coachella Valley of Southern California.

COLLINGS
: Yeah. And was he talking about his work at home, and...

NEWMAN
: You know, I remember my father leaving very early for work and not getting home until after we went to bed, so I don't have a lot of memories about what

he did. What I remember about the Coachella Valley, was I've come to really love hot weather. We had a huge rose garden and pomegranate bushes, so those are my two distinct memories of Coachella, is falling into the rose garden and eating pomegranates. (laughter)

COLLINGS

That's a pretty special memory. Did you have brothers and sisters?

NEWMAN

Yeah, I have two brothers and two sisters, an older brother Peter, and then a younger brother Steven and two younger sisters Debbie and Jeannie.

COLLINGS

OK, and what kinds of things do they do?

NEWMAN

Well, my older brother died in early Nineties of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. My younger brother lives around here and he's a psychologist, works for the county of San Bernardino. My two sisters, one lives in Maui, Hawaii and does worker's compensation claims, and my youngest sister lives here in Riverside and she also works in worker's comp field.

COLLINGS

And you, yourself, began your career as a special education teacher? Is that...?

NEWMAN

Yeah, I basically was a stay-at-home mom for many years with my two boys, and then went back when they were in kindergarten, went to school, started getting my education, renewing it at that point. Went as a speech and language pathologist, graduated from Cal State Fullerton, and then did work teaching, both substitute teaching when I was still going to school and then having a class in special ed, severe disorder of language classes.

COLLINGS

So it sounds like all of your brothers and sisters are doing sort of like helping-type professions?

NEWMAN

Yeah.

COLLINGS

Is that something that was important in your family, growing up?

NEWMAN

Yeah. When we moved from Coachella Valley, we went to City of Paris, a little town.

COLLINGS

Oh, I thought you meant Paris, France. (laughter)

NEWMAN

No, no, a little town just outside of Riverside, and my parents were very active in the church there, the Congregational church, and in the community, the PTA

and the whole bit. So they always had a very strong involvement in civic things, so we were very much taught that we were part of a community and the way the community evolved was our responsibility along with our neighbors, so it was really a small enough town where no matter where I went, my mother knew exactly what I was up to. We'd have people stop, did your mother know what you were doing, you know. So it very much was a feeling of that village raising the children together.

COLLINGS

Right, yeah. What was the population? Do you...

NEWMAN

I don't remember, now, and it's grown since then, but it was a pretty small one.

COLLINGS

And what religion did your family...

NEWMAN

It's the Congregational church, United Church of Christ now is -- it's under that umbrella, but it was the Congregational Church.

COLLINGS

So you went to church every Sunday and...

NEWMAN

Yeah, we very much participated in the church as a family. My parents, one or the other were a trustee for the church throughout my life. I think through high school, I know I had gotten perfect attendance awards many times for attending church and did a lot of the Sunday school teaching and whatnot, so it was a very strong part of our life, both in the spiritual part but also social. Very strong.

COLLINGS

It certainly sounds like it. And you said that your dad was at work most of the time, and worked long hours. What was your mom -- or is your mom...

NEWMAN

My mom was a stay-at-home through most of it, and it's the reason she was really able to be involved in school activities and sport activities in our life, and trying to raise five kids. I still don't know how they did that. But they were able to, and when I was in high school, my father had a heart attack and my older brother had to quit college and go to work to help support the family. My mother went to work at that point, and she was the city clerk for the City of Paris for many, many years after that, and as my dad recovered and was able to go back to work, then she continued to work at that point and I think that was kind of when I saw her really emerging.

COLLINGS

And had she been to college?

NEWMAN

No. She had been a telephone operator prior to getting married and had basically just stayed at home and took care of the rest of us.

COLLINGS

And how did your parents meet, by the way?

NEWMAN

I've never really been clear on that. Both my parents are dead now, so I haven't been able to go back and really pry into that, but what I understand is that they met -- my father is eleven years older than my mother, and that she had met him in her little small town she grew up in Iowa, and he was in Sioux City and that she actually had followed him to Sioux City and got a job as a telephone operator in Sioux City and then they married and moved to Oakland.

COLLINGS

Well, this is very enterprising.

NEWMAN

Yeah, so part of that whole history is kind of blurred a little bit. It wasn't until many years later, actually when my father died, that I found out he had been married before and had two boys.

COLLINGS

Ooh, really?

NEWMAN

Yeah, so in fact, my aunt, his sister is the one who took great joy in informing me that there was this other family. So it was just really bizarre. So there's a whole part of my father's life I don't know about. And my mother, when I'd asked her about it, she said that she always felt that that wasn't her place to talk about, that that was up to him and he just never found the right time.

COLLINGS

Yeah, (inaudible) so common in earlier periods. So your parents were part of that Midwestern migration to California, then, and lots of Iowans came out.

NEWMAN

Even my husband's whole family is from Iowa, in different areas, but yeah.

COLLINGS

And when they chose the places that they moved to in southern California, did they -- were they attracted to other Iowans? Or was that not...

NEWMAN

I think it was just they were following the jobs. My dad had always had an interest in construction and soils technology and water issues and stuff, and so when he had the opportunity to be at the water district in Coachella, I think that was a big draw for him.

COLLINGS

Well, some of what he was doing must have sunk in with you a little bit. I mean, because...

NEWMAN

I think so, because I picked up a lot of things unconsciously from...

COLLINGS

Terminology, yeah.

NEWMAN

And I know when we moved to Glen Avon, he had made comments about the Stringfellow Site that I didn't pay any attention to. And it wasn't that he knew a lot about it other than there was something there, and I wish that I had thought more to talk to him about that, but it wasn't until quite a bit later that I really understood what this thing was and by then he had passed away.

COLLINGS

So what kinds of things did he say about it?

NEWMAN

Just had mentioned that there's a site there, and you should be aware of it.

COLLINGS

But he didn't advise you against (inaudible).

NEWMAN

No, no. Not at that point. My older brother, he was in water -- worked for a water agency in San Bernardino and first with the county and the flood control agency, and then with Eastern Valley Water Company. He was the director and he used to -- we used to conspire all the time. He'd give me information under the table and...

COLLINGS

Ah, how useful!

NEWMAN

Yeah, and he always found it just hilarious to go to these water agency meetings and have everyone complaining about that damn Penny Newman and they never made the connection because we're in different counties, he has a different name, you know.

COLLINGS

What is his name?

NEWMAN

Peter Rusher. And so he would just get tickled by the whole thing, and eventually people figured it out, but they'd still start making comments, and then it would dawn on them, oh, Pete's here. (laughter) We actually had one experience when there was -- a report came out from the Office of Technology Assessment for Congress on how the site would contaminate the Chino water basin, and there was a huge public outcry over it, press articles on it, and EPA and other agencies came down to try and address the issue and they were looking for the expert on the Chino basin to help advise them on this and it turned out it was Peter. It was fun. It was really fun.

COLLINGS

So it sounds the small towns have been important through -- you grew up in a small town and developed a lot of your values there, and so it sounds like it was fairly natural that when you got married you would want to sort of replicate the setting that you had had.

NEWMAN

Absolutely, I think that's -- Glen Avon was an area in which my husband's family had settled and there's a number of Newmans and Whites in the area that are related to him, and so when we were looking for a place to move and settle down, I was looking for that small-town atmosphere, you know, the same kind of thing I grew up with is what I wanted for my kids, so we just happened to be driving around the area and came by a house and I said that's the house that I want, and it turns out it was for sale, and we bought it, and so it was kind of interesting.

COLLINGS

So just to backtrack a little bit, in your schooling, what subjects did you gravitate towards in your high school, particularly?

NEWMAN

High school was dominated by music. I was in the band, I was in the chorus, dancing I loved. So that really predominated my interest. I did well in school. I didn't have any trouble getting good grades and I was always considered the good girl, you know, that my friends used to always get very irritated when their parents were, "well, why can't you behave like Penny?" (inaudible) But I always came across that way, so I didn't have any major problems in school.

COLLINGS

It's funny, I'm interviewing another environmentalist who was also a musician. So maybe there's something there.

NEWMAN

Well, it's strange that now in my adult life, music is not a major role in it. I haven't played an instrument in a long time, and I married a man who doesn't dance, so that's just been totally out of my experiences, so it's kind of strange.

COLLINGS

So were you planning to be a musician at that time?

NEWMAN

At one point I wanted to be a choreographer. I mean, that was really my... that was really my...

COLLINGS

And were your parents encouraging all the kids to go to college, or get jobs, or what?

NEWMAN

They very much felt education was extremely important. They also allowed us to participate -- we had to participate in some activity. We could choose whatever it was. We had to take music lessons. We could choose whatever instrument we wanted, but we at least had to try it. I mean, they were very big on "at least try it." If you don't like it, then fine, but you need to have that experience in order to figure out what you really do like, where your talents are and stuff, is to give it a try. So they were really big on that, so all my brothers and sisters took music lessons of some kind. My older brother played the clarinet and I took it on as well, mainly because we had a clarinet. (laughter) So I got his hand-me-downs and my younger brother didn't want anything to do with the clarinet. It wasn't macho enough, so he had to have the trumpet or the drums, or something.

COLLINGS

Oh, yes, that's so true.

NEWMAN

Yeah, but I think my two younger sisters ended up with a clarinet and then piano was another one they chose.

COLLINGS

So, you were planning to go to college. Were you going to be a music major?

NEWMAN

No. I was going to be a choreographer, which -- whatever that meant! Or a teacher, and it was just kind of assumed I would be a teacher. But I had contemplated what I should be going into, and even took a whole course on identifying what your attributes were, analyzing that, and at the end of it it came out with you can be whatever you want. You've got enough skills, just pick something, and that didn't help. You're supposed to tell me. No, it's all...

COLLINGS

And provide a list of phone numbers.

NEWMAN

Yeah, exactly. Oh, here! OK. I'll go there. So I just had assumed that I'd get married and have children, and maybe be a teacher. And that was my aspiration.

COLLINGS

And what year did you -- sorry about my math, but what year did you graduate from high school?

NEWMAN

Sixty-five.

COLLINGS

Sixty-five, OK.

NEWMAN

And I got married in '65. So it was...

COLLINGS

Now, was that surprising to your parents or did that seem like a...

NEWMAN

It was a shock to my parents, because I had only known my husband for three months. He's ten years older than me. They did not know him that well, and they were absolutely shocked and appalled that -- and now, totally...

COLLINGS

And you were the good one! (laughter)

NEWMAN

Yeah, and now I totally understand why they would've been -- to me it seemed like just the natural thing to do.

COLLINGS

Yeah, and you were the first one getting married then, it sounds like.

NEWMAN

I think my older brother had gotten married. He got married just before he was sent to Vietnam, so we really had that experience.

COLLINGS

He did go to Vietnam?

NEWMAN

Yeah, he went. My younger brother was a conscientious objector. So we had a real turmoil in the family over that, and we were very much caught in that debate.

COLLINGS

Yeah! And what was your parents' view on the war?

NEWMAN

I think they very much were supportive of it, and were very proud that Pete went in. They were very upset that Steven didn't, and Steven was always kind of the rebellious one, so it was kind of normal, but still upsetting. (laughter) But as the debate went on and letters from Peter, he was opposed to the war too but felt he had to do his part, you know, was kind of the duty. Everybody is -- I need to play my role too. And so they ended up opposing the war in the long run.

COLLINGS

Oh, did they.

NEWMAN

Yeah.

COLLINGS

And how long was your brother over there?

NEWMAN

Quite a while. I don't remember exactly, but at least two years and probably three or four. It was quite a while. I remember my dad being really excited

when Pete was coming home, and he could hardly wait. He just kept talking about it, and Peter got home one evening and decided to wait and surprise my dad the next morning, that he was actually there. We knew it would be any time, and my dad died that night.

COLLINGS

Oh, my god. Oh, how terrible.

NEWMAN

So yeah, and that really hit all of us, so -- and Pete also found out when he got back that his wife had cancer, and she died within three months, so he had a very rough life.

COLLINGS

It certainly sounds like it. That's a...

NEWMAN

So he always took on that role of really looking out for the family, you know. He was the one who had given up his college education to support the rest of the family and help out, and then he did his part for the country.

COLLINGS

And he just didn't get -- he didn't reap the rewards.

NEWMAN

And he never did. I mean, it was just always -- you know, he was working at the water district as the director of it, and had finally reached kind of the pinnacle of his career. He was loving what he was doing, very highly respected, and then he got cancer, same cancer, non-Hodgkins lymphoma.

COLLINGS

And is there any theory about what was the cause?

NEWMAN

I don't know with his first wife, but with him it was Agent Orange. He qualified for the -- yeah. So it was, you know -- it was just really hard.

COLLINGS

Oh, absolutely. So the war really affected your family, without question.

NEWMAN

Yeah, and I think that was really, beyond the community, that that was the first time we really debated what was going on in a national or international field, where we had always been encouraged to talk about what was going on, community and important issues, and to take a stand on things, so it was very much part of our culture. The war brought it to another level, and I think it was one of the first times it started me thinking about everything isn't the way it's supposed to be, because I really had believed that government was there to help you and that the ulterior motives to it had never entered my mind. I just accepted things. So that was kind of the first inkling, but I never got into any of the protests or any of that. It was more on how it was affecting my family to

have one brother in Vietnam and one going through the process of getting his conscientious objector status officially, and not going to Canada and not hiding out or anything, but to do it through the system and to receive it.

COLLINGS

And that was successful then, I presume.

NEWMAN

Yeah, again, working very much through the church and church supporting him in his efforts.

COLLINGS

I see. That probably was an important (inaudible) to the successful...

NEWMAN

Yeah, and I think it made it more acceptable to my parents that -- to have that support coming from the church as well.

COLLINGS

So was your, sort of, moment of realization -- did it have more to do with just your brother being in Vietnam? Or was it more linked to the Agent Orange exposure?

NEWMAN

I think it started me in a very subtle way thinking about things, but again, it was more what was happening to my family than the events happening outside. It didn't prompt me to participate in anti-war. And then with me getting married in '65, you know, my husband is a fireman. He's ten years older. He didn't have that activist background, pretty conservative, you know, and we were starting our family and that's where I was concentrating my efforts, was getting my family together. We were buying a house. We were setting up our home, and beginning to have that family, so in a lot of ways I just didn't pay attention to a lot of what was going on, other than what was happening with my brothers.

COLLINGS

Right, so this was probably just kind of like percolating in the background.

NEWMAN

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

COLLINGS

You don't happen to still have those letters of your brother's from Vietnam? They sound like they're such fascinating documents.

NEWMAN

I don't. My younger brother and my older brother wrote back and forth a lot, and they would never share the letters with us.

COLLINGS

Oh, oh, I see. Interesting.

NEWMAN

Yeah. And my younger brother said, you know, it's stuff you don't need to know about. You don't need to contaminate your thoughts, you know.

COLLINGS

Right. Did they use that word?

NEWMAN

Yeah.

COLLINGS

Interesting.

NEWMAN

Pete found it to be very disturbing, a lot of the stuff that he saw and did. And while he would share it with Steve, he wouldn't share it with anybody else. Even the year when he was going through his treatment for cancer, and he pretty much knew he was going to die, he said you just don't need that, so... And I took him at his word, you know. (laughter) Maybe it isn't something I want to know anything about.

COLLINGS

OK, well, here you are in your new house, your new home, and you are planning to have a baby.

NEWMAN

When we moved into our home in 1966, I was pregnant with our first child, and about five months, almost six months, miscarried, which was pretty devastating to me.

COLLINGS

Absolutely, at that stage.

NEWMAN

Yeah, and clearly thought I was doing something -- it was something I did, you know. And all that blame. And I also had this mentality that with my husband being -- I was 18 and my husband being 29, that we had to have a child before 30, because he'd be too old, you know. (laughter) 18-year-old mentality, you know. So there was that feeling of "oh my gosh," you know, "I've let us down." And then I got pregnant again within probably, I think it was about nine months or so, and had our first boy, Eric, who was six weeks premature, so again I was feeling like I was not doing things the right way or whatever.

COLLINGS

And what was it that you thought that you were not doing correctly?

NEWMAN

I don't know. If I had figured that out, I would've done it differently, but I never did. You know, I think it was the immaturity of just taking everything that happens as your own fault instead of really understanding there are things that happen that are beyond you, you know. I don't think I was doing anything particularly wrong. It was just everything evolved around me and what I was

doing, so I came to realize later that it very much could have had the impact from the exposures in this community and things that clearly are linked.

COLLINGS

And what did the doctors tell you at the time?

NEWMAN

Especially when I got pregnant the second time, the concern they had was that I had an insufficient cervix, or that it just simply wasn't strong enough to hold the baby full-term, and so through this third pregnancy I went in monthly for pelvic exams to make sure that everything was going right and whatnot, which was really great fun. You know, you can imagine.

COLLINGS

Now, this was the second?

NEWMAN

My second child, so I had the first one that miscarried, the second...

COLLINGS

Was premature.

NEWMAN

Right, and then my third was Shawn, and carried him to full term, no problems.

COLLINGS

And did they offer any explanation for why your first child was premature?

NEWMAN

No, but they thought that probably was the reason, was that the cervix just wasn't strong enough to hold it, but I went through a lot of pretty watchful eyes during that whole time and toward the second child they wanted me to really take it easy and be off your feet and all this kind of stuff, and whatnot, but it worked fine.

COLLINGS

Oh, good. But soon after, your children began to have some health problems, I understand.

NEWMAN

Eric had a number of problems right from birth. I mean, just being premature, he had problems. We also found that he was allergic to the formula, and the doctors at that time didn't want you, because he was a preemie, didn't want me just nursing him. He may not be getting enough, and so I was supplementing with formula.

COLLINGS

Yeah, it was very -- they didn't really understand as much at that time.

NEWMAN

And the formula was what was making him sick, because he's allergic to it, so then we had to -- by then, I'm not producing the milk, so then we have to find other formulas, and it was just an absolutely mess. But he had the skin rashes

and stuff that kind of emerged from that. So it wasn't an easy childhood for him. When he started walking, or at the time when he should've started walking, he kept tripping and falling, and my -- I knew he was tripping over his feet. It wasn't that he wasn't ready to walk. He was tripping. And so we would take him into the doctors and they would -- "oh, you're just rushing him, stop being so overprotective," and all this. And, you know, to some extent I took that seriously, but I also knew there was something wrong and so I would take him back and I'd get another doctor. "Well, I see you've been here before." Just so paternalistic in the whole way that they treated me. But that's when I really learned to stand up to authority and question it, when I knew there was something going on, and I finally told them, I don't care if you think I'm crazy or not. I want him checked out by an orthopedist. There's something wrong here, and if you're referring me just to get me off your back, fine, do it, but you're going to do it. (laughter) So, and when we got into the orthopedist, he said "Why weren't you here earlier?" and it's like, talk to the other doctors.

COLLINGS

And what did he...

NEWMAN

He had a congenital hip defect and it caused his feet to hang in, so that when he walked, he would trip over his foot, and originally from the pediatrician, they put him in some orthopedic shoes as a way of appeasing me, and that just made that worse because the problem was in his hip, not his foot. And so by putting these heavy shoes on him, it made the problem even worse. And so the poor kid during this time had fallen and knocked out his front teeth, and you know, he looked like this battered little kid. He had vision in only one eye, and so...

COLLINGS

He was born that way?

NEWMAN

Uh-huh, and so they tried with the patch to see if that would work. So here you have this poor little guy with a patch on his eye, and eyeglasses, no front teeth, and braces, you know. It was like, pile it on, you know! (laughter) Just -- and I remembered talking to my mom and saying, you know, why didn't you tell me that there are all these problems with raising kids? And she says, well, I never had any of this! She just, OK, what am I doing, you know? What's wrong? So, you know, we had a lot of challenges with Eric.

COLLINGS

So you just said a moment ago that when you spoke up to your pediatrician, that that was kind of like the first time that you had ever done -- well, it sounds like the first time you ever had cause to, as well, but the first time that you ever kind of stood up for what you thought was right.

NEWMAN

And I think if it weren't for the fact that I have responsibility for this child, I probably wouldn't have. I was very shy at that time, and I remember when we first got married, of having to practice all day before I would make a phone call to the phone company or the utilities to...

COLLINGS

Really?

NEWMAN

Yeah, just scared to death of what they might think of me if I didn't explain the situation right or -- you know, just very, very shy.

COLLINGS

But you taught Sunday school, right? And that kind of thing.

NEWMAN

But that was different. It wasn't with these authority figures, see, and I think that was it, was that I was very in awe of people in charge and had this very strong respect for authority, and did what I was told to do, and didn't question things. And I think that the fact of being responsible for another human being, and it was my responsibility, changed that.

COLLINGS

Now, you're (inaudible) yourself, because you're in charge.

NEWMAN

But it was very hard, you know. It was very, very hard. And I think that going through that with the boys, and both of them had had health problems that I really had to fight to get addressed. Finding out, like going to the orthopedist and him saying "why weren't you here earlier," while I was trying, really gave me the confidence that what I was feeling and what I knew was right, and that started to build my confidence in being able to challenge authority in different ways.

COLLINGS

And this was also getting into the late Sixties, early Seventies. Were you starting to hear anything about the women's movement at all?

NEWMAN

I did, but it wasn't really a part of my life. It was, again, peripheral to what my world was. I certainly felt that I had the ability to do whatever I wanted to do. I didn't see myself as not being worthy of having a position, it just wasn't what I was aspiring for. I certainly had adopted the social belief that you get married and you have kids, and if you have a career it's incidental to you raising a family. So I kind of bought all of that, that time.

COLLINGS

So where are we going with our sort of next step? You began to get -- you went, you did go to Riverside Community College and you were asked to write an assignment about that you said that sort of raised your consciousness a great

deal. Was that before or after you began to get involved with neighborhood groups in your town?

NEWMAN

It was kind of at the same time. When I had the boys, I didn't get involved in many things in the community until they were in kindergarten, and at that point I went to work as an instructional aide at the school, had done a lot of volunteering at the school, was involved with PTA and joined -- I think the first year I joined PTA was the membership chairman and then the PTA president quit and I all of a sudden was PTA president, so that felt really comfortable to me, and it was the model. You know, my mother, years before, and I felt pretty good with that. I then, once the boys were in school, I clearly felt I needed to be doing more than just being in the home. I was just bored to death at home. I didn't find a lot of challenge in cleaning the house. I mean, OK, it's clean. Now what?

COLLINGS

Take a picture. (laughter)

NEWMAN

Right. And so I was looking for a little more, and so I went to work as an instructional aide, and then I joined a women's club, Jurupa Junior Women's Club, and started participating with that, and I look back at that whole time frame and where I'm at now is just -- you know, I would start two weeks ahead of a meeting to prepare my husband that I would have a meeting and that he would need to watch the kids, and then I'd have dinner all ready and everything, kids' clothes all laid out for bed, and everything else, and request that he watch the boys for that evening, and OK, well that's all right. It's one of my little projects. And boy, what a difference. (laughter) And I think it's been helpful for me in the work we're doing, because there's a lot of women that are still in that situation and I really relate to that. I understand it.

COLLINGS

This comes up in the -- there was some mention of you in a book by Robert Gottlieb about called Forcing the Spring and he does mention that -- I think we can talk about that as like a whole subject later on, because that is very interesting.

NEWMAN

So through that, I learned a number of skills and how to run a meeting and found that I had good ideas that people really respected and that I could implement those ideas and I was good at motivating people to be involved in things. But I always had -- it was a secondary thing, too, making sure the family was running smoothly and that I didn't inconvenience my husband on this, because after all, he was earning the money. (laughter) That was just...

COLLINGS

And there might be a fire! (laughter)

NEWMAN

So there was that part of it, and that kind of got me into some of the stuff with the Stringfellow Acid Pits, and I think working through the women's club really opened my eyes to some of the other things going on in the broader community, because we had a lot of projects on different things, and some of it was with the fire department, or our conservation program where I worked with them on, you know, preventing fires and doing educational things on that, which fit in very well with the family. My husband, that was acceptable, that was OK. So I wasn't rattling any cages.

COLLINGS

So was your husband proud of you, proud of the work you were doing?

NEWMAN

Yeah, yeah. I think so, as long as it didn't inconvenience the family. I think that was the bottom line, and it truly was, you know, this is Penny's project kind of thing. And he was very supportive on that. So one of the things I was sent to do as conservation chair, the environment chair, was to work with some other organizations in the community to monitor what was happening with the Stringfellow Acid Pits, and that's how I kind of got into this.

COLLINGS

And had there been problems already, that -- why was it being monitored?

NEWMAN

I think with the site, starting in 1956, it had been at the center of controversy from day one because it was a big problem, and there were a number of complaints about the odors coming from it. You know, when the wind would blow down the canyon, you could smell this very acrid smell, and so people knew there was something going on there, and I think that there were some of the people in the community who understood it more, and that people just didn't pay much attention. So it probably wasn't until that seven -- the first time I became aware of it was in '72, '73, '74, right in there, when I was PTA president, and a woman in the community, Ruth Kirkby is the one who brought it to my attention, and she basically called me up and said I needed to cancel the speaker for the PTA meeting that night and let her talk about this crisis in our community.

COLLINGS

Now, is this when it was overflowing? Was this the period of heavy rain?

NEWMAN

Well, yeah, because it overflowed a number of times. This is one of those times, the earlier times. There had been a major overflow in '68, when we had flooding throughout the area and then in '72, '73 there was another episode, so it had been in the news and there had been some attention to it. I don't think

people had a real sense of just how serious it was. I think there was a general acceptance that the agencies wouldn't do something that was bad for us.

COLLINGS

Yeah, that's what I wanted to ask you, what the underlying thinking was between the...

NEWMAN

And I think that's it, you know. The government wouldn't do that to us. You know, if they're letting it be there, then it must be OK, and I had that opinion too.

COLLINGS

Despite your percolating Vietnam War...

NEWMAN

Yeah, I still -- again, that was my brothers. There was something going on there, but it wasn't as concrete. So this, in '72, '73, '74, right in that time frame, when Ruth told me this, I said, well, being reasonable, that I can't just cancel our program and that I'd be happy to set up another time. We could have a meeting, have both sides present. You can talk about, we'll have the water board there, and have the whole thing.

COLLINGS

But you felt instinctively at that moment that you should present both sides.

NEWMAN

Well, of course. That's a reasonable way of doing it, right?

COLLINGS

Yeah, just wondering. Just trying to get the story here. (laughter)

NEWMAN

Be fair, you know, open-minded! And oh, she just wouldn't have anything to do with that, and accused me of not being a responsible leader and all of this stuff, and she, you know, just hung up and that was it. And I thought, well, maybe I'd better check on this, so I made some phone calls to the health department and the water board, and I was told that she's just this hysterical housewife, overreacting to this non-existent problem, that the site had been closed down in '72, that it wasn't a problem, don't worry about it, and so I assumed OK, must be all right then.

COLLINGS

And so this was the first that you had any inkling of the extreme emotion around this site? Nobody had ever murmured about it to you?

NEWMAN

There had been articles in the paper about the Stringfellow thing, but it all came down to, well, they wouldn't let it get out of control and we have these agencies looking over it. They know what they're doing, they're experts. They're just...

COLLINGS

And how did Ruth -- what was her name? Ruth...

NEWMAN

Kirkby.

COLLINGS

Ruth Kirkby develop her point of view?

NEWMAN

Ruth was a long-time resident of this community. She's been involved for a long time. She has a very aggressive, combative personality and had made a lot of enemies just because of her -- you know, you do it her way or you don't do it at all. And the same with my experience, you know, it wasn't a matter of working something out, as if you do it right then the way she wanted it done, she didn't want to have anything to do with you. Well, I wasn't -- that same experience had happened a number of times. She has the Jurupa Cultural Center over here, she helped found and develop.

COLLINGS

I visited there on the way over here.

NEWMAN

Yeah, it's a great place, and she had some experience with earth sciences and probably understood chemicals a little more than -- and the property abuts the site, and I think there had been some controversy over them trying to get some of the land in and Stringfellow family wouldn't -- there was something going on, so there was some animosity there anyway, and so it was presented in some ways that it's just them not getting what they wanted and that's why they're making trouble for their neighbor, so there were a lot of different things, both her personality and people not wanting to believe there's something wrong.

COLLINGS

So just the fact that she presented it to you, probably made you partially discount it?

NEWMAN

Well, not at first. Her reaction to me trying to be very reasonable kind of turned me off, and so I think that's one of the reasons many people in the community didn't get involved earlier was because of the personality.

COLLINGS

Oh, that's really interesting

NEWMAN

And I think that's what made Concerned Neighbors, when it formed, take off so quickly is because people did have concerned about the site. They just didn't want their only alternative or only avenue of addressing it be through Ruth Kirkby, and so they felt this gave them another opportunity to get involved, and so it was a number of people who had worked with Ruth that formed it originally, and took it in a different direction.

COLLINGS

And did she join that group?

NEWMAN

Oh, no. (laughter) No. And it was very -- had a lot of animosity to the organization. It was very critical of us.

COLLINGS

Now, just as you say that sort of a problematic personality first brought that problem to your attention, was it awkward to try to pursue this problem within the community in the sense that you might be stepping on toes of people that were your friends and neighbors?

NEWMAN

I think when we started Concerned Neighbors, by then people had a different opinion of what was going on. In '78, when we had the heavy rains and the site began filling up, and the dam threatening to break, and the water board feeling it was necessary to release a million gallons into the community, and then finding out that what that meant was that it was running through the street and into homes and in the school and then them not telling us what was going on. That whole process was so traumatizing to us, on so many different levels of finding out you're being exposed to toxic chemicals, to finding out they're withholding information from you so you can't even make good choices. The guilt, again, as a mother, not doing the right thing -- here, I was sending my kids off to that school, not having the slightest idea I was exposing them to things, and the guilt of not knowing that, that's something I should have known.

COLLINGS

How could you have known?

NEWMAN

Well, if I had paid more attention, if I'd listened to Ruth, if I had done my own investigating, I would have known. But I chose not to do that, you know. It was easier. And so I think that was the ultimate awakening for me, you know. It was the disillusionment that government isn't protecting us, that what it does isn't necessarily in our best interests, that they were making decisions based on their budget, not on what they should have been doing, that they were withholding information, deliberately withholding information from us. That just kind of picked us up, slapped us across the face, and said, "OK, you'd better wake up." And so it was a very traumatizing time, and it was about that same time when I was taking the class at RCC, and Doc Stallings had us do an exercise on identifying what your philosophy of life was, which I thought was just the silliest thing to be doing, that that's something you do when you're old and you look back at how your life was guided, but it was of course being the dutiful person, I always followed through on what I was assigned to do, so I did it and it was probably the most awakening, important exercise that I ever did, because

it really made me face what my values were and what was important to me and what I believed to be why we're here.

COLLINGS

You say that in particular the run-off that was released in '78 was a particularly traumatic event for you and was a political epiphany for you. Were the neighbors around you who were part of this group -- in your conversations, did people indicate that they were also having sort of wide, broader political awakenings? Or there was more concern with that particular issue and limiting it to that?

NEWMAN

I think at that particular time, I think for all of us it was that particular issue. It was, we didn't have any idea there were other dump sites. We didn't have any idea that agencies in general make decisions that may not be in the best interests of people. We thought this was an anomaly, you know, that we just had a really stupid person in charge (laughter), that we had people who made a combination of bad decisions, and really localized it. It wasn't until later, I think, when we started looking for solutions to Stringfellow, well, dig it up and send it over here, so we would look at that site and find out, well, wait a minute. They're in the same situation we are, and we met with people who lived near those sites and found out they were having the same problems and were then confronted with, OK, in order to solve our problem, do we put it on somebody else, and really having to grapple with the values and -- which, it was extremely difficult. It was really hard to have those discussions and to really search your soul on what you believe, and the conflicts among people who didn't share the same beliefs that you just assumed did, and then realizing that in order for you to advance, to easily solve your problem, you would be hurting someone else, and what that meant, and what that said about you as a person, and what it said about us as a community. It was just extremely complicated and extremely painful and led to some divorces.

COLLINGS

Did it, indeed?

NEWMAN

Oh, yeah, just these huge arguments among families and within families and a number of the men in the community who said just keep quiet, let's get it done, let us move out, then you can do what you want.

COLLINGS

Let us move out?

NEWMAN

Yeah.

COLLINGS

Move away from the community.

NEWMAN

Move away from the community, but keep it quiet so we can sell the house to someone else.

COLLINGS

I see, I see.

NEWMAN

And women in the community said, "I can't do that." And just -- and yet, in many ways, it was such a privilege to go through that, because you really got to know who you were as a person and what your values are, and what was important to you, and truly who you are. And that, I don't think many people come to grips with. We just kind of go through routines, and we never really get to look at that, and understand.

COLLINGS

Yeah. Now, when you say that initially you just sort of thought, oh, there's some stupid people making dumb decisions, did you as a community know any of those individuals, know people working at the site, know any of the agency -- or it was just all sort of the other out there somewhere?

NEWMAN

The agencies making the decision were outside of the community. They weren't a part of the community, which is what I find over the history is the way it happens. It's very easy to make bad decisions for someone else. It's a lot more difficult when it's part of your community, and I guess it's what really led me to believe that place and community are so vital to our society, and it's being totally torn apart and we don't have that pulling us together anymore, and it's really a center of what we do, is trying to rebuild that interactions and interconnectedness of a community here and building that base of...

COLLINGS

And what about the Stringfellow family? Did any of them live in town?

NEWMAN

They all lived in Riverside. They were very much part of the upper eschelon of Riverside society and I remember in fact at the end of our personal injury case against Stringfellow and all the companies, the judge, Judge Moselli, made a comment to all these plaintiffs who were sitting there in this courtroom that, "I couldn't say this before, but the Stringfellows were my family and I saw what happened to them," and this is to people who lost...

COLLINGS

The Stringfellows were my family?

NEWMAN

Were my friends. "The Stringfellow family were my friends, and I saw what happened to their family and how bad they felt about this controversy and to have their name drug through the mud," and he's addressing people who have

lost family members, and I was just so irate at that, and the attorneys just kind of wanted to push past it, because it could have nullified everything here. He clearly had a conflict of interest in this, that none of us knew anything about. So it was just -- and the church that I had attended when we moved here to Glen Avon, was the Congregational church in Riverside, which is different from the church I grew up in Paris. But I again taught Sunday school with my kids, and felt a part of that, and when we started with the whole Stringfellow battle, and I became kind of a noted person in that, I had people at the church ask me not to come back because I made Gwen Stringfellow uncomfortable, and that was probably the most traumatic thing I've ever gone through, to have the church -- and it wasn't the minister or anything. It was just people in the church that...

COLLINGS

Just informally.

NEWMAN

Who made me feel very unwelcomed there, and here I thought I was doing what the church had taught me to do, and I devoted my life -- it was part of my life, and at that point because I was at -- where I was getting criticism from everybody, you know, outside, you're driving down real estate values, you're doing -- you know, it's all your fault. This hysterical housewife, you don't know what you're talking about, from every angle. In public and in the press, and then to have my church do that. It was like it was a battle I couldn't do.

COLLINGS

So you left that church?

NEWMAN

I left the church. I haven't been back.

COLLINGS

To that? Or any other church?

NEWMAN

I have gone to a couple other churches, but not routinely. I mean, it really undercut my belief in organized religion. I think there's still very much the spiritual connection. I still have the same beliefs, but I don't put the value in an organized church anymore.

COLLINGS

Now, how did your husband feel about everything at this point?

NEWMAN

When I first started getting involved during -- it was kind of that period when the organization was coming together and stuff. There was about three or four months, maybe a five-month period when we had our first community meeting it really started getting public. My husband was going through a post training, peace officer safety training thing, and was gone that whole period. He'd come

home for short periods of time but was going through this up in northern California, which allowed me time to do all the rest of this, get heavily involved in it, so for the very first part of it he was kind of eliminated from it. I think he respected what I was doing. He believed in the information we had. I think he agreed with it. He participated in some of it, but I think it was also kind of hard for him. I mean, I remember I was making comments about the state did this, and he said "Would you please clarify that, because I work for the state too, and I don't do that," and I said yeah, I know, it's not you, it's this. And so it was -- he would argue with me also as a way of fine-tuning my arguments, so he always played the devil's advocate for me, which was really helpful. But we also found that with him participating, I never had any place to go to get away from it, because I'd run into people at the market who would want to talk about what's going on. Every place I went, that was the topic, and I never had a retreat, a place to get away from it. And you can't function that way, so we agreed that he would not participate actively, because we would end up discussing it. And so that became -- home was where I got a break. We certainly would discuss what was going on, but not to the same extent, if we were plotting together, you know. That level. So he really became a very important support person in the whole battle, in a nurturing way, rather than just me as the leader of the group that everybody was depending on, so it gave me a place where I didn't have to be strong, I didn't have to be the person with all the answers.

COLLINGS

This sounds like an incredible story. In sort of the earlier days before the debate really got started about not letting the facts out to depress property values, did people -- did anybody move away that you knew of?

NEWMAN

Oh, yeah. I mean, there was a huge debate going on whether we should -- people move away, whether we should demand relocation. And I think everybody at some point tried to sell their property. I mean, we certainly did, and we were going to move. I didn't know where, but we had our house on the market. I remember one time having the for sale sign out on the front. We're right on this corner, so it's very visible, but we also had a Stringfellow meeting and so we always had a sign out, the date and time of the meeting so people knew, and I remember my older son Eric coming and saying, you know, we could probably sell the house if you didn't have that sign, and so we had this whole discussion about -- but people need to know what this is. How would you feel if you moved into a house and all this was going on and nobody told you? So that's one of the things we were mad about, is that nobody told us what was going on, and how could we do that to someone else, to another family, to another little boy? And we went out and put up another Stringfellow sign. So I

really was very proud of him for that, you know, that's one of the positive things that came out of the horrible experience was passing on values, you know, and really having that opportunity again to confront and discuss what values were and what your particular values would be, and I think that's really contributed a great deal to who my children are now.

COLLINGS

That's wonderful. Was anybody able to sell?

NEWMAN

Yeah. I think a lot of people sold without disclosure. I think there were a couple housing tracts in the area, one particularly across from the school, that came in because there was still a lot of denial on the part of authorities as to whether releasing chemicals into a community was a bad thing, you know. We had this line given to us that after it travels 200 feet through rock and dirt that it purifies itself. It's like that old sanitation idea, and people buying into it and the particular developer kept saying he doesn't know anything about it so he doesn't have to disclose it, and a friend of mine took over reports and she followed him around, reading the reports to him so he couldn't say he didn't know, and making sure his office had copies of them. We tried very hard to make them identify it. So there were some that didn't do disclosure. Others put in it but people never knew what the heck it meant. It was hidden in all the documents and stuff, so there were a few lawsuits about non-disclosure of being in the area, and then there was an overreaction by the real estate agents of classifying anything this side of the river as being in the Stringfellow influence, so we went from one to the other, just bizarre. So people did sell their homes. For a long time there was a belief that it really wasn't -- I mean, it really took us years before people took us seriously. They would be upset about, and understand how we would be upset about the release of chemicals into the community, but they didn't believe there was any long-term problem.

COLLINGS

Now, your kids were having health problems growing up. Were you aware of other -- just sort of friends and neighbors having these kinds of problems?

NEWMAN

No, I think that most of us saw our own kids' problems as unique, and did not associate it with the site for many years. I mean, there's almost an overreaction not to attribute it to the site because you'd be viewed as hysterical, just overreacting. Oh, yeah, everything's -- and we've actually found it to be quite different, that people didn't relate things that clearly were related to chemical exposure because they didn't want to be seen as irrational. And so there was almost this, "Well, I don't know if it's caused by Stringfellow or not," kind of declaration right up front.

COLLINGS

How interesting.

NEWMAN

Yeah, it was really a -- different than what people assumed was happening. So I think the first community meeting we had in 1980, where it was a packed house and the way that we arranged the meeting gave people an opportunity to talk about what their concerns where, and it was at that meeting with people talking about my son has, my child has, my -- and someone else would say, "I thought mine was the only one having these problems, but he also has," and that was really -- it was like a cue ball hitting, bouncing the balls around a pool table. It was just like all these lights going off. Oh my gosh, here I had been going to specialists and they're telling me this is kind of a unique problem, when there's five people in this room doing the same thing, so it was -- that was really the time when we thought, whoa, this has had a bigger impact than we thought. And it wasn't until later, after we had been dealing with these, we all had thought it was from that initial direct impact or exposure that it was an acute thing, it was something temporary, that yeah, they may have had rashes but it would go away eventually, or the headaches would go away eventually. Once we stopped the exposure, then everything would be just fine, and it wasn't until later, probably when we were in the middle of the lawsuit in '84, and some of the testing that was done in preparation for the case, that we started seeing the more long-term health issues and I think it was at that point it hit us that, oh my gosh, this is not going to go away when the exposure stops. This has already happened. It's already started a chain reaction within our bodies, and damage that may not disappear, and it's much more systemic than we had thought, and then feeling like absolute idiots for not realizing that earlier on. It's like... (laughter) So yeah, that was really difficult then, because it was kind of like it doesn't matter what we do. It's already happened. It's already there.

COLLINGS

It's in the organism, yeah.

NEWMAN

And that we're going to have to keep watching to see what happens next year, what the health problems are next year. The cancers may not show up for 20 years, so that the future became uncertain, and that became, I think, less empowering because before we thought we'd stop the exposures, we'd get the site clean, we can go on with our lives, and now it's like, no, this is going to be a long-term battle for all of us, and this is going to have ramifications in the future no matter what we do now. It certainly is going to make it worse if we keep being exposed, but it also, I think, broadened our view of chemicals from just the Stringfellow site to what's out in society, because a number of us became sensitive to fragrances. I react very strongly to perfumes and aftershave, and different things like that that will trigger an asthma attack, just

bam. And I thought I was crazy for a while until they were explaining to me that most fragrances are a combination of chemicals, they're not crushed rose petals anymore, you know, and so cleaning products and soaps and all of that around us, and it was kind of like, well, gee, you know. Yeah, there's chemicals in this and there's chemicals in that, and so it kind of made the whole world dangerous, and kind of opened up, OK, well why are we putting so many chemicals in this stuff? So it just kind of opened up this whole new --

COLLINGS

It was a cascade.

NEWMAN

Yeah, so it wasn't just Stringfellow we had to worry about. We had to worry about products and the way that industry's producing things and what they're producing and how toxic things are. New and improved may not be good. (laughter) You know, it's like -- so yeah, just raised it to a whole new level of concern.

COLLINGS

Well, it sounds like we're sort of at the point where we'd continue on with the next segment, which I think we should probably do at our next meeting. But I did want to just ask you one follow-up question, and next time I'll have other follow-up questions. You mentioned about how the debate about selling property fell along gender lines, that it was typically the husbands who wanted everyone to be quiet so they could sell, and it was the wives who did not?

NEWMAN

Yeah.

COLLINGS

I mean, looking back, is that pretty much how it was?

NEWMAN

Yeah. I think the organization was clearly dominated by women. There were a few men who would help, but the leadership was the women and when we would try to take a step it was kind of like the men saying, "Well, I'm not sure we have enough research to prove that this is the case," and the women saying, "We have enough. We know in our hearts this is not right. We know this is happening, and we can't wait for the kids to be harmed to prove it. We need to take a precautionary approach," and it's better safe than sorry was what we kept saying which now turned into this whole new precautionary principle and stuff, but we knew it instinctively then and I think after the first few times of challenging things and finding out we were right gave us the confidence to go ahead and listen to what we knew was happening and take that risk. The men were not willing to do that. They wanted the science done. They wanted the proof before they put their reputation on the line, where the women just -- that wasn't as important.

COLLINGS

And their property values.

NEWMAN

Exactly. That wasn't as important as making sure that people and their kids weren't hurt again, so it very much fell out that way and I saw that over and over again in the communities we worked with, that it was primarily the women who stepped forward first, that once we showed we were right over a period of time then the men would come forward and join and in many cases say, "OK, now you can go home. We're here. We'll take care of the issue. It's an important issue," so in many ways I think this was the women's movement for working-class, low-income women. This was it. It's where we matured. It's where we developed our confidence. It's where we learned that what we had to say counted and that we were leaders.

COLLINGS

OK.

1.2. Session 2 (September 22, 2006)

COLLINGS

Oops, sorry, I always do that. The date today is the -- what is the date today?

NEWMAN

22nd?

COLLINGS

22nd, OK. September 22nd, 2006, Jane Collings interviewing Penny Newman at her office. OK, good afternoon, Penny. We ended up last time -- you concluded last time, you had gotten up to the conclusion of the lawsuit and you mentioned the judge's comment about his friends the Stringfellows, and how much -- how distressing this had been for them, and then you concluded finally by saying that the Stringfellow issue and others like it had been the women's movement for working-class and low-income women. So we sort of got -- you had kind of sketched out the whole story in the first session, and I wondered if you would mind sort of backtracking a little bit and talking more in detail about how the community came together to work on this issue? Let's see, it was June of 1973 that Ruth Kirkby and the Mothers of Glen Avon presented a petition signed by 85 residents, requesting the Jurupa Community Services District to take legal actions against the Stringfellow site. What do you recall about this group, the Mothers of Glen Avon? What kind of group was this?

NEWMAN

It was an organization that started out as mothers. Ruth Kirkby was the director of the cultural center, kind of an earth science thing, and next to the Stringfellow site, so she was really aware of the site and the issues around it.

And so there was a group of people -- I don't know everyone of them who was in that, and I know that they then changed to the Parents of, rather than the Mothers. It was spearheaded by Ruth Kirkby as a very authoritative way of doing things.

COLLINGS

I'm going to have to move this cord because it's a rather sensitive mike.

NEWMAN

So in her way of working with the (inaudible) basically to direct and what to do with them, but it was around for quite some time. I think Concerned Neighbors in Action kind of arose as an alternative to Parents of Jurupa, because people wanted to be involved in the issue but they simply didn't want to work with Ruth.

COLLINGS

Wow, that's interesting

NEWMAN

So it gave kind of another mechanism, and many of the people who were a part of Parents of Jurupa were in the formation of Concerned Neighbors.

COLLINGS

So Mothers of Glen Avon, slash Parents of Jurupa was formed specifically to deal with the Stringfellow site problem?

NEWMAN

That's my understanding, yeah.

COLLINGS

And then just sort of jumping ahead to the night of March 6th, 1978, the site overflows in heavy rain and pollutes the area, what are just your memories of that particular night and...

NEWMAN

You know, it went on for a period of time. It was in the midst of a lot of heavy rains that year, so at the particular time we didn't even know it was happening. Everyone was talking about the rain and what was going on. My husband was a battalion chief and so on a couple of occasions we would take the Jeep or a Jeep and go and see where flooding was taking place around the community and stuff, and so I remember seeing the flow of water coming out of that canyon. I remember seeing the edges of the flood channel, where it turns around the back of the elementary schools, splashing up onto the playground area. I remember seeing the flooding of homes along Pyrite Street. There were no curbs or anything so I remember seeing all that. I remember seeing the kindergarten playground, which is on the front side of the school, and the curb stops right at the school property line so prior to that, north of the school, it was flowing onto the dirt and into the kindergarten playground. So I remember seeing all of that. At the time I had no idea that there were chemicals from the

Stringfellow coming down. So it didn't have -- other than it was quite interesting and unusual and noteworthy for the community. I did not understand the ramifications of it. If I had known they were releasing chemicals from the site, I think my attention to it would've been in much more -- in greater detail. I probably would've been taking photos, you know, documenting what was happening. But at the time, it was just a flood.

COLLINGS

But this other group did realize that -- did realize at the time that these floods were releasing chemicals.

NEWMAN

Not at the very beginning. They too didn't know, and it wasn't until it had gone on for a day or two before people started paying attention to what was happening, and I think that actually where we found out they were releasing it was when the school district alerted the staff to what was going on.

COLLINGS

Ah, and told them not to tell the parents.

NEWMAN

Right, and that it was kind of at that time, and then just before that was when Ruth and some of the Parents of Jurupa were out talking about the flood channel and runoff from the site. But I don't think they understood they were actually pumping the stuff out of the site. I think they were concerned just about some of the runoff from the outside area, and at that point Ruth had raised so many questions, so many times, people had kind of dismissed it, so I think that's when it really became real to all of us, was wait a minute, this isn't a conspiracy theory. This is really happening, that the state really is releasing thing.

COLLINGS

When you heard that the school had spoken to the teachers about it, that was the corroboration of... yeah.

NEWMAN

And that they were actually pumping stuff out of the ponds, that just was incomprehensible to me previously. So I don't dismiss people's stories quite as easily.

COLLINGS

Oh, interesting. This was sort of an epiphany for you, then.

NEWMAN

I had an attorney tell me one time that just because people say you're paranoid doesn't mean they're not out to get you.

COLLINGS

Right. (laughter) Well, this is interesting about Ruth Kirkby. You say that she had been talking about this so much, and that she was sort of disliked for her

way of doing things, and that made it so that people really didn't listen. Was she known in the community for anything else? I mean, just in terms of...

NEWMAN

She's lived in the community a very long time. She had been a leader in the community and was involved in a lot of different things. I think people had known her to take advantage of situations if it worked in her favor, and so there was a little bit of wanting to maintain distance from the controversy that always seemed to surround her. It feels very personal now to me, because I feel that same situation many times. But I think that it was her personality of -- very obnoxious, and very cantankerous -- you do it my way or we don't do it, kind of thing that it really did turn people off, and so I think with the Stringfellow site, if someone else had been leading it I think we would've gotten to the bottom of it a lot sooner.

COLLINGS

Oh, wow, that's so fascinating, yeah. Did she have a reputation for criticizing the government, or -- because -- and sort of ruffling feathers in the community in that way?

NEWMAN

She was very critical of many of the agencies, but she also used her position to kind of maneuver people to provide things for her, you know, at the cultural centers. And she knew how to make people feel defensive and feel like -- and very persistent, so that they just get it for her to get her out of their face and so it was that kind of -- you just didn't want to be around her because you know she's going to be demanding something from you. So yes, I think history will look back and see her as someone who knew what she was talking about. She was absolutely right, but that the way it was presented and the way that she dealt with people made it difficult to get to the truth.

COLLINGS

Wow, that's -- I mean, I think this probably happens so often. It's very interesting to be able to see a concrete example of how personality interplays with historical circumstance.

NEWMAN

And it's been a lesson for me, because I know we have to be critical of what happens around us because there's so many things to be critical of, but to try and do it in a way that people understand, that you bring people along in the understanding and it not just be you with the information. That was the other thing, Ruth would never share her secret documents, so we try to be very open and to include people in discussions and to come to a conclusion of where we should go together, rather than dictating to people what they should be doing, so it's been a really good lesson for me.

COLLINGS

So this was a conscious organizing principle that Concerned Neighbors in Action took directly in response to how things had been handled before?

NEWMAN

Well, I don't know if it was directly in response, but it certainly influenced. I mean, I think that our organization because it was community people who had been friends and neighbors, you know, kids in Little League and stuff, we were used to working together, and I think it's an outgrowth of the basic community culture, but it's certainly -- you know, if things ever got to the point where it seemed expeditious just to make a decision and tell people what to do, you always had an example of why that wouldn't work, so in the long run it didn't speed things up, it simply slowed it down or stopped (inaudible) we had, so it was a good reminder but I don't think -- I think the community culture kind of dictated how we proceeded.

COLLINGS

And did Ruth Kirkby criticize what your group was doing in any way as far as you know?

NEWMAN

Yeah, she really saw us as a threat, you know. Didn't think we knew what we were talking about, and I think resented new leadership emerging, and so anything that we did got criticized even if it's exactly what she would've been doing. I remember one instance, we had children at a demonstration and she said this is just immoral to use children to advance your political agenda, and there were many times in which she had advocated people taking their kids out of school to participate, so it was Ruth and I think we all kind of knew that.

COLLINGS

Yeah. So how would your group -- you mentioned that -- I had sort of on my list here a question about how the group educated itself on the issues. You use as the counterexample the fact that Ruth Kirkby would have some documents that she wouldn't share with others.

NEWMAN

Well, one of the things that we did, we had committees of people work together on issues and so the knowledge wasn't centered on one person, and we did that both to share the workload but to also keep it open so that if someone got busy or sick or whatever, that everything didn't stop. And so we would go down to the agencies and go through their files and see what we could find, get copies of reports. We'd sit down together and try to figure out what the darned thing meant, have a dictionary there to look up multisyllabic words, you know. We didn't have the slightest idea. Or make sure we had somebody we could call up and say, "OK, what is hexavalent chromium and why should we be concerned?" Is this a high level, or is this... And so we really developed resources for ourselves to help educate and I think that that's an approach that

we've continued to this day. It's trying to demystify the technical science part of it so that everyone can understand it and participate in the policy part of it, and making the distinction between the technical issues where you have to have a Ph.D. to understand things, and a policy issue of the technical may tell you what level is there but the policy issue is whether you want a level there, and to make that distinction -- so we've been very conscious of not having scientists on staff or attorneys on staff, but to try and make the issues and frame the issues in a way that everybody can understand and participate and make decisions with.

COLLINGS

And what would you say was sort of the average educational level of the community when they were...

NEWMAN

High school graduate. A few were college level, teaching degrees. We had a number of teachers in our group, but I would say predominantly high school graduates.

COLLINGS

And how would you describe the community as a whole just in terms of ethnically, politically, socioeconomically?

NEWMAN

I guess it depends on what time frame.

COLLINGS

At that time, the late Seventies.

NEWMAN

It was a working-class community, probably -- I think we had figures that were around 5,000 people in Glen Avon, so right around that. At least, that's the number that kept coming up, (inaudible) six or seven thousand. Many of them had ranches here, smaller farms and ranches. Others, we had a lot of teachers.

COLLINGS

Oh, really?

NEWMAN

So it was kind of that -- it was also a mixture of a large population of Hispanic but Hispanic that had been born and raised here or had lived here a long time, not Spanish-speaking as such. Yeah, I think they were pretty conservative, pretty apolitical actually. Were going about their lives raising families, going to work, and not thinking too much about politics and what was going on. I think they felt not influenced greatly by manufacturing and the aerospace industry and stuff. While a few may work in that field, it was pretty removed from any of those facilities, so...

COLLINGS

Do you think there was any sense that some of the big social movements that were sweeping the country at the time -- this is a bit after the Vietnam War, but the Vietnam War protests, the women's movement, any of that was impacting this community at all?

NEWMAN

I think the Vietnam War impacted everything. Everyone had someone who was in the war, or not -- a conscientious objector or protesting against it. So I think, but not -- it certainly wasn't a center of protest or involvement. The women's movement was (inaudible). It had no relevance in what we were doing. I think the attitude of most people including myself was I was at home raising kids and I had gotten my teaching credentials and college degree when I had time around all the (inaudible), you know, and a lot of our activities were focused on making sure that when we're home to cook dinner and have dinner and get the kids settled before we did it. So it was very much that approach. We had a lot of women who couldn't participate until their husbands had left for work, and after their husband came home they couldn't do anything.

COLLINGS

They were on-call. (laughter)

NEWMAN

It was that kind of involvement. People didn't challenge that, and I think most of us adapted to it, kind of worked around.

COLLINGS

So the coming to the realization that something needed to be done must have been a -- was a very difficult one. It wasn't a natural posture.

NEWMAN

I think from our perspective it was. It was a natural occurrence, because we saw that our children were threatened by this, and this was invading our families and this was affecting our kids and that was, as a mother, our charge. We're supposed to take care of our kids. That was our whole assignment. Husbands may go off to work, but this is what we were supposed to be doing, and we were letting them down. We missed this, and I think that was the wedge that brought us into it, and it seemed extremely natural. It was just another one of the things that mothers did.

COLLINGS

And the watershed moment for that, in the last session you described a meeting where people started describing the kinds of illnesses that they were finding in their households.

NEWMAN

Yeah, I think once the committee formed...

COLLINGS

But that was different than this rather formal meeting in March of 1980 with Jim Anderson.

NEWMAN

Right.

COLLINGS

This was before that, OK.

NEWMAN

Well, yeah, I think there was a time just before that when we're in a smaller group but talking about what they were experiencing and for the core group that was really an eye-opener for us. I think we knew that having chemicals flow into the community was not something good, and that these -- lead was not good to be exposed to, different things that we saw in the report, but I don't think it hit us to the extent of what we were already experiencing. It was kind of like it wasn't just that moment when things were flowing through the community. This has been going on since 1956, and that there were other times we had been exposed, and the smells we had smelled were part of that. That's what we were inhaling. In '69 when the floodings occurred, what happened then? What were we exposed to? And I think that was the realization of it. I think the really epiphany that hit the community as a whole was the meeting with Jim Anderson, and that happened before we let Jim Anderson into the room.

COLLINGS

You sort of describe in the history here that he kept passing you notes saying that he needed to present, but you wanted everybody who was there to be able to speak about their experience first.

NEWMAN

Well, two things. One was we had made a conscious decision that Jim Anderson was not going to be in the meeting for the first part of it, so he was held in an anteroom outside of where the meeting was taking place so he didn't know what was going on. That was a strategy just to raise his anxiety, if nothing else, but to also get everybody on the same page before the meeting started, to kind of let out our agenda and our message. And we showed the video about...

COLLINGS

About toxic waste sites, that puts Stringfellow at the top of the list, yeah.

NEWMAN

And that really showed that this wasn't an isolated problem, that it was recognizable and (inaudible) and raised -- it's kind of like in a community when things go on, you just assume that it's normal, and you get -- you adapt to it. When you see it acknowledged from outside as, oh my gosh, look what they have, it's...

COLLINGS

So do you think this was sort of the moment when people realized that their case was not an isolated case?

NEWMAN

Not just that it wasn't an isolated case, but that this was something other people looked at as really bad, and that it wasn't just Stringfellow, it was Stringfellow! And here it made a list, for crying out loud. It's in a movie, and it's compared to Louisiana where looking at something from a distance you say "oh my goodness, how could they do that to those people?" Well, that was what was happening here, you know! So it kind of puts it into a different dynamic, and so it was something that -- that was very eye-opening for people. But then the other part that went beyond the core group was when people were talking about their health problems, we began to see that it wasn't just a few of us with sick kids, it was an entire community that were having the same types of experiences and I think that just elevated it for all of us to a new level, so there were a number of moments when it just kept ratcheting up. And I think that's what made that meeting so critical is that it was a point of recognition on numerous levels and focusing on a person that was in charge of this and let it happen. And so it was kind of a combination.

COLLINGS

So you think that the fact that he was there was a catalyst for bringing out a lot of that emotion?

NEWMAN

Yeah, I think the videos raised awareness. The interaction among the community kind of created a bond among people that we were sharing this horrible thing that was happening to us, and then as a call to action was having a person there who was in charge of solving this, who actually had ordered the release of the stuff, so it kind of brought it through a process, awareness and the bonding of a community and then an opportunity to take action, so it was a brilliant meeting, so we didn't know it was doing to be that way, but I think it was just the instincts of the community, the progression of that meeting really led to the group being galvanized and moving forward.

COLLINGS

So did you realize at the time how important that meeting was? Did you go home thinking, OK, now we're on a new path?

NEWMAN

Yeah.

COLLINGS

You did.

NEWMAN

I think a couple of things that happened during the meeting. The passing of the notes was Jeff Robinson, was an organizer who kept passing me the notes, telling me to move it along, don't stop everybody from talking, let's move forward, and I knew that people needed to talk, and that's why I kept ignoring his notes which drove him crazy. But I knew that this was an opportunity we could not pass up, that people needed this, that this was really drawing people together as well as raising awareness for the press that was there, really what it needs. So I think I knew at that moment that that was important. This was an important experience. I think when we targeted Mr. Anderson and put up the demands and asked him yes or no, we knew that was important because it was so clarifying on what government would respond to and what they wouldn't respond to, and that they weren't -- if we left it up to them, they were not going to do anything, and I think that made it real clear for the community and so I knew that at least those two things were really important out of that meeting. The next day, we had newspaper headlines and that was the first time they had really covered anything we had done, and that told me on another level this was an important meeting. It set the debate, this outline what was going on here and what needed to be done, so that was really another verification that this was important. This was a pivotal moment, and then when we found the pond that people had mentioned gone by ten o'clock the next day, the agency had acted. It was like a-ha, we now know that's how you get it done. By focusing on him, we made him do what he could do, and so that was another big moment for us. So there was a lot of things happening at one time, that made that particular meeting very pivotal.

COLLINGS

It sounds, yeah, very pivotal. Did you have more community members at the meeting than you expected?

NEWMAN

Oh, yeah. It was raining again. It was one of those really bad nights where people don't want to go out of their home, but it was -- we had been able to attract some of the media attention. I think people wanted...

COLLINGS

How did you do that?

NEWMAN

Again, just raising the issue, the outrage of what took place. I think many of the reporters didn't believe that the state would release chemicals, so they kind of came to see really see, OK, what really happened here. And then seeing the executive officer not respond to very reasonable requests kind of made them angry too. I kept watching them over at the site. I said, why not? So you could tell that, so we were kind of getting them in the story as well. So I think it was a curiosity. I mean, we don't have a lot of community meetings, of activists out

here, so at that time this was a big deal. There weren't a lot of -- usually people would gather to complain about the rodeo and who was going to do what or something, but this was something different.

COLLINGS

Now, prior to that, Parents of Jurupa had met with Tom Hayden, and...

NEWMAN

A couple of members, but not Parents of Jurupa. A couple of the really frustrated members had met with him when he was on the Border Commission or Southwest Border Commission and he was coming through and...

COLLINGS

You have a picture of that in the booklet, then.

NEWMAN

Yeah. This action meeting was after the investigator.

COLLINGS

Oh, that was after, OK.

NEWMAN

Yeah, but that was Connie. And I'm not sure how they came into contact with him. Yeah, I don't know who instigated that. I don't think it was someone that Connie would've called up, so I think somebody within his organization had seen what was taking them (inaudible). They were doing some stuff on environmental issues or toxics. They know Jane had been to Love Canal and so I think there was a conscious...

COLLINGS

Jane Fonda.

NEWMAN

Yeah, so I think there had been a conscious effort to make connection with somebody in the community.

COLLINGS

OK, because the reason that I was struck by that is that perhaps from our earlier conversation I was thinking that the community was more conservative than Tom Hayden and Jane Fonda, and so that just struck me as a curious connection.

NEWMAN

Right, and I think that was part of the (inaudible).

COLLINGS

And that flying for a meeting, Tom Hayden, Lois Gibbs, yeah.

NEWMAN

Yeah, (inaudible) came later, and I think one of the things about that first meeting with Jim Anderson, Tom Hayden offered assistance from an organized at the Laurel Institute, which we didn't know what the heck that was. So people when we were -- it's one thing to have a meeting with Tom Hayden as part of

this, and at this point people were wanting to talk to anybody who wanted to help.

COLLINGS

And he was part of the Brown administration, and he was part of the government.

NEWMAN

And then so he referred us to this Laurel Institute and I don't think people saw it as connecting with Tom Hayden and Jane Fonda. It was this other organization was going to help us and that's where Jeff Robinson came in, was working with us and we didn't know there was any connection whatsoever, so after the meeting, the first headline was "Hayden Backed Group," and it was like, what do you mean Hayden backed group? I had never met Tom Hayden at that point, and a lot of the other people hadn't, and so we were kind of dismissed as of course women couldn't have put this together. It has to be some man in the background pulling the strings, which really irritated us because we had done all the work and then we find out that the Laurel Institute, Laurel Springs Institute -- that Laurel Springs is Jane Fonda's ranch up in Santa Barbara, that this was part of their organizing thing, so that the connection was very clear, so people created yet another thing to have to deal with, so people were very angry and I was very angry because if we had known we could have made a conscious decision, whether we wanted to be associated or not, and we may have very well said yes, you can provide us help, we'll take the help. But at least it would've been our decision and not by deceit, and it would've helped us prepare for the meeting so that we could've set it up ahead of time and defused that as an issue instead of having that blow up in our face. And so it took us a couple steps back of having to regroup, rethink, and having a big debate about whether we participate with them or not, and I think a majority of people said, look, if there are some ways in which we can, they can be of help and provide some access to the governor and provide some stuff, OK, we'll take that, but we clearly are our own group and we maintain control over what we do and what we don't do, and no more of this withholding information from us. We're adults. We want to be treated as such, and so there was a big blow-up over that.

COLLINGS

Because you were a targeted issue group, and they were using your group as sort of a wedge issue for their...

NEWMAN

And doing it without us. I mean, it's a manipulation that was just so offensive.

COLLINGS

Now, did they sort of hide the connection because they felt that the community politically would be...

NEWMAN

And that's what I asked them, why didn't you tell us this up front? Well, because you probably wouldn't have been involved with us. But that's our choice. It's not a choice for you to make, and that if we're going to work together, if that's what the community decides, then you need to be up-front with us about what your motives are, where you're going with this, so that we are -- everything's on the table. Otherwise we're not doing this. And the group decided that, hey, they do have some things to offer to us. They do have a route and access to some people and places that we wouldn't have otherwise, but Jane Fonda and Tom Hayden had very strong reactions and they still do. I know when we invited them to our 25th anniversary, I still had gotten notes about how could you bring these people into the community. This is 2000's. That's a long time ago, you know, but it's still there, still a raw point for a lot of people, so yeah.

COLLINGS

So looking back, what did the connection with them do for the group, do you think?

NEWMAN

It clearly gave us access to the Brown administration very easily, but we had an awful lot of opportunities to meet with Jerry Brown and with people who could help us.

COLLINGS

So when you say the community organized money with bake sales and things to send representatives to Sacramento, you were going to meet directly with Jerry Brown through these connections.

NEWMAN

And to try and raise awareness for the passage of the Superfund bill and to -- some of it was maybe with the Water Resources Board who had money to give you to different projects, so that was one of the trips we took, which they weren't particularly helpful on, but there were times when it was, or it wasn't. Certainly connecting us with Lois Gibbs was a big benefit to us. We certainly had access to maybe beyond the local media, so there were tradeoffs.

COLLINGS

And what were the negatives, then?

NEWMAN

Well, the negatives were Tom Hayden and Jane Fonda. (laughter) You know, we got along very well and they still -- I see Tom quite a bit, keep in touch with him. Haven't seen Jane as much, but got notes off and on from her, been to their home and to their ranch, you know, so it was a very good relationship once we got past this, and I understand why they were defensive about it, because all the flak they've taken. So, we worked it out. But that clearly was a big negative, but

I think the positives far outweighed, really gave us an opportunity to meet people and raise our story and focus attention. It would've taken us a long time to get that out. Wouldn't say wouldn't have been able to do it, but it would've taken us a lot longer.

COLLINGS

Let's see, what did I want to say next? So with some of these later meetings that you refer to, like in the booklet, like with the Santa Ana Water Resources Board, I mean, those sound like very -- meetings where it was your signatures and - at that time you were asking for $11 million for the clean-up. I mean, do you think that you wouldn't have gotten there without the...

NEWMAN

No, I think clearly -- any of the local stuff was clearly (inaudible). I think the women involved in the group were very effective based on their experience of doing just the PTA stuff. I mean, for local families to pull off the kind of events that they've always done and to orchestrate activities and things, it takes a great deal of skill.

COLLINGS

It really does.

NEWMAN

And people always underestimate.

COLLINGS

People underestimate that, yes.

NEWMAN

If you can get a group of people who have been through PTA and Little League and maneuver 25 kids getting up to the practice on time or putting on a school fair...

COLLINGS

And the politics.

NEWMAN

And working with the school board in order to -- I mean, these are very skilled women, and they just simply put those skills on a new target and new contacts and learned. I think in taking on this whole new jargon that we had to deal with of the chemicals and trying to understand that, and I remember having discussions where the women would get together and they would say, well, I know when I'm cooking if I put this in and I put that in, we're going to have this huge explosion. What happens if you start mixing these chemicals? So they understood the theories behind all of this, and put it into a different context in order to understand it, but it made it so that everybody else understood it and I think bringing those skills that these women had developed in just running a family is really powerful, and it always impressed me how much we could do, and I think as we saw, that hey, I know how to do this. We were able to turn out

a hundred people to this because we're networked in the community. We already have these relationships. We're pretty good. And I think that's how I link it with the women's movement, because it really was, it was a way of building confidence and developing new skill sets. It was a way of -- they knew that they had to learn to speak in front of an audience, which many of them, that wasn't something they wanted to do, but had done a little of it in PTA meetings. That's how I got into the position. I had run a PTA meeting. I was president at one time, so well, you do the meeting. So that's how I became chair, and so we kind of just used the different skills different people had, and helped each other develop it where we were weak until we had a really powerful group of people, and continued to bring people in and develop the same skills, which is exactly what we'd been doing in the community and other arenas that were more acceptable. I think the difference was we were stepping out of what society was viewing as acceptable for women to be doing.

COLLINGS

But still you, as you say, you were guarding the health of your children, so it wasn't too big a leap for people.

NEWMAN

Yeah, I think that gave the legitimacy to us to be able to do it. We kind of formulated it in our mind, well, of course this is just another step at being a mother, taking on that role, and I think that's exactly why we were doing it. It wasn't because we were trying to be in the limelight or anything else. All of us didn't want that, but we felt we had to, that if we didn't, nobody else was going to, and that fell on our responsibility as a parent.

COLLINGS

So the leadership structure of Concerned Neighbors, that was drafted directly from, say, the PTA, like you...

NEWMAN

Not so much. It was just a collaboration of a group of people sitting in a room saying, OK, this is what we have to get done, somebody to do this, somebody to do this, and people would say, well, you've done the fliers for a membership drive. OK, yeah, I could do that. That's not hard. And turning to me and saying you've run meetings, lots of meetings with people. You do that. OK, and so that's how we've -- that's how a decision-making process occurred. It was very informal. It was very collaborative. And it was very vibrant, because one thing was real clear -- we weren't going to do something that the community didn't support, because they wouldn't pitch in and do it, and if everybody didn't pull together and take a piece of it, it wouldn't get done. So it was really good at immediate feedback on whether we were really representing the community or not. Best evaluation we could (inaudible). (laughter) If you weren't doing what the community wanted done, it fell on its face.

COLLINGS

So what kinds of things would the community pitch in and do? I know that you mentioned, like, the bake sales and the car washes for raising money to go to Sacramento. What other kinds of things...

NEWMAN

Well, even for meetings that we have planned and need to have fliers done so somebody would take a job of designing it and another one would pitch in money to go have them printed, then we'd divide them up to have them distributed around the community and stuff, and somebody else would make sure we had a place to hold the meetings, or else we'd take on making sure if we had a microphone available. Others would set up a carpool for people who didn't drive to make sure they can get there. So we took responsibility in bringing five to ten people with us, all of that kind of thing, so that was kind of how...

COLLINGS

And were the meetings held on a regular basis, or just as issues arose?

NEWMAN

The core group of about 20 families met very routinely. Sometimes it was once a week. Sometimes it was twice a month, depending on what was happening. But they were very constant, because I think for the first few years, we were very much in crisis. There was a very strong feeling of immediacy to the whole thing, of we need to do something because the next rain could (inaudible).

COLLINGS

So what were those years when you were in crisis, then?

NEWMAN

That whole '80 to '82, '83, and then there were the things like the tour with Lois Gibbs and the trips to Sacramento and there was money available and the Water Board Regional Board wasn't even requesting the money, so that's when the delegation got together and did the bake sales and stuff to raise some money to send some people up there to ask for our sales, which it was really strange, the water resource board. It was like nobody had ever done that before, and they were -- it was such a novelty to have community people up there asking for money for a project like that, that we were treated very nicely, but just kind of like, well, gee. You're community people, what are you doing here? And we had legislators that were wanting to meet with us while we were there, and it was just very strange.

COLLINGS

So you asked for the $11 million for the clean-up, but you didn't get it initially, and you said that you felt that it was crucial to continue to keep Stringfellow in the news, and I'm just, in order to secure that $11 million later on down the

line. What were some of the ways that you felt that you -- what were some of your media strategies?

UNKNOWN

Your husband's here and he needs a copy of your driver's license. Sorry.

COLLINGS

Yeah, so I was just asking you what your sort of thinking was for how to deal with the media.

NEWMAN

I think when we didn't get that money, what we did get -- we didn't get the full amount, but they did allocate some, and I think we were really taken by the reception we had gotten. None of us expected to be greeted, because we certainly hadn't been getting that kind of reaction from the local board. So we kind of came back, even though we didn't get the money, pretty jazzed because for once they heard about the issue and we had people in Sacramento talking.

COLLINGS

And they offered $4 million, is that correct?

NEWMAN

Yeah, and I think what it told us was that we needed to make people understand what the site is.

COLLINGS

Because you wanted a complete clean-up and $4 million was going to be for a partial job.

NEWMAN

Yeah, and we also -- when we were asking for the $11 million all of a sudden, the Water Board was saying, well, it's going to be $16 million, so they just kept raising the amount to make it even harder to go for a complete clean-up, so we knew that a decision would be coming up in July, so we had a time period -- and I can't remember when we went to Sacramento, but we knew that that hearing was coming up and that it was important to get the Water Board to agree to a full...

COLLINGS

I think May 28th, 1980 perhaps, you went to Sacramento?

NEWMAN

Yeah, and then the hearing with the water board was July 2nd, so it was pretty close there, and so after Sacramento if we didn't get the full amount we knew we at least had to get the Water Board to agree to a full clean-up, because once we had them saying yes, we should do it, then it's easier to get it justified because we had the water -- Mr. Anderson was in Sacramento saying he can't justify asking for the full amount. We thought, well, geeze, we can't even get them to see it as a need. We're in big trouble. So we set out to really focus on that July 2nd period and did an awful lot of work on trying to get people turned

out, helping people with their testimony, what they wanted to say, what message we wanted to get across, how we were going to do this, and with it being just before the fourth of July where people were wanting to go on vacation and go out of town, so it was a lot of work, so we did -- and I can't remember doing anything between Sacramento and July, but I do remember the trip to Sacramento was such a big thing. We got a lot of publicity out of that. Again, too many communities went to Sacramento to plea their own case, so that was -- and especially from out here.

COLLINGS

And you initially felt comfortable going because of the Tom Hayden connection, is that...

NEWMAN

No.

COLLINGS

No? OK.

NEWMAN

I think we just knew we had to. We stayed with some friends, friends -- some community people had friends who lived up there and stayed up there, but I don't even remember who they were now. But we stayed with them. They helped us get to the cab. I mean, it wasn't centered around Hayden. I don't think they helped in any way on that. That was strictly an outgrowth of the local focus with the board, so once we did that, the press was always on us to find out what we were going to do next, because locally this was a big story, and so they kept looking for angles that they could keep covering it, and so building up to that July 2nd was not too difficult for us. They were all the (inaudible), here's the issues, here's the options that are available to them. This is what the community says about those options and so there was -- it was kind of mutual. They were getting what they needed to, and so that July 2nd hearing was pretty phenomenal as well.

COLLINGS

How would you work with people to help them with their testimony? Would you meet, like go to their house and ask them what they were planning to say?

NEWMAN

Well, we would have our community meetings and people who had agreed to show up. There wasn't a real reluctance to speak. I think people really wanted to tell how they had been affected, and so we had a lot of people but at the meetings we would sit and say, OK, here are the messages that we need to get out. Who wants to take, you know, what the flood was like? Who wants to take what health issues? Who wants to focus on what we need to be doing, why we don't want a cap put there? Who wants to do those? And so people would just, you know, I'll do this, and Sally can help with this one too, and her story about

such-and-such can fit in, and we also tried to make sure people said it in their own way, that there was no script for them or just tell the story, and because it was so personal, you don't need notes. They lived it, you know, so it's not like preparing some formal testimony on some issue that we've researched. It's just telling your own story and personalizing it. We kept finding over and over again that that is the most powerful thing. It's not something you can debate. If we put out technical issues, they could bring technical people in, and we have this big dueling experts going on, and it's a wash. But if you tell what happened to you and why you don't want this, that possibility ever to happen again, there's no debate, and so we found that was the best way for us to get our points across, and so for some of them they were very hesitant -- or they wanted to speak, but didn't know how. I mean, public speaking still is one of the scariest things for people to do, and so we decided, OK, we need to do this as a group, that instead of just having somebody be called, to have to stand up and walk to the podium by themselves, and on their own, that when it came to the public comment we were all going to stand up together and line up against the wall all together, so that you're not by yourself, plus it would look good for the media, and do this as a community, and then people can go when they want and if two of you want to go together you can go together, and so we have this debate about, well, what if they don't let us, and I said, well, who are they to say we can't? (laughter) So we just did what we needed to do, and so it was pretty powerful.

COLLINGS

That's fascinating, how you handled the testimony.

NEWMAN

And to this day, I still find it very interesting. I know there were people who talked about their animals standing in the water, horses' hooves peeling and stuff, and years and years later I had one of the board members say what great work we did and stuff, she said, but you really went too far at that meeting, and I said, "With what?" She said the horses' hooves, and I said, the horses' hooves? Well, you shouldn't have brought in severed horses' hooves to a board meeting. That just was over the top. It's like, we never did that! "Oh, yes, I remember them!" And it never happened. We talked about it...

COLLINGS

Right, it was a visual. It was an image, an indelible image.

NEWMAN

Yeah, she swears we brought in -- why would be bring in a severed horse's hoof? (laughter) That is a movie, you know? Not what we did! But she's convinced we did.

COLLINGS

That's fascinating. Let's see. OK, all right. Let's see. OK, the next thing. The next major event was December 10th, 1980 when President Carter signed the Toxic Clean-Up Bill, and you -- in the history that you gave me, you indicate that concerned neighbors discovered other communities living near similar sites at that time. I mean, that had happened a little bit before, because you had mentioned the film and that very important meeting, but was this an important part of the story, meeting up with other communities?

NEWMAN

Yeah, I think it was. Both seeing it on a documentary, you see areas, really personalized. I mean, there weren't people. Oh, the interviews with people, but it just -- I don't know, it didn't feel like a lot of people. When we met Lois Gibbs, there was another person and the opportunities that we got to speak together without the press and Hayden and all the rest of the stuff going on.

COLLINGS

You and Lois Gibbs.

NEWMAN

Yeah, just the two of us talking, it was kind of like every time there was a moment, we (inaudible), trying to trade all these stories and how did you deal with this and how did I do with this, and the strategies and what worked for you and oh, God, don't try that, it really backfired, or if you do, think about this, and so it was all of that kind of stuff, and kind of finding validity to the whole issue of health problems because any time we brought up a health problem, "We can't prove it came from Stringfellow!" and so there was always this hesitancy on the part of people. They'd almost always begin their conversation with "I don't know if it has anything to do with Stringfellow, but..." You know, and really bending over backward not to blame the site, because getting criticized any time we did, and so it was very gratifying to see that there was a whole community also going through the same thing, and from there, because of that tour, they also went to some McColl's sites. We met some people at McColl.

COLLINGS

In Orange County.

NEWMAN

And just started connecting, and because we were saying we wanted the site dug up and hauled away, we started looking at other sites where we'd go, and after talking with Lois and with some of them from McColl, it was like, well, wait a minute. There's communities there too. Why would we think our site's different from their site? If this is happening here, why wouldn't it be happening there, too?

COLLINGS

In the new location.

NEWMAN

And so it really started us thinking about, wait a minute, we can't put our junk on them, and we connected, started connecting with other areas and the BKK site in West Covina, met with some of the people there who expressed their concerns about that site, Casmalia, became very active in trying to help at Casmalia, Kettleman Hills. So there was a whole grouping of people from those communities who came together and formed kind of a coalition of groups.

COLLINGS

What was the name of the coalition?

NEWMAN

California Communities Against Toxics.

COLLINGS

And did that group have a specific agenda, like your group had specifically wanted a clean-up, and specifically wanted a certain amount of money and so forth. Was this a more...

NEWMAN

I think we were looking at what could help all of our communities, you know, and what we came up with was seen as so radical that, you know, policy people didn't even want to talk about it. That was -- you don't take it to other sites, you don't -- as we're producing this, you can't dump it in the ground. It doesn't make sense to just dispose of liquid hazardous waste in the ground. It's going to leak out, and everybody was, oh, what do these people know, these housewives? But really, I think from those communities getting together, what we realized was that the easy answers of where should it go is the wrong question to be answering, that the question is how do we deal with this waste, and not presupposing that it just has to go somewhere, but let's see how we can eliminate what we can and deal with it and dispose of it in a different way. And that was pretty radical. That was something the major environmental groups were not discussing and kept telling us we have to be reasonable, which amazes me to this day.

COLLINGS

Now, did you make any progress in that regard?

NEWMAN

Yeah, actually, we got a bill passed that banned the disposal of liquid hazardous waste in the ground, and the industry said, oh, that's going to ruin the economy and all of this but it came up with ways of doing it, so it has to be treated before it gets disposed anywhere. You can't put it into unlined pits anymore. You actually have certified linings and all this other stuff, so it led to -- a lot of things we got through at that time. We got the Superfund bill passed, which was a major...

COLLINGS

Right, the state Superfund.

NEWMAN

Right, because we knew that even with the passing...

COLLINGS

Let me just make sure this cable's not under your elbow here. Sorry.

NEWMAN

That even if we'd gotten the state Superfund passed, one of the provisions -- if the federal passed, one of the provisions was the state had to have matching funds, and so we knew we had to have that, and there would be sites that wouldn't qualify for the federal program, that needed funding to get cleaned up, so we set out to do that and that's where Hayden's group came in handy and working with the governor and trying to get that bill through.

COLLINGS

And when it came through, you found out that -- well, the National Priority List was also developed, and you found out that your site was not going to be number one.

NEWMAN

Yeah, but for them to develop the National Priority List came quite a bit after the passing to the bill because the regulatory process is much longer, and we knew that there was one site per state that could be named immediately to be put on the list, wouldn't have to go through the assessments and reach a certain number, and because we have worked on the state Superfund quite a bit and had been the poster child for the governor on this, that we assumed it would go to our site. It's an abandoned site, and one that was going to cost an awful lot of money, and we started hearing rumors that the McColl site was going to be named instead because the governor wanted the political benefits of Orange County.

COLLINGS

Orange County, yeah.

NEWMAN

And that was pretty -- at first we didn't believe it, because we'd been working with him so closely, and then the rumors kept coming and we thought, oh, I want to see proof that you're going to put us as the lead -- the priority list, and we did, and we kept -- in our discussions in the community, there were a number of times when we said we need to target the governor because he's not coming through with his promises, and everyone said, "Oh, don't do that, hold off, hold off. He's our friend, give him time," including Hayden and all that whole grouping, and it just became very clear that if we didn't call him on this, he would take the easy way out for his political ambitions, and so we decided, OK, this is it. Time for the gloves to come off, and let him know that we knew that the signing of the state Superfund was coming up, and sent word that either we were named as the priority list, or we had a line item in the general fund for

full cleaning, or we would hold a press conference next to yours, decrying what -- you told us out. And we got named. (laughter) And that was also a big lesson for us, and that really is that politicians respond to power and politeness, and that if you demonstrate you have the ability to embarrass them or play hardball, they respect you much more than if you just go along being nice, and that was a big lesson for us too. And so we went to the signing and gave him a T-shirt. (laughter)

COLLINGS

I would think that's just hunky-dory. How much of the history of the story is taught in the local schools? Do people in the community today know about this?

NEWMAN

Not really. I mean, I think one of the things that we felt very strongly about was that the story needs to be preserved, and that's why we started (inaudible), and talk about the lessons we learned as we're going organizing on other issues, for a couple of reasons. One is to show what a small community of ordinary people can do. We changed federal policy, just amazing stuff, and to let people know this is part of your history and that you need to be aware of that because the site's still there. It's still here and if we don't keep our eyes on it, if we don't understand it, it could again pose the same problems and (inaudible), so it's out of self-defense. When you have something like that, in the presence of your community, you need to be aware of it and you can't just ignore it, pretend it's not there, and I know that there's real estate people and all that would just as soon (inaudible) some of our local politicians, paint it as, "Oh, that was the past," and when we found the perchlorate in the community in '97, '98, that was the comment made, and I said, you know, you were in office when perchlorate was found, and that just shows you you can't just forget it. You have to be aware of it. You have to know what's going on and be involved in it, because another surprise could happen at any time. So it's not -- it's something that's built into the community that has to be dealt with, but it's not something people are anxious to talk about. I think it's like any place, you want to hold up the positive things and kind of pretend the negatives don't exist, instead of just understanding it as being part of being a community. All communities have their strong points and weak points and this is ours.

COLLINGS

Well, you were saying that you felt a little bit like a Ruth Kirkby these days, that people were kind of trying to avoid the controversies that seemed to surround you. Is that vis-a-vis this community, or are you talking on a broader stage?

NEWMAN

It kind of depends. I mean, I think -- let me give you one example. We had -- the Girl Scouts have a peace pole celebration, or ceremony that they do. There's been thousands of these peace poles planted internationally, and they had selected Glen Avon in our park as one of the places to do it, and so one of our staff had been dealing with them about making arrangements where they (inaudible) giving them a tour and stuff, so about the Tuesday before the ceremony on Saturday they had a final meeting, so I went to it just to give support to it, and so I'm sitting at Denny's with all of these Girl Scout leaders and something came up and they said they were going to have one of my staff people do the thing, and someone mentioned we weren't going to have the supervisor because we didn't want it to get political or anything, and...

COLLINGS

The county supervisor.

NEWMAN

Yeah, and so someone said, well, let's have Penny Newman at the ceremony. Oh, we don't want her because she's political and controversial, and I'm sitting there, and apparently she didn't know that was me.

COLLINGS

Oh, interesting.

NEWMAN

And my friend, very good friend of mine, who had been through Stringfellow and stuff, was sitting there and she was -- it was like somebody punched her in the stomach. She was so embarrassed for me, and hurt, and she told the (inaudible), she said "this is Penny Newman," and of course she's totally embarrassed, and I said, it's OK, I don't -- if you really feel that this will create controversy or taint the ceremony, you know, I won't be there. It's not a problem. She says, "Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean it." And I said, "You obviously did mean it," you know, that there is that perception that I create controversy or...

COLLINGS

Now, if you were man, do you think that you would be having this reputation problem?

NEWMAN

I think if I were a man, I probably wouldn't have that controversy, because I don't find them to be quite as confrontational at times as we have to be. I think it's because I'm a woman, and because we come from a working-class community, you have to be confrontational in order to get your issues on the table, and so the fact I'm a woman and I'm treated that way, I think, goes hand-in-hand, because if I were a man I wouldn't be doing it that way. I probably wouldn't be advocating the issues that we advocate to the (inaudible).

COLLINGS

So what's an example of being confrontational?

NEWMAN

I think it goes to solving things on a superficial level or going deeper, and the deeper ones are the harder ones, the ones that officials don't want to hear because they can't do them easily. For example, dealing with air quality and diesel trucks, one of the issues we've been trying to get across to the county is that the closer you are to a diesel source, the higher the health risks are to you, and that by placing a warehouse next to where people are living, you're placing those people at a very high health risk so the logical thing to do isn't to put up a wall or trees, but to provide a buffer zone, 1,500 feet or 1,000 feet so that the health risk drops. You provide enough distance where it's a little safer. It's safer. But if you do that, from their perspective, you're giving up all this land that (inaudible) developed, and so a man's approach -- and I have -- quite frankly, that is, they constantly advocate this, the environmental groups, all of them, is that that's being unreasonable, to expect them not to use that land, and that instead let's see if they can reduce to a different fuel -- encourage, not require, encourage the use of a different fuel. In so many years, it will reduce the level but right now people are being exposed. That's not a compromise. And so that's viewed as being confrontational because we won't agree to negotiate away the health of these people, and it's these people at the table with us, and I can't turn to them and say, "It's OK, ten years is a little better." That's not a doable thing. Right now, we're in a discussion with the bonds that are coming up, proposition 1B, especially, would provide money for transportation (inaudible), to expand the ports and the mainstream advocates for clean air are saying let's green the port and allow it to grow. We know from studies done in our community that even if you get cleaner trucks, alternative fuels, safer fuels, that the sheer increase in numbers of trucks will leave us at the same level we are now, which is killing people. Our cancer risk in this area due to diesel is 1,500 in a million instead of one in a million which is EPA's acceptable risk. It's way off the port. So that doesn't solve anything for the people living in the community, but it's seen as doable, it's seen as it's the best we can get. It's a way of tweaking the current system, while for the communities it does nothing, and so for us we need to change the system, so we are calling on the ports not to expand. Well, that takes on everybody, local governments, (inaudible), it's the economic engine for the future. It's a death toll for the communities, and so that's seen as very -- you're not willing to cooperate. Well, what choice do we have? So also, because that is on the table in the discussions, Governor's integrating working group on the ports and goods movement, that's not something they put as an alternative, so we have to find ways to bring it to the forefront and try to change the coming debate and since we don't have the forums in which to advance that, we have to find other ways of doing it. One

way we raise the issue is putting up a billboard on Highway 60 that says "Welcome to Riverside County, we're Number One, dirtiest air in the nation, deadly health impacts. Call before you buy," and it had a picture of a girl with an asthma treatment mask on. And I can't tell you the stir that created. (laughter) But that was very in-your-face. It was kind of out there, for God and everybody to see, so that created -- our supervisor hates us. So people, and they know that he's very vengeful. He's done a lot of things to keep our park from being developed here. So they know that there is a consequence of siding with us. We then become on his list. He is the only decision-maker for this whole area. So that's one of the reasons I think people try to separate (inaudible), and I don't think it's quite the same as Ruth, in that she just was a very nasty old lady. (laughter) And I don't think I'm like that!

COLLINGS

(laughter) No!

NEWMAN

But I think they know that there's a consequence of siding with us, and so I've gotten to understand there are tradeoffs here, and that the fact that we're in the community with the people who are really being affected, it's OK, we think we're doing the right thing, and I know we're making a difference for people who it's very hard to make a difference for, and we just got awarded the non-profit organization award for the Hispanic Lifestyle Image awards, so we're doing what we're supposed to be doing.

COLLINGS

OK.

1.3. Session 3 (May 29, 2008)

Collings

Okay. Today is May 29th, 2008, Jane Collings interviewing Penny Newman at the CCAEJ headquarters.

Collings

As we were just discussing, you'll discuss the work of the CCAEJ [Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice] today. Just perhaps a chronological approach to start with, how you came out of the Stringfellow struggle into founding an environmental justice organization.

Newman

It seemed a natural step. Right.

Collings

Because some people sort of went back to their regular life after that.

Newman

I think that when we were starting, when we were working with Stringfellow, that we came in contact with other groups in the communities that were living near contaminated sites and had worked together in coalitions across the country, kind of uniting those communities together to push for federal laws and institutional changes. Through that process I became friends with Lois Gibbs from Love Canal, who had the Citizens Clearinghouse for Hazardous Waste, and they were interested in helping to provide support and technical assistance to communities around the country and were getting a lot of requests. So I was hired as the western field organizer for CCHW in about 1985, '86, someplace in there.

Newman

It allowed me to devote most of my time to both Stringfellow and sites around the area, so for about five years I worked doing that. I did a lot of workshops, you know, how do you deal with the media, how do you recruit people.

Collings

You conducted those workshops.

Newman

Yes. How do you build a structure for the organization that maintains some democracy to it and isn't hierarchical; how do you do grassroots fundraising; all of those kind of things that we had learned through Stringfellow and had to come up with a way of doing it. So that gave me a view of a bigger picture outside of Stringfellow and even outside of contaminated sites, because we dealt with a lot of proposed facilities and the incinerators. You know, if they weren't going to put it in the ground and use dump sites, then they were going to burn it in incinerators. So we helped communities kind of think through and research and gather information.

Newman

It took me all over the place, and so I really began to see there was a commonality in the communities that were targeted. You know, they were rural communities; they were low-income communities; and they were communities of color. So that really started bringing a more political understanding of how institutions operate and how corporations operate, and the defining commonality was the lack of power that communities had and influence into the decision.

Newman

So that kind of set the stage for understanding that it isn't just Stringfellow; that it's not an anomaly; that this happens routinely on a lot of different areas; and really brought that political analysis into work. So after five years I realized that flying all over the country was helping communities, but it wasn't building anything for the long term.

Newman

In looking at what was happening in Riverside and San Bernardino Counties, you know, it was very clear to me that we needed to focus here; that we were really in the hairs of the target for a lot of things. We were getting garbage dumps proposed. We were getting incinerators, both hazardous and garbage incinerators. We were getting a lot of different heavy industrial facilities being proposed for these two counties, and there wasn't anything here.

Newman

So I quit CCHW and we had a long process of talking with people that I really respected, organizers from around the country and people within the Southern California area, about if we did an organization, what would it look like? Would it just be duplicating something else? After a great deal of thought we decided to open up the CCHW--CCAEJ, as really creating a people's institution here in the inland valleys so that we could deal with the onslaught of proposals and the existing contamination that was here, and help communities so they didn't have to start from square one, and really start building a base of active people to build that power.

Collings

So did you find it a challenge to build an organization which had a mission, which is something that's more abstract than organizing a community around a specific threat?

Newman

Actually not, because I think, having dealt with Stringfellow, we had seen these other facilities coming in and realized, hey, you know, we're going to keep getting these facilities proposed here because of the makeup of this community, and that there were other communities that shared that commonality. It wasn't difficult.

Newman

It was also that I saw that, working for CCHW, we were raising money out of California that was going back east and not really coming back here. So I was kind of doing this organizing and everything else.

Collings

Where was the money coming from primarily?

Newman

Foundations, you know, but we attracted a lot of California foundations for the work I was doing here. So it seemed a little odd that money would be going out of California when it could be just supporting work in California. So it seemed like a logical thing to do, and it certainly would have made the focus much easier. And I was tired of traveling. I was in an airplane three out of four weeks a month. I mean, it was just bizarre.

Collings

Yes, that would--

Newman

Yes, and the area I covered was everything from Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Nevada, New Mexico, Arizona, all of California, Alaska, and Hawaii. I mean, it just--

Collings

What were some of the major struggles that you were dealing with during that work?

Newman

In Alaska it was a lot of military sites. In Hawaii there were geothermal sites that people were concerned about and recycling issues, pesticide issues. Pesticide was a big one we dealt with. In Arizona and in Southern California in the desert areas, there were a lot of incinerators proposed as the new technology for dealing with hazardous waste, instead of, you know, process changes and not using the chemicals. I mean, there was a huge array of issues.

Collings

In these communities that you were dealing with, did you find that people were receptive to the message that there was a linkage between, as you say in your mission statement, recognizing that there is a connection between environmental and worker exploitation and oppression on the basis of race and so forth?

Newman

Yes. I remember one time we picketed Montrose Chemical Company, which dumped DDT at Stringfellow. We went to the operation in Torrance and were very concerned that the workers were going to confront us on it. You know, we were trying to close down their thing, and, "Well, we just wanted the company to clean up their part of the mess." What we found was that the workers were coming over to us, you know, on the side, saying, "You can't believe what we're having to go through with this, and the kind of conditions that we're working with in the plant."

Newman

It became very clear that if a company isn't treating its workers fairly and just, and endangering them, they could care less about the community they're in. So that connection began to make a lot of sense. We had workers at Stringfellow who initially were extremely angry and confrontational with us, and about how, you know, the Stringfellow family would put us in danger. Then we found over the years, because that went on quite a while, that the workers, when they got ill, were fired, and they had nothing. You know, the family didn't care of them.

Collings

The Stringfellow family.

Newman

Yes, and that they were very hurt and disillusioned. We ended up, you know, they joined our lawsuit to try and get some compensation to deal with their health issues. So, you know, it became pretty clear we had more in common with the workers than differences, and that if we understood their conditions and their perspective, that it made it much easier to really outline solutions that were more comprehensive than simply going from our perspective outside of the company, and that it became much stronger, you know.

Newman

So we started looking in a lot of these communities, the community is made up of the workers, so it didn't make any sense to be calling for something to just be shut down, when you're putting these families--

Collings

Out of work.

Newman

--out of work. That didn't help the community in any way. So, you know, we began to understand, just as we initially had thought, "We'll just move it somewhere." Then we realized, well, that somewhere--

Collings

Yes. You thought with the strength, all of you would just move it out somewhere.

Collings

Right. Well, moving it into another community; we couldn't do that to them. Well, same thing. We began to understand that to really get to a comprehensive, systemic change, we had to involve all those who were affected, and that included the workers. I think it made us also aware that we're not isolated in one area; that the activities of a corporation impact nature as well.

Newman

So we needed to be aware of the Endangered Species Act. I mean, if a company is coming in and it's wiping out some species of some kind, that we'll be next. I mean, it's--you know. [Laughter] And that, actually, some of those laws were much stronger than those supposedly to protect people, and so you could utilize some of that. But it really raised the awareness.

Newman

I think one of the real benefits of doing this work is that you confront your values, and most people never have to. So we've really had to sit back and say, "What do I really believe, and is this really something I can do as a person?" It really gives you a better sense of why you're here and how you're going to leave this earth.

Collings

Well, so the thing that sort of radicalized your original group, the Concerned Neighbors in Action, was the question of the health of your children and families. So you're finding a commonality with the workers at these various toxic plants, that the radicalizing factor for them as well has to do with health issues.

Newman

Right. Well, and, you know, we really came to understand that health included having a decent job so that you had money to be able to afford healthcare. I mean, you know, that was one of the big things. When people were sick, they recognized they were sick; they just couldn't afford to get any treatment, because the working conditions they were in were so bad and the pay was so bad. So, you know, it became clear that, well, a living wage and worker health is a piece of this. So it was kind of this process of having a puzzle in front of you and finding a new piece that fit; you know, those "aha" moments of, "Ah, okay. Now the picture is making more sense."

Collings

But when you say "it became clear," does that mean that your organization went through a sort of a growing--

Newman

Oh, big time. I mean, it seemed like every day we were learning something new or having things become clearer to us. I mean, the whole process has been a major learning experience, just beyond anything I would have imagined.

Collings

Have there been times when you felt that you had to compromise what you would have liked to have seen, from an environmental standpoint, in order to accommodate some of these economic issues that were raised by plant workers?

Newman

We usually had found ways where we realized that the easy answer wasn't necessarily the right answer. Sometimes not everybody comes to that realization at the same time, so it takes a bit of work.

Newman

I know there was a time when we were working with the oil, chemical, and atomic workers with the Superfund Bill, and the fact that these plants were really bad and they were polluting, and you could do some process change, but basically, they shouldn't be making these chemicals, period. The workers were starting to realize that, but they were arguing that, "Well, don't do it yet. We agree that we need to; but we need to be able to maintain our standard of living,"--which they were very well paid--"until we can find another job of some kind, and this may take ten years to do this transition."

Newman

You know, people in the community were saying, "Well, wait a minute. We can't wait ten years for this to be taken care of, because it's killing us." So there was this real tension there.

Newman

There was a proposition that, in order to do this transition, there needed to be a Superfund for workers, you know, the retraining; a pot of money that could help retrain, which, you know, we were willing to support, but not on the time frame that they were talking about, because these communities wouldn't be there in ten years if it continued. So there were struggles like that.

Collings

What was the name of this particular plant?

Newman

Oh, it was basically industry itself. It was the production of toxic chemicals for use in other industries. Louisiana was where we were really focusing on, because there were so many plants down there.

Collings

Was this through the work of the CCAEJ or was this prior to that?

Newman

It was prior to that.

Collings

What was the mechanism in that case by which the workers there were coming to this realization? Was that through their labor union or was that through the Clearinghouse?

Newman

Yes, it was through OCAW[IU], the Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers [International] Union, yes. So it opened up a dialogue. We didn't come to any great solution to it. It just underscored the complications once you have these types of industries coming in. It kind of raised the issue of, you know, here society is being asked to deal with the aftermath of these decisions, and yet we don't have the opportunity to participate in the discussion about is this the direction that industry should be going. And I'm seeing that happen over and over again. I think the goods movement is a perfect example.

Collings

The goods movement is, yes.

Newman

It's being thrust upon us, whether we like it or not, and we're having to deal with the aftermath. But we don't get to participate in the discussion of is this really what we want for Southern California. I think if that discussion had taken place, we wouldn't be doing it.

Collings

Is this really what we want in terms of the high level of consumer participation, or is this really what we want in terms of just the fact of moving these goods through this corridor in Southern California?

Collings

Well, I think it goes even before that. Is this really what we want to be importing cheap goods, and then the consumerism that is demanded in order to keep that industry going, and becoming reliant on outside forces again, and an industry that is solely reliant on oil, which we're supposedly trying to get away from. [Laughs] I mean, none of it makes any sense. It seems to be if we had had a rational discussion, a public debate on this, we would never have taken this direction. But everything was lined up ahead of time and just thrust upon us, to the point where, you know, we find ourselves almost overnight, and it surprised us. My gosh, what are we doing?

Collings

You said that when you were involved in the Stringfellow struggle that you were always being sort of surprised to find out that the people you were working with did not share your values. I think this came up, in particular, with regard to the question of whether people could go ahead and just sell their house without disclosing why.

Newman

Yes. I think what surprised me was that there were a number of people who wouldn't confront their values and were just going to take care of what they needed to do. And yet, I totally understood that, you know, especially the men; they saw their primary role as protecting their families. To do that, they felt they needed to sell their home to move out of the area, and to sell their home, they had to withhold information. So, you know, as the protector of the family, they really had convinced themselves this was what they had to do.

Newman

It wasn't just surprising to me as much as within the family, where the wife was--you know, there was conflict, because they didn't want to do that, having seen what happened to their children, and felt they couldn't do that to someone else, and so it created conflict in the family. So it was the different perspectives people brought, and what they saw as their role.

Collings

So how did you sort of safeguard the CCAEJ, when you were setting that up, to address the question of whether people in the organization shared the same values?

Newman

Well, because it's a community-based organization, just like Concerned Neighbors were, except we were pretty successful in that we have money and we can hire people. But it's still made up of the people in the community.

Almost all of our staff come from those communities, and they were community leaders before they were hired here. So it's not like hiring a professional organizer, who comes into a community and then tries. So there are people who have chosen to continue to participate in a day-to-day basis [unclear] have made that commitment.

Newman

It still is the same--you know, we have a mixture of people that are membership that have different perspectives, and as a community, you're going to find that. The role we have, I think, is to help facilitate that discussion so that we can bring all those perspectives together to come to some agreement. Sometimes you don't make it, and most of the time we're able to. I think it's why we have a pretty close relationship with a lot of the unions, because they do understand that our initial reaction isn't to shut down the plant. It is to make them operate in a safe way that protects them as well as the community, and to give the union, if the union is in the workplace, then the workers have more say, just as with the community, you have more say with your elected officials. So sometimes it works; sometimes it doesn't. [Laughs]

Newman

I mean, we had a very clear example of that in working with the warehouses and trying to deal with the truckers who live in the community; they're a big part of the community. We had been, in initially talking with them, had made it clear we weren't trying to kick all the trucks out of the community. We were wanting to make sure that the warehouses weren't bringing other trucks into the community and destroying the community and increasing the pollution and doing all that; and if we were going to have warehouses, we needed to have a buffer between where people live and--you know. They--

Collings

This was a particular debate over how close the warehouses could be to the community.

Newman

And how many warehouses were coming into the community. I mean, you bring in 200 more warehouses, that's a hell of a lot of trucks that come into the community that don't live here. They just bring in the pollution along with the product.

Newman

What we found was that the truckers understood the pollution they're living with in driving a truck, and they didn't want it near their families, either. So when we talked about the buffer zone or limiting the warehouses in this community, they were totally supportive of that.

Newman

But we also found that, you know, if you didn't keep the communications very clear and frequent, that there were opportunities for misunderstandings. We had our supervisor send out a notice to all of the truckers that our organization was trying to shut down and kick all the truckers out of the community, and so we had 150 truckers show up in a meeting just hopping mad. It took us a good hour and a half just to let them vent and scream and yell. I've never been called names like I had been that--I mean, like I earned every dime I've ever made on that one meeting. It was very, very contentious, and they were extremely angry.

Newman

After an hour and a half, they had gotten it out of their system enough where we could actually talk. When we started talking to them, we said, "Where in any of our stuff have we said we were trying to get the truckers out of the community? Nothing we're doing is saying that."

Newman

They said, "Well, we got this."

Newman

I said, "It didn't come from us. Who did it come from?"

Newman

"Well, from a supervisor."

Newman

"Well, why do you think he sent it to you? He's trying to divide the community again, because he wants to make money off of more warehousing coming in next to your homes." So, you know, we were able to work it through, but my gosh.

Collings

Wasn't there a debate at some time about whether the truckers could park their rigs in their backyards?

Newman

And there still is. Yes, there still is.

Collings

But that's a separate issue, isn't it?

Newman

Well, no, it's tied to it. Some of them were parking on public streets, and the argument was that, you know, you don't have a right to. Number one, we don't know if it's outside trucks parking there or idling.

Collings

And idling.

Newman

Yes. Or a local person; and that these truckers bought lots, large lots, so that they could park on their property. We said, "Well, if you're parking on your property, the concern is, for the neighbors, is if you're idling."

Newman

So, you know, they had agreed they wouldn't idle. Now, there were some that actually operate trucking companies out of their homes, and they had four or five trucks. All of them, except for them, said, "That's unacceptable. You should be in an industrial area."

Newman

So the discussions took place, and there was give and take. You know, we had been told that having a secure truck area, where they could park their trucks and then come home, would be a good solution, and were told by them, "Well, those aren't secure."

Collings

I was just thinking, I mean, secured by whom?

Newman

Right. And so we said, "Okay, what's another solution? How do we know that this is a local resident or just an outside truck that's parking there?" So they came up with the idea of these permits that would identify a local resident that has his truck parked on his property, you know, a sticker on the windshield. So that was something that they felt comfortable. Some of them said, "Yeah, if we had a fenced, lighted, secured area, we would park there." But they came up with the solutions. I never would have thought of that.

Newman

So, you know, it reinforced to me the need to talk to them, because they know what the solutions ought--

Collings

Right. They're directly affected. So coming up with the permit was something under pressure from the CCAEJ, or was this something that was more kind of a neighborhood-based--

Newman

No, it was the community raising the issues. We don't come up with, "We don't want this. We don't want--." It comes from the community. These are issues they raise. It's not us sitting around deciding what needs to be done. We're reflecting what the community is raising, and then trying to negotiate or find some solution to it that really solves the problem.

Collings

When you say "the community," you're talking about Glen Avon, and what are some of the other communities that other activist members are representing?

Newman

Well, clearly the target area that--I mean, we work with communities all through Riverside and San Bernardino Counties, and provide information and what we can. But there are targeted communities that we focus on, and those are the lower income communities of color, because they are really getting the

heaviest dose of the pollution from a number of sources. So Glen Avon, Mira Loma, in this area is our targeted priority communities. So that's where most of our membership comes from. We work with the groups around March--

Collings

Air Force Base?

Newman

--Base, where the global port is; an air cargo port is going in, and industrial warehousing and whatnot around there. But not on the same intimate level that we do in Glen Avon and Mira Loma. In San Bernardino, the communities that we've really identified as the west side of the City of San Bernardino, which has just been receiving all the industrial, and is primarily Latino and African American.

Newman

Then there's Rialto, which is a lower income and Latino and African American community, with the perchlorate contamination. That's particularly bad in that area, and not receiving the kind of response from the agencies that the higher income white communities have gotten. Like Redlands or Santa Monica have gotten very quick action by the agencies, and it's been drug out for ten years there. So those are key areas.

Newman

In the desert office they're looking at Thermal and Mecca as the two areas that they really are focusing on, and building a base of new leaders in that area through our SALTA [Salud Ambiental, Latinas Tomando Accion] program.

Collings

Through your which program?

Newman

SALTA. It stands for Salud Ambiental, Latinas Tomando Accion, which is Environmental Health, Latinos Taking Action, and it's a ten-week, ten- to twelve-week program that really starts in the home, looking at cleaning products and pesticides and lead paint, and things that they're using; teaching them to read labels and what those labels mean, and understanding what's in the products. It then takes them to their neighborhood, and they identify issues of concern. They might be needing a stop sign or, you know, trash being dumped or something.

Newman

Then in the bigger community, what are some of the issues facing the bigger community? They go down to either the city hall to see the city council in action and be able to identify who it is that makes decisions that affect their families--or, in our situation, because we're unincorporated, a board of supervisors for the county--which is always an eye-opener for them. Then they--

Collings

Why is it an eye-opener?

Newman

Well, because you have these five white men sitting there that are so arrogant, and see people who will stand up to raise an issue, and they're treated like crap. I've seen them tell people to just sit down and shut up. I mean, it's just absolutely--they're just horrible, very disrespectful, and, you know, it's "How dare you question anything I'm doing?" attitude. So that's always kind of interesting. They have no mechanism for translation of anything, you know, so they totally disregard the Latino population out here completely. It's amazing. You know, it's like going back twenty years or something. It's just--yuck.

Newman

So that's always kind of an interesting experience for them, and they participate in community meetings. When they've graduated, one of the requirements is that they recruit people for a community meeting to attend so that they learn how to talk with their neighbors about issues and be able to condense information into an easy spiel for people to understand and to engage people. Then out of those classes there's usually a few that are really interested in going further, and so we have an advanced training that they can go through that gives them more information on the main issue affecting their community; like in Rialto it would be perchlorate. Here it would be goods movement and air quality.

Newman

So they go through that training, and then they can be on a community action team, which helps to decide--you know, it comes together on a regular basis to talk about the issues and what's coming up and what we should be doing about that, what research we need, and what meetings we should be attending, who we need to identify to put pressure on, and so on. So that kind of becomes the core.

Collings

Have there been some of these community action teams that have been more successful than others?

Newman

Yes, I think so, and I think part of it is we've gone through real growth with our staff and that some of the staff members are much better at coordinating and following through on things than others, just because they're still learning. So we have some that have starts and stops, and others that just keep growing. The perchlorate team is really strong in Rialto, and they also participate in our electoral program, which we merge with our organizing. So one of the things we realized was that as long as our communities are not voting, politicians

could care less what you say, because they clearly have the votes to count, especially in the county.

Collings

Yes. They have the numbers.

Newman

Yes. When they start seeing that our communities are turning out to vote more, then they have a tendency to start addressing the issues a bit more. So it's a long-term campaign to start building that. So every election, whether there's anything of major interest, we're out there reminding people to show up and vote, and every vote counts, you know. In some of these areas it doesn't take much to make a difference. The City of San Bernardino, you know, a candidate wins by 2[00] to 300 votes. So if we can turn out people, raise the level of turnout, you can have an influence there.

Collings

Do you think that you are the point where you can point to a particular election and think that CCAEJ has made a difference?

Newman

Oh yes. One of the issues we were dealing with, there was a Measure W, which was a local one here, and it was proposed to set up a service district which provides water and really is the key to development out here, because if they approve it, it will move forward. If they don't--it's kind of the most local agency we have to curtail stuff.

Collings

Growth. Because of whether water is provided or not.

Newman

Water's available, and sewage. With the new housing tracts in Eastville, in which a whole new community has been established, there's been a real effort to take over that board, and they're backed by the Building Industry Association. So they can run a slate of candidates, merge their money together, and [unclear].

Collings

Pro-development candidates.

Newman

Yes. So the measure was put out that would require for each seat to be representing a district within that service district, so that you had to live in one of these areas in order to run for that seat. The building industry really opposed that.

Collings

Who introduced that measure?

Newman

A couple of the board members that were on there and were ready to retire, and said, you know, Eastville is going to take it over if we don't do this. So there was no organized campaign to pass it. There was a big organized effort to defeat it through the Building Industry Association. So CCAEJ took it on as our issue, and it passed like at two to one. So everyone was very clear that that was CCAEJ.

Collings

Wonderful.

Newman

It was a test for us to see what our influence and credibility was in the community, which was really nice to see.

Collings

Absolutely.

Newman

So that was a big success for us. We don't endorse candidates or anything, so, you know, we don't even get into that. But the propositions are things that fall into what we do, and are related to issues affecting the community, so--

Collings

In the time that you've been reaching out to communities with these educational workshops, have you observed any generational shifts that you could point to?

Newman

What do you mean?

Collings

Well, like ways that perhaps the younger generation is coming out with more or less knowledge of some of these issues? There's more environmentalism taught in school now.

Newman

Yes, but it's, you know, recycle.

Collings

Yes, that's basically what it is, yes.

Newman

It's not the understanding of the political system. It's not the understanding of the institutional racism that's here. It doesn't give any analysis to that. So, no, I don't see a big difference. I see youth as being a category we need to do more outreach, and we have a lot of young people who are really interested in participating, and we've really been struggling to come up with a way to allow them to participate so it's their program. I think I'm too old to kind of help put that together. [Laughs]

Collings

You need youth leaders like the Communities for a Better Environment.

Newman

You've got to learn how to text, or forget it. [Laughs]

Collings

Yes. I mean, Communities for a Better Environment has these youth leaders that work with high school students.

Newman

Yes. But it's also, you know, I didn't want to get into a situation where we're just bringing young people into a meeting to have them kind of like the poster children. I didn't want to get into that kind of thing. I want them to define for themselves. So we haven't gotten funding for anything like that, and I think that for a youth program, they have to have their own funding for it. And generation-wise, you know, I don't even know how I'd go about doing it. You're talking to kids who weren't even around when we started in '78, and you know, they're, "78?"

Collings

"What?" [Laughs]

Newman

You know, you really realize how old you are. [Laughs] But the other thing, because I do talk with especially high school students in this area and telling them about what their history is and the culture of this community and what we brought, how we've influenced policy, and they're just blown away. You know, so I try to get across to them to have pride in their community. "This is your legacy here, and we know we can do things. We can change things." So there's some really good groups of clubs within the high school that have some real potential in this district.

Collings

Within the Patriot High School down the hill here.

Newman

Patriot and Jurupa Valley, yes, who are directly affected by this stuff, so--

Collings

Jurupa Valley is, yes.

Newman

Yes. Then the immigration issue is really big in this area. It really affects the students heavily. They're scared to leave school or to leave home to go to school because they're afraid of getting picked up. We've had the raids and everything else. So we get involved in that, because that's [unclear].

Collings

It's very interesting that you should raise that, because obviously it's central, particularly to immigrant communities, Latino communities.

Newman

We have a large immigrant population.

Collings

Right. You know, and it does sort of raise the question of when your community is facing what is essentially an existential crisis, can you focus on environmental issues?

Newman

I think you can, because it's kind of like, I mean, it keeps going on, too. I think you have to find a way of merging it. I mean, it's kind of like with our electoral program. It was kind of like, well, we have this immigrant population. So we started citizenship classes, and we've had over fifty people get their citizenship. Because we don't charge for it, and everywhere else, it's 250, $300 for a class.

Newman

So, you know, they're always full, and that gives us an opportunity to also talk to them about what civic engagement is. It's not just you become a citizen and you get to vote. Yes, it's important to vote, but democracy means you have to be involved all along, you know, on a daily basis, and having a say in what happens, and understanding what's going on in your community and stuff. So it's been really good, and we have some of our best precinct walkers are immigrants who cannot vote, but they're very good at getting their neighbors to vote for them. You know, "It's important you vote, because you're voting for me. I can't." Boy, they really get people turned out, because there's a personal connection.

Collings

Right. So you say that the community brings issues to you and there are these community meetings. How does it occur that there are these community meetings? Is that something regular, or is it issue-based?

Newman

Not as regular. We have some that are just, you know, come together and let's talk about what's going on. What are your concerns? We outline them into small groups that will break out and kind of take on one problem and try to figure out how to resolve it. One of them was the trash in the community. People were really upset about the illegal dumping that was taking place, and so out of that grew an effort; they wanted to have a cleanup day.

Newman

So we helped arrange that, and very successful. But it also put pressure on the county to start doing more, and so the code enforcement has been beefed up a bit, which has a downside, too, because it ends up targeting people.

Collings

People get tickets.

Newman

Well, and it's like there is no affordable housing out here. They are not addressing that at all, and yet they're bringing in warehouses where the jobs are minimum wage and temporary workers and no guaranteed hours, no benefits.

So there's no housing for those workers, and so you have two and three families sharing a single-family home, or converting the garage and moving a trailer in the back, or all whatnot. So Code Enforcement [Division] comes in and, you know, just wipes out. It's not that they're wanting to live this way; it's their only option, and without solving the problem.

Newman

So where are these people going, you know? So the vendors, street vendors, it's a way of people making a living, and providing a service to people who don't drive and can't get a driver's license, you know. [Laughs]

Collings

Right. And this proposition has come in that they can't park for more than half an hour.

Newman

Well, and here they're just shutting them down.

Collings

Shutting them down.

Newman

They have little pushcarts that go up and down the neighborhood, and because, you know, it's unhealthy. I said, "Well, establish some rules for them, you know. They're willing to do that." They just confiscate their cart and take what money they've earned, you know. So they have learned. They have another cart down the street hidden away, and they hide their money. And if Code Enforcement takes that, they go and get their other cart, and off they go again. It's amazing.

Newman

But again, a government that isn't dealing with what the real problem is. The problem is people don't have a way of making a living or finding shelter at a price that they can afford. So we're compounding the problem by bringing in jobs that don't make money.

Collings

Help pay, yes. So I guess part of my previous question was that, okay, the center has called for community action and environmental justice. So would community members feel like it was appropriate to raise other kinds of issues, such as immigration-type questions, at a CCAEJ meeting?

Newman

Yes, because, you know, we don't see ourselves as an environmental group. We're an environmental justice group, which means the environment is everything around us. If we don't have good schools that are teaching our kids, that's an issue for us. If we don't have the wages for affordable living and safe jobs, that's an issue. We look at the world from the community perspective. So

it's anything that impacts that community, has an impact on what our environment is going to be.

Newman

I think that's different from environmental groups or health advocacy or women's groups or whatever, is that we recognize we've got to stop going by these artificial barriers of what issues are, and realize that they're all interconnected. You can't deal with health issues without dealing with access to healthcare and the ability to pay for things, which goes back to the jobs. You know, kids aren't going to learn if they're sick, and you know, it's all interrelated.

Collings

Well, do you find that this presents you with a certain constituency; that perhaps you are not able to bring in your classical--perhaps this is a stereotype--sort of classical Republican businessman who is interested in--quote, unquote--"growing the economy," but has a very finite environmental concern?

Newman

Right. Yes, absolutely. I think we have carved out a niche that is not going to work with everybody. We don't take corporate money, because most corporations do something that exploits people. So that's limiting for us, but it's who we are. I think we have a real clear view of who we are and what we're here for, and it's like I said, you know; we'll work with other communities.

Newman

I'm working with communities in Temecula and that area, who are fighting a quarry from coming in. So the vineyard owners down there, they own million-dollar-plus homes. They have the resources to get whatever they need to fight this, but we're willing to work with them on giving them information and helping them in what way we can. It's just not a group we're going to devote a whole lot of time to.

Collings

So you're providing them with some expertise on organizing and activist techniques.

Newman

Right, and information about what to look for with a quarry and the silica dust and stuff.

Collings

Technical expertise.

Newman

Yes. I've been out there a couple of times to different meetings to talk with them and kind of inspire, you know, that "You can do this." Lord knows they can do it. They have attorneys up the gazoo out there. One of the things I find really interesting is even in that population they find that the law doesn't protect

them; that it's perfectly legal to kill people with pollution. It's just that there is a limit. You can't go above the kill line, you know. That's just absolutely amazing to them. "What do you mean?"

Newman

I said, "Well, that's what one in a million is, or twenty-five in a million. That's their license level. That's their limit, you know, just like a hunter."

Collings

Right. You can't go over this quota.

Newman

You have this license. You can kill three a day but no more than that, you know. Even when they violate it, they may get fined, but nothing much changes. So it's eye-opening for them, and I think in the long run that helps our communities, because they can articulate that in their social setting, which has much more influence.

Collings

So do you think that they are able to sort of take on some of the issues intellectually that you might be dealing with with other communities, as a result of meeting you and talking with you?

Newman

Yes. Yes, and I think it helps to break down some of that. I don't have any illusion that I'm going to change their particular perspective. But I think we are able to bring a little more sensitivity to it and a little more understanding of what's going on. You know, I had an experience in working in western--or eastern Washington State, when there was a proposed incinerator, and it was all these wheat farmers, who are very, very conservative. We didn't talk about pesticide use, and we didn't talk about anything but the incinerator, because they weren't about to have anything to do with an environmentalist.

Newman

But it was interesting, after talking with them about the incinerator and the types of chemicals coming in and what would be burned and what comes out of that, that I'd have individuals pull me aside and say, you know, "What do you think? Do you think it's a good idea that I've been putting the old pesticide cans down in the stream?"

Newman

I said, "I don't know. Don't you think it has some of these?"

Newman

He says, "Yeah." He says, "I don't think I'm going to do that anymore."

Newman

So they slowly start taking a little different view of things. You know, it's not going to be overnight, but it will--

Collings

Interesting, yes.

Newman

You get to understand that there's kind of a ripple effect for where you are and who you are and what you say, and that there are impacts you have on other people that I'll never know about, but that it's happening, and that hopefully they're good impacts. I'm sure there are some negative, too. [Laughs] But, you know, I think we're having an impact that will change somebody someplace.

Collings

Well, it's interesting that you have decided to settle in this area and focus on this area. Do you think that you as an individual, and other members of this organization, as individuals, have a certain status or perhaps notoriety within the local community that aids you in your work?

Newman

Aids and also creates an obstacle. I had one of my staff point out--we were having a discussion with one of our funders, and she said what astonished her in coming into the organization and participating in some of these things, is that when we go outside of the area to meetings, that my reputation is so strong--she described it as almost a folk hero, you know, to people--and yet here people just see me as, you know--

Collings

Here in Glen Avon?

Newman

--here in Riverside--as, "Oh, yeah, Penny." I was pointing out that experts are usually considered someone from fifty miles away. So people know me as Penny. They've grown up with me. They've encountered me through Little League and PTA and other things, so I'm just Penny.

Newman

Outside there's another level that comes in, where people really actually probably know more about what we've done than the people who've been doing it, because it just--you went through it, and so it was just part of doing it. You don't realize how special it was. But people from outside who benefitted from us doing that clearly understand what we did.

Newman

So the institutions that we created, like Department of Toxic Substances Control, out of Department of Health Services, because they couldn't deal with--they didn't know anything about chemicals. So we created a whole new institution to deal with that. Out of Centers for Disease Control we created the Agency for Toxic Substance and Disease Registry to focus on that. You know, Superfund was created because there was no funding [unclear]. All of these things came about because of what we started here, and specifically this community.

Newman

For us, it was, well, we just got the exposure stopped and we got new water. That's what people were focusing on and not the bigger picture.

Newman

I think the other thing that happens is that when we were going through our battles with various agencies, and we would win things, the people involved would make it much bigger than it actually was, because you don't get defeated by just some housewives. You get defeated by this well-organized--you know, it was somebody out there pulling strings. So it does create a folklore, so that when you go to address someone else, another agency, it's like, "Oh, yeah, I've heard about you," and they're waiting for that shoe to fall or something. They're always kind of amazed. "Well, you're not so bad."

Newman

So it's a very strange--I often think that it's kind of like celebrities, you know, who get seen in movies, and it's so different from their real life that it's hard to kind of consolidate that, you know, to get it under your hat.

Collings

But you don't feel that it like encourages the community members to step forward more, to attend more of these meetings?

Newman

Oh, I think it does, absolutely, and I think one of the things, because we were starting--when we started, we were going to develop all these different community groups and just let them go. What we found was, no, no, no, no; they didn't want that. They wanted to be a part of CCAEJ. They wanted to be here.

Collings

They wanted to be where the name, the known quantity was.

Newman

Because it gave them protection, number one, because there was that reputation and that people were less likely to take us on than they would Joe Blow in this neighborhood. So it gave them that protection. It built their confidence, you know; "I'm part of them," kind of thing. And it created this umbrella of power. It's not just our neighborhood, but it's also these other communities who are supporting us.

Newman

That took us a while to come to grips with, because it was like, well, shoot, then we're going to just--this could get out of hand. [Laughs]

Collings

Yes, because you wanted to empower all of these groups, and they just wanted to--

Newman

Yes, just go forth, you know, and make change. [Laughs]

Collings

Exactly.

Newman

And it was like, "No, no, we don't want to do that." I kind of use the analogy of unions, where you have the shop stewards in the different plants, but that they're under one umbrella, and that with that they have more power. So it does make sense to me. Again, it brought me back to people know what is best, and if you give them the opportunity to come together and develop this group wisdom, they'll come up with the right answers. We just have to keep reminding ourselves to come out of the office and listen to people, you know. I've had our CPA a few times talking about, "You're administrative. You're not program; you're administrative."

Newman

I said, "No, I'm program," and trying to kind of grapple with that. You know, that has to be. I can't just remove--because otherwise, we're top down; we're not from the bottom up, directing it. So you're having to kind of keep fighting this default that's always set up, like a computer, unless you change it, you know. You keep going back, and it automatically goes to the default.

Collings

To the reset, yes.

Newman

There's so much legal pressures and stuff to do it this way, because that's the way it's done, that to fight it is a constant battle. It takes a lot of energy.

Collings

So there's so much legal pressure to do it in--

Newman

In a very hierarchical--

Collings

Why is there legal pressure to do that?

Newman

Because legally in an organization, you have to have a person who's responsible for everything, that's just the key whatever. Then who are under you; and your supervision is supposed to be this way. So all of these mechanisms kind of work toward the hierarchical as the norm, and we're trying very hard to flatten that structure. We have kind of this team approach, where it's based not on your title but on the skills that you bring to a particular situation.

Collings

So one person might be like the point person because they have more technical information about that situation, or something like that.

Newman

Right. Right, and in our instance, if we're working in Mira Loma, the lead people are the staff that live in Mira Loma, because they have the credibility, they know the people--

Collings

Yes, the credibility.

Newman

--and they are directly affected. So they take the lead on it, not someone else. So it always is kind of pushing a change in who's dealing with the media. It doesn't make sense to have Jan in San Bernardino do a press conference in Mira Loma. So you utilize and you think through who are the best ones to do that, and then always trying to bring new leadership to share, and so you have new faces. The media doesn't like that. They like to be able to call one person and get an answer. So that's another default that kind of keeps--it takes a great deal of energy just to keep to the principles of what we're trying to do--

Collings

Oh, that's very interesting.

Newman

--but it's key to how we're successful. So when you're trying to focus on that, other things can kind of fall by the wayside, because it does take that attention. So it's a real balancing act.

Collings

So would you say that there was ever a time when the actual issue that you're dealing with kind of fades away because you're focusing on implementing the principles of your organization?

Newman

I think it's more that sometimes the issue takes away from us building the base. You get concentrated on trying to address the issue rather than how you're going about addressing the issue, and that's a big struggle.

Collings

So how do you decide what you're going to take on? I mean, you can't take on everything, I would imagine.

Newman

No, but the community will raise issues, and if there's enough people who are really concerned about that, they'll figure out a way to--we need to get together and do this. When it reaches a point where it's hitting a lot of communities or is a huge impact, then it becomes a campaign. At that point there's more resources given to it. We usually have specific funding for it. It's not the everyday kind of things, but, you know, this is clearly something that hits a lot of people that we need to--it's a big issue.

Newman

The goods movement is an example of that. That's one of our campaigns.

Collings

Right. That's a big campaign.

Newman

Yes, and then perchlorate is another big campaign that takes a great deal of work and concentration. We'll devote a lot of time toward thinking through a strategy to address that; you know, an analysis of the power structure and who makes the decisions and how do we go about--you know. It becomes--somebody was here the other day, one of the steel workers, and he says, "Your war room is just amazing."

Newman

I said, "Our war room?"

Newman

He said, "Yeah, you had all the stuff up."

Newman

I said, "Oh, yeah, downstairs."

Collings

So what did he mean by that?

Newman

Well, that we clearly analyze where we're at, who we're up against, and how to go about addressing it, and that that's different than a lot of groups do who just kind of, spur of the moment, throw something together and go after it. We really have learned you have to do it in a campaign model, where you identify where you want to go and then the steps to get there, and that you have to build momentum toward it, and you have to bring the public along with you so that they understand.

Newman

For example, we recently picketed a supervisor's [John Tavaglione] home with about a hundred people. If we had done that right out the door, people would say, "What are you doing? Why would you attack this guy?" He would get a great deal of sympathy. But for eight years they've seen that we have gone to all of these hearings. We have given testimony. We've provided comments. We've outlined the research. We've taken the legal measures we need to take in CEQUA [California Environmental Quality Act] lawsuits, you know, six times. We've won. And still they continue to do it.

Newman

The particular timing had three editorials criticizing the supervisor for the way he was treating the community, so that when we went to his house and said, "We've tried everything else. Maybe this will get his attention," it made total sense to them.

Newman

His response, "Well, now I'm not going to listen to them, even less than before," you know, just outraged people. So we think it through. We don't just do something to be doing something.

Collings

Yes. Now, going to the home of a political figure is a tactic that you do employ. There was the [Attorney General John] Van de Kamp visit during the Stringfellow days, and you were at Governor [Arnold] Schwarzenegger's home in Brentwood, and now you're referring to this visit. Why do you like to do that?

Newman

Well, I think when people in power, people in decision-making positions, get to looking at things as just a way of doing business, then when they make a decision that impacts people's lives so dramatically, like it is with Mira Loma and the warehouse facilities coming in and stuff, and they can do that in a setting where it's just routine business; that's the way it is. And they aren't called on it, and there's no consequence to it, they'll keep doing it. So the consequence has to be equal to what they're doing.

Newman

So, you know, it's not something we do every day, and it is really a last resort. It's kind of like the union going on strike. You try a hell of a lot of things before that. And you have to build up to it, you know. And the same things, that we really believe strongly that people have to be held accountable personally for the decisions that they make. If they're allowed to just think as a group, as a board or whatever, they'll continue to do bad things. Then it really has to be confronted head on, and the injustice has to be made public, so that people can't ignore it.

Collings

So going to their personal home is a way of making them take personal responsibility for a decision.

Newman

And they may not care what people in Mira Loma think, but they do care about what their neighbors think. If nothing else, having a whole bunch of people in the neighborhood will get the neighbors talking. "What is it you're doing?" So we made sure we had fliers explaining why we were there, so that the neighbors understood what we were doing there.

Newman

What amazed me, at both Governor Schwarzenegger's house and at Tavaglione's house, was that the neighbors were very supportive. The neighbors at Tavaglione's house, we did it on a Sunday afternoon, and they said, "You know, you should come back during the week. You'll probably get more press." That really amazed me.

Collings

What did the neighbors say to you at Schwarzenegger's house?

Newman

"We can't stand this man. If you want to come back, if they give you trouble on that, come over to my yard. You can use my yard. I'd be happy." They were honking their horns like this.

Collings

It was a political feud, or they didn't like his motorcycle, or what?

Newman

It was the arrogance. It was the arrogance of him, and they were talking about how, with the state police, he would let his fourteen-year-old drive the car up and down the street, speeding, and nobody did anything about it. That just--you know, he uses his position for his own personal gain, and they just find that--I mean, anybody would.

Newman

I think that's what is usually behind most of the conditions we find, is that there's some way in which a decision maker is benefiting personally from this, and that's why they have to be held accountable personally. And the message that your decisions are impacting us personally so our decisions are going to impact you personally, is important.

Collings

You used to do a lot of that kind of thing during the Stringfellow campaign, which you might sort of call performance activism. You don't tend to employ that type of activity with CCAEJ.

Newman

No, I think we do.

Collings

Oh, you do.

Newman

Yes. Yes, I think we try. I don't think it is as frequent with us now, but that's just because it was so much easier with the small group. We just got together and we decided, okay--

Collings

Just come up with something.

Newman

--this is the next thing we're going to do, and off we went. I mean, I could dictate, "Yeah, we're going to do it." That isn't real effective. I think it's a combination of the staff still learning and being comfortable in how to engage people and bring them to that level where they're ready to do that, because, you know, it's not easy for people to confront someone in a public setting like that. It's not easy.

Collings

Especially if you're dealing with a lot of immigrant communities, there wouldn't be that sort of inbred sense of permission that you--

Newman

Exactly. Well, and there's real danger in doing it, you know. One of the things that staff is beginning to understand and I knew was going to happen, was we're getting real pushback now. I'm trying to get them to understand that, yes, when this happens, it means you're getting close. So, for example, we had the county assessor was threatening to take our property tax exemption for the thirteen acres we have here.

Collings

Right here at the center.

Newman

Yes, with the park and all, and go back four years for back taxes, which would have been about $60,000, you know. We got this notice, and everybody was just freaked out, and I said, "No, this means we're about to make a breakthrough. They're pushing back, so they're taking us seriously."

Collings

What were you about to make a breakthrough on?

Newman

With our goods movement stuff and all. We had gotten the attention of the supervisor, and he was reacting to it. We won that. They've let us know that, no, we have 100 percent exemption, and we'll be getting a refund and all that. But it takes time and energy to have to deal with that, and we had an IRS audit two months ago. You know, that doesn't just happen because you're up on a list. It's because somebody called and complained. We went through it with flying colors. She kept saying our records are "perfect, perfect, just perfect."

Newman

So, you know, I'm telling staff, "As long as we're doing things the way we're supposed to do, we're fine. We'll take it on as it comes. That's part of this whole thing. There's going to be pushback. Power does not just give up. You have to take it from them, and they don't do it easily. There's a fight here. When we push, they're going to push back, and the harder they push back means you're making headway."

Newman

So for other organizers, they understand. "Oh, hey, good for you. You're getting an IRS audit. That's good. You're going to break through."

Collings

All right.

Newman

For the rest of them, it's like, "Oh, my god. I've never been through--." Well, now we know what it is, and the fear of that is gone. You know, bring it on.

Collings

Can you point to any instances where individuals who were involved in your group felt that they needed to drop out because--I don't know--they were afraid they would personally get an audit or something like that?

Newman

I think it's been more with people who haven't associated closely with us. I'm thinking about one family in Colton that we've been trying to help, but he's not quite getting it yet. He's still kind of the Lone Ranger out there, and he's been sued. He's had a slapped suit on him. He won it. They're threatening another lawsuit on him.

Collings

What was this family's issue?

Newman

It's an auto shredder that is being proposed. One of the local junkyard guys, who is pretty--you know, there are some industries that are much more thuggish than others.

Collings

Thuggish.

Newman

Yes, and usually the smaller--the auto wrecking yards. The waste management people are known for it. They're not as sophisticated as a GE or something, who will do it much more subtly. So you kind of come to understand which ones are going to be the thugs.

Collings

Let me take that cord away from you. [Laughs] How's that?

Newman

So he's kind of out there right now, so we're trying to kind of get him to understand why he's getting targeted.

Collings

That's a tough one.

Newman

Men are really hard; I mean, I don't know what it is about them. It's harder for them to join into a group then women, who are much more communal, I guess. I don't know. [Laughs]

Collings

All right. So you mentioned that the goods movement issue sort of had taken the status of a campaign. Let's just kind of get into that and talk about what the issues are and what your involvement is.

Newman

I guess when we started with the goods movement was probably '97, '98. We didn't call it goods movement; I don't think anybody did. We just saw some facilities being proposed. There was one warehouse that was starting to come in. We were concerned about it because it was taking agricultural land, and we would have this huge building in the middle of open space, and that the open space was very precious to the Mira Loma community; just, you know, half-acre or larger lots. People own animals and they go horseback riding and stuff, so the trails were very important.

Newman

So it started dealing with it that way. We came, actually, in contact with United Food and Commercial Workers, who were concerned that the warehouse would be leased to Wal-Mart, and that Wal-Mart was really trying to get a distribution center in Southern California in order to expand their stores. So they offered to foot the bill for a lawsuit on CEQUA, and since that's what we were looking at, we joined with them. So that was kind of our first inkling to it.

Newman

Then as we started doing more investigation into it about what the impacts were and were realizing it's not just the building; there's these trucks coming in. Then the information on diesel, and about that same time we went through this, USC came out with their findings with the children's health study on the impacts of lung development.

Collings

Proximity to highways and--

Newman

Well, and even before that. The first one was on the lung function and lung growth of children in Southern California and its relationship to particulate matter, and Mira Loma was identified as having children with the weakest lung capacity and slowest lung growth of all kids in the study with association with particulate pollution. I think there was another community that was specifically with a chemical, and I can't remember what it was. But Mira Loma really stood out, you know. It was at the end of the chart, big red circle around it.

Newman

So all of that kind of combined to make us realize that, hey, this is not just a big building. This is something that's really critical. Then we found that Mira Loma was identified as having the highest levels of particulate pollution in the nation, and in Southern California, with as bad as the pollution is, we're it. That didn't make sense to us, so we started really looking at it, and it became very clear this was a serious problem we had to address.

Newman

We then had some warehouses proposed directly across the street from a housing tract that's been there for quite a long time, and people were--well, first

of all, didn't know about it. So we started giving people information about this proposal, and they became very alarmed, many of them because they felt they'd lose their view of the mountains, you know, with these big buildings. They didn't like the increased truck traffic because of their horses. Then later it was the health issue. I think it just started emerging.

Newman

In particular, I think it was about 2000 or so, we had a community meeting where we had AQMD [Air Quality Management District] come out and some of the researchers from USC, and our supervisor was there, and it was a packed house. I remember the specific moment when we had the slide of a cancer risk that AQMD did. They had one without diesel which left it pretty low, in the light color, which meant the lighter, the lower the cancer risk. Then they showed the next slide with diesel, and it just turned purple, deep purple, and you heard the air being sucked out of the room as people gasped. It was really quite a moment.

Newman

I remember standing next to a supervisor at the podium. She's trying to answer these questions people are putting in. Somebody said, "I understand there's going to be seven warehouses right on Belgrave across from our--."

Newman

He says, "I don't think that's what the proposal is."

Newman

I said, "Yeah, it is."

Collings

This was the same supervisor, Tavaglione.

Newman

Yes. He said, "Are you sure?"

Newman

I said, "Yes."

Newman

He says, "Well, I guess, yeah, there is seven of them." People were just--and I thought it was so funny that he was turning to me for information. But that night--

Collings

Well, he probably knew very well it was seven.

Newman

Oh yes. Oh yes. So I think it was the first time he had seen the children's health study, because he just hadn't paid any attention to it. I think it's the first time he saw AQMD's stuff, and I think he was as shocked as anybody else. He promised at that point he was going to set up an air quality task force. He was going to really look at this. He was going to have EIRs done on all of these

things and, you know, on and on and on. But once he left the meeting and got to talk with the developers and stuff, then it didn't matter that the kids had--you know. So he kind of got his bearings again.

Newman

But that was really the key to the community talking together on the issue. So we've really been on the forefront on it. I remember one of our funders was telling me, on our proposal to them about, you know, we needed to stop these warehouses; he says, "You can't stop development. It's going to happen. Why don't you put your goal as going to have the trucks go a different way or something?"

Newman

I said, "No," you know; that AQMD told us that even if we had new trucks with clean fuel, that the sheer increase in the number of trucks was going to make the pollution at least stay where it's at and not be reduced.

Newman

He said, "Well, okay." So it gave us the funding, and we stopped 700 acres from being developed into industrial property. That made him a believer, and we've had a really good opportunity to work with him.

Newman

But it also caught the eye of the business world in Riverside and San Bernardino Counties. The business press wrote a big article in the Inland Empire magazine on people you need to know; did a big article on us and stuff. So we really kind of set the area on alert. We've been able to save that so far. They're now proposing homes on that property that would go next to existing warehouses. For some reason, that's supposed to be different than putting warehouses next to existing homes. But it's the same outfit. They're going to have people living next to a source. So the battle has gone on since then.

Newman

As the port started looking to expand and people became aware there, I think the China Shipping lawsuit emerged. They used some of our briefs to utilize for theirs. We started kind of making some connections and began understanding that it's not us just battling with the county. We needed to find out what was going on at the ports, because there was something bigger driving all of this than local land-use decisions, which were bad enough. So we've kind of gotten pulled into the bigger picture of really seeing what was at stake here.

Collings

Now, were those seven warehouses constructed elsewhere?

Newman

No, at least not that--there's other warehouses that some of these companies are doing, but they would have been done, too. One thing I learned; it's not an

either/or. You put them here or--they want to do all of it. So we stopped those, and there are still others going up.

Collings

So your organization participated in this conference--or participates in the IMPACT Project, along with Communities for a Safe Environment, the East Yard Communities for Environmental Justice, and some others. So what kind of work do you do with the IMPACT Project?

Newman

Well, it's kind of an outgrowth of another group, the Modesta Avila Coalition, which was Jesse's [Jesse Marquez] group [Communities for a Safe Environment] and East Yard and us, with Mira Loma and San Bernardino, who were looking at rail yards. We were trying to kind of come up with ideas on how to address the rail yard pollution and introduce some bills and 3500 Rules with AQMD, and you know, really trying to push somebody to do something about rail yards. Out of that we realized that rail yards are one piece of it, but, you know, the warehousing issue and the truck issue, and all of these other things. We were working together, anyway, and Andrea [Rico] and the researchers at USC were a part of it. They were such good resources for us, and really willing to work with the communities.

Newman

So we thought, "Well, we might as well try and get some funding for this," and the endowment was interested in funding, but they wouldn't do it without the community input. So we brought in Occidental College with Bob [Robert] Gottlieb for some of the policy stuff, too. So it became this coalition that formed.

Collings

What is the position of your organization on the port growth question?

Newman

Well, I think we're coming to understand that this industry, this whole thing, is not a good economic engine for Southern California; that there's only so much you can do with technology. When AQMD came out and did the specific air quality study on Mira Loma as part of their environmental justice program and found that even if you use green trucks, you're not going to solve the problem because of the increase that would take place, that really got us to understand capturing things with the particulate traps isn't going to work. Then with the research that came out on aerosols, the ultrafine particles and [unclear] and all, that the traps don't even begin to address, and that that's really the major problem with diesel, that we have to look further. This isn't going to solve the community's problem. So in doing so, you start to understand this growth of this whole industry is really the critical problem.

Collings

But if this port brings 40 percent of the offshore goods into the United States, it's a pretty big concern. How do you take that on?

Newman

Well, it's a big concern that that's way too much.

Collings

I mean, it's a big business concern. It's a big enterprise. How do you take that on?

Newman

Yes, but there's only a certain select few that are profiting from it. The community doesn't profit from this, and it relies on people buying this junk that comes in. We can't keep doing that, you know. So from a long-term sustainability, you know--we're going to live here a long time. We're not going anywhere. This doesn't make any sense for us.

Newman

I think there's a number of forces coming together that are starting to really impact whether this is going to succeed or not, and one is the economy. People don't have the money to buy the way they were, and so there isn't going to be the demand for this stuff coming in. If we're not making something, if we're not producing, if we're not providing for our communities locally, what are we going to fall back on? You know, if oil keeps going up the way it is, and everything with this industry is petroleum-based, from the trucks, the rail, the ships, the whole thing.

Collings

To the goods that are produced.

Newman

Yes. That it's not going to work. Then you look at the impacts on the infrastructure that local communities are paying for. They can't keep doing that. The cities and counties can't keep funding that. So the health impacts alone are costing communities a huge amount. Now with ARB's latest estimate of 24,000 people dying each year because of the air they're breathing, I mean, how can we keep doing this? This just doesn't make any sense.

Newman

So the point we've been trying to get across is, as long as you keep doing this, you're not doing something else, and as long as we're subsidizing this industry, and we're pouring so much money into it with Prop[osition] 1B, and subsidizing the railroad, who can well afford to do its own business; we don't need to be doing that. But as long as we're focusing on that, we're not proceeding with anything else that would be a better deal in the long run for all of us. So at some point you have to say these few that are profiting can't profit on the backs of everybody else, and that we have to find some mechanism that provides a benefit, you know, a net benefit to everybody, and this isn't it.

Collings

What kinds of contacts have you had with port officials on this question?

Newman

We've been working with the groups that live near the ports, because, you know, there is a fundamental belief that they have--they're directly affected; they have the most to say in this. But not all to say in it, because what ends up happening, I think, in some of these debates that go on, is that they come up with a way of reducing pollution at the ports; they just transfer it out here. So we've gotten an agreement with the groups that that won't be solutions; that we won't agree to those solutions. It's a little harder in practice, because people get so desperate.

Newman

So you have this debate about on-dock rail versus off-dock, which would address this process or proposal next to the school, which is a horrendous situation. But people get into the point of, "Okay, if we don't go forward with this, we'll let you do the other," you know. And I totally understand that. I mean, you know, I totally understand it. But we have to have that reminder that that's--you know, you're just trading off another community, you know. It's important to win that battle, but not at the expense of someone else.

Collings

So have there been any tensions between CCAEJ and, for example, the Communities for a Safe Environment? I'm just throwing that out as an example, because that's in Wilmington.

Newman

Yes. No, I think because of the IMPACT Project, and we come into contact. It's a collaboration that has emerged organically, and we understand our shared interest in this. So I think we have a pretty good understanding of that. They're all coming from that community perspective. I think where we come into conflict--

[Transcription stopped due to technical difficulties.]

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