

Interview

with

Eboni Neal Cochran

June 2, 2006

by David Cline

Transcribed by Emily Baran

**The Southern Oral History Program
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill**

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Interviewee: Eboni Cochran

Interviewer: David Cline

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Length: 1 disc, approximately 62 minutes

DC: This is David Cline on Friday, June second here in Louisville. I'm meeting with Eboni Cochran and if you could just introduce yourself, say your age and where you were born.

EC: My name is Eboni Cochran, thirty-four years old, I will be thirty-five this year. I was born in Louisville, Kentucky, but I was raised, I guess most of my life as a child, in Bloomington, Indiana, well a good portion of my childhood.

DC: Is that where you went to high school?

EC: Well, my early childhood. No, I went to elementary and middle school in Bloomington, Indiana while my father was in law school there. Then we came back to Louisville in my freshman year in high school.

DC: And your father is, just for the record?

EC: Sterling Neil Jr.

DC: I've also interviewed Mr. Neil for this project. You've been involved in the pollution issue with the factories in Rubbertown. Can you tell me a little bit about specifically what you've been doing and how you came to your involvement?

EC: Okay, well it's kind of weird. The house that I'm living in now is, actually I'm the third-generation Neil to live in this house actually. So it's kind of strange, because my grandparents lived in this house and when we used to come visit, you know, we used to smell

odors, but at that young age, I don't remember anybody ever talking about chemical plants. It was just something that was here.

DC: And what neighborhood is this considered?

EC: This is now considered the Chickasaw neighborhood. Actually, there was a formal subdivision name, but I can't even remember it. Nobody even goes by that anymore.

DC: But we're in the west end?

EC: West Louisville, yes. So then my uncle purchased the property. By the time he purchased it, things had gotten a little bit better, so we purchased the property in 2000 from my uncle. Well, in 2003, I got this flier in the mailbox talking about Rubbertown chemical plants. I was like, "Hmm, this looks important" and I sat it down on the table and went along. Then I got a second flier in my mailbox that said, "We're having a meeting, Rubbertown chemical plants," and I said, "Oh man, I've really got to see what they're talking about." Then by the third time, I said, "Okay, I'm just going to stop, cancel anything I have on that day, and I'm going to that meeting." So that's how I got involved in this was by the persistence and the canvassing of people who were part of REACT at that time. So that's how I got involved.

DC: Okay. Can you tell me a little bit about what REACT [Rubbertown Emergency ACTION] is?

EC: REACT initially started out as a campaign of the Justice Resource Center, you know, the Rev. Louis Coleman. Then in 2003, maybe mid- to late-2003, it kind of split off into its own independent organization. It's basically just a group of residents who are fighting for reduced to no emissions coming from the Rubbertown chemical plants. I don't know what else you want to know, but that's basically what we do is try fight for that. Basically, from about 2003 through about 2004, we really, really fought hard at educating the Metro Council and the

Air Pollution Control Board. I'm told that when REACT first got started that the Air Pollution Control Board, there was some kind of proposal out there to require Rubbertown chemical plants to reduce emissions by three percent and the Board voted it down. Well, after that point, REACT started to attend every Air Pollution Control Board meeting monthly. We would take maybe one to two people to speak before the board and we did that for a solid probably year and a half to educate them and kind of put a human face on the issue.

In 2005, I think it was June, the Air Pollution Control Board adopted the STAR Program, which is the Strategic Toxic Air Reduction Program, which is much more aggressive than reducing the emissions by three percent. That's something that we've been doing for the past few years is fighting for STAR. And we also, for about a solid year and a half, went to Metro Council meetings. Those meetings occur on the second and fourth Thursday of the month. So what we did was send two to three people from the neighborhood, just anybody, to go and speak before the Metro Council so that we could keep it in their minds and educate them, because you know, the things that they hear from the agencies are different from how residents actually experience things.

DC: Right.

EC: So we felt that it was important for them to see that human face and actually to tell them the truth about what was going on. So we did that for about a solid year and a half and what ended up coming out of that, we think that we were partially helped out with the fact that they adopted a resolution to support the STAR Program. And they also voted against a resolution that would have studied the economic impact to industries, which really we felt was unnecessary, because throughout the process of the STAR Program, there were all kinds of stakeholders meetings and the industries and residents were able to submit comments and we

felt that if you felt there was an economic impact to industries, during that period of the stakeholders meetings would have been the time to have brought that forth. We've just been doing everything. We've been really trying to expose the fact that the Air Pollution Control District is an ineffective agency. They do not have adequate odor investigations. They're responsible for those and odors do indicate chemicals. But we found initially that they would come out a day or two later and the odor's gone. And most people around here will tell you that the odors are either in the middle of the night or very early in the morning and on the weekend. At the time, they didn't have equipment to test the air. They actually told somebody that they follow the smell with their nose.

DC: And now do they have equipment?

EC: They finally have gotten some equipment, but I think now they're in the phase of training people to actually use the equipment. So they should be doing some testing within the next several months hopefully.

DC: Now how many people are actively involved in REACT?

EC: We try to keep that confidential. I mean, it's not a massive amount of people, but we like to be kind of secretive. (laughs)

DC: Right, but are you able to get people out when you need them?

EC: Yeah, we actually feel like the community's kind of an extension of our organization and a lot of times we do work through other organizations who might have listserves or much more capacity than what we have and we send action alerts or messages through them or ask their people to come and speak for us.

DC: Now I'm really interested in how this plays out in terms of race. I know that Rev. Coleman uses the term "environmental racism" when he talks about pollution. I notice that

there was just a class action or a couple of class action lawsuits filed from Riverside Gardens and I take it those are mostly white complainants.

EC: Correct.

DC: So coming from the outside of this community and looking in and I see this issue and I think, "Okay, this is affecting both black and white citizens of Louisville. This could be an issue that could potentially unite people."

EC: It's funny, you would think it could. I mean, the trend around the country is for these chemical plants to be located in or affect mostly people of color and people of low income. So you would think it would be a crossover issue for communities to come together, but it's a strange thing.

DC: But it hasn't, it really hasn't worked that way?

EC: No, and actually REACT has worked with Riverside Gardens on some things, so it's not like--. Actually, the reason that they are a part of the class action lawsuit is because we involved them in the class action lawsuit, because actually we were the ones who, ever since probably around 2003, REACT members have been contacting attorneys to take on the case and of course, every local attorney they called said that it was a conflict of interest. So we finally, we called everybody from Johnny Cochran to Erin Brokovich and apparently, Erin Brokovich doesn't work east of a certain area, so she referred the case to the people, Missouga and Liddell, who are now handling that class action lawsuit for Riverside Gardens. So that's the reason. There's no like warring factions or anything. When we knew that they were going to take our case, then we had a meeting and we brought in Riverside Gardens so that they would have a chance to benefit.

DC: So there are two different cases?

EC: Actually, it looks like there are going to be several different classes. I don't know all the technical stuff, but it's not going to be just one class action lawsuit.

DC: And the attorneys—

EC: Missouga and Liddell, and they're out of Detroit. There is a local attorney that they're working through, Matthew White.

DC: Yeah, I've contacted them. I think I'll be interviewing them next week.

EC: So as far as the racism thing, I have no doubt in my mind that racism is involved in a lot of it and really, Rev. Coleman, he's the expert on a lot of things that go on. I'm very new to this whole, people say "activism" thing. I'm very new to it, even though my family has a very strong history of it and I've always been involved in the community as far as if there's a meeting or if there is something that's happening, then I'll give input, but as far as being involved in a group activity, this is really my first time. But it's strange, because one thing that has occurred is that groups like the Sierra Club and other organizations that probably don't have many black members, they really shunned REACT in the beginning, I'm talking about really. I was told that at one meeting, there was a Louisville Forum meeting at some Italian restaurant and that REACT members were actually not allowed to come in. One of our members was able to slip in, but they would not allow REACT members to come in.

But now, it's so funny, because I was just in a meeting Wednesday that REACT and Kentuckians for the Commonwealth co-hosted, co-facilitated, and now all these groups that probably, well one of the groups at least that probably would not have worked with REACT before in the beginning, they're now wanting to work as a coalition, which you know, I try not to be kind of resentful, but I'm like, "Where were you guys in the beginning when we were trying to tell the whole world that no, they're not doing the odor investigations, these people are

putting out stuff at night?" It's still kind of interesting, because I can tell that they do not want to be associated too much with REACT.

DC: Why do you think that is?

EC: I really can't get into the minds of people, but I don't know. If you just look at it from the outside in, it could be racism. I don't know what else could explain it.

DC: From my perspective, reading newspaper articles about this and trying to unravel it -- there's the Rubbertown Community Action Council and there's so many different sorts of councils and boards involved in this and then it seems like each of the companies then also has its own little community board. Can you tell me about sort of working through the structure? I'd imagine it's very difficult.

EC: Well, that's one of the things that I've found out about this, because I've been a voter ever since it was legal for me to vote. But many times over the years, I can say that I was an uneducated voter and I just voted because I felt like my ancestors fought and died for me to vote and so I needed to get to the polls to vote even if I didn't know who I was voting for. Well, working with REACT has really taught me about participation in the political process. I mean, this is true participation. That whole going to the booth to the vote, that's the end product kind of, but I forgot what your question was and I had the answer.

DC: What it's like dealing with, through all these different councils and boards.

EC: Gosh, it's horrible, because really the system is not set up for participation by residents. They schedule meetings during the day. I mean, I've had to take out hours of PTO [personal time off] to make it to a meeting, because I knew they didn't want us there. They don't invite you to the table and like I was telling somebody at a workshop the other weekend, sometimes you just have to be at the table. Believe me, when REACT, when we used to walk in

the door, you would see all kinds of eyes rolling. You would hear heavy sighs. Nobody wanted us there. We basically had to stampede through the door and it is very difficult, because all the information is kind of spread out all over the place and one of the things that gives the other side power is that we don't have the information. So we basically have to dig for the information and it's very difficult and tiring, especially because none of us have a chemist's degree, none of us.

One of the things that we had to start doing was trying to—well, what I did definitely was I always carried a notebook to every meeting and believe me, we went to just about every meeting there ever was. What I would do is take notes. Even if I didn't understand the word or what the heck they were talking about, I would take notes. Then I would come home and put in keywords into google or something and try to figure out what they were talking about and that's like one of the ways I learned about the toxics release inventory, which tells you the emissions of some of the major sources of pollution. Then what I started doing with that information is, I may not know all the stuff about it, but I would go in a meeting and I would say, "Well, what I'm wondering about if you say that your emissions are lower, but what about the three hundred thousand pounds of ammonia that you released in 2003?" And everybody would think I actually knew what I was talking about. But basically, we have to learn the language of the people that we're fighting against. That's been extremely difficult trying to learn some of the technical jargon to the extent that we could with our limited knowledge. So it's been very hard trying to navigate the meetings, because a lot of people don't want you there. They're not going to tell you about [them]. You're not going to be on their e-mail list. So you either have to find somebody on the inside, you have to overhear a conversation, it's really rough.

DC: Is it both the factories and the city that have made that difficult?

EC: Oh yeah. In the beginning, the city didn't want us there. When they started having problems with Senate Bill 39 from Dan Seum, which he wanted to take local power away from the local authority, that's when they didn't mind seeing us coming through their door, because what we were fighting for is what they were fighting for. So they like us sometimes and sometimes they don't. But our issue's the same all the time. Whether you like us or not, we really don't care. But yeah, that's a tough thing. It's so funny that I'm just now realizing that the system is not set up for public participation. That is why most people don't vote.

DC: Even though that's democracy at its most basic, you would think it would be—

EC: Exactly, but when you get blocked by the people who have power, and people don't understand that *we* have the power, *we* have the power. I mean, I really feel and it's not like I'm thinking, "Oh, REACT did this or that," but I really do feel that that whole year and a half of educating the Air Pollution Control Board, educating the Metro Council, I really think that made a difference; I feel that in my heart.

DC: So STAR feels like an accomplishment?

EC: Yeah, I think that we were partially--. And it's so funny, because I went to the Air Pollution Control District site. I was looking for something. They do have a good website and they had this little PowerPoint presentation on, I guess, the time line for STAR and all that. They put all these names of all the organizations that helped and they put West Jefferson County Task Force, blah, blah, blah, and then it said, "Other community organizations." I thought about contacting Art Williams and saying, "Oh, I was wondering if you could get me the names of those other community organizations that helped with the STAR issue, because

we could use them to help us with the Senate bill fight.” I mean, the fact that you never mention REACT means that we had some kind of influence.

I went to a workshop a week or two ago that the Sierra Club put on and one of the panelists was naming off all the people who helped with the STAR and all that. When it was time for comments, it’s hard for me to keep my mouth shut. So I said, “Yeah, I just wanted to make sure that we don’t leave out the Rev. Louis Coleman, who was always out there exposing injustices.” I said, “If it wasn’t for him, a lot of this would not be happening right now. Even the monitoring wouldn’t have happened.” And I said, “And REACT and other residents that just came out to speak, we can’t forget those people.” And everybody’s like, “Yeah, yeah,” but nobody said it. I had to say it. And it’s not like, nobody in our group wants any recognition necessarily, but the fact that people leave you out of the picture when you know you were an integral part of it, that’s just kind of fishy to me. You might call me a conspiracy theorist, but I think it’s also part of a larger plan of keeping the larger community from knowing that if you are persistent and if you work together and if you’re just a regular ordinary person, you can make a difference. I think it’s all in the major plan. Nobody wants to know that ordinary citizens have power. And we’re also fighting up against these rail cars. That top picture, I’m standing on the school grounds.

DC: And now what school is this?

EC: Kennedy Montessori Elementary School and that’s in the Park Duvalle neighborhood. Those tanks right there are 1,3-butadiene tanks.

DC: And this is a rail line that runs just adjacent to the school?

EC: Across the street.

DC: Across the street from the school.

EC: Gibson Lane.

DC: I'm looking at a picture of tanker cars, rail cars, and you said they're full of—

EC: They're 1,3-butadiene. I can't say if they're full or not, but what I do know, what I have asked a chemist, she said that even if they're not full that they have vapors that can still be explosive. One, 3-butadiene is a cancer-causing chemical. It can trigger asthma attacks, all kinds of things. And there's been other things on that line like vinyl chloride, styrene. There was a supposed styrene leak back in July of 2005. In April of 2006, there was a chlorine leak on the same rail line that of course, nobody in the neighborhood knew about until people called from other areas and asked them if they were okay or if they happened to watch the news that night. These are the issues we're dealing with. We've met with the emergency management telling them that we need some kind of warning bells and they said, "Well, the weather system bell that comes on for the tornadoes is what we would use." We said, "Well, how would people know that it was a spill versus a weather-related issue?" We found out the alarms actually have the capability of making different tones, but they refused to do anything about it. They don't educate the community. There are not annual updates on what you should expect if there's a chemical spill. DC: I've driven through that area now and the only thing I've seen is these signs every so often that say, "In case of emergency, leave the area."

EC: Oh, I haven't even seen that.

DC: But that's it. I mean, there's nothing about who to call or shelters or the possibilities.

EC: And some people don't know what "shelter in place" means and to tell you the truth, this house, I think, was built in the 50s. The windows are not the best. We need replacement windows. We would have to duct tape all the windows in order to keep out

something. And really, there's MSD there that has chemicals. There's Ashland up here if you go around—

DC: What's MSD?

EC: Oh, I'm sorry, Metropolitan Sewer District, so it's a sewage treatment plant.

DC: Oh right, that's the big plant.

EC: Right. Then there is Ashland Distribution, which I'm assuming that's petroleum or something that they're having those big tanks. When you go just up the street and make a left, many days—not today, this is a good day—many days it's such a strong smell of gas, you're like, "Are we going to blow up?" There are so many different issues and it's just so crazy. I think the reason that there hasn't really been an uprising is because a lot of the people feel helpless and hopeless and they're like, "It's been like this for so long. They're never going to do anything." And also, like people work every day, like I have a full-time job. I have a husband. I have a three stepchildren. I have parents that I do things for. I have two grandmothers that I do things for. Nobody has time for REACT. I don't have time for this. Sometimes I get very resentful, because I'm like, "Why do I have to be here at this meeting?" People, because just like other residents, they think that if it was this bad that the powers that be would be on it, but that's not true. It's just simply not true. Am I just rambling?

DC: Not at all, no.

EC: Park Duvall Community Health Center had a continuing education workshop for nurses on teratogens or teratagens, I always get it wrong. A teratagen is anything that causes a change like in the genetic makeup or something like that, something crazy. I know that, I think it's American Synthetic Rubber emits talulin, which is a teratagen and it affects the reproductive system and it can cause reproductive damage, learning disabilities, behavior

disabilities. So I called the medical center and I said, "Well, can just a regular resident come?" We always try to go to meetings so we can at least ask one question and get the word out. So I go to this meeting and they're talking about teratogens and how the genes and all that kind of stuff. Then there's this little blurb about—I don't know if I made my statement first or not, but I had to try to get it all in one instance, because I knew they would never answer another question from me.

So I said, "Well you know, talulin is a terategen and a chemical plant right up the street here, American Synthetic Rubber, they put out two hundred and seventy-four thousand; it was over over two hundred thousand." Then I told them about the fugitive emissions, which are basically leaks. So this guy from the University of Louisville, I don't even remember his name, he gets up there and he's like, and I don't know why this was part of a medical workshop, but he said, "Yeah, the chemical plants probably contribute about a million dollars apiece to the community." And when I filled out the form, I said, "What did that have to do with human health?" I mean, that was a whole political thing and that's what we're up against.

After he said that, I think I remember saying, "Well you know, that's not, even though they put up that cost, the harm that they're causing to the people in this community is way much more of a cost." Like one day, my husband took, it was he and my two stepdaughters had to go to the doctor. We have insurance. We ended up having like a two hundred dollar bill after you had the co-payments and all the medications, two hundred dollars for one trip to the doctor for three people. Think about people who don't have insurance. That's a tax on the Medicaid system, the Medicare system, the people themselves because they're stressed, because they don't have medical care. I mean, that is the cost of the emissions from these chemical plants; that is the cost. Probably about a year into me working with REACT, my youngest

stepdaughter woke us up and was like, "Kenya can't breathe." And I thought to myself, "Oh Lord." So we took her to the hospital and she was diagnosed with asthma. Then I kept thinking to myself, "This is just totally ridiculous."

DC: Right. And the asthma rates are very high in this area?

EC: Yeah and actually, I don't want to quote any, because the asthma rates and cancer rates that I had been quoting, I'm not sure if that's changed. Some new reports have come out, so I don't want to [misquote]. At one point, this was the worst cancer area and asthma area and I think it is still the worst cancer area. But it was funny, I did look at a cancer report from the health department and it was so, I mean of course, smoking causes cancer and they were showing how in this part of the city, there was the highest cancers and they correlated with the smoking. Then I thought to myself and I talked to a physician about it, because before I comment on reports and stuff, there's a chemist and a physician that we consult with a lot out of this state. I said, "Okay, this is going to be a potential problem for REACT, because when this report gets out to the public, everybody's going to say, "Oh, well it's because of smoking." So then he pointed out to me that Louisville has about the same or lower smoking rates than the state. I can't remember what it was. It was something tricky. But our area of the city has the highest cancers, so there has to be some other type of issue going on there, something in addition to the smoking, because I knew as soon as everybody read that report, because when I first read it, I was like, "Hmm. They're going to try to disprove that people are sick in this area."

DC: So it really requires a lot of expertise on your part and a lot of consulting with lawyers and physicians?

EC: Right, because of Rev. Coleman, he had a lot of contacts around the nation, so now we keep in touch with those people. There's a chemist out of Louisiana by the name of Wilma Subra. We consult with her and she's actually come and testified at hearings. And Dr. Mark Mitchell, he's out of Connecticut. Because we used to send out a newsletter and before I sent out the newsletter, I would send it to them to make sure we were accurate, because one thing they can get you on, if you say one inaccurate thing, you're through. So what we try to do is not, at least what I try to do personally is not talk about anything I don't know anything about. If somebody questions me about something I don't know something about, I'll just say, "I'll have to think about" or "I don't know," but I will never just holler out something, because it just discredits you and then it destroys the whole, all the success.

But there are so many people that really feel that they've been impacted by the chemical industry. And you know I was at that workshop the other weekend and somebody mentioned the class action lawsuit and was like, "Well, I hate that it had to come to this," and this was actually the person with the West Jefferson County Task Force who got the money for the funds for the monitoring, which is great, and the risk assessment came through that organization. They were like, "Well, it's bad--." Then I said, "You know, we have a rogue senator, Dan Seum, who's trying to stop the STAR Program. Then you have Ann Northrop, a congresswoman who was trying to get the EPA to change their position on the STAR Program. What are citizens to do? We cannot rely on people in public office, because they are many times going against us. So I don't feel guilty if I sue the company. It's the company's fault."

DC: It's just another tool.

EC: Yeah, and it's the company's fault. And we don't want anybody to lose their job, but if they lose their job because of the lawsuit, it's the company's fault, because the company did not do what they needed to do to keep the people safe.

DC: Now what you're alluding to, I think, is it seems like the companies always threaten, "If you impose new restrictions on us, we'll just leave town." That's the threat that's always out there.

EC: Right. Okay, I mean, I'm sorry. We don't want anyone to lose their job, but some people have already lost their jobs, because they can no longer work. We have a member, Jonathon Tinsley, he was taking his garbage out or something, or walking down his driveway, and there was this kind of fog over his house. He collapsed. He's now wearing a defibrillator, a pacemaker-type thing, and not only that, but he has the one that is discontinued because it was recalled, and not only that, they'll pay for the device, but not for the surgery, if I understood him correctly. So we're having somebody who is on disability and let me tell you, I used to, like the summer after my freshman year in college, I was at the Division for Disability Determinations and I looked through a lot of those cases and it was hard to get on disability. He got on it, he's on disability. He can't work, like tomorrow we're supposed to be tabling at this park to pass out literature and I'm not even sure he can sit there in the hot sun. He has a hard time breathing. And he's a young guy, he's fit, he's not overweight, he never smoked, but now he has a heart condition and it's because of the--.

And here's the thing about it, when he first came to REACT, he was trying to ask us, "Do you guys know of anything that happened in 2003 in July," or something like that. It took him until either late last year or this year, he does so many open records requests, which are even hard to get back, found out that within two to three days of his incident, there had been an

explosion at one of the plants and that, I think, the information, the run sheet said that they had to let it burn out itself. To me, that's not just a coincidence.

DC: But that had not been made public.

EC: No. It may have been in the paper, but it's not--. You know, all these little incidents are not really common knowledge. A lot of people don't get their news from the newspaper.

DC: Is that one of the things that you would like the factories to do is to notify residents?

EC: Yeah.

DC: More readily.

EC: Every time there's an incident, residents should know about it.

DC: And do they do that at this point at all?

EC: There is a voluntary, it's called the R Call System. It's like a bulletin board system, but it only stays up there like twenty-four hours, the announcement. We've been kind of lax at checking that, because we had kind of committed to checking it every time. Sometimes you would find that the companies would put on there, "There was a spill." But here's their favorite line: "It was contained." I think it was back in 2004 maybe, I was driving on Thirty-fourth Street at Southern. All of a sudden, I encountered this most horrible smell that I've never smelled before. I pulled over because I was getting physically ill, but then I thought, "No, no, no, no. It's probably a chemical plant," so I kind of made it to Algonquin, made a left and just went as far away as I could and called the Air Pollution Control District. When they finally called me back, she said they didn't have anybody to come out and investigate. So when I finally sent an e-mail telling everything that happened, blah blah blah blah, they said, "Well, we did call around to the different chemical plants and there was a latex spill." But then

somebody said, I don't know, but they basically said it was contained and my thought on that was if I was smelling it—

DC: In your car.

EC: It was not contained. Something got out. You contained it after so many gallons or whatever was out in the atmosphere. So when they say it's contained or under control, people feel safe and those are not two words that make me feel safe. Just like with the chlorine leak, they said they had it under control and they were monitoring [it], but if you're somebody who has a depressed immune system or if you have asthma really bad or emphysema, it might be that a little bit of chlorine can go a long way in killing you or triggering something. To me, I feel like as a resident, I should have the option of knowing whether or not I should take my child somewhere else for the night, because my child might be more sensitive to chlorine than me. One time, we couldn't afford to go on a vacation one year and this was when the kids were little. So we had previously bought a three-room tent and we had like this gazebo, so we thought, "We'll camp out in the backyard," because like our backyard has a lot of trees around it, so it kind of makes it feel woodsy. So we camped out. We had a really good time. Well, the next day, my husband said that he smelled chlorine or some kind of bleach in the middle of the night and I really didn't think, it was like in the beginning of my working with REACT, so I really didn't know, really didn't connect that until later on. But you know, you can't even go in your backyard and have a cheap vacation because you have to be concerned about that. I mean, I don't know. I could talk to you for days and days and days.

DC: Now do you see this issue and your work in it as part of other struggles or as a legacy of the civil rights movement for example?

EC: Yeah. All of it does kind of fit together. It's just like, "Who's important?" The people with the money, not the people who don't seem to have a voice. It's all consistent. It's all the same thing, just in a different way.

DC: So who bears the brunt and who has the power?

EC: Right, the people who bear the brunt are always the same people, always. The people with power are always the same people, always. I think the little people have power, but I think that the little people have been just beat over the head so much with so many different issues that they just have given up.

[conversation breaks off as phone rings]

DC: You were just saying about the connections.

EC: It's funny, because one thing that I think that has been common between all the different Louisville social justice fights is that the people who are the victims are always blamed for their own problems. And the people who do that, who blame the victims, they really know how to market that idea. They know how to use the paper, use the media, to show that it's really their fault. "They're too obese. They smoke too much. Why do they live there anyway? Can't they move?" Some of them have no clue, but some of it is orchestrated so that the larger society won't really get active, because it's really those people's fault. They've done a very good job on that, I must say.

DC: Have you tried to really work with the media at all? How important do you think it is to get the media to tell your side of it?

EC: I think it's really important and I actually think that between 2003 and 2005 especially, REACT and this issue got a whole bunch of coverage. I don't know if you've googled Rubbertown, but it's gotten a whole bunch of coverage and I think that the coverage

was really fair, because REACT, Rev. Coleman, some other groups that were against the chemical plants, they got a lot of exposure through the newspapers, a lot. We did have a couple of times where we sent in large amounts of letters to the editors that didn't get published, but you know. And we've gotten a fair amount of news coverage, I think, television. I was kind of surprised by that, because last year I went to the Spin Academy in California.

DC: What's that?

EC: They basically train social justice organizations on how to be effective. They do economic justice, any kind of social justice issue, and they have workshops on how to do press releases. It's just phenomenal.

DC: Where is that based? Where did you go?

EC: Where did I go? Did I go to San Diego? Yeah, and actually, we were located on a ranch outside of San Diego. It was like, oh my God. We were in these cabins in the hills, the mountains behind it. I would look out the window and there would be like animals grazing on the mountains. It was the most peaceful. I wanted to stay. When I went there and they had different workshops and there was one on media coverage, how to get media coverage, how to speak. We had to actually videotape ourselves being interviewed and that type of thing. I was so shocked to realize that REACT had accomplished a lot of what they were telling we needed to do to get coverage. I was thinking, "Dang, is it really that hard to get news coverage?" So we have a really good environmental journalist here. He's really on it. He's really on it.

DC: Do you stay in touch with him regularly to try to cultivate that relationship?

EC: Yeah. Actually, he calls quite a bit. I think I may have made a mistake though, because I told him, probably last year, I said, "Would you mind if I gave you some additional names, because I want people to know that it's not just REACT who is concerned about this?"

He's like, "Yeah, yeah. Give me some more names." And it seems like since then, I'm not, we've not been in the paper that much. But he keeps asking me for names and then I'm like, "You know what? I should have never brought it up, because I don't know anybody." (laughs) Then the one name I gave him of a neighborhood leader, they were like, didn't share my same view, our same view. So I was like, "Oh, that was a mistake." But I think that with that particular journalist, what I did learn from the Spin Academy was that we don't just need to seek out the environmental ones, but we also need to cultivate relationships with the other sections of the paper, the neighborhood section, the business section, and things like that. So that was something that was really helpful.

DC: How about working with other activist organizations or other community organizations, is that part of it too?

EC: I'm sure they probably said something about that, but there have been the Kentucky Alliance Against Racism and Political Repression, they've helped us a lot, I mean a lot. Anything we want them to do, they will do it.

DC: So they're a real ally?

EC: Oh yeah, definitely. Even the Yearlings Club lets us use their facility if we ever need it. We had somebody from Jobs for Justice actually, one of our members asked them to speak during one of the STAR hearings and she spoke. There are a lot of allies. I mean, some people just don't want to come out and say it though, I guess because it would threaten their thing. I'm really still in the stages of trying to understand what's actually going on.

DC: What is Jobs for Justice? I'm not familiar with them.

EC: Actually, I'm not sure exactly everything they do. Like I said, I'm kind of new to this whole, there's a whole bunch of activists out here and I don't know what's going on. But

yeah, Jobs for Justice, Attica Scott, you could probably google her and find her somewhere on there. But we also work with Coming Clean. Their website is coming-clean.org, I believe. It's like a collaborative of organizations across the nation and REACT is part of one of the fence-line work groups. They have like a chemical policy work group. They have been very helpful.

DC: So you're really part of a national movement?

EC: Right. When we've have phone-ins, we've asked some of the people from Coming Clean to phone in. One time, we had a phone-in and by the time, like mid-day maybe, the city stopped taking calls. I think that's pretty effective. But there's a Environmental Justice 2006 coming here. It's going to be the last week of September and Coming Clean is hosting this. There's going to be three regional buses, one on the west coast, one northeast, and one southeast, and Louisville was picked as one of the southeast stops. Then I think on that Monday, October the second maybe, the people on the buses are going to go to the Capitol and try to address some policy issues. Then like on October the first, that Sunday, the last day of the tour is going to be Environmental Justice Sunday and communities all across the country are going to demonstrate and activate their communities in solidarity.

DC: Okay.

EC: So Coming Clean has been huge, because if you're part of their listserve, you can send out a listserve to all or the fence-line action people and just say, "Okay, what about this? Does anybody know anything?" There was a bio-diesel company that was going to locate right up the street and I sent out a listserve and I said, "I don't know anything about bio-diesel. Does anybody have any suggestions?" I eventually got hooked up with somebody who I think was

with the American Lung Association in DC or something and we kind of spoke about that. Also, I don't know if you know about the toxics release inventory database.

DC: No.

EC: That came out of the Clean Air Act where certain companies that emit certain amounts of certain chemicals have to report annually their emissions. That's a lot of the data we used to educate people, because you can look it up online and you can see that such-and-such has two hundred thousand pounds of butadiene fugitive emissions and you can use that. It was part of the Community Right to Know Act. Are you out of tape?

DC: No, I'm just checking to see.

EC: We have been participating in conference calls because the EPA had proposed, was it back in 2005 or 2004? There was a federal register notice that they wanted to reduce the burden of reporting from chemical plants. So this Coming Clean has been very-- OMB Watch has actually been pretty much the lead on it, but the Coming Clean listserv, you would see e-mails on, "Okay, there's an action call, Action Alert: do this; Action Alert: do that." Basically, OMB Watch came up with this strategy of like, they worked with some kind of congressman or something to get the budget amended or something to block the EPA, some kind of trick they do. Coming Clean is good for that. And it's so crazy, because it connects the local issues with the national issues. It's like what you do locally and/or nationally, what you do nationally can affect you locally, because some people just can't connect with that national.

One year, the Department of Transportation had a federal register notice because they wanted to take the markings off of these rail cars, because they thought the terrorists wouldn't know what was in the tank cars if they took the markings off. Okay, but anyway, REACT sent in comments. Well actually, Miss Lewis, she's a member of REACT. I was supposed to send in

REACT's official comments and I forgot. I was so mad. But Miss Lewis, who is a member of REACT, sent in the comments and people from all across the country sent in comments. And they stopped that, that proposal went sour. But to me, that just shows you how local participation matters at the national level. It's just like, I'm all excited about that. If I didn't have a full-time job, this would be something that, I would be just trying to educate on what we can do as a community, even if it was just one hundred people out of this whole city, that any time there's an action alert, boom, they act it. That would be a miracle, but it would be effective.

That whole Coming Clean, that whole collaborative is absolutely wonderful. You learn a lot. I probably have to come home to about sixty e-mails or so, but it's worth it when you finally find something you like, that piques your interest. All of them are just willing to help anytime that REACT has said, "We need help" or "What should we do on this?" Because they know that we're just ordinary residents. We don't have necessarily the knowledge. Another thing when I went to Spin, I was so surprised to learn that people actually get paid for what we do. I mean, I couldn't believe it. It blew my mind. They kept asking me, "How many staff people do you have?" And I was like, "Well, what do you mean?" I said, "Our steering committee is about ten members, our steering committee." I was like, "We don't get paid. This is volunteer. We have no payment. We use our own gas money. We call long distance to people on our own dime." I thought that was rather interesting. I was like, "Dang, I could do this for money!" But then you know, I thought, "Well, that's one issue I have with the whole 501-c3 thing is that you have to limit some of the things you do as far as lobbying."

DC: Because you're beholden, yeah, to your funders?

EC: I just, I don't know. It seems like the more money you get, the easier it would be, but to me, I think that would just destroy the heart of the organization. But that's just my

opinion, that's not everybody's, so we'll probably end up being a 501-c3 one day. I say that's for the birds. I want to be able to say, "Dan Seum's an idiot. He's hurting us. He's helping to kill our kids." I want to say anything I want to say.

DC: I'm interested, having talked to your father also, do you talk with him about strategy and stuff?

EC: Actually, he's very good about strategy. Sometimes I don't take his advice. Well actually, I would, but like I say, I work a full-time job, so it's so hard for me, it's so hard. I mean, I keep a notebook at my desk in case something comes to my brain so I can write it down in the middle of trying to do what I do. He has so many good strategies that I know will work, but we don't have the people power sometimes or the time to do it. So they're all in my little book. I do listen to my father. I actually wish he would retire so that he could benefit the community, because just like that up there that we're thinking about having a West Louisville Math and Science Center.

DC: He told me about that too.

EC: Yeah. Because one time I was listening to State of Affairs on WFPL, which is an NPR kind of station and they were talking about the lack of African-American participation in science and this and that. I'm thinking, "Hello? Have you ever gone to school?" There's nobody in that book that is of color and I think sometimes when you are not, and this is one thing that's frustrating, because sometimes people who are not African-American will be like, "Well, what's the big deal? Well, do this, do that." But they don't understand, when it's beat into your head from birth until adulthood, when you don't see anybody that looks like you, certain things are internalized. If you don't have a father like my father, certain things are internalized to where really you don't think that black people do that kind of stuff or that

they're smart enough. Nobody's necessarily ever told you that, but it's implied in the fact that there's nobody black. The only person you hear about is Martin Luther King Jr. We love him to death, but there were so many others. When they teach the little bit they teach about slavery, when I was growing up, I used to be kind of ashamed during that period, because it was almost like nobody who was a captive ever fought back. It was like we were just these dancing-around people, because that's the way it's taught in the school system. So it's very hard for me, because I feel like we need a whole--.

When we grew up in Bloomington, we grew up around a lot of different cultures and there were a lot of Arabic-speaking students who would go to our public school, but then after school, they had to go to their own school. Really, that's going to have to be what happens, in my opinion, to pull us out of this. I really think that people are being actually a little bit too hard on African-American people, because not that we're necessarily victims, but this is like psychological warfare, is what I mean. You cannot raise a child from a baby and most of the images until recently have been beautiful, the beautiful people have been white and light with long hair and straight hair. You can't think that psychologically somebody's not going to be damaged by that if they don't look that way.

DC: Sure, internalize all of that.

EC: So yeah, we'll hopefully get that back on the ground. That's my fault. Because there are so many African-American scientists just in this city and it's like, "Hello? This is the way you get more African-American participation, by getting the African-American professional scientists involved and by training people from this high."

DC: This would be an education center essentially focusing on math and science?

EC: Correct. And I'm talking about, now I can't remember what I was going to say, but applied mathematics, applied science. What do you actually do with it? Not $A + B = C$, therefore $A = C$. We're talking about how math and science benefit you, how does it touch your life every day, hands on.

DC: How to make the connection.

EC: Right. I don't know, it's like easy to me. That's an easy answer. So hopefully, we'll get back on target with that. But anyway, I got off the subject.

DC: No, that's cool. I asked the question. (laughs) We can wrap up now. I'll just ask you if there was anything I didn't ask that you think I should have asked.

EC: I'm sure there probably was.

DC: Or just anything else you'd like to say.

EC: Just that, I don't know. I just think it's a moral issue, an ethical issue. I think that it's sad. I was up at the state house, my uncle's a state senator and he was fighting so hard against Senate Bill 39. To tell you the truth, I had never heard him speak on the floor before at all. When I heard him, I was kind of impressed, but he was outnumbered. It was almost pointless, but I do have to say that he's made sure that there's been, I think there's been about a million dollars put in to monitoring. He made sure that the funds were available, which I don't say that much, because people think I'll just say it because he's my uncle. I guess when I was there, I just noticed how hard the fight is. If you don't have the people you need in there, you have almost no power.

DC: And even when it does seem pointless, you have to keep standing up and making the speeches.

EC: Exactly. And the fact that this city is complicit in all of this, in all of it. I was at Mayor Jerry Abramson's office. A lot of us went down there and we were like, "We are not leaving until we see this guy." So we sat in there and I was like, "Well, what has the city done?" He was like, "Well, before the merger--." He said, "We've only been a year into merger and that was part of Jefferson County." I said, "Well, what have you done in the last year?" He just looked at me and didn't even answer me. I don't want to hear that. Your city is being affected by chemical plants whether they're across the county line or not. You need to do something about it and it's so strange that he wanted to get on the lawsuit with this Gallagher Plant across the river. Apparently, they're getting sued by a city. He wanted to join in on that lawsuit, because their pollution's affecting us. I'm thinking, "You need to be handling what's in house."

DC: Very interesting.

EC: This is back before he was getting all the credit for the STAR Program. So I don't know. I think that there are so many good people in this neighborhood that want to fight, but they just don't have the tools, the time, and sometimes it's just like people give up. I just want the world to know that in west Louisville, 99.9 percent of the people are wonderful people that get demonized in the media because the only thing you hear about, and that's another thing when I talk about psychological warfare is that when you are watching the news, every newscast, there's going to be a murder and there's going to be somebody black, every single newscast.

DC: Just crime and killings, right.

EC: Now just think, if you're not African-American, you're going to be like, "Oooh." If you are African-American, you're going to internalize that if you don't have parents that can

show you the truth, because I'm telling you I live among legends. My father tells me about a lot of these people that live in the neighborhood and some of the stuff they did back in the day. I live among people who are legends. But when you look at the media, they have just demonized black people, demonized to the point of debilitating the community. It's just, phew, it's sinful. We went from being physically enslaved to being psychologically enslaved. It's just worked. It's like somebody put it into motion and it's just getting perpetuated to the point where even some black leaders will perpetuate the media. So I just want to say that everybody's good.

(laughs)

Oh, I do have to tell you this one story. Around the same time we bought this house, several people in my office at work bought a house. So we used to go on these tours. We would take extended lunches and go to people's houses. One time I brought this girl to this house right before we bought it. So I brought her down Northwestern Parkway and I think I kind of did that on purpose. We were going by the Shawnee Sports Complex and it must have been the summertime, because there was actually kids playing baseball or something. She was like, "Oh, this is really nice." And I said, "Well, what did you think it was going to be?" She didn't say anything. So I brought her through the parkway and blah blah blah and to the house. It was like, "What did you think?" Then I had another girl at work ask me, you know Seal, the singer?

DC: Yeah, sure.

EC: I love Seal, but anyway, she was like, "Eboni, do you know what that is on his face? Are those like gang scars where he got cut with a knife?" I looked at her and I said, "How would I know if that's a gang scar?" I said, "I have no affiliation with gangs. I've never smoked weed in my life. I don't do drugs. I don't drink alcohol. Once a year at the most, I'll drink alcohol. So how would I know if he got cut up by a gang?"

DC: It's just outrageous.

EC: So this is what I mean by everybody's being affected by it and it's just being perpetuated. I guess that's all I can say and if you give me your e-mail address, I can give you more and more lectures. (laughs)

DC: I'll just stop this now, but thank you so much.

EC: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Emily Baran. July 2006