

Louisiana bucket brigade

As neighborhoods go, the African American community of Diamond is rare. Many of the families of this neighborhood have lived here for generations, since the days before the Civil War. Consisting of four blocks and about 220 homes, Diamond is located in Norco, Louisiana, 30 miles west of New Orleans. Nestled alongside the Mississippi River, this community is a fulcrum of African American history.

Sadly, part of that history includes a major source of pollution. Since moving into Diamond in the 1950's, many people believe that the Shell Chemical facility has gnawed away at the heart of the community. Today, Diamond rests in the shadow of that facility and the giant refinery—partially owned by Shell—on the other side of town. The entire Diamond neighborhood lives and breathes within 2000 feet of toxic pollution releases and potentially deadly disasters.

On a peaceful day in 1973, the people of Diamond were terrorized when a Shell pipeline exploded and flames burst into the home of Helen Washington. She was killed instantly. Leroy Jones, the teenage boy who was mowing her lawn, died in the hospital three days later. Current residents of Diamond—many who were children on that sad day—still remember the sight of the young boy's burning body as he ran through the neighborhood. The explosion and the fatalities shook the very foundations—physical and spiritual—of this tightly knit community.

Since that day, Shell has bought approximately 48 homes from families for an average price of \$26,933. Many residents believe that Shell has made their property values plummet and profited from buying their land on the cheap.

The Concerned Citizens of Norco was formed to assist residents in getting a fair price and relocation assistance from Shell. The group has been battling

Shell for a fair relocation package for years. Since the day of that terrible accident, many people have believed that their community is too close.

In September of 2000, Diamond residents thought they had reason to rejoice. After being pushed by the Concerned Citizens of Norco and being exposed in the media for questionable tac-



tics in working with the community, Shell finally made a more comprehensive offer with its new Property Purchase Program. Once Diamond residents began to read the offer, however, they realized what a cruel twist the program is. Shell's offer excludes half of the community. Shell's offer is available to only two of the four streets of Diamond. Washington and Cathy Streets are included; Diamond and East Streets are excluded.

Shell's Property Purchase Program threatens this historic African American community. By offering to buy only two of the streets and not all four, the offer rips this historic community in half. A community that survived slavery and segregation is now being threatened by Shell.

Many families are scattered throughout the four streets of Diamond. Even people who are not blood-related share the life long ties of living as neighbors. Shell managers say the program is voluntary, but the "choice" that they are offering is a cruel one: stay and risk illness and death or leave family and community behind. Which would Shell's managers choose? We will never know, since Shell managers choose to live many miles away from their facility, in neighborhoods far from the harm they create.

SHELL'S GREAT DIVIDE

Lofty Principles vs. Low-Down Land Deals

Ruth Jones, the mother of the boy who was killed by the pipeline explosion in 1973, still lives in Diamond, on Diamond Street. Nearly thirty years after the death of her son, Shell has dealt her another blow. Despite earning a record setting 3.9 billion dollars in the first three months of 2001, Shell has excluded Mrs. Jones from the program. (Earnings report: May 5, 2001 Shell press release)

Norco - Shell's New Nigeria?

Since 1993, Shell has been a corporation reviled by many people worldwide for its seeming complicity in the Nigerian government's execution of Ogoni activist Ken Saro Wiwa (www.moles.org). Mr. Saro Wiwa was the leader of a successful campaign to end Shell's abusive oil drilling practices in the Ogoni region of the Niger Delta. Shell's public image took a black eye from which many people believe the company has never recovered.

In April of 2001, Nigerian activist Oronto Douglas visited Diamond and denounced Shell's division of the neighborhood in a ceremony with more than 200 Diamond residents. The people of Norco and Diamond pledged solidarity to one another. Annie Brisbie, a leader in the Niger Delta, also visited and was aghast at Shell's divisive practices. "This is what Shell does in my country—divide and conquer," she said.

Shell claims to have learned from its experience in Nigeria. If that's true, why won't the corporation do the right thing for the Diamond community? Instead, Diamond is being divided, and people around the world are learning about it. The corporation may soon be walking with two black eyes.

Lofty Principles

Shell's Property Purchase Program has been rolled out as part of the Shell Corporation's Sustainable Development Program. Unfortunately, the eloquent language of Shell's new corporate image has not translated into reality for Diamond.

"Our success as an organisation is intimately linked to that of society. We wish to play our part responsibly—by maintaining and enhancing natural and social capital."

An Expression of Values, www.shell.com/royal-en/content

Social capital is clearly a key word at Shell, and it's at the very heart of the Diamond community. Adults care for their elderly parents, families watch each other's children, and neighbors lend a hand when someone falls sick. The value of these services exchanged is priceless, and would be impossible to duplicate if the neighborhood is torn in half. True respect for social capital means relocating all four streets of Diamond.

"Our Business Principles mean that Shell companies must not exploit children in any activities, either directly or indirectly through joint ventures, contractors or suppliers."

People, Planet & Profits, A Summary of the Shell Report 2000

It's true, Shell may not be forcing children in Diamond to work in the plant. But it's also true that the children must live with the fear of the booms, roars, and hisses that screech from the Shell plant on a daily basis. Most of the children in Diamond live on the two streets that Shell refuses to relocate. The children are the ones at greatest risk of an accident. Children have fragile, developing bodies least able to withstand the toxic soup of chemicals in the air. True concern for children means relocating all of them to a healthy environment.

"We must ensure that the sometimes lofty words we use make practical sense to all our staff. Project proposals, for example, will only succeed if they take account of environmental and social factors as well as financial ones."

Mark Moody-Stuart, People, Planet & Profits,
A Summary of the Shell Report 2000

Shell is a corporation that, on paper, seems to understand the importance of communities. The citizens of Diamond simply echo the words of the Shell Chairman—that Shell's lofty words be translated into a reality that can keep Diamond together.

Parish Buffer Law Would Prevent Diamond Dilemma

If a 1995 zoning law were applied to the current situation, all four streets of Diamond would be relocated. On October 17, 1995, the St. Charles Parish Council—the local governing body for Norco—passed Ordinance No. 95-10-5. This ordinance declared that future industrial sites could not be within 2,000 feet of residential property. Unfortunately for the residents of Diamond, that ordinance applies only to newly constructed facilities. Shell has sanctuary in the laws of the 1950's, when it first began operations. If Shell were true to its principles, they would adhere to today's laws and relocate all four streets.

Countering Shell's Reasoning

The Shell management in Norco says that all four streets of Diamond cannot be relocated because the economic health of Norco might be harmed. This "economics" argument finds Shell on dangerous ground. This was the same argument used to justify slavery. There is no dollar figure that can justify tearing a community apart. African Americans have been the victims of this rationale too many times over the sad course of American history. It is a shameful argument for Shell to trumpet at the dawn of the 21st century.

Aside from the moral repugnance of this argument, there are other reasons why Shell's argument is not valid.

- Shell has provided no evidence that businesses would be harmed. They have conducted no studies and put forth no proof that their belief is fact.
- Shell's argument illustrates the heart of the environmental justice issue; the African American community is asked to bear the burden of toxic pollution so that others can prosper financially.

Shell managers have also expressed the fear that if all of Diamond is relocated, then everyone else will want to move, too. Concerned Citizens of Norco has been the only group clamoring for relocation. In all that time, there is no other constituency that has ever mentioned the subject.

Shell consistently fails to recognize that people and their families—not just dollars—are impacted by their program. Shell's economics argument in no way compares to the value of keeping families and a community together.

Diamond's Social Value— Keeping Families Together

Gaynel Johnson lives on Diamond Street, one of the streets excluded by Shell. She tells of the human costs to her family if they are left out by Shell's program.

"I grew up here. I been living here for about 46 years. Grew up on Cathy Street. In 1993 I moved over here to Diamond Street. This is where my family is from, Norco. It feels kind of bad [to be excluded]. Number one I started out with this group [the neighborhood]. Now to find out I live on Diamond Street and I will be left out . . . I really feel bad about that.

As far as my mother-in-law, it will affect her cause she's handicapped.

Her sister and [her] son live on Cathy. Really we rotate. I go in the morning, the sister in the evening. Her son, he's now working but he comes in the morning sometimes and fixes breakfast. Then my daughters come to help some, too. We all pitch in and do what we can do for her.

That's gone if they move us. They are separating us. They are dividing families so it will be kind of hard on her. Be hard for her 'cause she can't really do nothing for herself."

Gaynel Johnson isn't the only one left out. Approximately 129 other families are also excluded.



Natural Boundary for Relocation Ignored

Diamond holds a natural boundary that should inform the limits of Shell's relocation program. A thick grove of trees separates Diamond's four streets from the rest of Norco. These trees were originally planted to keep the African American community separate and apart from the white community. This historic divide remains today as a natural boundary and dividing line for Shell's program.

Shell-Shocked

No words can relay the psychological torment of living near a facility that might explode at any moment. Shell managers assure the Diamond citizens that all is well, but at the end of the day, those managers drive away from Diamond to their homes miles away from the facility.

The facts are that the Shell facilities emit an enormous amount of pollution. In 1998, the chemical plant and the refinery were the source of 50% of the parish's toxic air emissions. Shell reported a total of 868,857 pounds of toxic chemical releases from their Norco facilities in 1999. The chemical plant continues to emit over a hundred tons of hazardous chemicals right across the street from where children live.

Chemical	Amount Emitted to the Air in 1999	Health Effect
Benzene	65,000 pounds	Known carcinogen
Toluene	31,200 pounds	Developmental and reproductive toxin
Propylene	173,000 pounds	Damages the heart, liver, and reproductive system

In the first months of 2001, from January 1 - June 14, Shell / Motiva (the refinery partially owned by Shell) personnel called the Emergency Operations Commission to report releases, incidents or accidents approximately 54 times. That's an average of over two times a week. Some of those calls may have been to report what Shell considers "small" releases, but nothing is insignificant when entire families—including children in crucial stages of development—live and breathe beside it.

On Sunday, June 3rd, 2001, the flare at the Shell refinery was so loud that it could be heard in the living room of Audrey Eugene's home on Bethune Street in Diamond. It sounded like a jet engine right outside of her window. The fact is that people in Diamond live under the constant threat of accidents.

The 1973 pipeline explosion wasn't the only fatal accident at the Shell facilities in Norco. Still more lives were lost in 1988, when seven workers were killed in an explosion. The top of a huge refinery unit, the catalytic cracking unit, went flying into Diamond. Roofs collapsed, windows shattered and walls were cracked by the force of the blast. Homes and lives in the neighborhood still bear the scars of being rocked by the explosion.

Shell managers seem frustrated when these accidents of "long ago" are brought up. What Shell management fails to recognize is the constant psychological trauma suffered by Diamond residents today of their proximity to Shell.

Gaynel Johnson describes the very real psychological effects of living next to Shell.

"In 1988 there was an explosion. I was injured in it. My children were injured in it. [People who say, "don't worry about it, it was a long time ago"] didn't live through it.

I have four brothers. Three of them went in the service. Two of them are very, very Shell-Shocked. And I [used to say], "You know y'all don't have to do this. You can go out and give it to God and you can do this." In 1988 [after the explosion] I see what my brothers talked about when they talk about Shell-Shocked, because if we hear any type of noise—somebody passes and slams their car door—we jump. Because it's a flash back from the '88 explosion. We are Shell-Shocked. We sleep with clothes on. You want to

ask me why do we keep going back?

We keep going back [and remembering] because I am afraid. I'm frightened. My nerve is wrecked. That's why I keep going back. I'm just like those veterans. I'm Shell-Shocked."

Deloris Brown lives on Diamond Street. Shell pipelines are in her yard.

"After [the 1973 explosion] I just went on living but we are still on pins and needles. [Sometimes I] just go to

bed and pray and rest your nerves. We went to a meeting right after the explosion and the [Shell] guy said, "Yes there is something over in the chemical plant. You wouldn't have no chance to escape or nothing." They come on your mind you know they come and go and it's scary."



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For more information about Norco:
www.labucketbrigade.org, www.cbecal.org
 or www.sierraclub.org/cleanair/webcam/

Produced by the Louisiana Bucket Brigade in cooperation with
 Concerned Citizens of Norco.
 Written and researched by the Louisiana Bucket Brigade.

Edited by Denny Larson, Katherine Wilson, and members of the
 Diamond community.

Photo credits: Katherine Wilson
 Funded by the StarFire Fund. Thanks also to the Beldon Fund,
 the Calcasieu Parish Major Donor Fund and Communities for a
 Better Environment.

Design and Printing by Inkworks Press.

