

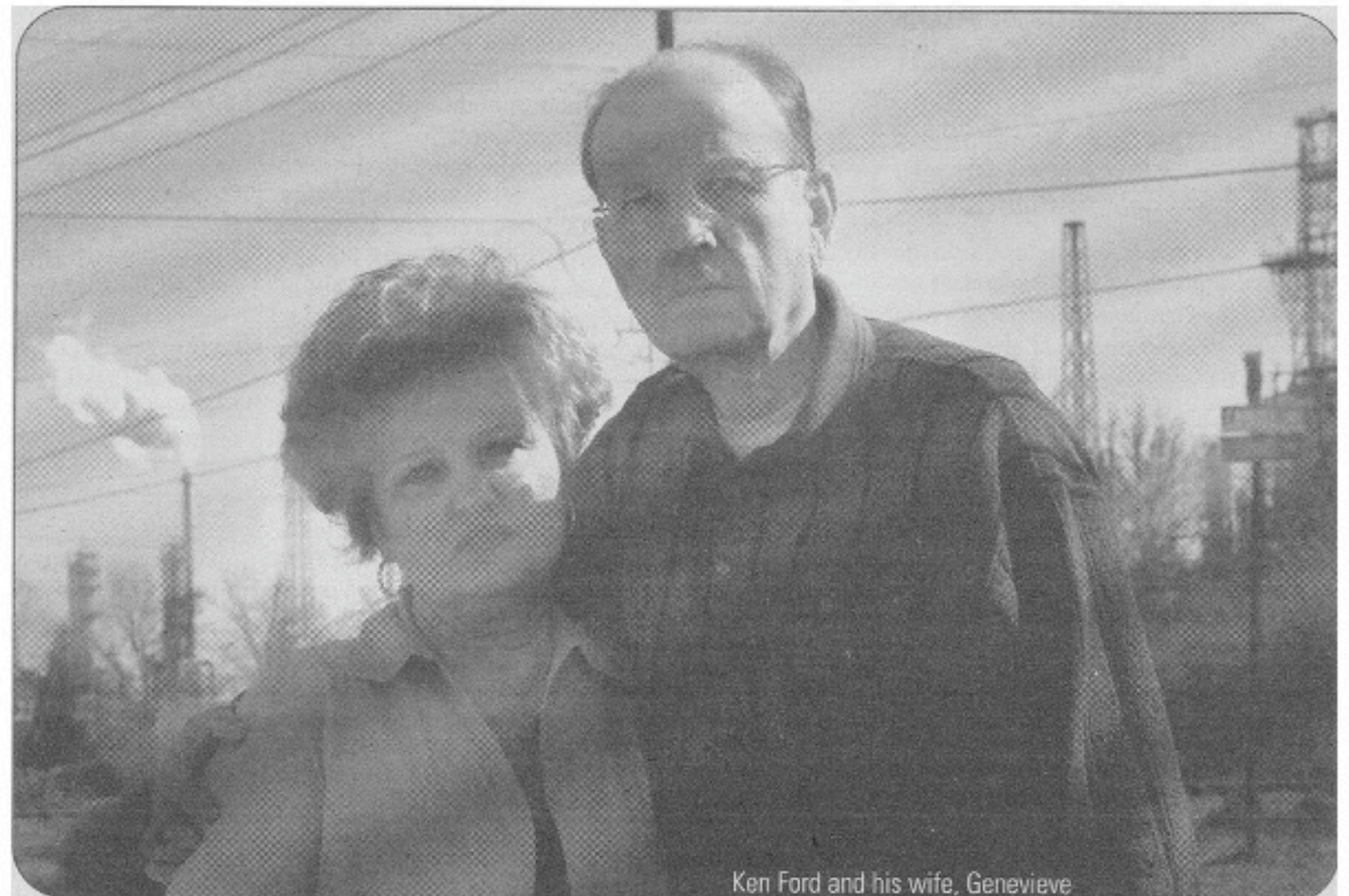
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news & views

The Smell Test

Chalmette residents hope a federal lawsuit will finally help the condition of their fenceline communities around the Chalmette refinery.

BY ELIZA STRICKLAND



Ken Ford and his wife, Genevieve

On a recent Thursday morning, a group of neighbors met in Ken Ford's Chalmette living room, a half-mile from the ExxonMobil Chalmette Refinery. The residents, mostly middle-aged homeowners and retired senior citizens, were members of the St. Bernard Citizens for Environmental Quality, and they were fed up. They say they've put up with noxious odors emanating from the refinery for decades, and they're tired of wondering what chemicals are in the air each day and worrying about what effect those chemicals might be having on their health.

Lou Troyani has lived in the neighborhood around the Chalmette refinery for 28 years. "My husband had a garden," she says. "He would have beautiful bell peppers and mirlistons, and then after a while we'd go out and look at the bell peppers, and on top they were burnt; they were like from outer space. They were kind of crinkled up and black, and they were horrible." She shudders. "We had to stop growing stuff."

John Lewis has lived in the area all his life. He blames the refinery for the severe health problems he has seen all around him over the years. "In my neighborhood, there's always somebody that's dying or has cancer," he says. "In my own family, my wife has had cancer, I've had cancer, my daughter died from cancer, the lady across the street, her daughter died from cancer, my grandson had cancer. I just wonder why there's so much cancer in my neighborhood."

So with complaints like these, the group met that Thursday morning and finally took the law into their own hands: they filed a citizen's suit against the refinery in federal court.

Ford, president of the St. Bernard citizens group, says he has been trying to work with the Chalmette refinery on air issues for almost 25 of the 40 years he has lived in the neighborhood. He has met with council members and congressmen, and complained to the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ), the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and the refinery.

Over the years, Ford says, he has grown frustrated by the government's lack of action

and the refinery's flat denial of any problems. Finally, the citizen's group began discussing what it could do about the problem on its own under the Clean Air Act. "When you can't talk things over (with the refinery)," says Ford, "when you sit in your yard and it smells so bad you have to go inside, and when you look at your windowsill and see it's covered with this petroleum coke and you worry that it's hurting somebody, and when you call them and you get no answers, what else can you do?"

ExxonMobil representatives declined to comment on the lawsuit or their environmental practices for this article.

Adam Babich, director of the Tulane Environmental Law Clinic, filed the suit on behalf of the St. Bernard Citizens for Environmental Quality and the Louisiana Bucket Brigade. He explained that citizen-suit provisions are written into most environmental laws to give people a chance to

Clipping for the
Louisiana Bucket Brigade



