

A close-up photograph of a person's hands playing a board game on a diamond-shaped board. The board features property names such as 'GO TO HELL' and 'MARVIN GARDENS'. A large white shell logo is partially visible in the background. The scene is dimly lit, with a dark red overlay at the bottom.

# SHELL GAMES

**Divide and Conquer the Diamond Community**





## Diamond

is a neighborhood of four streets in the town of Norco, Louisiana, 40 miles up the Mississippi River from New Orleans. Diamond is in the heart of the region's infamous "Cancer Alley." Many of the people in Diamond have lived on or near this land all their lives, and though the neighborhood is called New Diamond Subdivision, it is, in fact, a neighborhood with a long and rich history. The land on which it now sits was once Trepagnier Plantation, then Diamond Plantation. Many of the people who live there today are descendants of the slaves, sharecroppers, and farmers who once worked the land. The people of Diamond can tell you where they were born, where their parents were born, and where their grandparents used to live in days gone by. Belltown, the Big Store, the Big Yard—these are the cherished names of places that are now occupied by the Shell Chemical facility. Sadly, since Shell entered the community in the 1950's, many of the places rich in the history of this African American community have been bought by the corporation for its expanding industrial needs.

Outside of the Shell fenceline, members of the Diamond community believe that Shell has created an unofficial buffer zone that has turned many homes and memories into vacant lots, giving the neighborhood the appearance of a ghost town in the making. Members of the community believe that the Shell Chemical plant and the oil refinery, with their large volumes of toxic pollution, fires, explosions, flaring and chemical spills, have dramatically reduced their property values. Shell's purchase program is "voluntary," but does a person living next to a chemical company have a choice?

The purpose of this report is to expose Shell's unfair property purchase tactics in Diamond. This report also serves to honor the history of Diamond. The community is more than just property to be seen through the view of dollar signs. It is rich, historical land and a sacred home to a community. Shell's property purchase tactics seem to indicate a respect for profit instead of for the neighbors and their community.

Over the last 25 years, Shell has been buying property in the neighborhood. Today, the company owns 18% of the lots that comprise the four streets of Diamond. Neighbors will tell you that some people have fled the neighborhood without selling because they could no longer stand the pollution. When the abandoned homes and vacant lots are factored in, the percentage of affected property jumps to 30% of the lots. Over one quarter of the neighborhood is like a Toxic Ghost Town.

When asked about relocation, the company managers will smile and say they are happy to buy out anyone at fair market value. How much is fair mar-

ket value with a chemical company next door? Many residents believe that Shell has refused to buy property at a price that will allow people to resettle elsewhere without going into debt. Race and class are issues in this struggle. Diamond is an African American neighborhood. Some of the residents are middle class; still others are senior citizens struggling to survive on social security. How would Shell conduct negotiations with rich and powerful white neighbors?



Members of the Diamond community believe that the spate of health problems is caused by the chemicals from the plant. They know that the generations that lived on the land before the plant did not experience the health problems of today. Samples taken by the community's Bucket Brigade – the air sampling tool

– have proven that hazardous chemicals are almost constantly in the air. A criminal investigation by the EPA and a damning account of the company's environmental practices by a whistleblower confirm the community's fears (Times Picayune, June 3, 6, 10, 2000; August 13, 2000).

Imagine how bad the problems must be if the residents of Diamond Plantation are willing to sell at low prices and leave the land of their history.

The Shell Corporation has a "rich" history, too. In the second quarter of 2000 the corporation set records for profitability – over three billion dollars. (Shell PR, March 8, 2000, Royal Dutch/Shell Turns in Record Results, [www.shell.com/library/news](http://www.shell.com/library/news)). How much would it really cost this huge corporation to listen to the people of Diamond, to buy four small streets of homes at a fair price so they could relocate to a cleaner environment?



## Shell's "New" Offer: The Effect on the Families of Diamond

The Shell Corporation has recently put forth a "new" purchase offer to the community. This program, called the "Norco Voluntary Fenceline Property Purchase Program," continues to exclude half of the community - Diamond and East Streets. Shell's proposal appears to show how little the corporation understands its neighbors. Many families have close relatives that live on all four streets. The Hollins family is a good example. Mary Hollins lives on Cathy Street. Her elderly Mother lives on Diamond. Mrs. Hollins is the principle caretaker for her Mother. If Mrs. Hollins were to follow Shell's plan, she would leave the neighborhood and abandon her Mother. Does Shell really expect that Mrs. Hollins and others in similar situations will sell out their families?

The "new" program was described in a letter sent to only half of the community members in Diamond. The offer continues to base the price on market value in Diamond. The corporation does say, however, that a premium will also be paid. This premium must be enough to enable Diamond residents to relocate without incurring debt.

Shell's "new" program has come about after relentless agitation by the residents of Diamond. However, the timing appears suspicious to members of the community since it was announced just after the beginning of an EPA criminal investigation and a whistleblower's tell all story. Is Shell using Diamond in a public relations ploy or to make peace with federal regulators?

The residents of Diamond have good reason to be skeptical about this "new" offer. The corporation's description of the "new" program notes that it is "an enhancement of the property purchase program that has been in place for thirty years." If the "new" program does not enable people to buy a comparable home elsewhere and compensate them for the reduced market value of their homes, then the "new" program will only be a continuation of Shell's old purchasing tactics.

The map on the next two pages is a map of the four streets that make up the Diamond neighborhood. Those streets are Washington, Cathy, Diamond, and East.





# A closer look at the property records

Shell's property purchases since 1977 have resulted in the purchase of 48 of 269 residential lots – 18% of the neighborhood. The records show that the total paid for 45 of those lots between 1977 and today is \$1,120,079. The average price paid per lot was \$24,350. Fourteen of those lots were a housing project, and those lots make up \$478,000 of that total. Take out the 14 lots, and the remaining 32 were sold for \$642,079. The average price of the remaining 31 then decreases to \$22,141 per lot. There are other ways to break down the information:

| Property description     | Total paid | Average price paid |
|--------------------------|------------|--------------------|
| 8 empty lots             | \$76,479   | \$9,559            |
| 13 wood homes            | \$246,800  | \$20,908           |
| 7 brick homes            | \$283,700  | \$40,529           |
| 1 mobile home            | \$246,800  | \$20,908           |
| 21 total lots with homes | \$565,600  | \$26,933           |

The problem with a purchase average of \$26,933 for a lot with a home on it is that a homeowner in Diamond would have to go into debt to move and find a comparable home almost anywhere. Shell management will claim that the price is fair market value. What they do not say is that it is largely the Shell Chemical facility's presence that has reduced the fair market value.

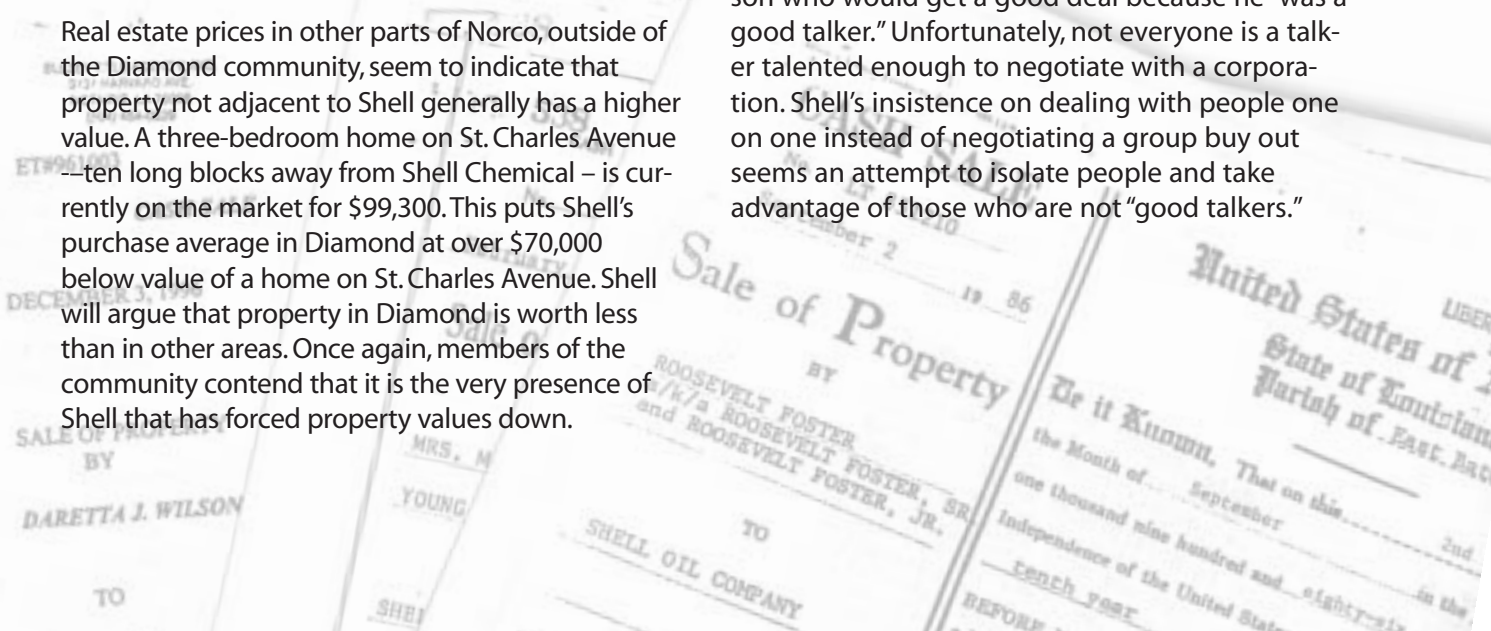
Real estate prices in other parts of Norco, outside of the Diamond community, seem to indicate that property not adjacent to Shell generally has a higher value. A three-bedroom home on St. Charles Avenue – ten long blocks away from Shell Chemical – is currently on the market for \$99,300. This puts Shell's purchase average in Diamond at over \$70,000 below value of a home on St. Charles Avenue. Shell will argue that property in Diamond is worth less than in other areas. Once again, members of the community contend that it is the very presence of Shell that has forced property values down.

Purchase patterns over time indicate that Shell has increased its buying habits. The numbers of sales throughout the last three decades are as follows: 1970's: 1, 1980's: 15, 1990's: 16.

The steady rate of purchase in the 80's and 90's seems to indicate Shell is interested in land in the Diamond community. Shell demonstrates as much in its most recent purchase offer. Why then don't they approach the entire tightly knit community and make a reasonable and fair offer that includes all four streets? Diamond residents are left to speculate that Shell is playing a waiting game, counting on buying property as people die or are forced to move away because of the various risks posed by Shell.

For the most part, Shell has paid more for brick homes than it has for wooden homes, and more for wooden homes than it has for empty lots. One discrepancy in

prices paid for wood homes highlights a problem with the way in which Shell negotiates with community members. In examining the record of a wood home that was sold for a greater price than the other wood homes, Percy Hollins of Cathy Street laughed as he remembered the toughness of the former owner. Mr. Hollins said that the owner who sold out to Shell was the type of person who would get a good deal because he "was a good talker." Unfortunately, not everyone is a talker talented enough to negotiate with a corporation. Shell's insistence on dealing with people one on one instead of negotiating a group buy out seems an attempt to isolate people and take advantage of those who are not "good talkers."





## Margie Eugene Richard

of Washington Street is a retired schoolteacher and President of Concerned Citizens of Norco, the group fighting for relocation. She knows about Diamond's historic value, including the history of the slave revolt and the day that Mary McLeod Bethune (1875 – 1955), the celebrated African American activist, dedicated the school in Diamond. Shell Chemical now sits on the land once known as Belltown where Mrs. Richard grew up.

Mrs. Richard explains, "I'm a life long resident of Norco... I grew up in a section of Norco nicknamed Belltown. We had plum trees, a lot of peach trees. And every family in Belltown was closely knit.

I remember when I was in about fifth grade my Mom and Dad sitting us down and telling us we had to move. We weren't going to go very far [but] there were some people buying all of the land. I didn't question it but later on my Dad was saying that the people who owned [the land] - the plantation owners - they were selling the land to the company. To Shell. In the early fifties or late forties... we built over here [in Diamond] cause people had lots here. That's when my Dad who was one of the community leaders fought for a school.

The high school [was built] right down the street on Washington ... I remember they named the school Mary McLeod Bethune and Ms. Bethune herself came for the dedication of the school. I was eleven years old. I heard her speech first hand. We shook her hand. I asked to see her walking cane. She had a little accent. She said, 'Black boys and black girls don't go to anybody's back door. Black girls and boys like you hold your head high and never never fail to fulfill your dreams.'

Part of her lives in me now. When I taught children I told them [the same thing]. Even now when I go back as a retired [teacher] I tell them 'Don't let anybody stop you from fulfilling your dreams. Become educated.' America is a good country. A lot of things need to be done but don't ever feel that you're nothing. People are so amazing.

The Nat Turner rebellion was recorded in the history books, but the largest slave revolt that took place was [right here]. It's in the book On the Way

to New Orleans. Well the soldiers ... what they would do when they captured the leaders they would behead them and put their head on a stick in front of the plantation. The hoped that this fear would stop them but it didn't. If anything the group [of slaves] grew stronger and they hid right down Washington Street. They hid where we called the farmland that my parents had. They were known as maroons. The largest slave revolt was along this riverfront. It was over 600 strong, standing up for freedom. One of my ancestors on my children's side, their father's side - Hannibal Waters. He was marching for freedom. On my Dad's side some of our relatives were there with the group."





## George Eugene, Cathy Street, born on February 24, 1923

Mr. Eugene tells about growing up in Diamond. "I'm seventy-seven. I've been here [in Diamond] all that time. I went to New York and stayed two weeks. I went to California and stayed there a week. I been a lot of places but I'm right here. Right here.

The younger generation of today—it would never appeal to them to go running around in the swamp [like we did]. The children used to go in the river to swim. A lot of time we used to go hunting pecans and persimmons, blackberries, mulberries. We used to take cans and make balls and a broomstick and make a bat. And we used to have fun. These children think they have fun now but we used to have fun.

I lived in the Big Store. I went to live with my Aunt ... That is who I wanted to stay with. The children used to play up in there. We would run and jump off the porch. Sometimes on Friday or Saturday evenings somebody would need some money to pay their rent and they would have a fish fry and sell the fish or kill a chicken and sell fried chicken to catch up with their bills or buy food or whatever. People didn't stay up too late cause they had to get up at four o'clock to go cut sugar cane and stuff. All the way from Baton Rouge [people were] cutting sugar cane. Shipping it to New Orleans on the riverfront.

On Saturdays they would have a house supper and make big pots of jambalaya and gumbo and sit around laughing and talking and that's how they used to get along. One would help another. You need garlic or tomatoes? Whatever you need all you have to do is holler out and somebody [would] give it to you. They kill hogs and eat it like a feast. They cook and they kill and they clean and they cook. They make homemade blackberry wine and they cook and eat like a party. People used to have a lot of fun.

Shell began to buy, and nobody knows how Shell was going about buying, but Shell was buying up everything they could get. When they got to this area here all this was farming ground and over there where Shell is [now] sitting, at that time [it was] where the people was staying at. We knew [Shell was] going to build but we didn't know what, or that it was going to be that large. Everybody was living over there, working on the land with sugar cane or tobacco. Then it got sold. [Before I had the house I am in,] I had a house from over on the plantation. It was carried over here. Over one hundred years old.

We used to go out on the [railroad] track and take sugarcane off the cars and put it on the ground and move it. Business wise there wasn't too much business in this area. Shell, when they started expanding, they took over this place over here but they didn't hire no colored people. Said they didn't know how to do the work, but they had never tried.

I had a beautiful little restaurant called the Chicken Coop. Never wanted to handle liquor [at the restaurant] cause it caused too much confusion. They talk about something that happened ninety years ago and then they end up fighting today.

My aunt used to come and help me out. When they would have [high school football] games, after the games all the children would stop in to the Chicken Coop. When holidays come or a carnival, whoever had the prettiest costume on [would] get a free hamburger. Children would dance and have some fun ... [I was] excited over that little restaurant. Business was coming in so fast. I was about 25 or 26.

Job I retired at was handling corn in Destrahan. Feed for animals. Pay about six dollars an hour—good money during that time. Retired making about ten dollars an hour. I just thank God. The Lord has been good to me. I made it."

Mr. Eugene knows that leaving his community would be difficult. But despite the hardship, he wants to move away from Shell.

"Moving is not as easy as some may think it is. It's complicated to start a new life over again. In other words what I'm saying is to meet new friends, to join another church, to get in whatever activities are going on in another town. That's going to be complicated.

People don't realize they been living in this area all their lives. They think it's going to be like this wherever they go. No. It's not like that."



## Peter Jackson,

Washington Street—directly across from the tanks of Shell Chemical

Mr. Jackson tells of his life in Diamond. "I am 68 years old. We used to play out in the yard, used to walk to school. We'd walk there and walk from school. [That was] in Belltown.

Sometimes we'd play marbles all day. Maybe burn tires at night and sit out and tell jokes. The smoke [from the tires] would keep the mosquitoes away. That's pollution now, you can't do that.

Well at that time, my Mom and Daddy had bought over here [in Diamond] ... I wasn't here during that time ... In '51 I went in the service ... In '55 [I came back] ... Shell was building up, taking over that place over there. I guess it bothered the people who were living over there. They started selling lots over here, and everybody was in the process of buying land back here. This was all fields and stuff ...

It was pretty nice to live. Had clean air, no more fumes or nothing like that. It's a whole lot different now. You can't even sit out in your yard, you can't even leave your windows open or nothing like that because of all the fumes and stuff.

I've been living here just about all my life and I wouldn't want to leave, but the plant has got so messed up over here it look like you have to leave, you know? But it looks like they could pay more for this property. All the health hazards people went through living here all them years. Fumes they're inhaling, breathing. It's a hazard to your health. We've been knowing that for years, ever since we've been here. But there's no where else to go. It takes money. People ... don't want to be getting in debt going anywhere else and buying. Can't do that. They've made it so you can't even sit out in your yard like you used to ... on account of the plant—fumes, chemicals, and different stuff."



# Unfair Negotiating Practices

Members of the community believe Shell management has used the following questionable tactics in negotiating relocation with the community.



- **Divide and conquer.** During meetings with the community, Shell managers oftentimes communicate information to a few individuals in offhand conversations, instead of to the group in the official meeting format. Tensions rise in the community when one neighbor believes that others are privy to private information from management. Despite the confusion that management has caused, the residents of Diamond have consistently overcome what appears to be attempts at confusing the community. The residents of Diamond remain united.
- **Exclusive meetings.** The company repeatedly refuses to have open meetings with the community. In July of 2000, Shell held a meeting that was “invitation only.” Shell excluded Rosemary Brown, the vice president of Concerned Citizens of Norco. The majority of Diamond residents were also excluded. The company even turned community members away at the company gates, saying there weren’t sufficient “provisions” for people to attend the meeting.
- **Intimidation.** Shell security officials can be seen driving through the Diamond neighborhood. On August 22, 2000, news cameras were in Diamond filming a story at Margie Richard’s home on Washington Street. A number of cars were parked outside of her home. A police car drove by the house at least three times that morning. Unusual police activity in the neighborhood on this and other days leads residents to believe that Shell can summon the police at will into Diamond to look into legal and Constitutionally protected activities that take place in the neighborhood.
- **Stalling, ignoring deadlines.** Shell managers do not adhere to deadlines. Diamond residents are often left waiting for promised phone calls that do not come. Shell officials told the community in the spring that they would propose relocation prices in 30 to 60 days. The 60-day deadline came and went on July 1st. When residents called about the deadline, Shell managers said that the deadline just meant “about that time.” Is this the way Shell deals with all of its business partners?
- **Disputing the right of association.** Some Shell managers attempt to interfere in the business of Concerned Citizens of Norco by trying to dissuade the community from inviting community advisors—technical experts, lawyers, organizers – to attend community meetings with the corporation. On one occasion, Shell management disputed the credibility of a fax on the basis that it was sent to the company from a city outside Norco. The community maintains the right to counsel from any and all sources.

These are just a few examples of tactics that the community routinely faces. Shell is a wealthy corporation. Wouldn’t it be easier to be straightforward with the community and give them the fair relocation they deserve?

**The people** of Diamond stand in solidarity with people all over the world that are forced to live as Shell's neighbors. The people of The Niger Delta are particularly recognized. On July 23rd, 2000, Nigerian activist Von Kemedi visited Norco on behalf of two groups from the Niger Delta region of Nigeria: the Ijaw Youth Council and Our Niger Delta. These two organizations and many more are committed to combating Shell's destruction of the land on which the people of Nigeria rely for life.

During the gathering in Norco, Von told of what Shell does in his homeland. "Shell and other companies have burned so many flares in my home for 40 years – day and night without stopping." Von listened to the story about the fight for relocation with an understanding of the tactics and tricks that Shell has used. "What they do in the [Niger] delta is not much different from what I have seen here in Louisiana. They have very little regard for the people, they pollute the environment, and they do all this in the name of producing oil."



Resistance to Shell's way of doing business is a united resistance. Victory for Diamond will be less meaningful if the people of the Niger Delta continue to suffer. Shell's practices are not acceptable in Norco, in Nigeria or anywhere in the world. The people of Diamond recognize the global assault waged by Shell and pledge to assist in the fight for human and environmental rights everywhere.

The Diamond community also recognizes that the problems and unjust actions by Shell are a product of the corporation's management, not the workers. The community supports the workers and hopes that the struggle for a fair relocation will make Shell management more just and accountable in all phases of its business, including its treatment of its employees.



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For more information on how you can assist the relocation effort, please call (504) 914 – 3164 or e-mail [labucketbrigade@yahoo.com](mailto:labucketbrigade@yahoo.com)

For more information about Norco: [www.igc.org/cbesf](http://www.igc.org/cbesf) or <http://www.sierraclub.org/cleanair/webcam/>





**Unlike the people of Diamond, the manager of the Shell refinery lives in a neighborhood free of large industry and pollution. He lives roughly 25 miles away from the Diamond neighborhood and the Shell facilities.**