

The Clerk's Black History Series

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Hazel M. Johnson

(January 25, 1935 – January 12, 2011)

“The Mother of Environmental Justice”

Hazel M. Washington was born on January 25, 1935, in New Orleans, Louisiana. Hazel was her parents' only child that lived past their first birthday. She was orphaned by the time she turned twelve and went to live with an aunt in Los Angeles. After completing two years of high school, she returned to New Orleans to live with her grandmother.

In 1955, Hazel met and married John Johnson. In 1962, the couple left the Jim Crow-era South for Chicago as part of the Great Migration, a time of mass movement of African Americans from the South to the North. Hazel and her husband moved to Altgeld Gardens Homes, a housing development on the south side of Chicago, originally built in 1945 to house Black veterans returning from World War II. Hazel quickly endeared herself to the neighborhood, earning the nickname of “Mama Johnson”. Hazel would routinely organize field trips and block parties for all of the neighborhood kids. Her idyllic life changed when in 1969, her husband was diagnosed with lung cancer, although he had no real risk factors, and died just weeks later at the age of 41 years old.

While watching television, Hazel learned that the south side had a higher cancer rate of any area in the city. She later heard from neighbors experiencing cancer and other lung ailments like asthma; mothers in the neighborhood had children with birth defects or high rates of miscarriages. Hazel's own children suffered from skin and respiratory illnesses since moving to Altgeld. She learned that Altgeld Gardens sat in the center of a 14-square-mile ring of pollution called the “toxic donut” stretching from Chicago's Southeast Side to Northwest Indiana: which housed more than 50 landfills, a chemical incinerator, a water and sewage treatment facility, steel mills, paint factories, scrap yards, and abandoned industrial dump sites.

Eventually Hazel compiled her findings in a report to the decade-old Environmental Protection Agency. She had hoped that the EPA would take action but they denied any knowledge of contamination. Hazel continued pushing for accountability and government oversight.

Frustrated with the lack of response from the EPA, Hazel founded the People for Community Recovery (PCR) in 1979 to fight environmental racism. The non-profit organization successfully lobbied the city of Chicago to test the well sourced drinking water supplied to Maryland Manor, a South Side neighborhood dependent on well water. Hazel convinced city and state officials to meet her in Altgeld Gardens and she took them on a “toxic tour” so they could see the problems first-hand. After this tour, tests were conducted in 1984, which revealed cyanide and toxins in the water. This led to the installation of new water and sewer lines.

PCR educated Altgeld Gardens residents on toxic waste and empowered them to play a positive role in their community, providing workshops and training on how to recognize environmental lead and test for lead poisoning. They also encouraged the youth to recognize their connection to the environment and the importance of keeping it clean. To demand justice for Altgeld Gardens residents, Hazel organized neighbors to conduct health surveys that would provide supporting evidence showing the low-income minority residents were disproportionately impacted by environmental pollution. In the mid-1980s, she helped Barack Obama, then a small community organizer, gain traction with residents over the fight to remove asbestos from Altgeld Gardens.

Hazel was a featured presenter at the National People of Color Environmental Leadership summit in Washington, D.C. in 1991. She spoke powerfully about her community's struggle with environmental racism, and as a result of her hard work and efforts, she was christened “The mother of the Environmental Justice Movement”.

In 1994, Hazel was invited to witness President Bill Clinton sign Executive Order 12898: Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Population. Two years later, President Clinton honored PCR as one of the country's top-100 environmental groups.

Hazel continued advocating for Environmental Justice until her death from congestive heart failure on January 12, 2011. In 2015, the Illinois General Assembly named a section of 103rd Street “Hazel Johnson EJ Way” to honor Hazel's legacy. Hazel's daughter worked alongside her mother from the beginnings of the organization and now serves as PCR's executive director.

