

# Toxic Coal Plants on Trial in Joliet

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When it comes to shutting down decrepit coal-fired plants, what [happens in Chicago](#), shouldn't stay in Chicago—or at least, neighboring Joliet should be placed on the coal-free future fast track, according to participants last Sunday in an International Women and Climate Justice Tribunal held at Sacred Heart Church.

“We don't get the power; we just get the pollution,” said Ardis Doolin, a Will County resident who testified about her own respiratory disease from the Romeoville plant. “No one should have to look at the smoke spewing from the stacks and ask: Is that going to make me sick?”

As a follow up to a similar tribunal in West Virginia that focused on the impacts of mountaintop removal mining, the Joliet gathering drew impacted residents from Chicago's Pilsen area, Will County, and around the region and heard powerful testimonies from women dealing with the fallout of air pollution generated by Midwest Generation's coal plants in Joliet and Romeoville and toxic coal ash dumped by Midwest Generation in the unlined Lincoln Stone Quarry. According to a study by the [Clean Air Taskforce](#) in 2010, an estimated 120 deaths, 2000 asthma attacks, and 180 heart attacks are attributed annually to pollution from the Will County and Joliet coal plants.

Sponsored by [Loretto Community at the UN](#), Feminist Task Force, Eco-Justice Collaborative, Citizens Against Ruining the Environment, and Pilsen Environmental Rights and Reform Organization, the depositions from the tribunal will be delivered to the Rio +20 United Nations Earth Summit on June 20-22, 2012.

“What we've heard today is that these coal plants are polluting the land, the air and our water – if Midwest Generation won't comply with the law, they need to be shut down,” concluded jurist Brian Perbix of Prairie rivers Network. “We all need to work collectively to make sure there is a local voice in deciding what happens in our communities as we transition to clean, renewable energy.”



*Witness Mary Burnitz testifies, photo courtesy of Pam Richart*



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Here are three of the testimonies:

### [Mary Burnitz, Citizens Against Ruining the Environment](#)

I live in the shadows of the Romeoville faculty. It is a fact Clean Air is a fundamental right and I feel that our rights are being compromised.

In 1989 we were excited to find the perfect site to build our home and raise our children. From my kitchen window we were aware of the coal fired power plant with the 4 tall stacks but didn't think much about it prior to purchasing our land. I had contacted the EPA, Environmental Protection Agency and was told it would be closed with ten years.

In 1993 we had our 5th child. When she was 8 weeks old, Marsha, was hospitalized due to an upper respiratory infection. This was followed by years of bronchitis, wheezing and repeated respiratory issues. From one Doctor to another, I was told it was either environmental or food allergies that were the cause of her respiratory distress. She lived daily with medications, nebulizer and an air purifier her first 10 years.

Within time I had noticed the white chairs on our deck were covered with black soot then noticed some of the neighbors' rooftops and driveways were covered with the same black substance. (Photos of driveways & rooftops) My neighbors and I began to realize that not only was this covering our homes but this is what we are breathing.

After Midwest Generation purchased the coal plants the black clouds of pollution not only increased but we began living in fear of explosions from this facility.

In 2000 we began contacting the EPA as we were frightened by the EXTREMELY loud noises and releases that were, and are, still coming out of the Romeoville coal fired power plant. We found that the equipment is too antiquated to handle the capacity they are trying to put out. So the additional pressure blows their relief valves. When the values are blown, the machinery is being pushed to the limit and beyond.

This is an example of what neighbors and I have to contend with:

Just recently while taking a bath I flew out of the tub, when a deafening roar that sounded like a jet was going to crash into my home!

I immediately called Midwest Generation and was told that one of the units "tripped" and multiple valves were releasing steam. Once again the same lame answer. Relief valves and

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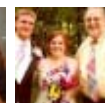
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malfunctions! We are not being protected if we are within the “fall out” area from untreated “fugitive chemical releases” during their malfunctions. We know that it has been established particulate matter coming from coal burning is dangerous to our health and that fugitive releases are untreated as they have escaped emission controls. This facility has minimal to no pollution controls!

We don't believe them when they insist that it is just steam being released as we have been in litigation with them for 10 years due to their thousands of illegal pollution releases. People here in around this facility breathe the soot, are kept awake by the noise, are told not to eat the fish due to the polluted waters, during the summer there are smoldering fires in the coal and we worry about fires and explosions from this 24/7 operation. Then in 2006 we heard ambulances – 5 Midwest Generation workers injured .. .3 Critical!

This is a dangerous operation and we worry about our health and safety.

Two years ago my husband, Ron was forced to go on disability due to chronic respiratory illness. He uses daily medications – Advair, Spirva and Flomase for his COPD chronic obstructive disease. Pulmonologists, ear, nose and throat, lung function tests, CT scans, the list goes on. One ENT from Joliet told him the reason was the pollution. Air pollutions knows no boundaries, we all breathe the same air.

Now, we wonder why the EPA and the government allows new construction homes to be built in the shadows of coal plants

**Sandy Burcenski, [Citizens Against Ruining the Environment](#)**

We know well that the negative impacts for our health and the environment are nationwide as we have coal facilities in our backyards. Like the Romeoville coal fired power plant, Midwest Generation's Joliet facility is also grandfathered from the Clean Air Act. Both Romeoville and Joliet are located in Will County. Will County's primary source for drinking water is “well water.”

After coal is burned it produces a waste byproduct called “coal fly ash.” This waste contains toxins such as Mercury, Lead, Arsenic, Selenium, chromium, cadmium and other heavy metals. Many of these heavy metals are toxic, carcinogenic, and can cause birth defects.

Joliet's coal plant is also home to an unlined coal ash landfill known as Lincoln Stone Quarry. Since 1996 it has been exempt from the IL Class 1 Groundwater Standards. The Joliet facility also ranks in the top 40 for contaminated sites

in the United States.

Midwest Generation has been dumping coal ash and slag in this unlined quarry since 1962. According to data that we've collected, the IL Environmental Protection Agency has been aware since 1995 that this landfill is the source of toxic contaminants and heavy metals such as "arsenic" which have already been detected off site. They also know there is a strong indication that these contaminants and toxic metals can potentially impact our drinking water.

Quarries by their very nature are fractured bedrock. In the vicinity of Lincoln Stone Quarry home of the unlined coal ash pond, there is an active quarry who blasts regularly. Local residents complain about their homes shaking & the cracks in their walls from the blasting. No wonder the majority has to purchase their drinking water. We can only imagine what affect this has on a contaminated coal ash quarry.

The EPA insists that if there are no hits on the site's monitoring wells that contamination has not affected the property owners' private wells in the area. With the many health issues of residents not only in this area but throughout the county we want to feel secure that our wells are not contaminated. Although the government states that our water is safe they only test wells for bacteria.

What proof do we have if our wells are not individually tested? Residents cannot afford to pay the exorbitant costs of testing for heavy metals. Costs for the testing of private wells should be absorbed by the industry surrounding these private wells.

The limestone quarries in the Chicago area are underground room and pillar mining operations rather than surface pits. These quarries operate 200' below ground and the limestone layer extracted is 90' thick. We worry about extracting 4-8' of coal from 300' down and the subsidence impacts as this is 90' feet that is being removed under Will County! A local company, LaFarge perforates the surface with approximately 30 injection wells and blows the fly ash they receive from many of Midwest Generation's coal plants to fill the mine voids. This is permitted under Illinois Environmental Protection Agency

Some of the bottom ash from the coal plants is dumped in the above ground, Lincoln Stone Quarry. This quarry is a real site of concern as ALL residents are on well water and according to our information Lincoln Stone Quarry is leaching coal ash pollutants off site and towards private wells. So far, no action from the state and nor enforcement cases.

As this area is on a fault zone and near an active quarry we have concerns with the thought of hundreds of coal ash injection wells perforating the water table and contaminating the ground water.

There are other technologically feasible, economically reasonable solutions to land filling coal ash. This technology is already being utilized by this same company.

We believe that regulating coal ash and treating it as hazardous waste is crucial to protect human health and safety and the environment throughout the United States.

**Carol Stark, resident and Director of [Citizens Against Ruining the Environment-C.A.R.E](#)**

I realize that this Tribunal is meant to give a Woman's perspective on how we have been affected by Coal Fired Power Plants, Coal Ash and the pollution associated with Coal. However, it is important to note that I am not just a resident of a community held hostage by greed in corporate America; I am also one of the Directors of a volunteer organization that has been fighting to keep Dirty Industry out of Lockport and the surrounding communities. Our group is, Citizens Against Ruining the Environment-C.A.R.E. and I have been involved with them for 18 years. I originally became involved when our City of Lockport accepted a proposal from A Wood Burning Incinerator Company. Because my daughter had asthma there was no way I wanted that facility in Lockport as it would have aggravated her condition. Luckily we stopped that plant from being built in our community.

My story begins 29 years ago when we moved here to Lockport and I was pregnant with my 2nd child, the daughter I just mentioned above. Back then this was just a sleepy little canal town with a population of approximately 2500 people. I remember my husband commenting on how much it reminded him of his home town in Ohio. We thought we had found a "GEM". Little did we realize how tarnished a "GEM" this area really was. The first indication that we may have miscalculated on that initial assessment came when one of our neighbors and I were discussing our drinking water. I commented to her that I noticed she and many of the others on our street had water delivered to their homes. I was curious why they would BUY their drinking water. She informed me quite adamantly that NO ONE in Lockport drinks the water. It was well known to ALL who lived here, that this was something you just did not do! That was when I became aware of this underlying current of skepticism, mistrust, and apathy that most of the people had been living with. They all suggested that the elected officials were not being completely forthcoming with all information

re: the water status-but they also knew NOT to drink it!  
Years later due to my involvement with CARE, we discovered that the back of our water bills had a warning that: too much water consumption could lead to bone cancer due to high levels of radium! That became yet another fight that we were involved in.

The next Red flag indicator came when my daughter was a toddler, and kept experiencing these terrible coughing spells, which at times became so bad that it required a doctor's visit. It would start out like a cold or flu but quickly escalate to problems breathing, sometimes wheezing, and eventually Doctors, medicine, and then the cycle would return after 2-3 months. We went to so many different doctors trying to figure out why this was happening, and recurring. It was very frustrating and I finally decided to consult a new pediatrician further away to see if he had any other conclusions. By this time we had been through approximately 4 doctors, in 4 years-and no closer to determining what was really going on. It wasn't until we saw the New Pediatrician, and he started asking more in depth questions, that we actually obtained a diagnosis that made sense. This doctor suggested a breathing treatment in his office and chest x-ray, as he believed this was not just a "bad cold," bronchitis, or whatever else we had been told previously. He suspected ASTHMA!! No one on either side of our families had ever had asthma, so we were totally surprised by this diagnosis. The in office breathing treatment actually helped Catie, but we also had to obtain a Nebulizer for home use. At that time it was a large, heavy "Contraption" and we were told Catie needed to use it every day after school for 20-30 minutes.

Yet another "red flag" was when I myself was diagnosed with Breast Cancer in October 2002. There was no history of breast cancer on either side of my family. This was completely unexpected and I was in shock. And with limited time to really disseminate all the information being thrown at me, I was at the hospital a month later having an 8 hour surgery, which altered my life from that day forward.

Eventually, since I had the Environmental background at my disposal, I started questioning and doing some research on my own and with the help of other experts. I was convinced that there must be a link between my Breast Cancer and our Environment. Of course, as always, I found out more than I ever imagined.

You can place buzz words like "Breast Cancer and Coal Fired Power Plants" and other key words in Google and you will be amazed what pops up. This little tidbit of Information is from: The US National Library of Medicine "Most dioxins are produced through burning and other industrial activities. Major sources of dioxin emissions are incineration of waste,

chlorine bleaching of pulp and paper, copper smelting, chemical manufacturing, cement kiln burning, coal-fired electricity generation, wood burning, forest fires, and backyard burning of household trash. Other sources of dioxin emissions include cigarette smoking, drum and barrel reclamation facilities, motor vehicles, residential oil furnaces, scrap electric wire recovery, and tire burning.”

When I first got online to research this it was several years after my cancer, but I knew there had to be a link, between these coal fired power plants and the high incidences of cancers we had heard about from our friends and neighbors here in Lockport and Joliet. Some Streets actually had 10 or more cases on 1 block! If there are only 25-30 houses, on one block, having almost half of those with at least 1 family member with cancer, did not seem normal.

One of the issues that come up when researching something like this, is the fear that most people have, when you start asking about where they live in proximity to these plants. Once they realize that you are inferring that the cancer they or a loved one has may be due to living so close to these Coal Fired power plants, they become elusive, defensive, and sometimes angry because they realize their home value will decline if you pursue this line of questioning. Many also worked at these plants, or a Father, Uncle or other family member worked there, and they believe their pensions could be in jeopardy, so they stop talking to you all together. I've found that now people are even more fearful than they were 15 years ago, because they feel stuck, they cannot move to another area as easily as they could in 1997 due to the economic situation. So their home means everything to them.

The list of Environmental, Social, Economic, and Health issues surrounding these plants is endless. The lack of oversight by those agencies which we were told would protect us, have failed. Those who live near these plants, such as those in the Smiley Subdivision near Joliet's Coal Fired plants, or the residents of the Lockport area, next to the Will County plant have been ignored and forgotten.

The large corporations with their paid lobbyists and their monetary perks for politicians seem to be the only real winners here. It is time for all that to change.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my story.

Jeff Biggers is the American Book Award-winning author of *Reckoning at Eagle Creek: The Secret Legacy of Coal in the Heartland* (Nation/Basic Books), among other books. Visit his website: [www.jeffbiggers.com](http://www.jeffbiggers.com)