

**October 27, 2009**

**Statement of Sheila Holt-Orsted to EPA Region 4**

Good Morning. My name is Sheila Holt-Orsted. I'm a member of the Holt family from Dickson, TN. Dickson is about 40 miles west from the outskirts of Nashville.

I'm here today to say that a change has got to come. EPA, we need you to provide better oversight of environmental problems in our communities. We no longer want to see our communities to be the dumping grounds for hazardous wastes and toxic chemicals.

I travel here today to say that I don't appreciate being a statistic. The people you are hearing from today each have their own story about how they've suffered when toxic waste is improperly disposed of in their community. Dr. Robert Bullard has told my story in the report "Toxic Waste and Race at Twenty" (Chapter 7). He called it a toxic terror in a Tennessee town. I call it my horror story. It comes with an "R" rating for waste and race.

In 2002, while in Dickson for the Christmas holiday, I found my community riddled with cancer, including my father. I was so disturbed that I got a full physical when I returned home. A biopsy report revealed that I had stage 2 breast cancer. I was a former Miss TN Heavyweight and Mixed Pairs Bodybuilding Champion. At the time of my breast cancer diagnosis, I was teaching aerobics and weightlifting classes, working as a personal trainer, and playing in two adult women basketball leagues. That was all replaced by chemotherapy, radiation, numerous surgeries, and a mastectomy.

During my quest to find out why this had happened to me, I learned so many family members were sick so I didn't have to look far. My family's farm – the farm where I grew up – is directly adjacent to the Dickson County Landfill. The Landfill's owners had accepted waste at the Landfill for years with toxic chemicals. Among the chemicals dumped was trichloroethylene or TCE, a cancer-causing chemical that was used as a metal degreaser.

I learned that TCE was seeping from the Landfill into groundwater at levels that far exceeded EPA's safety standards. I started going through state documents I found. Horrified, I could not believe what I discovered. Among the State documents were two sets of letters. One group of letters was written to white families. These families were warned that tests indicated their well water was contaminated with high levels of TCE. They were immediately placed on clean drinking water from the municipal supply.

The other letters went out to black families, including my family. The letter my family received said that no levels exceeded EPA standards and that the use of our well water should not result in adverse health effects. Both of these reassurances were untrue. While white families were warned of the dangers and provided with safe drinking water, my family was being poisoned. This is where it turned twisted.

I learned that a state employee went to his supervisor and told him that EPA has misinformed my family about the safety of our water. The supervisor suggested that EPA be contacted and questioned about the letters we had received. EPA said they were not in a position to deal with it at that time. The State of TN decided not to do anything. One letter I discovered said TDEC decided not to warn us of the TCE contamination to avoid the confusion of having various agencies sending different messages. The State of TN was more concerned with not contradicting EPA than it was in protecting my family from a known cancer-causing chemical in our water.

My father lost his battle with cancer and I continued my battle with cancer, while my other family members now live in fear that they might get sick next.

The one bright spot is the team of lawyers, churches, and environmental groups that have joined my family's fight for justice. The Natural Resources Defense Council is representing me in a lawsuit seeking to clean up the toxic contamination at the Landfill. The NAACP Legal Defense Fund is representing me in a lawsuit to address the racial discrimination my family faced.

My family is embroiled in what will be one of the biggest EJ battles in recent history.

EPA, I traveled here today to say, “Do your job!”

- Support Legislation that codifies the Executive Order on Environmental Justice.
- Support legislation that reinstates the superfund tax.
- Protect families and communities like mine around the country.

Thank you.