

Activist Spotlight

Lois Gibbs and Environmental Toxins



Fact: The United States has about 50,000 toxic waste sites. The federal government works with state and local officials to clean them up, but it takes a long time. Many sites have been waiting decades for cleanup.

Read about how Lois Gibbs organized a campaign to demand that her community clean up a toxic waste dump. Then, use the worksheet to address an environmental issue in your community.

A Mom Becomes an Environmental Activist

In 1978, in Love Canal, New York, Lois Gibbs uncovered a problem. She learned that her son Michael's school was built on land where toxic chemicals had been dumped. Sometimes there was a strange smell near the school. After it rained, children played in the oily puddles that bubbled on the ground. Gibbs worried that the poisons were making people sick. She demanded that her community investigate the problem. With help from reporters and other neighbors, Gibbs learned that the entire neighborhood was built on top of toxic land. Many homes had toxins in the basements and yards. Gibbs formed a group to protest the pollution and fight for the government to clean it up.

After years of work, Gibbs succeeded. The Love Canal neighborhood was evacuated, and some of the toxins were cleaned up. The federal government reaped much of the neighborhood in the 1990s. Some residents still report issues today.

Gibbs kept working as an environmental activist and helped train new activists. Her work led to the creation of the "Superfund" law, which created a fund that the federal government uses to clean up waste sites around the nation.

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Be an Environmental Activist

Step 1: Identify an environmental problem in your community. Some things to consider:

- Is there trash along roadways and trails?
- Do you need a stronger recycling program?
- Do stores use plastic bags?

Step 2: What can you do to fix the problem? Brainstorm ideas.

Step 3: In the space below, draft a letter to a local elected official to explain the problem and your ideas for fixing it.

Step 4: Type your letter on a computer so you can e-mail it to the official. You can also print it and mail it.

A large, empty rectangular box with a black border, intended for drafting a letter to a local elected official.