

LOVE CANAL

EMMA COOK

Love Canal. Sounds like a wonderful place. I mean, love is in the name so it must be nice, right? Wrong. Search Love Canal in your local search engine and you'll be met with headlines that read 'tragedy', 'environmental disaster', 'public health time bomb', etc. You won't be met with a canal like that of the Erie Canal. In fact, it was a scene of one of the worst environmental tragedies to ever occur in the United States. Now, if you were to visit the site of the Love Canal today, you'd think I was making up a story. You'd see nothing but stretches of grass fields surrounded by lines of wiry looking fencing. It's a sight I personally have especially easy access to. For all my twenty years on this Earth, I've maintained residence only about a half of a mile from the notorious Love Canal. I've ridden my bike, walked with my mom, taken my dog for walks etc. past it. For most of my life I wouldn't give it a second look; I was completely unaware of the tragedy that took place there. Once I learned about it at school and from my mom, it induced some fear. A younger me was asking my mother, "Am I going to get cancer, Mom?" and "I'm still going to be able to have kids, right, Mom?". Despite the Love Canal not being an active

issue, it raises alarms that a young child would even have to concern themselves with. I should've been worried about my homework or what videogames I was going to play, but instead I was worried about infertility and an illness. The citizens of Niagara Falls who resided around the time of the disaster shouldn't have had to worry either.

The origins of the disaster started with William Love, who the canal was named after, proposed to build a canal in the late 1800s that would provide cheap hydroelectric power. The project was ultimately left incomplete due to issues with currents. Between 1942 and 1953, Hooker Electrochemical Company saw an opportunity to dispose of their waste. They dumped over twenty thousand tons of hazardous chemicals at the incomplete Love Canal. These chemicals were Dioxin, benzene, chloroform, and other PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls). Those chemicals would seep into the soil and groundwater which would be the spark starting a much larger fire down the road. After the dump site was covered, Hooker sold

the land to the Niagara Falls Board of Education for a deal of a whopping one dollar and a clause that released them from being liable for any issues that should occur in the future. The Board of Education made the deal with intentions of building a school on the property.

Yep. You heard right. A school. A place of education for children. Right directly on top of a hazardous chemical dump site. It's hard to decide which is worse: Hooker not caring what happens in regards to the site because it wouldn't be their legal responsibility any longer or the Board of Education knowing full and well they were buying a plot of land used for waste disposal and still planning to build a school on it. After the completion of the 99th street school, another school was built on 93rd street along with a number of homes in the surrounding area of the site. The homeowners who bought these homes were completely oblivious of what was underneath the site. The parents that sent their children to these schools unaware their children would be frolicking the halls built on chemicals. All was seemingly well until the 1960s and 1970s when citizens started to complain about putrid odors and strange substances coming to the surface in their yards, playgrounds, and basements. The health effects ranged from increased reports of stillbirths and miscarriages, birth defects, liver dysfunctions, epilepsy and more. The complaints were adding up so the EPA and

NYSDEC investigated and soon after President Carter put out an emergency declaration. Immediate cleanup was employed and almost a thousand families were evacuated and relocated in a certain radius to Love Canal.

The most vital player to this story was a Niagara Falls citizen, Lois Gibbs. Gibbs wasn't anyone of notable position or status; she was merely a concerned citizen and mother of a sickly child. She went straight to the school board with recommendations from physicians that her child transfer schools. The school board was in fear that if they were to allow her child to transfer then other parents would follow suit so they denied the transfer. Lois was outraged by this response from the board and in turn gathered with other parents to discover their children were experiencing health issues as well. It expanded into a discovery of a community wide problem. Lois headed a movement of parents in the Love Canal Parents movement and other Niagara falls residents in the Love Canal Homeowners Association to demand action. A ten foot wall was built around the site and the government bought a couple hundred homes to attempt to ease the situation. The lack of substantial action angered the citizens due to no one really knowing the extent of the effects of the chemicals, still residents left living near the site, children and people were sick and dying. When the EPA had significant findings of

chromosomal damage and links to cancer, Gibbs took matters into her own hands. She held two EPA agents hostage in her home for approximately six hours. Her demands were that the government relocate the hundreds of families that lived in close proximity to the Love Canal. Within two days, the government agreed and relocated the families. Lois and the Love Canal Homeowners Association eventually obliged President Carter to declare a second emergency declaration to relocate the remaining families. Gibbs and the other residents struggled for three long years to demand rightful action to extreme wrongdoing. Without the determination and relentless activism of Gibbs and others, the Love Canal disaster would have continued to wreak havoc on the health of the Niagara Falls community surrounding the site.

This disaster left an impacting legacy but also leaves a lesson and harsh reality. This level of environmental disaster could happen at any time and any location in the world again. As a person in the younger generation, I can say honestly that I am scared shitless. The government's disregard of the citizens' health and outrage for action back in the 60s was a foreshadowing of how they are today. There is no regard for human life in the environmental issues we experience. We, as a human population, are dealing with an overwhelming amount of environmental issues already with climate change and the irreversible damage of that as my classmates

talked about earlier today. Scientists worried there would be another Love Canal, but what they fail to realize, we are Love Canal. The governments have already failed us. Rising temperatures, unwavering carbon emissions, deforestation, toxic air and too many more to count. We are living in not just the greatest environmental tragedy in the U.S, but the greatest environmental tragedy to ever see this planet. My generation now must fight to hold the government accountable and we don't have three years to struggle over local issues anymore. But, I and I believe millions of other young persons like myself, want to take a page out of Lois Gibbs book. I may not necessarily want to hold government agents hostage like she so boldly did, but I'm ready to take it straight to our governments at every level.
