

GUEST ESSAY

We Have Been Asking the Wrong Questions About Wastes

Lois Marie Gibbs

*In 1977, Lois Marie Gibbs was a young mother with two children living near the Love Canal toxic dumpsite. She had never engaged in any sort of political action until her children began experiencing unexplained illnesses and she learned that toxic chemicals were oozing from the dump site into many of the area's yards and basements. Then she organized her neighborhood and became the president and major strategist for the Love Canal Homeowners Association. This grassroots political action brought hazardous waste issues to national prominence and spurred passage of the federal Superfund legislation to help clean up abandoned hazardous waste sites. Lois Gibbs then moved to Washington, D.C., and formed Citizens' Clearinghouse for Hazardous Wastes (renamed the Center for Health, Environment, and Justice), an organization that has helped more than 7,000 community organizations protect themselves from hazardous wastes. In 2003 her organization began coordinating a massive education program by the Environmental Health Alliance (a coalition of 160 groups) about how to prevent toxic and hazardous wastes from being released into the environment. Her story is told in her autobiography, *Love Canal: My Story* (SUNY Press, 1982). She was also the subject of a CBS movie, *Lois Gibbs: The Love Canal*, which aired in 1982. Her latest book is *Dying from Dioxin* (Boston: South End Press, 1995).*



Just about everyone knows the environment is in danger. One of the most serious threats is the massive amount of waste we put into the air, water, and ground every year. All across the United States and around the world are thousands of places that have been, and continue to be, polluted by toxic chemicals, radioactive waste, and just plain garbage.

For generations, the main question people have asked is, "Where do we put all this waste? It's got to go somewhere." That is the wrong question, as has been shown by many experiments in waste disposal and by the simple fact that there is no "away" in "throwaway."

We tried dumping our waste in the oceans. That does not work. We tried injecting it into deep, underground wells. That does not work. We've been trying to build landfills that do not leak, but according to the EPA all landfills eventually leak. We've been trying to get rid of waste by burning it in high-tech incinerators; that only produces different types of pollution, such as air pollution and toxic ash. Even recycling, which is a very good thing to do, suffers from the same problem as all the other methods: It addresses waste *after* it has been produced.

For many years, people have been assuming, "It's got to go somewhere," but now many people, especially young people, are starting to ask why. Why do we produce so much waste? Why do we need products and services that have so many toxic by-products? Why can't industry change the way it makes things so that it stops producing so much waste? When you start asking these questions, you start getting answers that lead to *pollution prevention* and *waste reduction* instead of *pollution control* and *waste management*.

People, young and old, who care about waste reduction and pollution prevention are asking why so many goods are wrapped in excessive, throwaway packaging. They are challenging companies that sell pesticides, cleaning fluids, batteries, and other hazardous products to either remove the toxins from those products or take them back for recovery or recycling rather than disposing of them in the environment. They are demanding alternatives to throwaway materials in general.

Since 1988, hundreds of student groups have contacted my organization to get help and advice in taking these effective types of actions. Oregon students took legal action to get rid of cups and plates made from bleached paper because the paper contains the deadly poison dioxin. As a result the school systems switched to reusable cups, plates, and utensils.

Dozens of student groups have joined with local grassroots organizations to get toxic-waste sites cleaned up or to stop construction of new toxic-waste sites, radioactive-waste sites, or waste incinerators. Waste issues are not simply environmental issues; they are also tied up with our economy, which is geared to producing and then disposing of waste. *Somebody* is making money from every scrap of waste and has a vested interest in keeping things the way they are.

Waste issues are also issues of *justice* and *fairness*. There is a lot of debate between industry officials and government risk analysts and regulators about so-

called acceptable risk. These individuals decide the degree of people's exposure to toxic chemicals but rarely ask the people who will actually be exposed how they feel about it.

Risk analysts often say, "There's only a one in a million chance of increased death from this toxic chemical." That may be true, but suppose I took a pistol and went to the edge of your neighborhood and began shooting into it. There's probably only a one in a million chance that I'd hit somebody, but would you issue me a license to do that?

As long as we do not stand up for our rights and demand that "bullets" in the form of hazardous chemicals not be "fired" in our neighborhoods, we are giving environmental regulators and waste producers a license to kill a certain number of us without our even being consulted.

We live in a world that is shaped by decisions based on money and power. If you really want to understand what's behind any given environmental issue, the first question you should ask is, "Who stands to profit from this?" Then ask, "Who is going to pay the price?" You can then identify both sides of the issue and decide whether you want to be part of the problem or part of the solution.