

Nonprofit News

Wielding community effort to make lifesaving environmental changes



[Above]: Bradley Angel and Marie Harrison in the organization's office. [Below]: Harrison at the closed PG&E plant in Bayview Hunters Point. Photos courtesy of www.greenaction.org.

By Vince Ei

How does a modest organization such as Greenaction, a nonprofit with six staff members and no wealthy business executives on its board of directors, go toe-to-toe with the likes of PG&E and the United States Environmental Protection Agency?

Before Bradley Angel became the executive director of Greenaction, he worked for Greenpeace helping low-income, indigenous, working-class communities, and communities of color combat environmental justice issues. When the international branch of Greenpeace took over in 1997 and relinquished work in the community level, Angel resigned.

"One of the things we're really proud of with Greenaction is with a miniscule fraction of the resources that some of the bigger environmental groups have, been able to accomplish extraordinary things. There are no more dirty power plants in San Francisco," Angel said.

The closing of that last power plant — a major pollutant of the soil and groundwater in Bayview Hunters Point — was the result of an 8-year battle against PG&E. It is just one of many notches under the young organization's belt.

Highly incredulous of the corporations and government agencies in place to preserve the health and safety of the community, several grassroots organization leaders came together and formed Greenaction in 1997, wherewith Angel was able to pick up where Greenpeace left off.

So, while being out-staffed and out-funded by their opponents that supposedly promulgate environmental integrity, how are they able to make such a huge impact?

According to Angel, "All our work every day is based in and working with and empowering the grassroots community from the front lines of pollution and

injustice and racism, and so we think it's vital if you want to succeed you gotta involve the community, plus it's the right thing to do and the right way to do it."

In 1999, Angel approached Marie Harrison, a resident of Bayview with an extensive background in environmental justice, to join as a community organizer. Harrison knew the extent of Angel's passion from meeting him at different environmental justice events even before Greenaction formed.

"They had a history of being very young and being aggressive enough to take on an issue and not leaving that issue until they've won that battle," Harrison said. "Folks would use our name to scare you because they know that we don't quit."

The tenacity behind the reputation of Greenaction is built on how much advocacy it inspires in the community. The first step is to educate.

"As a community level organization, advocacy isn't just hell-raising," Angel said. "We are very much a hell-raising organization, but, very much, we do a lot of research."

For example, Angel and Rose Chan, Office and Grants Administrator of Greenaction, designed a 52-page manual aimed at community members in the San Joaquin Valley to successfully campaign against diesel emissions from parked trucks and buses with the engine left running. The toolkit includes information on health effects, laws and regulations, and a "Good Neighbor Agreement" which businesses can sign as a pledge to the community to reduce diesel pollution.

"Our before-and-after hotspot watches by community members showed a decrease in idling and got several local businesses to sign our good neighbor agreements," Chan — also a Certified Health Education Specialist — said in an email.

Creating fact sheets, pamphlets and reports to present

technical jargon in layman's terms can be demanding, but the real challenge is making that message resonate, the next and most crucial step.

"The most difficult issue I face is getting communities, everyday folks, to understand that they really have a right," Harrison said. "For whatever it is, we still have people who don't understand or don't believe they have a right to speak up for theirs."

The very success of Greenaction hinges on community support, and there are many ways Greenaction organizes a call to arms against an issue.

With its diesel initiative, Chan said, "We had community members do door-to-door outreach to neighbors [informing them of the dangers of idling and how to report what they see to the local air district], targeted



truck drivers to educate them about health dangers, the impact idling had, and to discern why they idled their vehicles. We talked to school principals about bus idling."

Often times, fact sheets and reports need to be translated into several languages, but the language barrier can also make it difficult for different groups to recognize a common problem.

According to research by Harder+Company in 2010, the largest population percentage in Bayview Hunters Point is a tie between black and Asian/Pacific Islander at just 33 percent. White people make up 42

percent of the population in San Francisco but just 6 percent in Bayview Hunters Point.

"We always strive to be culturally appropriate and culturally sensitive so it's actually respectful and effective and empowering to the community so they will stand up to defend their communities, their cultures, their lives," Angel said.

Harrison notices even more separation when it comes to prioritizing the issues that plague Bayview Hunters Point. The affordable housing projects along the Hunters Point shipyard are one instance that exhibits this division.

Poor regulation of pollutants from construction is just the beginning of the environmental problems, but the project also led to evictions and did not create as many job opportunities for community members as promised. Residents more immediately concerned with one issue could care less about the other, and for Greenaction, the struggle against social and environmental injustice go hand in hand.

"There are civil rights laws in this state and the nation that our government systematically, continuously, consistently ignores and violates," Angel said. "We believe that the law is clear that when a government agency makes a decision it is prohibited by civil rights laws from taking actions that would have a negative disproportionate impact on

communities of color, and the government pretends those laws don't exist in the environmental realm."

Its first success was stopping a nuclear waste dump site in Ward Valley in 1998. "In most cases people want to get involved and do what they can — and it makes a huge difference, and that's how you bring about change in the world," Angel said. "A handful of professional environmentalists are not going to do it. You need the people who are affected the most, on the front lines, involved."

Greenaction's website is www.greenaction.org/.