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December 21, 2011

Louisvillian of the Year

How Rubbertown resident Kathy Little's environmental activism made her public enemy No. 1 for LG&E

BY JOE SONKA

When I first meet Kathy Little on her neighbor's front lawn on a beautiful, almost cloudless late August afternoon, it's one of those typical days on Cane Run Road in southwest Louisville that residents know all too well.

Little walks up with her Boxer's leash in one hand and her 7-year-old granddaughter Bryanna's hand in the other and delivers an exasperated greeting.

"Welcome to Cane Run Road."

As we look west, about 100 yards away — just past the pauper's cemetery and across from a trailer park — there is one cloud looming in the sky.

It's a continuous plume of fly ash billowing out of the rickety Louisville Gas & Electric sludge processing plant, silhouetted by a mountain of coal ash that is more than 100 feet tall and stretches for a mile.

For the past two years, battling this toxic eyesore — the leftovers of arsenic, mercury, cadmium and other toxins from the coal burned at the Cane Run power plant — has been Kathy Little's obsession.

"Right here," Little says, pointing to Bryanna, whom she and her husband, Tony, are raising. "This is why I fight."

But in truth, Little, 57, has fought for many more people than her granddaughter over the past year, relentlessly serving as both a citizen watchdog over the actions of LG&E and an inspiration to others in the same situation — living in the shadow of a coal ash landfill.

It wasn't always this way on Cane Run Road. When Little bought her modest, one-story house in 1979, the view from her porch was not a long black mountain ridge of coal ash, but acres of farmland, apple orchards, and Indiana just across the Ohio River.

But as the years went by, the Cane Run plant — built in 1954 — expanded and became more and more of a nuisance, as the soot that blew over would cover their car and house, requiring frequent washings. It was annoying, but never really considered dangerous.

For Little, that perception changed soon after December 2008, when a breach of a coal ash pond in Kingston, Tenn., resulted in 1.1 billion gallons of toxic sludge swarming 300 acres of the town, leaving complete devastation.

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In response to this disaster, the Environmental Protection Agency identified several “high-hazard” ash ponds across the country to draw attention to at-risk communities — including, to Little’s surprise, the one 50 yards from her home.

Once Little discovered this, she began researching and making phone calls, trying to find out what the contingency plan was in case of a breach. She didn’t get any answers from the Army Corps of Engineers, and the answer she got from LG&E didn’t exactly put her at ease.

“They said they would walk the neighborhood if a breach occurred,” Little says. “Now, our house wouldn’t be here, our door would be gone, so I doubt they’d be able to knock on the door to let us know. We’d be gone.”

She also began to learn what was in the dust that blew over from the landfill and the particles emanating from the smokestacks next door at the main plant.

“We have it coming from both ways,” Little says. “There are combustibles out of the power plant stacks, nitrogen oxides and sulfur dioxide, and, of course, that wonderful mercury. And then we have the particulates from the landfill — silica, the heavy metals from cadmium to mercury, you name it.”

Then there are the chemicals seeping into the watershed from the unlined ash pond, as well.

“Bryanna stays inside most of the time. But the fly ash gets inside, too. I don’t know if that is affecting her overall health, or whether I’m too protective. But it’s not fair to her, and it’s not fair to the other kids in this neighborhood.”

In 2010, Little received more disturbing news: LG&E had applied for a permit to build an additional 60-acre, 14-story landfill, this one even closer to her house.

So when LG&E held a public meeting that summer to discuss the permit, Little came prepared with questions. But what she encountered at the meeting was just more frustration.

“That point was my lowest of low points, because I couldn’t get any straight answers from them. And I just sat down and started crying.”

Lauren McGrath, an organizer with the Kentucky chapter of the Sierra Club, noticed Kathy and introduced herself.

“Just seeing somebody who was so on the ball, had done her research, knew what she was talking about, and yet not getting any answers,” McGrath says. “I wanted to connect with her.”

In recalling that meeting, Little says, “I met some friends that night ... they picked me up. And at that moment, I determined that I was going to fight.”

Though Little had never done any kind of political or environmental activism, she hit the ground running — knocking on doors, collecting petition signatures, planning meetings — with the help of Sierra Club organizer Thomas Pearce.

“She was a grandmother who had just become awakened to the fact that this nuisance that had been bothering her for years actually had serious potential health impacts,” Pearce says. “And she was determined to do something about it. So we made a good fit.”

Free time soon became a precious commodity, as Little continued her full-time job in a human resources department, finding time to organize and walk the neighborhood after work and on weekends.

Impressed by Little’s dedication, McGrath asked her to speak at the University of Louisville’s Bluegrass Bioneers Conference. At first Little was nervous, but according to McGrath, “When she started speaking, everyone in the room was just totally captivated by her story, moved and motivated to do something. And that’s when it became very obvious to me that she was a clear leader.”

Little’s organizing picked up steam in early 2011, with the help of Pearce and fellow neighbor Debbie Walker, who lives closest to the landfill and had just gone through two bouts of cancer in consecutive years. They held community meetings at the Veterans of Foreign Wars hall down the road, picked up the support of state Rep. Joni Jenkins, and held a rally outside the plant, calling for

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the company to withdraw a request for a permit to build a new landfill and urging them to switch from burning coal to a cleaner energy source.

Pearce, who's been a community organizer for 25 years, says you don't encounter people like Kathy Little every day.

"Once a decade. She is one of those rare people, just an amazing dynamo. She's a great spokesperson for the community and is completely engaged in the process of building community power. That's what sets Kathy apart from a whole lot of other folks."

In April, James Bruggers of The Courier-Journal wrote a prominent article on the effect of coal ash on Cane Run Road residents and their battle with LG&E.

Less than a week later, LG&E announced possible plans to phase out the burning of coal at the plant by 2016 and switch to natural gas, citing tighter federal regulations on emissions.

But Little wasn't even close to finished locking horns with LG&E. In fact, she was gearing up to take on other coal-burning culprits, as well, traveling outside of Louisville to help communities facing similar predicaments.

This Spring, Eastern Kentucky Power Co. sought a permit for a 200-acre coal ash landfill in Clark County — right next to a neighborhood.

Little traveled to Clark County to speak with residents.

"I don't want people to be snowed under by these utility companies who try to tell you that coal ash is benign," Little says. "I want them to know from my experience."

Eastern Kentucky Power soon rescinded its request for a permit.

"With her mere presence there, and how fired up people got after listening to her, they ended up canceling the coal ash expansion before they even got to a first meeting," Pearce says.

Little then traveled to Atlanta with a group of students from Berea College to testify before the EPA. By the time she was finished sharing her story, several people in the audience were in tears.

Around that same time, residents of the small town of Bedford in Trimble County learned LG&E was seeking to construct a 200-acre coal ash landfill just across the road from residential farms.

Feeling powerless and not knowing how to stop this from happening, farmer Kelley Leach started Googling. He came across a story about Cane Run Road and took note of Kathy Little. He found her number and gave her a call.

Leach picked the right person.

"We've actually talked on the phone about our landfill for hours on end," Leach says. "Especially when I get a little discouraged, I can give her a call and say, 'Kathy, what do you do to get people involved?' And she works me right out of it. She is such a good coach and a motivator."

"I couldn't ask for a better advocate for the situation we're in than Kathy Little."

Little made the hour drive to Bedford to meet with the residents that Leach had assembled in a neighbors' barn, right across the street from the proposed landfill. She told the residents her story, and gave them advice on what points to emphasize in the upcoming permit hearing and how to recruit more people to the meeting, where LG&E would defend its case.

Five days later, LG&E spokesman Paul Puckett walked into the lion's den.

A crowd of nearly 100 packed into a standing-room only meeting space; they proceeded to lambaste LG&E for the next four hours.

When asked for the seventh time if he would want his family to live next door to their landfill, Puckett calmly told the crowd yes, as the ash is perfectly safe.

"Then you've been sniffing that coal ash too much!" replied P.J. Nacke, who fears a severe drop in the value of her farmland adjacent to the property.

After Puckett 1) replied in the affirmative that he would put his child in the town's only certified day care center near the future landfill, 2) said LG&E would not pay for the medical care of a neighbor who had a child with asthma, and 3) politely ignored a citizen who mocked LG&E's "green box" commercials, Kathy Little went to the mic.

Little isn't a natural when it comes to public speaking. She tends to be soft-spoken and keep her head down, focused on her notes. But once she gets going, her message is powerful.

After listening to three hours of LG&E's spokesman telling the people of Trimble County there is nothing to fear about living next a landfill, Little was too angry to be nervous. She locked eyes with Puckett and her voice never wavered.

"Even though he says he'd live next to this landfill, believe me, you should be very afraid. These people are *not* good neighbors."

The next public meeting in Bedford will likely be held in early 2012, and Little is already gearing up for the fight.

"You (need to) get people to realize the impact, the suffering that people endure every day living near these coal ash facilities, the worry that you have every day, the stress that you feel because you can't protect your child," Little says. "That's a horrible feeling. So what do you do if you can't protect your child? You go out there and raise some hell. And you make people listen. So that's what I do."

Back home in Louisville, Little's struggle against LG&E at the Cane Run plant heated up over the summer.

Earlier this year, Little and neighbor Debbie Walker convinced the Louisville Metro Air Pollution Control District to test samples from their soot-covered homes, which came back positive for fly ash.

LG&E attempted to discount the findings, telling them this is likely due to buildup over many years and claiming that dust doesn't leave their property. LG&E also reminded them that the EPA does not currently regulate coal ash, meaning they aren't breaking any rules (because there aren't any rules to break).

The company even went so far as to invite the Walkers and the Littles to the LG&E plant to have dinner, where the company brought in a scientist to assure them — as they had many times before — that coal ash isn't harmful.

"After that dog-and-pony show that LG&E threw for us," Little recalls, "(Debbie Walker's husband) Greg was so upset, he said, 'Kathy, nothing's ever going to happen to those people over there, they can do whatever they want.'"

And so they devised a new plan: Because the Walkers lived so close to the landfill, Greg would take pictures whenever he saw dust leaving the plant. Less than two weeks later, a mammoth cloud rose from the landfill and blanketed the neighborhood. Walker snapped pictures and sent them to Little, who in turn sent them to the media and APCD.

Within days of media reports covering the events, LG&E announced that their sludge processing plant had malfunctioned, and they temporarily shut it down for repairs. Based on this evidence, the APCD fined the billion-dollar corporation a paltry \$4,000.

By November, APCD had cited LG&E for numerous additional violations. In response to LG&E's claim that the house samples testing positive for fly ash was due to years of pollution buildup, APCD took new samples — this time from a house the company had graciously offered to power-wash, providing a clean slate.

The samples again tested positive for fly ash, finally and definitively proving that dust was escaping the landfill and entering the neighborhood.

The fine was only \$26,000, but at least someone, at last, was holding the company accountable.

Ultimately, two-thirds of the violation notices LG&E received were substantiated by Walker's photographs.

"That was the worst thing that could ever happen to LG&E," Little says. "Because if you can't see it, it didn't happen."

In September, it seemed Little's leadership and hard work had finally paid off, with LG&E announcing they will indeed switch from burning coal to natural gas at Cane Run Road. The bad news: The change won't take effect until at least 2016, meaning residents might have to face up to five more years of the landfill's signature "dusting." In addition, the coal waste left behind will likely be there for many years to come.

And that means Kathy Little's fight is not yet finished.

"I think she's become public enemy No. 1 to LG&E," says the Sierra Club's Thomas Pearce. "And it's obvious at this point, I'm sure they're trying to figure out how they can recover a bit of their public image. I mean, just the fact that her and Greg Walker single-handedly got them fined for the first time ever ... They've become an autonomous, independent force to be reckoned with, and they're not taking crap from anybody."

Kathy's husband Tony, who is politically conservative but emphasizes that this is a situation where government needs to regulate, deadpans that it could be worse. "So far, the LG&E security guards haven't come over and pepper sprayed us. But who knows, we might be next."

When Kathy Little first started throwing herself into this work, Tony admits he had mixed feelings.

"You know, sometimes I think I was being selfish, because it was taking her away from our family time, and I guessed I resented that a little bit," he says. "Sometimes she's at meetings late and we miss dinner, things like that.

"But I think what she's doing is great. I think she's accomplished a lot more than she thinks she has. It's been kind of like David vs. Goliath. I think she's thrown several stones, and they've hit pretty close to home over there."

Kathy Little believes she wouldn't have to spend so much time as a citizen regulatory agency if certain state and federal government officials would step up and do their job.

"People like Beshear and McConnell, it just seems like they are working for the corporations instead of us," Little says. "I don't understand that. But I guess I don't have to."

When asked what message is most important in her activism, Little recalls a conversation she had while canvassing: "I met this one lady when I was out knocking on doors who said, 'You know, I don't matter because I don't own the property that my trailer sits on. But I'm hurting.'

"And I think if there's any message that needs to be put out there, it's that everybody counts," Little says. "I don't care if you own property or if you live out on a trailer on Cane Run Road. If you're affected, you should count."



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Employment

By Kay1982
You forgot to tell us that Kathy works in the HR dept of a company whose biggest business is COAL.

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