

PROFILE OF RESISTANCE

DOLLIE BURWELL

Environmental Justice activist, caseworker, congressional aid

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COURTESY OF JUSTIN COOK

Background Information

Born May 24, 1948

Dollie Burwell was born into a low-income family in Warren County, North Carolina.ⁱ Her journey into political participation and organizing started at 12 when she worked on a voter registration project. She continued her education by taking classes at Durham College and Shaw University.ⁱⁱ While in college, Burwell continued began organizing with individuals who were denied government housing based on their race.ⁱⁱⁱ

Burwell's Resistance

In 1978, 30,000 gallons of toxic PCB-tainted soil were dumped in 14 counties, including Warren County.^{iv} Governor Jim Hunt chose Warren County, one of the poorest counties with most Black residents, as a landfill site to contain the toxic soil.^v In response, Burwell organized a small group of Black women who all feared the poisonous outcome. The women opposed the soil contamination, adverse effects on water sources, and the community becoming a site for future toxic waste disposal.^{vi} Additionally, she rallied her church and influential church leaders to amplify the number of people of all backgrounds and ages.^{vii} As truckers dumped the first waste shipment, unarmed protesters marched to the dumping ground and lay on the ground to prevent trucks from coming in to dump more waste. During the demonstration, police officers with riot gear violently terrorized them.^{viii} Officers arrested and detained many protesters, including Burwell and her 10-year-old daughter, Kimberly.^{ix} Community members filled various roles to ensure the demonstration was successful. Some women cooked for hungry protestors, many passed out flyers, and even children participated by passing out snacks and water to weary demonstrators.^x

Achievements

Burwell's work resulted in Warren County being known as the “Birth of the Environmental Justice Movement.” Through Burwell's tireless organizing efforts, she brought attention to the issue of environmental racism in the nation, which still influences the creation of legislation regarding environmental hazards. Burwell continues her civil rights and environmental activism today.^{xi}

Essential Questions

1. Dollie Burwell reached out to different people she knew in her network to protest and bring attention to the urgent problem at Warren County.
 - a. Why is it essential to collaborate with a diverse network of people when creating social change?

2. Society stigmatizes people who have been arrested. People arrested include those who resist unjust laws and treatment to bring transformative change and justice, like Dollie Burwell.
 - a. What should a person do when they face unfair laws like Dollie Burwell did?

3. ***“The Washington Post cited the Warren County Environmental Justice Movement as the largest Civil Rights Movement since the 1960s. I believe that was in part because of the role children played in the demonstrations.”***
 - a. What role(s) can you play in changing your community?

ⁱNewton, David E. “Profiles.” *Waste Management a Reference Handbook*, ABC-CLIO, Santa Barbara, CA, 2020, pp. 167–168.

ⁱⁱNewton, David E. “Profiles.”

ⁱⁱⁱNewton, David E. “Profiles.”

^{iv}Fears, Darryl, and Brady Dennis. “This Is Environmental Racism.” *Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/interactive/2021/environmental-justice-race/>.

^vFears and Dennis, “This Is Environmental Racism.”

vi Fears and Dennis, “This Is Environmental Racism.”
vii United Church of Christ. “A Case for the Mother of the Environmental Justice Movement: Dollie Burwell,” September 20, 2017. https://www.ucc.org/pollinator_a_case_for_the_mother_of_the_environmental_justice_movement/
viii “A Case for the Mother of the Environmental Justice Movement.”
ix Fears and Dennis, “This Is Environmental Racism.”
x Fears and Dennis, “This Is Environmental Racism.”
xi Record, Jennifer Bollinger, The Warren. “PCB Site Declared Clean.” The Warren Record. https://www.warrenrecord.com/news/article_b04befe1-8979-5c38-b3be-ad04152ce9ec.html.