

How to Be Politically Active

When You're Disabled, Poor and Pissed Off

tips for the chemically injured

by Julie Genser

*As human beings, we're
the only species stupid enough
to actually poison ourselves.*

Mike Adams

For those of us challenged with chemical injury, it's become painfully clear: our water, ground, and air space have been completely polluted by a mix of ignorance, greed and lack of foresight. From the construction of dams and deforestation to off-shore dumping and suburban sprawl, our species has managed to pollute its own food sources and decimate biodiversity in a relatively short span of about 200 years.

Those with severe chemical sensitivities have become part of this collateral damage, the sacrificial lambs who give up their ability to just 'be' in exchange for the world's ability to talk with anyone on the planet from anywhere in the planet, to watch hundreds of channels of sub-grade TV programming, to approximate the scent of an exotic fruit salad or certain muskiness; the list is long. As if sitting down to eat real fresh fruit, interacting in community, or getting close enough to someone to smell their human scent just isn't good enough anymore. I have often wondered why we, as a species, have moved so far away from the real essence of things. And how do we find our way back?

**Activism is my rent
for living on this planet.**

Alice Walker

Although most of the responsibility for these crimes against Nature falls on our government and the major corporations and individuals who have spearheaded this destruction of our Earth, we all have a hand in it as long as we allow it to continue.

The question becomes: how can we be politically effective when most of our resources—our health, our finances, our support systems—have been devastated by illness? How do we organize ourselves, as a group of people suffering from a debilitating set of health conditions, isolated and worn down from years of battle with physicians questioning an EI (Environmental Illness) diagnosis, with health insurance companies who deny our medical bills, with family and friends who question our sanity, with communities inconvenienced by our requests for a clean air space, with homes and neighbors that repeatedly poison us, with our own bodies that don't cooperate with our deepest and most primal desires?

When I started this essay, I didn't have any answers. So I posed this question to longtime environmental activist, anarcho-primitivist, and prolific author **Derrick Jensen**. His work and life revolve around answering these questions: *Why do we act as we do? What are sane and effective responses to outrageously destructive behavior? What will it take for us to stop the horrors that characterize our way of being?*

This was his response: *'it sounds much like many indigenous communities: your job is to survive.'*

**When I dare to be
powerful
to use my strength in the
service of my vision,
then it becomes less and
less important
whether I am afraid.**

Audre Lorde

If our survival is our political edge, then it becomes important to define what it is we need to survive. As I see it, at the most basic level we need pure food sources (to eat), clean air (to breathe), non-toxic homes (to be sheltered from the natural elements), and we need social connection (community). If 'united we stand, divided we fall,' then it becomes imperative that we organize our collective resources—no matter how sparse—to secure these things that are necessary for our survival.

How does this translate in the real world? For starters, each and every one of us needs to recognize that we are part of a larger community—the chemically sensitive community—even if we live isolated and don't access the computer or phone. We all have something to share, even if just our story of survival that helps to validate the experience of another.

The benefits are always two-fold: the joy of giving and the comfort of receiving. When we channel our justifiable anger, frustrations, and feelings of helplessness that arise from living in a world that doesn't make sense into something productive and useful, we transform negative energy and experience into positive, on both a personal and social level. In this way, our suffering and our more difficult emotions can become tools for personal growth and action—sending ripples of change through our communities and reweaving the fabric of our lives.

I feel thankful every day for the challenges I've been faced with. They've helped me to realize more of my full potential and have given deep meaning to my life. But the ability to turn adversity into blessing is a skill that takes practice. To help you get started, I've put together this list of ways to contribute to your community no matter

your energy or financial level, to help ensure our survival, and ultimately, to help keep the world a hospitable place for humans and other living beings.

plant seeds: literally and figuratively.

Our planet is being killed off by industrial pollution, one species at a time. Help re-wild the Earth by sowing seeds of native plants wherever you can—along streets and highways, in your backyard. Don't stop there: 'drop knowledge' wherever you can without being preachy and start planting the seeds of awareness with your friends, family, and colleagues. Let them know how they, too, can save their money and health by switching to non-toxic personal care products and using natural gardening methods instead of pesticides to grow healthy lawns.

Your silence will not protect you.

Audre Lorde

put a face to the name.

Show up at court hearings, town meetings, and other official gatherings with your face mask, oxygen tank, or beekeeper's hat (to protect from EMFs) and put a face to our illness when important environmental issues in your community are being discussed and decided.

Post video diaries on sites like YouTube, Google Videos, and Yahoo Videos, to help spread awareness about issues important to you. See two poignant videos on **life with Chemical Sensitivity** made by Gordon McHendry, founder of **MCS-International**.

Create art—photography, paintings, drawings, performance pieces—that helps to make the invisible visible. Check out the work of the **Creative Canaries**, an international network of artists with chemical sensitivities.

speak your truth.

Channel anger and frustration into education: write letters to the editor of your local newspaper; write to senators, CEOs, landlords, family, and friends.

- See **The Armchair Activist** for a wonderful example of intelligent, articulate, and insightful letters to the editor by Barbara Rubin, who was disabled by multiple pesticide exposures.
- Start a blog—your very own online journal—in a well-established blogging community like **blogspot.com** or **wordpress.com** to increase your

I am only one, But still I am one. I cannot do everything, But still I can do something; And because I cannot do everything I will not refuse to do the something that I can do.

Helen Keller

chances of traffic. Here are a couple of great examples:

- [Adventures with Multiple Chemical Sensitivities: Tales of The Masked Avenger](#)
- [No Scents Please](#)

Make sure you use all the **blogging tag tools** available for spreading the news about your blog: [digg](#), [del.icio.us](#), [technorati](#), etc.

- Feeling especially creative? Create a template letter or political art image to share with the world! Send it to [**PlanetThrive.com**](#) and they'll make an [**e-card**](#) out of it that all visitors to their site can use! E-mail [**Planet Thrive**](#).

spread the word.

Create informational flyers, brochures, or postcards and post them in your neighborhood, in health food stores, laundromat bulletin boards and other local gathering spots, as well as your [**MySpace**](#), [**Facebook**](#), [**Tribe**](#) and other online community profiles. Start your own website—there are lots of free tools out there on the Internet these days so being poor is no excuse!

- Check out Eric Francis' [**DioxinDorms.com**](#) which details his investigative reporting of the ongoing cleanup and denials of dioxin and PCB contamination in the dorms at SUNY New Paltz after an electrical transformer exploded in 1994.
- See [**Fight Big Pharma's MySpace page**](#).

deal with the media effectively.

In [**Media in the United States**](#), Anup Shah says: *Media omissions, distortion, inaccuracy and bias in the US is something acknowledged by many outside the USA, and is slowly realized more and more inside the US. However, due to those very same omissions, distortion, inaccuracy and bias in the US mainstream media, it is difficult for the average American citizen to obtain an open, objective view of many of the issues that involve the United States.*

It's critical for grassroots activists to become savvy on how to interact with media—the very system that is creating the news distortions and bias—to offer a more balanced and realistic view of what's going on in our culture. Read [**Beyond Pesticide's tips**](#) on how to develop a strong media strategy and work effectively with reporters, editorial boards, and others to get your story covered.

better yet, become the media.

If you're skilled at writing and have reporting experience, apply to Newstarget.com's [**Web Seed Citizen Journalist program**](#), where approved articles on health, food safety, environment, and other related topics will be published on the NewsTarget Network. That means that your work will be displayed on NewsTarget.com (RSS syndicated) and several hundred other news sites, included in emails to over 100,000 NewsTarget.com subscribers, and spidered by Google News, reaching tens of thousands of additional readers each day.

put your money—and your support—where your mouth is.

Buy needed products and services from companies whose values and corporate culture you support. Likewise, go out of your way to support companies/organizations whose values are aligned with yours.

- For example, I might buy a subscription to [**Our Toxic Times**](#), the newsletter put out by the Chemical Injury Information Network (CIIN) because I want to support their work, more than my wanting the newsletter itself.
- I might choose to make my own tri-salts or switch brands rather than buy a product with a household name from a company whose values I do not support.

**If I am not for myself,
who will be for me? And
if I am only for myself,
what am I? And if not
now—when?**

Rabbi Hillel

support can come in various forms, not just financial.

- Become a free member of [**PlanetThrive.com**](#) and help catalogue our collective intelligence: **rate and review** products and services; **share your experience** with environmental illness; **connect with others** to offer knowledge, support, and friendship; **start a blog**; **post in the green classifieds** for safer housing, vehicles, rideshares, and used health products; the ways you can contribute without spending a dime are endless.
- Some websites with targeted business ads will earn a small commission when visitors click on ads. It's not even necessary to purchase anything. This is an easy way to help a company/group you support to cover their overhead expenses and ensure their survival.

join forces.

Start your own political action group or local support group and create a website presence. Research grassroots activism first to make sure you are using your time and efforts most efficiently—there are a ton of websites and other resources out there for the beginner. A great start is: [**Tools for Organizers, Activists, Educators, and other Hell-Raisers.**](#)

- Check out the creative and fun group [**The Toxic Amenders**](#) who use the tools of empowerment and celebration.

volunteer.

Give some of your time and energy to groups that have a proven track record with getting things done. Take the [**Rainforest Action Network \(RAN\)**](#), for example. This inspiring small group of activists has forced major corporations to change their ways. The secret to their success? 'We're very tenacious,' says Mike Brune, executive director at RAN. 'Once we sink our teeth into a company, we don't let go. We're also very creative and we don't go it alone. We have relationships with various other grassroots organizations which all come on board.' They share some of their tools in their online [**Activist Toolkit.**](#)

change laws.

Make a list of your pet peeves. Here is one of mine:

- Why is junk mail acceptable? We need to make companies creating the 'junk' responsible for it's re-use /recycling /disposal.

Then go about trying to change the way things are done. Make calls, write to your local representatives. Take it one step at a time to find out who's in charge, and what needs to be done to change it. Then organize others to help out.

Here are a few inspiring stories of how others turned toxic trauma into triumph:

**The activist is not the man
who says the river is dirty.
The activist is the man who
cleans up the river.**

Ross Perot

A fourth-generation shrimper, [**Diane Wilson**](#) spent her life in Seadrift, Texas, fishing off the Gulf Coast, until in 1989, she made the connection that her community was the "cancer capital of the world" because of the number of chemical and plastics manufacturers that dumped toxic waste into the water. The ensuing hunger-strike and sinking of her shrimp boat (that resulted in Formosa Plastics agreeing to zero discharge

and for them to recycle their waste stream!) were the start of a lifetime of activism and civil disobedience.

'I usually encourage actions that have some commitment, some risk. But I always say nonviolent, because your actions have to be a part of you. You've got to have an integrity about how you live, and your battles have to have the same type of consistency. We're losing ground, this planet seems to be losing ground, and the way things are set up, we're making just inches into this road. Things need to happen, we need to make a change and people have to be willing to get out there and do more than write a letter. Letters are good and all, but I guarantee it's when people put themselves on the line, when you get face to face with your corporations and your politicians, when you have a sit-in in their office, they see you. When they get your letter, they can just pitch it in the little trashcan. I'm all for encouraging the warrior in people that is real dormant to come out.'

Lois Gibbs founded the **Center for Health, Environment, & Justice (CHEJ)** after winning the nation's first community relocation of 900 families due to a leaking toxic waste dump in Love Canal, New York with no prior experience in community activism. Her efforts led to the creation of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's "Superfund," which is used to locate and clean up toxic sites throughout the United States. What kept her going through all the challenges? *'They made me mad, and it wasn't a matter of I'm going to go out and do good. I was just furious and frightened.'*

In 1990 **Ruth Berlin** and her son became victims of pesticide poisoning. By 1994 she had evolved from victim to activist when she founded the **Maryland Pesticide Network (MPN)**—a grassroots coalition of 29 organizations—which has since been instrumental in having passed some of the toughest anti-pesticide laws for schools in the nation. Maryland Governor Parris Glendening was so impressed with Ruth's determination that he appointed her to his pesticide advisory board in 1997. "Ruth campaigned aggressively and argued passionately for passage of the pesticide laws," said the governor. "Thanks to Ruth's tireless efforts, moms and dads in Maryland have the information they need to keep their children healthy and safe," says Glendening.

For more on grassroots activism efforts, read **Tips for Activism** by Informed Choices for Healthier Living and explore the links on **Planet Thrive**.

Julie Genser is a world traveler and spiritual explorer, temporarily grounded by environmental and chemical injuries. She is the founder and director of PlanetThrive.com, a grassroots community for personal wellness that aims to empower others healing from environmental illnesses with the information, resources, and support necessary to create change in their world.