



**Charles Lee.** Photo provided by Charles Lee. Used with permission.

# Rallying Point

## *Charles Lee's Long-Standing Career in Environmental Justice*

| Dianne See Morrison, MFA

**TWENTY-TWO YEARS AGO,** Charles Lee, a life-long social advocate and current head of the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA's) Office of Environmental Justice, presented a report at the National Press Club in Washington, DC. A photograph of the event shows him at an unadorned podium, a young, bespectacled man flanked by leaders from the United Church of Christ's Commission for Racial Justice, earnestly detailing his findings. At the time, Lee says he believed the groundbreaking study would have an impact, but perhaps in fifty years time. He couldn't imagine the nearly instantaneous reaction the report stirred up. As Rutgers environmental health professor Michael Greenberg says, "It was like a hammer falling off a table onto a bare foot."

"Toxic Wastes and Race" was the first report to use rigorous analysis and methods to show how pollution and environmental hazards were disproportionately affecting minority and low-income communities. Before the report, there was a growing suspicion that these communities were bearing the brunt of what has been called "environmental racism." But while there were countless stories that could be told of ruined neighborhoods, chronic

illnesses and even early deaths, there was no analytic proof.

Suzi Ruhl, now a senior lawyer with the EPA, recalls her own reaction to the report. At the time of its release, she was working for the Southern Poverty Law Center helping communities litigate against environmental mishaps and hazards. As she notes, the report gave activists and organizations like the Southern Poverty Law Center a "rallying point," a reference that finally validated their own work with hard data.

Indeed, it is hard to overstate the importance of "Toxic Wastes and Race." The report, says Greenberg, "embarrassed government officials, environmental organizations, scientists and industries." Within 6 short years of its release, all of the report's recommendations were implemented: in 1992, then EPA Administrator William Reilly created a Work Group on Environmental Equity, and later created the EPA Office of Environmental Equity (renamed in 1993 the Office of Environmental Justice). In 1994, President Clinton signed Executive Order 12898, entitled Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations, in which federal agencies were directed to make environmental justice a priority.

It is tempting to see "Toxic Wastes and Race" as the great landmark in Lee's life, the one that kicked off his career in environmental justice and as a social advocate. But even in his younger days, Lee was eager to devote his time to a worthy cause. During the 1970s, Lee became associated with District 1199, the hospital workers union, as a shop steward. He took some classes in occupational safety and health and became "intrigued" with the subject. Hospital workers were mainly African American and Latino, and he began to think a lot about issues of race, poverty, and occupational and environmental health.

In 1982, an event that would have a momentous effect on Lee's life—and on the environmental justice movement—began to unfold. The state of North Carolina chose Warren County—despite its relatively high water table and its highly permeable soil—as the site of a polychlorinated biphenyls (PCB) landfill to take in soil that had been contaminated by PCB-laden oil, which had been illegally dumped along the state's highways. The predominantly African American county was one of the state's poorest regions.

Lee had already written his first paper on race, poverty, and

the environment in 1978, and he knew that Warren County, in which 500 people would eventually be arrested, would be of “great historical significance.” By this time, he was working for the New Jersey Committee on Occupational Safety and Health. He organized a group of labor and community leaders to travel to Warren County to do some fact-finding and to show support. It was here that Lee met the leaders of the United Church of Christ’s Commission for Racial Justice, one of the major organizations to take part in the protests. Though the landfill ended up being built, the United Church of Christ decided to initiate a special project on environmental hazards in communities of color. They asked Lee to head the project.

Lee ran the United Church of Christ’s Environmental Justice program for 15 years. Much of his time was spent traveling extensively around the country, getting the word out on environmental justice, organizing conferences, and working with local community groups to help them find solutions. One of the key meetings that Lee helped put together was the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit held in 1991, which brought over a thousand environmental organizations together.

During the 1990s, Lee increased his involvement with the EPA. In 1994, he was appointed the chair of the National Environmental Justice Advisory Council’s Waste and Facility Siting Subcommittee, a post he held for 4 years. Timothy Fields, the EPA’s deputy assistant administrator, and later its assistant administrator for solid waste and emergency response, worked with Lee on a number of waste management and environmental

cleanup issues—from Superfund relocation policy, to the siting of waste transfer stations, to community involvement in federal facilities cleanup.

Lee’s subcommittee produced a major report that led the agency to make sustainable community development a fundamental tenet of the brownfields program and led to “significant improvements in the brownfields assessment, cleanup, and revitalization process,” according to Fields. Throughout his work on the subcommittee, Lee’s signature dedication to bringing disparate groups and agendas was ever present. Fields, now a senior vice president with policy consulting firm MDB, recalls working with Lee: “Charles has always tried to look at all sides of an issue as he tackled tough environmental justice issues—the community perspective, the regulator perspective, and the industry perspective. He has the respect of all players, the credibility to bring different stakeholders together, and the analytical skills to craft an effective solution.”

But while Fields acknowledges the importance of Lee’s “Toxic Wastes and Race,” calling him one of the “great pioneers of environmental justice,” Fields believes that Lee may actually make his biggest impact on the field through this work at the EPA.

In 1999, Lee joined the EPA as its associate director for policy and interagency liaison at its Office of Environmental Justice. Eight years later, he became the office’s director. There is much work to be done. New, larger issues seem to appear daily. Lee points, for example, to how globalization has brought on the rapid expansion of ports to handle the skyrocketing amount of

freight traffic between countries, while the earth’s rise in temperature is forcing, for one, the upheaval of entire indigenous villages in Alaska as their land and homes disappear under the rising sea. Moreover, tackling these mounting problems doesn’t just require national efforts, but international acceptance and cooperation as well.

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Lee himself remains optimistic that things can and will change, by systematically and methodically chipping away at the problem. He reports the understanding of environmental justice issues has grown much more sophisticated, especially as more analytical tools that target and measure it become available. The sheer number of environmental incidents has also grown, thanks to better methods of identifying them. “I think we understand the issues in a much more comprehensive way, and that’s a positive thing,” says Lee. He is also hopeful that with these new analytical tools, the EPA will be able to measure the progress of their work and be able to develop “best practices” for dealing with environmental concerns.

But of course, much of the work that will have a lasting impact—the chipping away—is the type of work that Lee has been doing for years. Robert Brenner,

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who is currently the director of the EPA’s Office of Policy Analysis and Review in the Office of Air and Radiation, but who first worked with Lee over 20 years ago, says that since joining the agency, Lee has already had a “huge impact” on the EPA’s understanding of the issues of environmental justice, and has created a network of people and the infrastructure to deal with them. Says Brenner of the work he has done with Lee, “He is absolutely tireless in his efforts to solicit ideas, to develop groups, to help promote their ideas, to listen patiently to help people to develop them.”

There is a simple explanation for his long, tenacious involvement in environmental justice: “Charles is just a real humanitarian,” says Richard Moore, the executive director of the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice, who has known Lee for over 20 years. “He is a very spiritual person. He really cares about people, about improving their lives.” He is also, says Moore, an “intense human being,” who “when he is on it, he’s not on it just a little bit, he’s on it the whole way. He lives it, sleeps it, eats it, and breathes it.”

While long-standing colleagues are quick to heap praise on Lee as a dedicated humanitarian, Lee himself says he never saw his sense of social justice “as such a big deal.” It was typical, he says, of many people who grew up during the 1960s, who looked around and saw what was happening with the civil rights movement, the antiwar rallies, the anti-poverty movement, and the burgeoning concern for the environment. “My value system [is] no different than many of my peers,” Lee says trying to mitigate his colleagues’ praise, “What

influenced me tremendously about the civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King and Malcolm X was their humanity.”

It is clear that that sense of justice and the desire to do the right thing has sustained Lee over the years. There is very little that he looks back on with regret. The only hint of poignancy is when he talks of his father, a chemist who had brought his young family from Taiwan to America. He was, says Lee, a “highly motivated individual” who was determined to see his children become successful. He was the one who instilled in Lee a “strong love of science,” to which he has devoted to environmental and social justice, as well as the sense that “practically anything is possible and worth striving for”.

Although his career took a very different path to what his father had envisioned for him, Lee says his father, ultimately, was very proud of him. His father passed away, however, shortly before Lee was appointed to a National Academy of Science committee on environmental justice in 1996. “During the first meeting of that committee, I kept thinking about how much my father would have enjoyed knowing that his son was part of such a prestigious process,” Lee recalls.

Mostly, Lee is just grateful to have been a part of a process to try to make his corner of the world a better place. Lee says he has “always marveled” about how “fortunate” he has been. “A friend of mine once told me that if it were something really important, one should not expect to accomplish it in one’s lifetime,” he recalls, adding, “I once told the Commission for Racial Justice’s board of directors that we went to work on an issue that, at that

time, did not have a name. Having been able to see a movement that I played an instrumental part in starting come to the point now where it is on the cusp of truly being part of the mainstream is both gratifying and humbling. It has instilled me with a great sense of the ways in which one can make a difference in the lives of people and the importance of having faith in one’s vision.” ■

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doi:10.2105/AJPH.2009.178590