

Global Assessment Report  
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Citizens for clean air

*New York*

Lalita Daikoku

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## Case Study

# **Citizens For Clean Air, New York**

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*[Established The Women's Peace Committee with the motto 'Peace through Friendship and Trust' to help build a better community. Member, Board of Trustees, Sarvodaya International Trust, an organisation dedicated to promoting the Gandhian ideals of truth, non violence, peace, universal brotherhood and humanitarian service worldwide. Director, Bharat Soka Gakkai, New Delhi, a voluntary organization affiliated with United Nations, working in the area of peace, culture and education.]*

How often have we heard women say helplessly, “I am only an ordinary housewife so there is nothing I can do”. Well here is a story of how an “ordinary housewife” expanded her personal protest about the air pollution in New York City into a widespread civic movement.

This case study deals with Hazel Henderson’s very first campaign as a civic activist, as an ordinary citizen and mother, before she became the self-taught famous Dr. Hazel Henderson – a world-renowned futurist, evolutionary economist, globally syndicated columnist and consultant on sustainable development.

It all started in the 1960’s when Hazel noticed that every evening after play, her daughter had a layer of soot on her skin which literally had to be scrubbed off while giving her a bath. She herself was suffering from a persistent cough. In addition to soot, smoke from thousands of garbage incinerators made the air smell foul. Having lived in England in the early part of her youth she was familiar with the great smog in London in 1952, when four thousand people died in a week and hence knew that this air pollution was a health threat for everyone, especially children.

Hazel began by talking to other mothers at the neighbourhood park while they were watching their children play. Starting with the simple question, “Don’t you think the air here is bad?”, she engaged them in repeated discussions that eventually led to the formation of ‘Citizens for Clean Air’.

During her daughter’s afternoon naps, Dr. Henderson began to write letters to the mayor of New York City and other city officials, asking them to address the issue of air pollution. Eventually, she received a reply from the mayor stating that what she thought was pollution was probably just mist rolling in from the sea! The response of politicians and experts to her appeals for cleaner air was always the same: It costs too much money; we can’t do it. Lurking behind such responses she often sensed contempt: What does a housewife like you know about the way the world really works?

Refusing to be discouraged, she decided to do further investigations and found that the city actually had an office of smoke control. When she phoned them to report smoke coming from nearby chimneys, she was politely told that they knew their job and were measuring soot particles in the city's air each day.

By now they were a small but formidable group of ten members with the goal of having air-pollution forecasts included on televised weather reports. They divided up the task of writing to high-ranking executives in all the major television networks.

When they learned that broadcasting fell under the jurisdiction of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in Washington, they wrote to its chairman. They also wrote to Nelson Rockefeller, governor of New York State. The letters contained information about New York City smoke-control devices and a request that television broadcasts should include daily measurements under the FCC requirements stipulated by a 1934 act of congress "to broadcast in the public interest, convenience, and necessity". Both, the FCC Chairman and the governor replied saying Hazel should keep them informed of the TV networks' responses.

Hazel then photocopied this response and sent them to the TV network chiefs. In a few weeks they received a call from the vice president of one of the major New York television stations saying that he liked the idea of including the New York air-pollution index on TV weather programs. One month later, the New York Air Pollution Index, based on primitive soot measurements, was on the air. Three months later all TV stations, most radio stations and local newspapers were covering the index. Similar indexes began being broadcast in other cities of USA too.

The group also called on all of the top advertising agencies, hoping that some company would donate publicity work, but none were willing. After visiting 20 firms, the group members decided that they would try just one more, and if that company refused as well, they would give up. Fortunately their hard work and persistence paid off. The last firm on their list was a newly formed company called Carl Ally Agency and their young president Carl Ally agreed to do a free advertising campaign for them. In a few months, a beautiful truthful advertising campaign was created. This created a great public awareness and rapid expansion of 'Citizens of Clean Air'. Soon the New York City Council enacted two laws concerning air pollution, and shortly thereafter the United States Congress passed the Federal Clean Air Act in 1970. In recognition of her achievement, in 1967, the New York Medical Association conferred the Citizen of the Year Award on her.

Encouraged by this success, Dr. Henderson started taking part in civic movements in other fields.

Who were some key partners in her struggle? A key person who helped her in the initial stages was Dr. Norman Cousins, who had been asked to head a task force on air pollution. It was he who opened many doors for Hazel to get her public-education ads accepted by New York television, radio and newspapers. Interestingly when she faced a lot of hostility from top executives of polluting industries, she decided to sensitize not just the consumers, but the stockholders too!

There were many hardships and persecutions that she faced, the worst being letters accusing her of being a communist. The people behind such hate mail went so far as to write to the president of IBM where her husband was employed, saying the wife of their company staff was a communist. But Hazel persistently fought on. The simple desire to have her daughter and other children breathe clean air, alone gave her and the group the strength to endure the numerous persecutions and keep pushing ahead.

What were her tools and approaches to deal with the campaign? In her dialogic book with Dr. Daisaku Ikeda she says that in a civic movement the following points are important:

- The cause must be a serious one, which is apparent to everybody.
- Mobilize many volunteers
- Thoroughly read up and educate oneself on the matter to become a world-class expert on the problem.
- Every pronouncement made should have been thoroughly investigated and researched.
- Make use of the power of media in a good sense.
- Be persistent and dogged and never give up no matter how difficult.
- And most importantly, each participant of the civic movement must have a noble spirituality to fall back on.

## **References**

- Henderson, Hazel & Ikeda Daisaku; Planetary Citizenship (Santa Monica: Middleway Press), 2004.
- SGI Quarterly, October 2004. Website: [www.sgiquarterly.org](http://www.sgiquarterly.org)