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Patsy Ruth Oliver:
A Mother's Battle For Environmental Justice

Patsy Ruth Oliver was driving up and down her dusty Texas road, looking for the snake she'd run over the night before. "There goes the EPA and the Army Corps of Engineers all wrapped into one package," she had muttered before backing up, taking aim at the snake, and flooring her creaky old Dodge Diplomat. "Of course, the reptiles are a lot more respectable than our enemies," she said remorsefully the next morning. "The rattlesnake is a gentleman. He warns you before he strikes."

With five children and seven grandchildren, 58-year-old Patsy Ruth Oliver was a whirlwind of a woman with mischievous eyes and a devilish wit, a gripping storyteller whose language was a mixture of grit and Gospel. Unable to remain idle while her children, her mother, her husband, and her friends began to sicken and die from the effects of toxic waste buried beneath their homes, Oliver organized her neighbours to fight back. For more than a decade, she did battle with the Environmental Protection Agency, corporate polluters, and the United States Congress to free the people of Carver Terrace from what she called their "prison of poison."

When I last saw her it was summertime in Texarkana, a faded railroad town on the Texas-Arkansas border, and the brutal humidity made it difficult to breathe. In Carver Terrace, Oliver's old neighbourhood, it smelled like someone was brushing hot, sticky tar onto a sun-scorched roof. But it was just the air, licking at the toxic soil of this suburban ghost town.

Dark patches of creosote seeped through the withered lawns, around rusting swing sets and down the cracked center of the street. Tiny bubbles of what locals call "migraine gas" floated in oily puddles. Before long, my head ached and my tongue was coated with a strange, greasy taste.

"If it starts stinging," Patsy Ruth Oliver warned, "don't scratch. Just rub.

Otherwise it will start welting." Grabbing a stick, she stabbed the ground and waited patiently for the evil-smelling muck to rise. "When it oozes up," she said almost cheerfully, "you smell it even more."

Welcome to "Toxicana," Oliver's hometown and Superfund Site No. 677, one of the worst toxic waste dumps in the country. "Every time I come back here it's like a pain in my heart," said Oliver, her voice echoing off the plywood-shuttered houses. "There's just death everywhere. There's not a house here that hasn't been affected."

In 1993, over the objections of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)—which insisted that the carcinogens lacing Carver Terrace's water, air, and soil did not pose an immediate threat—Oliver and the angry mothers of Carver Terrace finally convinced Congress to authorize a buy-out so that they could leave their homes of 25 years. This grassroots, mother-led movement handed the EPA a rare and embarrassing defeat, enabling many families to start new lives in neighborhoods free of toxic pollutants. But the saga of what many call the "black Love Canal" did not end there. The battle for Carver Terrace has become a rallying cry for the growing "environmental justice" movement, which charges that industrial polluters target minority neighbourhoods. And it transformed Patsy Ruth Oliver from a small-time hell-raiser, intent only on protecting her own family, into a formidable grassroots organizer, helping groups across the Southwest combat what they call environmental racism.

"I didn't know beans about toxics," says Oliver, her Texas drawl barely keeping pace with her words. "I was a nurse and a housewife and a mother. What did I know? But suddenly, everything I had worked for in my life was up for grabs—because of toxics. My American dream had turned into an American nightmare."

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If you had half a minute, Patsy Ruth Oliver would tell you with relish that she was part Choctaw and all rebel, a bastard out of Texarkana with an unbent spirit. When her dog Terry bit her, she bit him back. As a young woman, Oliver fought segregation the same way. In the 1960s, she proudly endured being splattered with rotten eggs during sit-ins at the "whites-only" Woolworth's lunch counter, and dodged buckshot in a "wade-in" at the town lake. "That was a belittling thing," she said. "But it made us a stronger people."

She started work as a domestic at the age of ten, spent years as a nurse's aide, and ultimately landed one of the best-paying jobs there was for African-Americans in Texarkana: assembling detonators on the high-explosives line at the Lone Star Army Ammunitions Plant. It was a casual irony to Oliver that she both lived and worked in places that are now Superfund sites. She jokes that one may have saved her from the other: "If I hadn't been working swing shift, graveyard shift, and weekends at the plant, I might be dead by now."

By the early '60s, Oliver had five children and a failed marriage to a career military man. She moved with her children and her mother to a public housing project. It wasn't a bad place, she says, but she hated it there. She wanted a

backyard for her children, a flower garden for herself, and a comfortable place for her mother to call home. And so, while she worked at Lone Star, waitressed on weekends, and cooked for white families on the side, she plotted her escape. "Mama, we're going to have a house," she vowed. "I don't know how we're going to get it, but we're going to get it."

One day on the bus in 1967, Oliver heard some women talking excitedly about a new subdivision. It was named after George Washington Carver, the African-American agricultural chemist and educator. Prices were low. And for upwardly mobile blacks in segregated Texarkana, it was the only game in town. As the construction site swung into view, Oliver stood up, pulled the cord, and got off the bus. After chatting with developer Sam Weisman, she plunked down her cash, promised to return with $90 on payday, and walked away clutching a down-payment receipt for a brand-new, ranch-style brick home.

Oliver knew that her dream house lay atop the bulldozed remains of a wood treatment plant. As a girl, she had cut through the 62-acre Koppers Company yard when she was late for classes at segregated Dunbar High. But in 1967 few traces of the plant remained, and no one worried about toxic creosote waste. "It never crossed my mind," says Weisman, now retired and living in Shreveport, La. "I was just looking for a piece of property to develop for the coloured in the area." He hit pay-dirt. Preachers, teachers, and factory workers flocked to the neighbourhood's 79 modest homes, and gloried in the pride of ownership. Children raced their bicycles down Milam Street and played in the creek. And Oliver, with deep satisfaction, planted a flower garden and watched her children grow.

But over the years, odd things began to happen. After a hard rain, dark gunk would bubble up through the ground and give puddles an oily sheen. Something ate holes in the bottom of plastic swimming pools and corroded galvanized water pipes. And grass simply wouldn't grow; residents were forced to buy truckloads of topsoil to keep their lawns and gardens alive. There was no relief inside, either. The sharp, smoky smell of tar wafted from faucets, and greasy black sludge appeared in sinks and bathtubs. Cats and dogs grew listless, formed tumours, and died. And slowly, without talking to each other, without admitting it to themselves, people started to get sick.

Once robustly healthy, Oliver gradually developed a thyroid tumour and a ruptured gallbladder. Nathaniel Oliver, a sweet-tempered seaman and cook whom Patsy Ruth married in 1979, got a painful cyst on his kidney. And her mother, a vital and energetic woman, suddenly couldn't keep down any food at all. Over coffee, meeting by chance in doctors' offices or at the grocery store, the mothers of Carver Terrace started comparing notes: they'd all had upset stomachs, dizzy spells, shortness of breath, and night sweats. Their daughters were having prolonged menstrual cycles and more miscarriages than anyone could remember. Small children had frequent headaches, nosebleeds, and rashes. And people in nearly every house in Carver Terrace, it seemed, were having liver, heart, kidney, or thyroid problems.

The death toll climbed steadily. By Oliver's count, 27 people in 79 homes died, many from cancer. Some were already old and sick. But often death came inexplicably and without warning. Two women in their 40s died suddenly at work. One man got dizzy and fell through his living room window; another was found dead sitting in his bathroom.

At night, residents would sit out in their yards to escape the odor inside their homes. But there it would be, riding on the evening breeze. Some residents began to connect the old creosote plant with the odor in the air and the dark gunk in their backyards and sinks. Others tried to convince themselves the smell was rising off the nearby railroad tracks, or from a leaky car engine.

The truth did not begin to emerge until 1979, one year after leaking barrels of dioxin were discovered beneath Love Canal, New York. In response, Congress ordered the nation's largest chemical firms to identify their hazardous waste sites. The Pittsburgh-based Koppers Company, which had left a string of toxic dumps across the country, placed Carver Terrace high on its list.

Koppers knew two things that Oliver and her neighbours did not: their pretty, landscaped yards were saturated with creosote. And prolonged exposure to the oily black liquid, a distillate of coal tar, could prove deadly. Creosote exposure can induce nausea, headaches and dizziness; cause second-degree burns and rashes; and lead to cancer, kidney failure, respiratory ailments, and liver problems.

State investigators came to inspect Carver Terrace in 1980. One inspector, shocked by his readings, warned mothers that it wasn't safe for their children to play outside. The state's findings were alarming: The soil and groundwater were contaminated with arsenic, pentachlorophenol, creosote, and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons—a potent carcinogen. But residents were told nothing about the study for four years.

In 1984, the bombshell dropped: Texas officials asked the EPA to place Carver Terrace on the Superfund list, the $9-billion trust that Congress established in 1980 to clean up toxic waste dumps. The EPA flew in a pack of scientists and administrators, armed with arcane explanations and a slide show. The site was toxic, they told residents, but not immediately hazardous to their health. Cleanup crews could reduce dangers to an "acceptable risk" level.

There was, however, one catch. More studies were needed before a cleanup could begin. "That may not sit well with a lot of folks, but you can't start removing the whole face of the earth," said Stan Hitt, chief of the Superfund Enforcement Office in EPA's Dallas office. "You have to study the problem."

"They studied us, all right," agreed Oliver. "To death." Over the next eight years, EPA and Koppers Company took turns analyzing Carver Terrace's water, soil and air—virtually everything, in fact, except its people. For reasons that EPA still cannot explain, residents were never interviewed.

Soon men arrived in protective white "moonsuits," rubber gas masks, and disposable gloves to inspect the soil that scantily clad children played in every day. Why were EPA employees dressed for germ warfare, residents wanted to

know, when they were being told the neighbourhood was safe? "We require them to wear clothes like that to minimize potential health effects from continual exposure," explained EPA spokesman Roger Meacham.

That answer satisfied no one in Carver Terrace, where exposure was measured in decades, not days. "They couldn't answer us," said Nathaniel Oliver, a tall, gentle man who has harsh words only for the federal government, "because they'd been lying to us for such a long, long time." And so the inspectors poked and sampled, while Patsy Ruth Oliver watched from her front porch, her curiousity turning slowly to anger.

Workers shut down the sand and gravel company next door, ringed it with a wire mesh fence and posted a warning: "SOIL CONTAMINATED WITH TOXIC WASTE: KEEP OUT." Soil on their side of the fence, residents were told, was safe. "Our toxics down here are real intelligent," drawled Oliver. "They can read. They'll stay on that side of the fence."

Neighbours erected their own sign. Leroy Davis, told by his doctor that he was too sick to stay in Carver Terrace, nailed one to a tree before leaving for a nursing home. "WELCOME TO TOXIC WASTE DEATH VALLEY," it read above a skull and crossbones. "ENTER AT YOUR OWN RISK." But residents were stuck. For as word of the contamination spread, property values plummeted; one house reportedly sold for only $7,000. "We were trapped," said Oliver, "in a prison of poison."

In 1988, the EPA finally unveiled its report. It was four volumes long and took two people to carry. And it concluded that the soil of Carver Terrace could be safely removed, mechanically washed, and replaced with fresh topsoil. "What about our health?" Oliver and others demanded. Those concerns had been fully addressed in the report, they were told. And so Oliver read it, "with a dictionary in one hand because I am no chemist."

But Patsy Ruth Oliver didn't need a glossary to realize that someone had made some deadly assumptions about her community. Yes, there were contaminants in the creek, the report stated. But it dismissed that danger, saying it was "difficult to imagine" that anyone would swim in such a shallow, snake-infested, and murky brook. Yet Oliver knew that every child in the neighborhood had played there. No-one at EPA had ever asked.

She read on. Children could easily place creosote in their mouths, the study said, but "the unfavorable taste will be enough to keep a child from ingesting soils from the seep area again." That rankled, too. Oliver knew many children in Carver Terrace who used to eat "mud pies." One, Suzette Fulce, had her thyroid removed at 17.

Incredulous, Oliver read further. Eating vegetables grown in contaminated soil could be harmful, the report stated. "But only one residence in Carver Terrace has been observed to have a vegetable garden." That was too much. "People had gardens all around," Oliver said angrily. "But they didn't come looking." For years, her entire family had eaten the tomatoes, onions, potatoes, watermelons, beans, peas, turnips, collard, cantaloupe and strawberries that

Nathaniel grew in their garden.

Was that why her mother was wasting away from esophageal cancer? Why her daughters had suffered miscarriages? Why her own stomach pained her so? Nathaniel was stricken by the thought that the vegetables he had so carefully grown and cooked for his family might have poisoned them. "I got scared and I got angry," he said. "Nobody told us. We had to find out for ourselves."

Oliver had had enough. If the government had evacuated residents and purchased homes in Love Canal, NY, and Times Beach, Mo., then why must they stay in Carver Terrace? "We don't want to die out," she declared. "We want a buy-out." The EPA insisted that no buy-out was warranted. "This situation is certainly no Love Canal," Meacham said. But Oliver thought she knew what distinguished Carver Terrace from Love Canal, and it wasn't the soil. "If there's one thing I know," she said, "it's racism. I have a Masters degree in Jim Crow."

And so Patsy Ruth Oliver started to raise hell. Together with a local watchdog group, Friends United for a Safe Environment (FUSE), she pounded on doors, got petitions signed, organized a network of mothers who compiled notes on their families' ailments, and led marches through the neighborhood. No one was more surprised than Oliver for she had long been a homebody. "I could have been one of the people hiding behind their curtains and watching the march go by," she said. "But here I was leading the damn thing!"

She and other residents descended on the state capital in Austin, on EPA offices in Dallas—where officials locked their doors and sent their employees home—and on EPA headquarters in Washington, D.C. "If they can take down the Berlin Wall," she demanded, "why can't the EPA take down this invisible wall and release us?"

Soon her face was a regular feature on the front page of the *Texarkana Gazette* and her rapid-fire denunciations were a growing irritant to her targets. "She's a troublemaker," grumbled developer Sam Weisman. "She's a thorn in our side," groused EPA's Roger Meacham. "She's a lightning rod," chuckled Dave Hall, Texarkana's coordinator for emergency management. Patsy's family couldn't decide what they felt most: concern or pride. "She's going to get herself killed," Nathaniel fretted. "I couldn't have been prouder of her than if she was Sen. Carol Moseley-Braun talking about the Daughters of the Confederacy flag," said daughter Stephanie, 41.

Oliver, who had gone back to school to get her nursing degree, now turned her full attention to toxins. "Carver Terrace became a school for me," she said. "I started rubbing elbows with these rocket scientists, hoping it would rub off a little on me. Every time they said something, I was like E.F. Hutton: I listened and was very quiet." She chuckled at the memory. "Why, I was so quiet, you could hear a rat piss on cotton!"

Still, Oliver admitted, it was a bit daunting. For the environmental movement was white, and she was a black woman from the rural South. "Sometimes I was all alone," Oliver said. "Sometimes I looked like a fly in a glass of buttermilk." But she took her allies where she found them. And toxins, she

liked to say, "are equal opportunity killers—they don't discriminate."

Oliver had long prided herself on her meticulous appearance in public. Now she traded in her glamorous dresses and wigs for T-shirts and corn braids, and hit the road. Her five children mourned the lost elegance—"Patsy was like a black Auntie Mame," said Stephanie—but they cheered her on.

She flew off to address a Greenpeace summit on industrial waste in Washington, D.C., and attend Stop Toxic Polluters seminars at Tennessee's famed Highlander Center, where Martin Luther King, Jr. was once trained in community organizing. She joined several regional environmental groups that sent her to the Earth Summit in Rio de Janiero. And soon she was swapping tips with activists from across the U.S., from Navajo elders fighting an asbestos dump in New Mexico to African-American women fighting a proposed PCB landfill in North Carolina. Their revolts had sewn the seeds for a new grassroots movement: environmental justice.

"Patsy typifies what's happening in the environmental justice movement in communities of color," says Robert Bullard, director of the Environmental Justice Resource Center at Clark/Atlanta University. "It's mostly women—mothers and housewives—who get involved to protect family, home, and community. These are not traditional environmentalists. These are people talking about survival."

Encouraged by her new allies, Oliver took to the airwaves, starring in a flashy Greenpeace eco-video for VH-1, MTVs station for adults. "We don't have the complexion for protection!" charged Oliver, echoing a popular slogan. Even Rev. Jesse Jackson weighed in: "The people of Carver Terrace," he said, "have seen only poisonous creosote at the end of their rainbow."

Finally, in November 1990, Congress appropriated $5 million to purchase Carver Terrace and relocate its inhabitants. Residents were elated. But it took nearly three years for the Army Corps of Engineers—who residents felt woefully undervalued their homes—to complete its task. By that time Oliver's mother, who had marched with her daughter through the rain-drenched streets of Carver Terrace and accompanied her on the grueling 700-mile round trips to Austin, had died.

Patsy Ruth never really got over it. One official made the mistake of urging her to be patient during those endless delays. "Don't ever use that word with me," she snapped. "The most patient woman I knew is dead, stretched out in her grave. Keeping my mouth shut was the worst thing I ever did."

Back in Carver Terrace, Oliver stared glumly at the small house they once shared, which was nailed shut and posted with an U.S. Government "NO TRESPASSING" sign. "My American dream died a long time ago," she said in a low and trembling voice. "And when my mother died, it really died. It's hard for me to respond when people ask: 'How do you like your new home?' It's just a house, and it's not on toxic soil." But her mother's death forged a resolve in Oliver. "Okay, Mama, I told you I was going to get us out of here," she vowed. "'I made you that promise.' And I decided, once I got out, to carry on that fight."

She did. Oliver threw herself into environmental work across the Southwest. In the border towns of Brownsville, Texas, and Matamoros, Mexico, she joined the fight to curb chemical emissions by the nearby maquiladoras, factories built in Mexico to avoid U.S. wage and environmental regulations. Pollution in those towns was so extreme that women were giving birth to horribly malformed babies. "I know what hell looks like," Oliver said after returning from one tour of Matamoros. "Dead animals in the water, raw sewage. You can't imagine." Oliver also combatted construction of toxic waste incinerators along the Texas-Arkansas border, and rallied against operators of a Jacksonville, Ark., Agent Orange factory that wanted to burn dioxin-laden waste. In 1993, in recognition of her work, Oliver became one of the first two black women named to the board of Friends of the Earth.

Oliver was out of town so much she barely found time to enjoy the new house that she and Nathaniel had built just outside Texarkana. But she made sure to plant a flower garden, which she inspected like a hawk every morning. And the message on her answering machine was gleeful: "We always enjoy hearing from our friends," Oliver greeted callers. "And, thank God, we're out of the Toxic Twilight Zone."

But tragically, not for long. "We're out of Carver Terrace," Oliver used to say, "but it's not out of us." Just a few months after Oliver moved to her new home, her eldest daughter, Stephanie, died suddenly from a brain aneurysm. And on December 15, 1993, the day that the Army Corps of Engineers finally arrived in Texarkana to bulldoze her old house in Carver Terrace, Patsy Ruth Oliver died in her sleep.

"Friends, Neighbours Mourn Carver Terrace Leader," the Texarkana Gazette said the next day. "An Environmentalist Passes," noted the Texas Observer in a full-page obituary. The writer, a fellow Texarkana environmentalist, recalled Oliver's first speech: "We're not going to let our dreams die," she had said. "We want to leave our children a legacy of clean air, clean water, and a clean land on which to live. And not only in Texarkana, but throughout this United States of America. We want our voices heard so loud that we'll ring from the mountaintops, and from shore to shore."

Her children have vowed to continue the work that she left off. And at the funeral, as her sons and daughters stepped forward to recall their mother's spirit, humour, and fire, they read from a program inscribed with a simple message. "So many people don't think one person can make a difference," Oliver had told her children. "But really, it has to start someplace. So let it start with me."