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## Preface

Every book has a story about how it came to be written. This one is in your hands because my brother, Michael Lerner, invited me to Louisiana to meet Margie Richard, a woman who lived in a trailer on the fenceline with two giant Royal Dutch/Shell petrochemical plants. Richard was part of a group of residents in the small African-American community of Diamond who were protesting emissions from the plants that they were convinced were destroying their health. They were demanding to be relocated at Shell's expense. It was a classic environmental justice struggle pitting a small, relatively powerless community against the resources of a giant multinational corporation.

Since 1976 I have worked with my brother at Commonweal, a nonprofit health and environmental research institute in Bolinas, California. He became involved with the residents of Diamond because he thought their demands for relocation were reasonable and he wanted to alert people he knew in the philanthropic community to the struggle. He also opened up a back-channel dialogue with some of the top officials at Royal Dutch/Shell in an effort to help shape a solution to the confrontation that would work both for Shell officials and for local residents.

When my brother asked me to come to Diamond, the initial idea was that I would conduct a series of interviews with residents and record an oral history of what their lives had been like on the fenceline with the Shell petrochemical plants. I conducted more than two dozen interviews and posted them on the Internet. In the process, I met a number of environmental justice activists, from many different walks of life, who had converged on this obscure community on the banks of the Mississippi in St. Charles Parish. Fascinated by their stories, I began to interview them to find out what had

drawn them to this struggle and what help they had been able to provide the residents of Diamond.

It did not take long to discover that Diamond was a subdivision of Norco, Louisiana, and that the two communities, though adjacent, were segregated. I crossed the color line and interviewed white residents in Norco who claimed that pollution from the Shell plants was not bad and that many of them were living to a ripe old age. Residents of Diamond were just complaining about pollution in an effort to squeeze money out of Shell, some of them charged.

To round out the story I also interviewed officials at Shell. They told me that their facilities were not hurting anyone's health, how they were improving the operation of their plants to reduce emissions, and why they were reluctant to buy out and relocate all the residents of Diamond.

In the end, I had hundreds of hours of interviews on tape and a wide variety of perspectives on the grassroots campaign by Diamond residents to be relocated. What had started out as an oral history of the people of Diamond became a broader story about a struggle for environmental justice.