Seeing Green

Fed up with outsiders dumping garbage in her South Bronx neighborhood, Majora Carter rallied her neighbors and turned environmental safety into a “black thang.”

November 28, 2006 By Denene Millner

In 1998, Majora Carter, a New York University film student was planning to become the next Spike Lee, until one day her dog dragged her, literally, down a different career path. While walking her pooch along the waterfront in her South Bronx, New York, neighborhood, Carter, 39, stumbled across an illegal dump teeming with garbage and tires. Carter got hot: “Because we are a low-income community of color, we were being dumped on.” She decided to “fight back and reclaim the land” by rallying volunteers to engage in a massive cleanup. The results? The first park along that waterfront in 60 years.

“When [people who live in] my community look outside their windows, I want them to see and enjoy beauty,” Carter says. “It is a reflection of themselves.”

Carter taught herself how to write grants. In 1999, she won $1.25 million to create the South Bronx Greenway, a 23-mile biking and pedestrian path. (The first phase of construction starts in 2007.)

In 2001, she launched Sustainable South Bronx (SSB; www.ssbx.org), a nonprofit community advocacy group that fights environmental racism, the practice of intentionally locating hazardous waste sites in minority or poor communities and polluting them. What’s at stake? Carter describes the alarming levels of severe allergies, asthma, heart and lung disease and cancer that plague her neighborhood. Nearly 20% of children in the South Bronx have asthma, and the borough’s asthma-related hospitalization and death rates are five times the national average. Experts blame pollution. “I do go through temper tantrums,” Carter admits, “but on some levels [this injustice] inspires me.”

SSB has also stopped construction of a solid-waste management facility, helped sponsor a community market and broken ground on three other water front parks. Her efforts earned her the acclaimed $500,000 MacArthur Foundation’s “genius” grant in 2005.

What’s next? Halting the city’s plans to build a new prison in the neighborhood and lobbying for a recycling plant instead. This time her community is primed to fight. “Majora opened my eyes and in-spired me,” states Marta Rodriguez, a 31-year-old mother of three. “A new prison tells us that we don’t deserve better, and that’s not fair. We all deserve to live in a positive and safe

environment.”

BLOW THE WHISTLE
How to penalize polluters in your neighborhood

Start Snitchin’. Write and call local officials, and attend local government meetings. Tell them you are against dumping and waste facilities in your neighborhood.

Call in Backup. Start a petition and get your neighbors to sign it. “If five people talk about the same thing, it’s an issue” in the minds of government officials, says Carter.

Put Big Business on Blast. Show up at stockholder meetings. Invite local media to accompany you; most companies hate bad press.

To find an environmental organization supporting your community, check out www.environmentaldirectory.net.

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