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USA, *Cancer Alley*

Human Rights

CHLOROPRENE EMISSIONS BY DENKA IN CANCER ALLEY

Cancer alley, known as the 100 miles stretch of land located in the Mississippi river between Baton Rouge and New Orleans, is known for its high levels of air pollution and respiratory diseases within the residents of the area. “The region accounts for approximately 25% of the nation’s petrochemical production, consisting of over 130 plants, refineries, landfills, and factories. Socioeconomic status (SES) data in Cancer Alley reflects low levels of income and high levels of poverty and illiteracy” (Wesley J., Chunrong J. and Satish K., 2012).

In a specific area within Cancer Alley called St. John the Baptist, there is a neoprene manufacturing facility owned by Denka, the only facility of its kind in the U.S. The EPA’s (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency) National Air Toxic Assessment (NATA) determined that the probabilities of cancer within the residents of the surrounding areas of the neoprene manufacturing facility are the highest in the country (Eastern Research Group, Inc., 2020). High concentrations of Chloroprene (chemical used in the production of Neoprene) are present in the surrounding areas air, which has led to the alarming death of residents in the area. In interviews with CNN and The Guardian we can see how residents know friends, family or neighbors that passed away due to cancer, “Almost every household has somebody that died with cancer or

that's battling cancer" (Lartey J. and Laughland O., 2019).

The EPA in a 2016 internal memo recommended that annual emissions should not be more than 0.2 ug/m³ due to risk of cancer. In that same year, the EPA installed canisters that collected air samples, which have shown that the plant emits far more than the recommended amount, but since it's just a recommendation, the Denka plant can, and still produces more than the recommended maximum amount, this putting in danger the life of all the nearby residents (CNN, 2017).

St. John the Baptist has a population of 43 600 people (2017); residents usually work in the nearby factories in cancer alley due to proximity; 87.3% of its population has health coverage, the median household income is of \$53 628 and have a house valued approximately on \$150 000

Even Though the median household income is of \$53 628, we can see that the two communities surrounding the area of the Denka neoprene manufacturing facility have an income between \$28.8k - \$39.9k, the lowest in the area (Data USA).

(Figure #1, Data USA. Retrieved Jun 8, 2020, from <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/st.-j>)

These two communities (Census Tract 708 & 709) have an alarming poverty rate of 35.8% in Census Tract 708 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018) and 29.7% in Census Tract 709 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018), by far surpassing the poverty rate of Louisiana. Residents have been continuously trying to reduce the chloroprene emissions of the Denka plant below the 0.2 mark through political pressure and news coverage, but this has not been achieved. These communities have been affected by the Denka plant for years and just recently have been warned about the risks of living nearby the installations, it has even been questioned if kids should move to schools that are further away from the plant (Louisiana Department of Health, 2018). This is not only a health issue, this is, also, a quality of life issue. A typical family in these communities has 2 to 3 members, speaks English at home, has a High School Diploma or higher, drives to work and inhales on an everyday basis the highest concentrations of chloroprene in the county (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). This is a problem that needs to be solved now, and can't be ignored like it has been the last 70 years. Data provided by the EPA shows that Census Tracts 708 & 709 have a much higher rate of cancer risk due to Chloroprene:

Table #1, Chloroprene Cancer Risk - Based on NATA Data

(Table #1, Subra W. (November 13, 2019) Retrieved Jun 21, 2020, from https://www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2020-02/documents/rfr_17002_-_stakeholder_opposition_to_rfr_mtg_11-13-2019_wilma_subra_1.pdf)

Dr. Mindy Roseman of Yale Law School, after reading The University Network for Human Rights report towards the situation, said: “The findings of this report are alarming, especially regarding children within the radius. This is a matter not only of environmental and racial justice, but one of public health and human rights protection for the most vulnerable among us. Those responsible — Denka Performance Elastomer, municipal, and state authorities — will have to take appropriate action. This is not a report to be ignored” (NAGRA R., 2019).

These Communities have been affected by the little political action regarding chloroprene emissions since 1969. The Richard Nixon administration, the Gerald

Ford administration, the Jimmy Carter administration, the Ronald Reagan administration, the George H. W. Bush administration, the Bill Clinton administration, the George W. Bush administration, the Barack Obama administration, and the Donald Trump administration have not directly addressed this issue, which has led to the highest rates of cancer risk in the country.

As a kid, I had the privilege to live in a small village nearby a natural park. I was surrounded by trees, I could visit a clean river whenever I wanted to, I ate the vegetables my grandmother and grandfather grew and always breathed clean air. At the age of 9 I moved to Mexico City and I felt something was taken away from me, if I felt like this I can't even imagine what these communities are going through on an everyday basis. After reflecting towards my personal experience I realized that clean air is not a privilege, it's a right, but it's not considered like one, and that needs to change.

My proposal consists on a 3 phase action plan. The first step would start by creating 60 second, vertical format videos, narrated by celebrities who have sadly lost friends or family due to cancer (Pierce Brosnan, which lost his first wife, and step daughter to ovarian cancer, Celine Dion, which lost her husband due to cancer, and Luis Enrique Martínez García which lost her daughter due to cancer), these celebrities would be contacted and asked through social media and PR assistants if they would like to participate in this project. The video will show and explain the raw data that has been collected and shared throughout the period on this ongoing issue, this video would be shared on social media platforms like instagram, facebook, youtube, etc. Once this video is shared, new videos will be created but this time with the help

of local churches (Our Lady of Grace Church, Rev Dr. Forell Bering Sr. Bethlehem Baptist Church Of Reserve, La 70084) in order to contact local residents and show how the Denka plant has affected specific individuals, by giving them a voice which has been denied to them for years, these videos will also be shared in social media. It is important that at the end of each video a link to an online petition created at change.org is visible in order to pressure Denka to reduce its emissions.

It is important for the young generations to be involved in this issue, that's why as a second step an invitation to the schools surrounding the Denka plant will be sent for students and parents to attend. In order for this protest to have a greater impact and meaning, it has to take place every monday of the week within school hours. This information will also be shared with news outlets in order for them to know when the protests are taking place and hopefully this story will be covered nationwide.

Once the topic has gained national attention it is important to keep pushing, that why as a third step a nationwide protest will be organized, this protest will encourage the young generations to go on the streets within school hours and demand for a change, not only for this specific case, but all the cases nationwide regarding air pollution, water pollution, climate change, etc. It is important that we all unite as one and change our current situation.

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Disparities in Cancer Risks from Air Toxics. Retrieved Jun 4, 2020, from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3546767/>

Annex:

Attachment of the EPA document with the records of Denka Chloroprene emissions:

[https://www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2020-05/documents/
r6_summary_through_april_23_2020.pdf](https://www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2020-05/documents/r6_summary_through_april_23_2020.pdf)