

A jewel in the nihilism

KEVIN WERNER, Stoney Creek

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When Al Lehman, a resident of Oliver Street since 1959, described to politicians the hardships he and his neighbours have endured created by the BIOX Canada plant next to his house, he had Brenda Johnson of Environment Hamilton beside him.

Ms. Johnson's presence with ordinary Hamiltonians, as they fight for their environmental rights, has become essential as they look to the five-year-old organization for a comforting word, guidance and yes, empowerment.

Since last summer, Ms. Johnson, project manager for Environment Hamilton, has been assisting North End Hamilton residents as they defend their homes against environmental degradation. The funding for the one-year project is coming from the Hamilton Community Foundation.

"People don't have to sit back and take it," she said. "They should be told they are part of the process."

In a city that has created more environmental problems than it has solved at the expense of area residents' lives, Environment Hamilton has become the beacon people are turning to for help.

Over the years, Beach Community residents, homeowners in Hamilton's east end and people along Burlington Street living in a unknown toxic soup, have had limited opportunities to fight back. At best, their efforts have been met with a shrug from the powers that be. Most often, their voices are ignored.

In 2001, Environment Hamilton dramatically changed the power landscape. Hamilton east resident Linda Lukasik sued the city under provincial legislation to clean up the toxic liquid seeping from the Rennie Street dump and into the Red Hill Creek.

Even more surprising, Ms. Lukasik won a \$480,000 settlement and a court-imposed order for the city to clean up the dump. Part of the money went towards creating the Lake Ontario Keepers and incorporating the non-profit group, Environment Hamilton.

The group has quickly become one of the most respected environmental advocacy groups, not only in Hamilton, but across the province.

"We add the spice in the stew," said Ms. Johnson.

Today it promotes such activities as the Trees Count program; teaming up with the Transit Users Group; opposing the energy-from-waste project by Liberty Energy; taking a lead role to revitalize the Rennie Street dump; cleaning up Windermere Basin; protecting Hamilton's water supply; and until recently it has provided an internet location to Citizens At City Hall (CATCH). In the past, Environment Hamilton has also dabbled in local politics and advocated eliminating poverty.

Its annual general meeting is scheduled for March 30 at the Hamilton Central Library, starting at 7 p.m and will celebrate its 2005 accomplishments.

But its bread and butter activities, and arguably its most effective impact, has been to provide help to residents who are lost in the environmental legislative jungle. The group has also been a necessary conduit between residents and the local environment ministry office and politicians.

Through Ms. Johnson's dogged professionalism, Environment Hamilton has become better known as a facilitator rather than a perceived agitator.

A Winona resident, Ms. Johnson was involved in the Stoney Creek boundary expansion, when Environment Hamilton executives spied her strengths. Ms. Lukasik had taken a job with the provincial environment ministry and the group was in need of a strong but soothing leader. Ms. Johnson seemed to be a natural choice.

"I had huge shoes to fill," she says.

Her quiet but sharp arguments have impressed politicians, residents and even Hamilton's vision-challenged business leaders.

A recent seminar with Stelco and Dofasco representatives ended with the suits asking Ms. Johnson to immediately join their community groups.

"We are not against industry," she said. "They are trying to be good neighbours. But it's good to have an organization that knows about the Environment Bill of Rights."

But it seems like with all Hamilton success stories, the ending remains in doubt.

Ms. Johnson's efforts could evaporate in June when the HCF's funding dries up. Her grunt work that has been established with residents and the potential to expand the project across the city could end up dissipating down the proverbial drain, chalking up another missed opportunity to the city's ever growing list.

"Environment Hamilton will continue to do good works," she said. "But there is no contingency plan in place" if her project ends.