

Lois Gibbs

1951–



WHY SHE MADE HISTORY Lois Gibbs is considered “the mother of Superfund,” the federal legislation that required corporations to clean up chemical spills. Gibbs led efforts to clean up toxic waste in Love Canal, New York.



As you read the biography below, think about what Gibbs did for the environment. What long-term effect did the crisis at Love Canal have on environmental protection?



AP/Wide World Photos

During President Jimmy Carter’s four-year term in office, the environment became a central issue. Many environmental questions and concerns surfaced. Chemicals dumped by companies over the years were causing health problems. In New York state, Lois Gibbs focused national attention on the environment and toxic waste when she led the movement to clean up Love Canal. Experts warned that it was likely that many more toxic waste sites existed around the country.

In 1978, Lois Gibbs was raising two children in Love Canal, New York, a blue-collar neighborhood near Niagara Falls. Homes there had been built on a dumpsite containing 20,000 tons of chemical waste. The toxins were leaking into homes and schools, and people were getting sick.

Gibbs’s son Michael was always ill. When Gibbs read a newspaper article about toxins under the school, she started a petition to close the school. As she walked door to door to ask people to sign the petition, she realized that not only children, but men and women of all ages were sick. Many suffered from health problems such as cancer, birth defects, and urinary tract diseases.

Gibbs had no experience in community activism. Yet she organized her neighbors and formed the Love Canal Homeowners Association. National news coverage of Gibbs’s work finally led to action. The New York State Department of Health conducted environmental tests in the neighborhood. They declared a state of emergency, finding that the levels of chemicals in the area were unsafe. The neighborhood was evacuated and the school was closed. In 1980 President Carter signed legislation that provided funding to move families away from Love Canal. Gibbs’s leadership led to the relocation of more than 800 families.

A Search for Order**Biography**

Gibbs's work ultimately led to the clean up of Love Canal and a \$20 million settlement for the people of Love Canal from the company that dumped the waste. Perhaps even more important, it led to the creation of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's "Superfund." The Superfund is used to locate and clean up toxic sites throughout the United States. For her work Gibbs earned the nickname "mother of Superfund."

After her success, Gibbs received 3,000 letters from people all over the country who wanted to know how they could solve toxic waste problems in their neighborhoods. In response, Gibbs formed the Center for Health, Environment and Justice (CHEJ) in 1980. CHEJ is a grassroots environmental crisis center that provides information, resources, and training to more than 8,000 community groups around the nation. Gibbs says, "Average people and the average community can change the world. You can do it just based on common sense, determination, persistence, and patience." Her life is proof that a single person can make a great difference in our country.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. **Describe** What environmental crisis is associated with Love Canal?

2. **Identify Cause and Effect** What long-term impact did Love Canal have on environmental protection?

ACTIVITY

Many of the chemicals that were found in Love Canal have since been banned in the United States. Even so, communities around the country are still dealing with toxic waste. What environmental issues are important in your community? How do these issues affect you? Write a letter to a local, state, or national representative expressing your concerns about your environment.