News
EarthBeat



Sharon Lavigne, the 2021 Goldman Environmental Prize winner for North America, in front of oil storage tanks in St. James Parish, Louisiana (Courtesy of Goldman Environmental Prize)



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PAUSE

This week's reflections focus on air.

READ

> *Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.*

— Margaret Mead

> *Our steps are made firm by the Lord,*
>
> *when he delights in our way;*
>
> *though we stumble, we shall not fall headlong,*
>
> *for the Lord holds us by the hand.*

— Psalm 37:23-24

REFLECT

Sharon Lavigne is a Catholic environmental activist and founder of Rise St. James, a grassroots group formed to save the lives of community members impacted by toxic air from petrochemical plants in St. James Parish, Louisiana. The area is known as Cancer Alley because of the high rates of illness among the predominantly Black and low-income residents living near the factories.

Rise St. James is leading opposition to an effort by the Formosa Plastic Group to build what would be one of the world's largest petrochemical complexes, comprising 14 plants, in the community where Sharon lives. I spoke with Sharon about how Rise St. James began in her living room and how her deep faith in God guides her

advocacy for life and clean air in her community.

"We formed a meeting in my den, and we had about eight people," she said. The next meeting drew 20 people, and the movement gradually grew into what is now Rise St. James.

> *Me and other people would say, "Let's fight Formosa!" And a bunch of them said, "Oh, no, we can't fight that. The governor approved that, and we're not stopping them anyway because the parish council is going to approve it. And those people have money. We don't have money to fight the industry." I said to myself, "What does money got to do with it?" We are fighting for our lives so I never worried about the money.*
>
> *When I first started, I didn't think it would get this attention, and I didn't think we would have people all over the world looking at what we're doing in St. James. I had no idea of being an environmentalist or being an activist. I didn't even know about a Goldman Award, because I wasn't in it for an award, I was in it to live.*
>
> *One Sunday evening, I sat on my porch after hearing about the Formosa coming, and it just got to me. I sat on my porch to read my Bible. I read Psalm 37 and the 23rd Psalm, I read that daily ... I was just talking to God. This time I listened for an answer. I asked Him if He wanted me to give up the land, the land that He gave me. To my surprise, He answered me and told me no, and it startled me. So I asked Him if He wanted me to give up the home He gave me, and I pointed to my home. He said no again. I almost fell out of my chair, because I thought he was going to say, "Yes, go on and pack up and leave." But He said, "No."*
>
> *And then I asked Him, "What do you want me to do?" And that's when He said, "Fight." And all the tears came down my face like a faucet. I said, "Oh dear Lord, fight? I didn't know how to fight."*
>
> *But when I was praying, I could see the birds going back and forth. About three or four birds, looked like they were having fun, going from one tree to the next. And it's so nice to see those red birds. I said, "I wonder what that means?" And my daughter said it means change, and somebody else*

> *said, "The ancestors are speaking to you."*
>
> *And I could feel the vibrations, the wind blowing through me, and I knew that was God. You gonna know when God speaks to you — it's a certain voice of feeling or whatever, and I knew it was Him. And I said, "Thank You, Jesus. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you." And from that day on, something inside of me just went. It's been going ever since, and it has been going in the fast lane. I used to say, "Dear Lord, why did you choose me?" I'd say that for a long time. Then I stopped saying it. Now I say, "Dear Lord, thank you for choosing me."*

Sadly, since the founding of the group, two of the original eight members of Rise St. James have passed away due to health issues.

Louisiana's governor has said Formosa will bring much-needed money to the state, but Sharon noted the environmental injustice inherent in this thinking. "You will make us the sacrifice zone to save the whole state," she said. "Don't use us to save the state."

Of plastic pollution, she said:

> *We need to go back to the way we were in some aspects. I know they'd call it progress from way back when my great-grandparents were living. We had milk, the milk was in a glass jug so we didn't put it in any plastic. Today, the chemicals that's in that plastic are cancer-causing. We need to get away from all this plastic. I know we can't do it overnight. But gradually, we need to get away from this plastic. There's too much.*

Plans for the plant have stalled, and there are signs of hope that Formosa will not prevail. Because of pressure from Rise St. James and others, an Environmental Impact Statement is being required before permits are granted. Although Hurricane Ida damaged her house and others in the area, Sharon and Rise St. James have persisted, most recently serving a hot meal in a local park. They will continue until Formosa's plans are canceled.

"This is a life and death situation," Sharon told me. "If they [Formosa] come in here, it is a death sentence. That's why we have to continue to fight, and that's what I am going to do. I am going to fight."

ACT

- Learn more about the fight against Formosa Plastic Sunshine Project, and check the Rise St. James website for updates.
- Sit in prayer, and ask God how God is "choosing you," in your own community and context, to work for clean air and a healthy planet. Who else might join you in this work?

At Home in Creation

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