



Peggy M. Shepard (1946-Present)

**Executive Director
West Harlem Environmental Action, Inc.**

“We expect that activists and researchers will come from far and wide to strategize and find resources to assist them in battling the preventable environmental threats prevalent in too many communities of color.” Peggy M. Shepard, 2005.

Overview

Peggy Shepard has successfully combined grassroots organizing, environmental advocacy and environmental health research to become one of the most highly respected environmental advocates in the country today. She has been a pioneer for advancing the perspective of environmental justice in urban communities to ensure that the entitlement of clean air, water and soil extends to all people and communities. A leader within New York City and the national Environmental Justice Movement, she is co-founder and executive director of WE ACT For Environmental Justice (WE ACT), based in West Harlem, which has a 24-year history of affecting environmental and environmental health policy and practice locally and nationally.

A resident of West Harlem, she has developed a grassroots organization of volunteers from the West Harlem community in 1988 into a professionally-staffed organizing and advocacy non-profit. She received the 10th Annual Heinz Award for the Environment for “her courageous advocacy and determined leadership in combating environmental injustice in urban America.” For “two decades of leadership in environmental justice and urban sustainability,” she was awarded an Honorary Doctor of Science from Smith College at its May 2010 commencement. Her activism to build healthier communities by engaging residents in environmental and land-use decision making earned her the 2008 Jane Jacobs Lifetime Achievement Award from the Rockefeller Foundation, and she is the former chair of the EPA’s National Environmental Justice Advisory Council (NEJAC) where currently she co-chairs its Research and Science Workgroup. She has been a pioneer in developing community-academic research partnerships to improve children’s environmental health. WE ACT has cooperative partnerships with physicians and scientists at leading medical institutions, law schools, labor unions and diverse environmental, public health and urban constituencies.

Early Life and Education

Born in September 16, 1946, Peggy Shepard is the oldest of six children by Mrs. Evelyn Shepard, a housewife, and Dr. George Shepard, a retired gynecologist. Shepard grew up in Trenton, Ewing and Lawrenceville, New Jersey, where – in addition to having access to a beautiful park nearby her home and

to a big backyard to play in – she commuted 30 minutes to the rural, scenic areas where she attended Solebury and Newtown Friends schools in Pennsylvania. Such early exposure to green and natural areas increased Shepard’s appreciation for nature and for the more traditional concept of environmentalism. Understanding the unequal distribution of environmental hazards in poor communities of color relative to their lack of access to such environmental amenities, Shepard declares that the issues that she is currently working on are issues she began thinking about in those years.

Shepard graduated from Howard University with a Bachelor of Art degree in English in 1967. She also took graduate courses at Baruch College in New York City from 1983 to 1985. Shepard is currently the Executive Director of West Harlem Environmental Action, Inc (WE ACT). Under her leadership, the organization operates programs in environmental health, environmental education, and community and youth empowerment, and has cooperative partnerships with physicians and scientists at leading medical institutions.

Career

A former journalist, Shepard was the first African-American beat reporter for *The Indianapolis News*. She was a copy editor for *The San Juan Star* and a researcher for *Time-Life Books*. She also served as an editor for the popular magazines like *Redbook*, *Essence*, and *Black Enterprise*. Unsatisfied with the narrow scope of what those magazines covered, Shepard moved to New York in 1971 to begin a publishing career. In 1979, she began a career in government as a speechwriter, assuming the first of several positions with the New York State Division of Housing and Community Renewal. Working in this organization helped prepare her for a career in government and politics. In addition, she served as the Women’s Outreach Coordinator for the New York City Comptroller’s Office; then became a Democratic District Leader, representing West Harlem from 1985 to 1993. She also served as the President of the National Women’s Political Caucus from 1993 until 1997.

In 2002, Shepard was elected the first female chair of the National Environmental Justice Advisory Council (NEJAC) to the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). She is currently co-chair of the Northeast Environmental Justice Network and was a board member of the Environmental Justice Fund. She is a former member of the National Advisory Environmental Health Sciences Council of the National Institute of Health and serves on the Institute of Medicine’s committee “Ethics of Housing-Related Health Hazard Research Involving Children, Youth, and Families.” Shepard is also a member of the Environmental Justice Advisory Committee to the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation and sits on the boards of the national and New York State League of Conservation Voters, Environmental Defense, New York Earth Day, Citizen Action of New York, the Children’s Environmental Health Network, and Healthy Schools Network, Inc. Finally, she is an advisory board member of the Bellevue Occupational and Environmental Medicine Clinic; the Harlem Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention; and Mt. Sinai’s Children’s Environmental Health Center.

In 1988, concerned about the noxious odors emitted by the North River sewage treatment plant, Shepard helped to organize an act of civil disobedience during which she and six other community organizers were arrested for obstructing traffic near the plant. She subsequently co-founded West Harlem Environmental Action, Inc. in 1988, which four years later, helped win a lawsuit against New York City, resulting in the creation of a \$55 million odor abatement plan, a \$1.1 million settlement fund for the West Harlem community. The settlement also led to an agreement with WE ACT and the Natural Resources Defense

Council to monitor the implementation of the consent agreement between the city and state as well as the five-year plan to fix the North River Plant.

Since then Shepard has turned a small group of committed volunteers into a professionally staffed environmental justice non-profit organization. WE ACT was New York's first environmental justice organization; it was created to improve environmental health in communities of color. WE ACT currently works on environmental and social justice, land use, waterfront development, brownfield redevelopment; transportation and air pollution, open space, and environmental health issues. Shepard has also rallied the support of political leaders and the Transit Workers Union in a successful public education campaign that has helped the Metropolitan Transit Authority make a transition from diesel-powered to natural gas- and hybrid-powered buses.

Shepard's dedication to community-based participatory research led to a partnership with the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University. She is a co-investigator of the Columbia Children's Environmental Health Center's Community Outreach and Translational Research group which is seeking to improve children's environmental health in northern Manhattan and the South Bronx. She is a community partner of the National Institute for Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS) Center for Environmental Health in Northern Manhattan at Columbia and principal investigator of an NIEHS grant to foster communications and partnerships between researchers, clinicians and community on environmental health education and outreach. Shepard is co-author or contributor to several articles published in the journal *Environmental Health Perspectives*. She was also a guest editor of a special supplement of the afore-mentioned journal entitled, *Advancing Environmental Justice Through Community-Based Participatory Research*, published in April 2002. She has also published environmental justice articles in the *Fordham Environmental Law Journal*.

Highlights

Shepard received the Dean's Distinguished Service Award in 2004 from the Columbia University's School of Public Health and was the recipient of the 10th Annual Heinz Award for the Environment from the Heinz Foundation in December 2003. In 2000, Shepard received the Union Square Award from the Fund for the City of New York for her grassroots leadership and advocacy, and in 1998 received the Earth Day Award for Excellence in Environmental Advocacy from Earth Day New York. In 1997, she received the Susan B. Anthony Award from the National Organization of Women's New York City Chapter and in 1993 she received the City Club of New York's Earthling Award for Environmental Justice, and the New York State Environmental Woman of Action award by Tambrands, Inc. She was recognized by *National Wildlife Magazine* as one of the People Who Make a Difference and in 1991, she received the Life of the City Award from *NY Woman Magazine*, and the New Yorker for New York Award from the Citizens Committee of New York in 1990.

Shepard asserts that all of the issues currently on WE ACT's agenda are very important and thus difficult to rank in order of importance. However, an important organizational focus is WE ACT's Sustainable Development program. WE ACT has recently launched a capital campaign to support the construction and maintenance of its new home: The New York City Environmental Justice Center. This abandoned Harlem townhouse will be renovated as a state-of-the-art "green" building, serving as a major new resource for supporting the advocacy, organizing, research and education work of environmental justice activists locally, regionally, nationally, and globally. "The Center will act as a beacon for communities and

individuals grappling with environmental hazards,” says Shepard. “We expect that activists and researchers will come from far and wide to strategize and find resources to assist them in battling the preventable environmental threats prevalent in too many communities of color.”

WE ACT is also involved in the revitalization of the Harlem waterfront. The community-driven plan for the Harlem Piers area, called “Harlem on the River,” was established through an extensive planning process initiated by WE ACT in collaboration with Community Board 9, community members, businesspeople, local development groups, and elected officials. These groups participated in numerous design meetings and public forums to produce a community vision for the Harlem Piers. In 2000, WE ACT organized a mail campaign in which thousands of postcards were sent to the Manhattan Borough President and the Economic Development Corporation (EDC) to stop plans for a tourist hotel and to request that the EDC incorporate the community’s vision (which features a park and restaurant) more fully into plans for the waterfront. WE ACT has since been invited by the EDC to participate in a task force – the Harlem Piers Working Committee – to help facilitate the planning and development for the site. Shepard, recognizing an opportunity to promote economic and sustainable community growth collaborated with Community Board 9 to seek funding to help plan for the revitalization of the waterfront. She has since appointed a Waterfront Park Program Manager in the WE ACT office to help with the project.

Shepard is a tireless crusader for environmental justice who combines grassroots mobilization with environmental advocacy and scientific research. She is one of the foremost environmental advocates. Because of her work, Shepard has been invited to speak at numerous universities on environmental justice and community-based health research.

For More Information

Email: peggy@weact.org

Professional Website: www.weact.org/staff-peggy-shepard

This interview was conducted in 2015.