

# ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

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Creating Equality,  
Reclaiming Democracy



Kristin Shrader-Frechette

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For my mother and for Catherine

## Preface

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Nearly 80 years ago, Catherine Jackman graduated from Centre College, in Danville, Kentucky. Hoping for a career in teaching, she was one of the first African-American women to receive her degree from Centre. Despite her superb grades and the state's chronic shortage of teachers, no Kentucky school would hire her. After months of searching for employment, Catherine took the only job she was offered, that of seamstress at Danville's Rainbow Cleaners. My grandfather, owner of the Rainbow, often left her in charge. Inside the cleaners, Grandpa said customers always would speak politely to Catherine. He was outraged that, *outside the shop, she became invisible to all the whites who passed her on the street.*

In the middle 1920s Grandpa's young wife was stricken with severe encephalitis and was sent as an invalid to Kentucky State Hospital. Left with a three-year-old daughter, Mildred, he lapsed into despair and then alcoholism. Catherine managed the shop every day, but his alcoholism only worsened. Soon Catherine brought little Mildred home with her each evening to Colored Town, on the outskirts of Danville. She lived in Colored Town until she married my father when she was 18. From Catherine, Mildred learned her deep laugh, her quick wit, her remarkable cooking and sewing skills, and her habit of hugging people as soon as she saw them.

One of my favorite Kentucky-Sunday memories is of driving down the main unpaved street of Colored Town. None of the homes was painted, and all of them had outhouses and pumps out back, even in the late 1950s. But all of them had big covered porches, with chairs for visiting, across the front. Dad would be at the wheel of our old black Hudson, after having driven the three hours from Louisville. Mom, Mildred House Shrader, would be telling stories about her childhood in Colored Town. Our car never made it more than a few blocks down the street before people would converge on it, shouting "It's Millie and the kids," pulling open the car doors, and hugging my brothers and sisters and me.

Mildred House Shrader became a leader in Kentucky civil rights causes and active in both the women's movement and the peace movement. She made a difference in the world. She was the first activist I knew.

As children, sometimes we were embarrassed by Mom's outspokenness. We often wished she would just stay at home, keep quiet, and continue canning garden vegetables and caring for our family of nine. When friends came to visit, we often pleaded with her not to say anything controversial. Not until I was 16 did I fully realize how fortunate we all were to have her. Not until she was dying, at age 43, did I realize how profoundly she had shaped all of us.

Mom and Dad designed and built a house in Fern Creek, Kentucky, near Newburg, a large African-American settlement. As a result, in the late 1950s and 1960s we grew up in the only racially integrated part of Jefferson County, and some of my sisters and brothers, like Christopher, made their best friends in Newburg. Christopher and his friend Walter ("Bubba," they called each other) spent a good deal of time thinking up ways to get the better of the local racists. They had a deadpan routine they used to challenge segregated clubs or neighborhoods. Once Chris went to "join" the local Moose Club, the chief source of entertainment in Fern Creek. After he had paid for a family membership, Chris mentioned that he and his "brother" would stop by to play pool. When they did so, Walter would be the only colored face in a room full of white pickup-truck owners. The ensuing situations, with Christopher and Walter doing their deadpan exchanges, were the subject of many raucous dinner-time stories. Chris and Walter would always "win" such conflicts, at least in the retelling.

By the early 1960s, my mother had become the first white member of the NAACP in the state of Kentucky. A common Christening name for newborn girls in Newburg was "Mildred," for their white godmother. When Mom and Dad marched and sang in civil rights protests, they often pulled the two youngest of us seven brothers and sisters behind them in our rusting red "Flyer" wagon. Later my mother became a leader in Kentucky's open-housing movement.

Once her youngest children were in school, Mom went to college. When she was diagnosed with bone cancer, she had been teaching for only a year—high-school English in the poorest slum of Louisville. Mom had the first environmentally induced cancer that I knew, caused by unnecessary and repeated X-rays. Years later, the U.S. Office of Technology Assessment confirmed that up to 90 percent of all cancers are environmentally induced and theoretically preventable.<sup>1</sup> Mom need not have died at age 45. Her death put a human face on the monumental societal failure to practice environmental ethics and to assess the consequences of technological risks. Her life and Catherine's life put human faces on the response to injustice. This book is for them.

KS-F

University of Notre Dame

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