

**Reading Handout Unit 17:
A LIFETIME OF COMMUNITY ACTION**

All Americans have the right to express themselves and affect their local governments through their words and deeds. In this reading, you'll learn about a well-known Chicago resident named Marian Byrnes, who has fought to save wild places in the Chicago area for much of her life. Hers is an excellent example of the power of community action. You can learn more about Ms. Byrnes by watching the Chicago film in the *Edens Lost & Found* DVD set. After you read the story, answer the questions.

If you're going to take a walk with Marian Byrnes, you need to bring along three things: a walking stick, some good shoes, and your conscience. Nothing less will do.

One morning recently, the 79-year-old woman sets out on a walk to show a visitor some of the wild places in her neighborhood. She lives around the shores of Lake Calumet, on Chicago's southeast side. It's an interesting place because some parts of the neighborhood are famous for the steel factories that once employed many people in the community. The area has long been a site of dumping, legal or otherwise. Other sections of the neighborhood were never developed and are still the original prairie lands that were here before Chicago was born. Ms. Byrnes lived right next door to one of these plots of prairie land most of her life.

The ground under her feet shifts from asphalt to pavement to grass in a matter of minutes, and soon she has left her Jeffrey Manor neighborhood behind. Birds sing in the trees, and the grasses rise as high as your hip in spots. Ms. Byrnes has insisted for decades that she is not a naturalist, and yet she calls out the names of plants as she passes, saluting them as if they are old friends:

wild parsnips, wild roses, wild strawberries, fleabane, wild oats, vervain, squirrel grass, and catnip. "Well, since I started work to save the prairie, I learned as much as I could from experts and wildflower identification books," she confesses.

Ms. Byrnes stands straight and has a good spring in her step. Her hair is white, and her voice, when she speaks, is soft and raspy. She grew up on a farm in Indiana and longed for open spaces, even after she came to Chicago to teach school and raise a family.

"I moved here because of the prairie," she says. "I was a widow with three boys to raise. And when we came house hunting, and we came to the house that I live in now, they said, 'This is the house we want!' They hadn't even been inside. They were running toward the prairie. Kids used to come from all over the South Shore to play army on the prairie. The realtor told me that [the prairie] had been a government land grant to the railroad on the condition that it never be sold—that it was supposed to be a buffer between the railroad and any kind of development. But obviously that changed."

In 1979 she came home from teaching school to find a note in her mailbox saying that the Chicago Transit Authority planned to build a bus garage on the north half of her family's beloved Van Vliissingen prairie. "Naturally I was very upset about that, and I went to the public meeting and found a number of my neighbors there who were also upset about it. So we formed an organization, the Committee to Protect the Prairie, to keep it open. We somehow managed to succeed in doing that for 20 years, until the city decided it was also a good idea and took over the project."

In 20 years, Ms. Byrnes and her growing number of friends have thoughtfully prodded the city to do the right thing a number of times in the Calumet region. Ms. Byrnes' Committee has since morphed into the Southeast Environmental Task Force and is part of a larger coalition called the Calumet Stewardship Initiative, which draws its strength from 30 area organizations. They defeated a city proposal to build a dump at Big Marsh, a major birding site. They opposed construction of a garbage incinerator on the site of an old steel mill. And they defused the mayor's plan to build the city's third major airport in the region. At the time, the city thought an airport was the best solution to decades of waste dumped in the region: cover it up with asphalt. Countless other projects, or threats of projects, have sent residents back into the meeting halls.

Eventually area residents forced the city to stop thinking of the Calumet as a dumping ground. The turning point came in 1998, when the National Park Service announced the Calumet was suitable for designation as a National Heritage Area. Two years later, the city and state announced it would allocate funds to save the area. At first they split the acreage down the middle: 3,000 acres of the best land to be preserved for nature and 3,000 acres of the already damaged or denuded fields to be set aside for appropriate industrial use. (The preserve area has since grown to 4,800 acres.) Much of the discussion these days is how to find the right industries to take over the old factories again. The ideal company is one that would add value to the region, not harm it in any way. Part of what makes Ms. Byrnes such an effective crusader is her acceptance of this sensitive balance. "I think we all now agree and accept that industry has a right to be in the

region. That's what made the Calumet. But it has to be done intelligently."

Ms. Byrnes is pleased that younger citizens who started on local grassroots organizations have since moved up the ranks in city government themselves, paving the way for a smoother passage of environmentally friendly legislation. And an even younger generation is learning to love the area that is being saved.

"School classes come here for field trips, and the kids have a wonderful time because they can gather any specimens they want to. There's no restriction on gathering," Ms. Byrnes says. "Kids find things here that I've never seen. Last time I brought a group out here, a little boy found a Western frog, a little tiny brown frog, and caught it. We examined it for a while. So it's a really important educational resource."

Recently project leaders have set up ten experimental plots, treating each one differently to find out which works best for prairie restoration. The results will help scientists fine-tune their treatment of the area. At the same time, area residents have started meeting with local factory managers and discovered they too are interested in talking to local residents about the future of the neighborhood.

Ms. Byrnes steps gingerly around the edge of a small pond and spies a small frog and some tadpoles in the water. It's a rare thing to get a private tour with her these days. At an age when most people would consider slowing down, Ms. Byrnes attends at least a meeting a day, shuttling to each on public buses. "It's hard to say what keeps me going," she says. "But there's always something else to do."

But just how has she done it? Ms. Byrnes says she has managed to be an active and powerful voice for so long because she

never lost hope. From the very first meeting she attended, she learned something she has never let go of. “I found that there were plenty of people just like me who felt the same way—my own neighbors. If you put us in a room and got us talking, something would happen.”

For a while, she thought she would be able to give up her work, now that the city has finally seen the wisdom of saving the Calumet. But she has since changed that notion. The city needs to hear the voices of its people—including Ms. Byrnes’s soft but firm one—or it will lose touch again. Much has improved since she became accidentally involved in community action, but she still grieves for what was lost.

She gestures at the land around her. “I’m sorry; I’m probably going to cry. The ‘Eden lost’ is what used to be here,” she says. “Where we are now was once all cattail marsh. I have friends who remember going out with their fathers in the 1930s in a rowboat, where

Van Vlissingen Prairie is. They went fishing among the cattails. And now it’s all filled in. But the ‘Eden found’ is the prairie people have worked to restore. The ‘Eden found’ can be considered superior to the ‘Eden lost.’ The birds, especially the big birds, have managed to survive. They’ve become accustomed to this territory, and they persist in returning even though their habitat has shrunk and shrunk. And there definitely are less of them than there were in the original Eden.”

Ms. Byrnes continues coming back to the land and the bargaining table, again and again, to raise her voice. Ultimately, she feels, her work will triumph. “I’m hopeful for the future of this area because the city of Chicago and the state [of Illinois] have made this pledge to save thousands of acres of land for permanent preservation, and I think they will hold to that pledge. It makes me feel very happy, wonderful.”

And she heads back home through a field of thistle, daisies, and strawberries.

Questions

- 1. Where in Chicago does Ms. Byrnes live, and why is her neighborhood special?

- 2. What environmental problems does the Calumet face?

- 3. What happened in 1979 that inspired Ms. Byrnes to take a more active role in her community?

4. Over the years, what are some of the things the city wanted to do with land in the Calumet area that Ms. Byrnes and her neighbors convinced the city not to do?

5. How did the big change in the city’s attitude come about? What was the turning point for the Calumet?

6. What do you think of the city and state’s solution to protect half of the Calumet’s acres?

7. Many people in the neighborhood need and want jobs. What kinds of business do you think would be perfect for the Calumet area?

8. How does Ms. Byrnes answer the question about what keeps her going? Do you think she trusts and respects her neighbors? How do you know that?

Name _____ Date _____

Names in Group _____

HANDOUT 17.1: Guidelines to Policy Profiles

POLICY PROFILES

Read the following questions and statements below and use them as a guide to help you and your group complete your policy profile. Write your answers on a separate page.

Policy assigned to your group: _____

1. What does the policy say? What is it designed to accomplish?
2. How did the policy come into existence? What is its history?
3. Who does the policy govern (businesses, national/international governments, and the like)?
4. How is the policy enforced? Are there punishments for infractions? If so, what?
5. How well is this policy being followed and enforced? Give evidence to support your position.
6. Do you feel the policy is fair to all? Why or why not?
7. What changes would you make to the policy itself? Is it strict enough? Too strict? Do you think there are potential loopholes in this policy?
8. What changes, if any, would you make to the enforcement? Why?
9. Be sure to include visuals to support your presentation: charts, graphs, maps, video, photos displays, collages—be creative!
10. List the role each team member played in the preparation of this report and presentation. Divide the responsibilities fairly and work together.

Extra Credit:

Create a timeline that shows milestones from the policy's history (when it was first proposed, where it was presented, and when it was ratified by various countries, and so on).

HANDOUT 17.2: Community Action and the Media

WHAT IS A COALITION?

A coalition is an alliance or association of individuals or groups that come together to pursue a common cause. Governments and nations can form coalitions. Churches and neighborhood organizations can form coalitions. Political groups can form coalitions.

Coalitions are often brought together by common concerns and goals. When one group joins with another, the resulting coalition can often accomplish much more.

Most often, small action groups and the coalitions they form will be nonprofit. The terms *nonprofit* and *not-for-profit* are used interchangeably. The big difference between, say, a local chess club and a local church, synagogue, or scouting organization is that the last three are chartered organizations. They have a legal status and are recognized on the state or federal level. Environmental groups such as the Sierra Club are chartered groups. They are legal entities, much like corporations, except that they do not exist to earn a profit. They may earn money but only to pay their employees and run their organizations.

When small action groups band together to form coalitions, they share their strengths. One group may be able to provide excellent media contacts. Another may be great at planning rallies and preparing signs for marchers to wave. Another group may excel at meeting with local business leaders or local politicians.

HOW TO ORGANIZE A COMMUNITY MEETING

Organizing meetings can be more difficult than you think. Who speaks when, what is on the agenda, and how to follow up are all-important issues to consider if you want to get the most out of a meeting—and maintain everyone’s enthusiasm.

Before the Meeting

- Know what you want the meeting to accomplish. Set distinct goals.
- Know who you want to attend.
- Know how you want to follow up.
- Publicize appropriately, especially if there are special speakers attending.
- Allow plenty of time to find a meeting place.
- Make sure the meeting time works with the majority of key people.

During the Meeting

- Have a sign-in sheet where attendees can leave their contact information.
- Have an agenda and do your best to stick to it.
- Plan who will speak when and how much time each person will be allotted.
- Assign someone to keep the “minutes” of the meeting.
- Let everyone know how and when there will be follow-up.
- Always end on a positive note, with a plan to get together again.

After the Meeting

- Send the minutes to those who attended and those you think would be interested in knowing more about the topics discussed or any future plans and actions that are coming up.

Welcome feedback—good and bad—about how things can be improved.

Keep the momentum going!

HOW TO WRITE A PRESS RELEASE

A well-written press release can be the key to garnering publicity—and possibly support—for your cause or event.

What to Include

- Contact person's name and phone number and/or e-mail
- The date and location
- Information about the who, what, where, when, why of your event
- Information about the organizing group or groups
- Informational quotes from key people

What Not to Include

- Anything that sounds like begging: "Please come! If you don't, no one will know how hard we've worked . . ."
- Also, do not condescend to the reader: "If you don't come, it just proves your lack of concern for real news stories . . ." You get the picture.

In short: Stick to the facts, keep it professional and adhere to the format.

Whom to Send It To

Send your press release to anyone at local newspapers, magazines, TV and radio stations, and government agencies whom you feel needs to get your message or who can give you the kind of publicity and support you need.

Contact the organization. If it's a newspaper or magazine, ask for the editorial department. Explain you have a press release you would like to send them and ask if they prefer e-mail or fax. It is always best if you can address a press release to a particular person. Do some research. Look at the paper and determine who covers the issues your press release discusses. Do the same with TV and radio.

After you've sent your release, do some follow-up leading up to the event itself. First, be sure to phone the office and make sure the appropriate person received your material. Then be sure to stay in touch with them leading up to your event. Media professionals keep very hectic schedules, so it's important you and your organization stay in the forefront of their minds.

The Format

The format for a press release is fairly standard. Basically, you want to sum up the key points of your issue or event on one page. Provide the appropriate contact information and a bit of background so that a prospective media professional can get started researching and developing their coverage. Templates are available on the web; so are services that will send your press release out for you (for a fee, of course). But all you really need is e-mail access or a fax machine and you're in business. By simply following the format and inserting your own information, you can have a professional press release ready to go. Here's a sample:

Contact: Iman Organizer
555-555-5555
contactme@xxx.net

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

June 1, 20__

OUR GREEN TOWN COALITION LAUNCHES
INDEPENDENT STUDY OF PROPOSED
LANDFILL PROJECT

*Local coalition to mobilize investigation
of environmental impact*

Our Green Town, USA—In June 20__ the Our Green Town Coalition announced a year-long process to analyze unresolved issues surrounding the proposed landfill at Yuck Mountain in Your Fair County. This effort will draw on the technical expertise of more than 10 specialists in ecology, hydrogeology, structural geology, groundwater hydrology, and environmental engineering. The information gathered will be used to critique the basis that the Department of Trash is using to justify the proposed landfill.

"By harnessing the resources of a group of scientists like this, I think we will come up with a more profound statement on how we view the technical basis for the Yuck Mountain Landfill project," said Our Green Town founder Izzy Green. "It is

vital that we assure the citizens of our county that if the landfill is built, it will be successful and our citizens will not need to be concerned for their health and safety.”

For nearly 20 years, a number of consulting firms, national laboratories, universities, and other experts have been developing and analyzing information to address the landfill’s potential environmental impact on nearby communities.

“At this point in time, the scientists will look at all the information and address it from the technical perspectives that *we’ve* developed and our own understanding of the situation in Your Fair County,” Green explained. “Ultimately, this may result in our raising these issues during their license application.”

Your Fair County is one of the largest counties in the United States at 15,000 square miles, and it is home to some 200,000 people. Your Fair County has passed several resolutions approving the landfill, contingent on the employment of construction and operation techniques that assure the health and safety of Your Fair County’s citizens.

Our Green Town Coalition is a community-based consortium focused on ensuring sustainable practices in the business and private sector. Established in 2005, it seeks to bring individuals, government, schools, and businesses together to work toward a sustainable future.

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HOW TO RUN A PRESS CONFERENCE

When there is an announcement to be made, an issue to be discussed, an event to be highlighted or just some great news to share, a press conference (preceded by a press release, of course) is a great way to do it.

A press conference should not run on too long—maybe a half hour at the most—because the conference is a way of introducing the press to the topic and, ideally, giving them just enough

information to get them excited about covering it further.

Decide who will run the press conference. This person should act as a master of ceremonies, welcoming everyone to the press conference, introducing key speakers, and then answering any questions. A schedule should be set well ahead of your conference.

Get confirmation of attendees. This can also help bring more people to the conference. If you find out Mr. Scoop is coming from the local paper, be sure to let people from the TV or radio station know that.

In fact, be sure you know the names of all press members attending. This is key to developing ongoing relationships.

Before and after the press conference, make members of the press aware of any important “angles” they might not know about that would make covering your event more enticing.

Always be professional and polite when dealing with reporters and aware of any deadlines they may have. Make it as easy as possible for them to give your story the coverage it deserves.

Always follow up with key people as a way of cultivating your relationship with the press and making sure they haven’t forgotten about your organization.

HOW TO WRITE AN OP-ED OR LETTER TO THE EDITOR

One of the best ways to get involved is to interact with your newspaper. This seems foreign to some people, but the structure of a newspaper does provide for this. First, it is important to become familiar with the editorial or opinion section of the newspaper. It has several main parts.

Editorials

This is where the opinions of the newspaper are expressed. There is no byline or name attached to these opinion pieces, as they are the opinion of the editorial board as a whole. This is where you

might find an endorsement for a political candidate, for example.

Letters to the Editor

These are short responses to the editorials or other content in the newspaper by any reader.

Op-Eds

Editorials or op-eds are done by newspaper staff columnists and “guests,” who could be anyone who can write a solid, engaging piece of 500 words or so that expresses a particular stance or position.

Every newspaper has information on how to submit letters to the editor and op-eds. To make your submission the strongest, be sure to back up your opinion and position with research and statistics if possible. Think of it as writing the pro or con portion of a debate.

GETTING THE WORD OUT

You can get the public’s attention in many ways, and not all of them follow any particular set of rules or guidelines. In fact, the more creative you are, the more likely you are to get attention. Here are just a few ideas:

- Hold a rally and invite motivational speakers.
- Have a bake sale featuring goods from local farmers and bakers.
- Dress up as trees and stand on the corner of a busy intersection to raise awareness of a tree-planting initiative you’re sponsoring.
- Give free talks at your local library.
- Start a blog or a podcast where you discuss topics important to your organization.

In all of these cases, being creative is key and staying positive even in the face of adversity will increase your rate of success.