



Faye Bush in front of a Gainesville pet food plant

## Gainesville's Erin Brockovich

Faye Bush started out delivering funeral flowers and uncovered a toxic threat to her close-knit community. Fifty-five years later, she's still looking for justice.

FAYE BUSH DOESN'T LOOK anything like Julia Roberts. Low-cut blouses, miniskirts, and stilettos aren't her style either. But that doesn't stop people from comparing her to Erin Brockovich, the real-life hero Roberts portrayed (earning her an Oscar) in a 2000 film of the same name. With the help of a major law firm, Brockovich, a single mother of three, exposed Pacific Gas and Electric Company's attempt to cover up its dumping of toxic chemicals into the water supply of a small California town. Her investigation ultimately yielded a \$333 million settlement from the energy giant—the largest ever paid in a direct-action lawsuit in U.S. history.

Faye Bush, whose mocha skin, close-cropped gray curls, and gold-rimmed eyeglasses are more grandma than Hollywood, hasn't collected millions, but she has dedicated fifty-five years of her life to environmental justice efforts in Newtown, a predominantly African American, low-income section of Gainesville that is home to a dog food processing mill; a large scrap metal facility; and factories that produce chicken feed, hair-spray, and chemically treated wood. At seventy-three, the grandmother of nine and great-grandmother of nine still has an undiminished fighting spirit. Bush says residents on the Southside—the same part of Gainesville that in 1993 city officials confirmed was built atop a former city dump—suffer disproportionately high rates of lupus, cancer, and respiratory illnesses. Bush, who also suffers from lupus and a heart condition, blames the high rates (compared to national averages) on the many factories in the area. “The houses were here first,” she says matter-of-factly. “That's not the case on the richer, north side of town.”

Her role as a crusader came more out of necessity than desire, says Bush, executive director of the Newtown Florist Club, an organization that has evolved from a social service club into one of the leading environmental justice advocacy groups in the country. A “florist club” might seem a bizarre name for such a socially active

group, but the moniker is in tribute to the organization's origin. Bush's mother, Maggie Johnson, was among eleven African American housewives from Newtown who began the organization in 1950. Their mission was to collect money to provide funeral wreaths for bereaved families. Over time, as the number of door-to-door collections grew and the rose-bearing women attended more and more funerals decked out in their signature white dresses, they began to notice that an unusually high number of their neighbors were dying from similar illnesses. By 1978 they began to suspect that the deaths—along with the heavy odor and thick dust particles that always seemed to blanket their cars and homes—were related to the many nearby industrial facilities. That discovery catapulted the Newtown Florist Club into the environmental justice movement.

“There are lots of communities across the country, especially African American and other minority communities, that are dealing with the same issues as Newtown,” says Jamie Baker Roskie, managing attorney of the University of Georgia's Land Use Clinic, which has been advising the club on local environmental policies. “But looking at the size of Gainesville and Newtown, I have been impressed with their diligence. It's one of the most vibrant movements I've seen in a community of this size. I'm especially impressed with Faye; she's not one to give up. And she does it in a way that is so gracious.”

Earlier this year, Bush was in the running to be named “America's Greatest Hometown Hero” in the sixth annual Volvo for Life Awards, a search for real-life heroes across America. Ultimately, Bush didn't win the award that would have included a \$100,000 donation to the Florist Club and a new Volvo car every three years for the rest of her life. She insists that making it to the semifinals was flattering and provided inspiration enough for her to press on.

Bush works on her grassroots campaign from an office in a quaint brown brick house with tan trim on Desota Street—the same street where, in 1990, club members discovered through an amateur door-to-door survey that six residents had been

**The rose-bearing women noticed that an unusually high number of their neighbors were dying from similar illnesses.**

diagnosed with throat cancer, eight with lung cancer, seven with lupus, one with a brain tumor, and more than a dozen with respiratory illness.

“When we brought this to the city’s attention, they promised to look into it and came back with the conclusion that these deaths and illnesses were related to unhealthy lifestyles, like smoking and drinking,” says Bush of an Environmental Protection Agency report that concluded there was no evidence directly linking the deaths to any of Newtown’s surrounding businesses. She disputes that ruling. “We had a sixteen-year-old girl die from lupus and a twenty-year-old man die from a brain tumor; there were no lifestyle issues there. The problem is nobody wants to take responsibility for what’s going on here.”

Undeterred, Bush is still pressuring government agencies, speaking to media outlets, and inviting other environmental groups to Newtown to talk about environmental issues. The Florist Club has met many times with attorneys about taking legal action, but going up against companies with deep pockets requires money and resources that the mostly working-class Newtown residents simply don’t have.

The mild-mannered Bush, who speaks with a heavy Georgia drawl and tends to add an “s” to words like “people” and the word “and” to dates (as in “nineteen and ninety”), turns polished pro when she speaks of the environmental factors that she believes have claimed the lives of many of her family and friends. For example, she points out that thirteen out of sixteen plants on Gainesville’s Southside are located within five miles of Newtown. Ironically, just past the “Welcome” sign at Gainesville city limits, visitors are greeted by clouds of white smoke billowing from the palatial Cargill

manufacturing plant. A billboard advertising the Northeast Georgia Medical Center's stellar cancer treatment services follows.

"We do have a problem with a lot of mills close to the Newtown area, but we can't just make a business move," says Gainesville Mayor Myrtle Figueras, who describes Bush and her organization's work, particularly with young people, as an "active and positive voice for environmental justice" in the community. "We have been trying to work with the Florist Club and the businesses so that they can have a relationship where they can peacefully coexist. When residents call the city with complaints, we try to make sure that the proper codes are being enforced."

While many of her peers are spending much of their golden years tinkering in their gardens or spoiling their grandchildren—or worse, battling debilitating diseases—Bush dedicates her time leading "toxic tours" around Newtown's mills and factories. She also meticulously documents

the incidents of noise and environmental pollution to maintain a paper trail on the plants and junkyard.

"Eventually, I believe that something will come out of this," she says. "We have to keep talking about this. We haven't gotten rid of them yet, but at least they know that we're here and we're watching."

Bush, who joined the club when she was eighteen, has also taken care to include the community's young. The Newtown Youth Bucket Brigade, a group of youths ages ten to eighteen, helps gather random air samples that are regularly tested and shipped off to the Environmental Protection Agency for analysis. "You usually see adults doing this kind of stuff, but it's good that we kids get to do it," says brigade member Kamoney Dean, a sixth-grader. "We all really appreciate Miss Faye for letting us get experience and all that she is doing for Newtown."

Although environmental issues are the centerpiece of the Florist Club's initiatives,

it has expanded further into the community. Its contradistinctive list of accolades also includes a successful youth-led campaign to get the street leading to Newtown renamed after Martin Luther King Jr.; the launch of a program that helps low-income residents buy homes in the area; and an annual summer leadership program that offers teenage girls courses such as conflict resolution, etiquette, environmental justice, and community service.

"We're trying to develop them into community leaders," adds Bush, who contends that the phones at the club's offices "ring off the hook" with calls from residents seeking all types of assistance. "People call the Florist Club for everything, like we're the NAACP or the SCLC," she says. "People just associate us with community justice. We're going to press on and help in every way that we can." ■

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