

A Mother Grizzly from Marblehead

The ursine image is an apt one. Clean air and water advocate Lori Ehrlich has no fangs and snarl, but she's fiercely effective in defending the health of her offspring - and the grateful citizens of Boston's North Shore.



She helped launch two environmental organizations, and was pivotal in brokering the corporate cleanup of a decades- old, power-plant waste site. She led a grassroots delegation to Capitol Hill last year to protest President Bush's energy plan, provided environmental policy advice to the fledgling administration of Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney, and has been named an "outstanding activist" of the year by a statewide environmental group.

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But Lori Ehrlich, a 39-year-old mother of two from Marblehead, Mass., resists the label of "environmentalist." It's a pigeonhole she fears carries baggage that could thwart her goal of not just exposing environmental problems, but of quickly solving them.

Introducing herself at a March conference of Boston's Toxics Action Center (TAC) - held at Northeastern University - the soft-spoken accountant summed up the way she prefers to be known.

"My most important hat is that I am the mother of two daughters. They are the reason I caught this bug. I used to care about the environment. Now I'm obsessed," Ehrlich told her audience, before expounding on the public health dangers associated with coal-burning power plants - a subject on which she has become expert over the past five years.

"I hate the word 'activist,'" says Ehrlich, a founding board member of HealthLink, a Marblehead-based environmental watchdog group, and cofounder of the Wenham Lake Watershed Association (WLWA). "I like to think of myself as a mom looking out for the health of my children and my family."

Right. As in a mother grizzly defending her young - minus the bared fangs and snarl but with a quick mind, boundless energy, a knack for networking, and a winning smile. It's a combination that spells success, Ehrlich observers say.

"People from environmental groups spend far too much time sitting in rooms talking to one another. What I always appreciated about Lori and about HealthLink were the freshness they brought to their advocacy, and the groundedness of it," says Stephen H. Burrington, deputy chief of Commonwealth Development for Massachusetts governor

Mitt Romney, and former general counsel at the Conservation Law Foundation. CLF has worked with HealthLink to push for more stringent power-plant emission regulations, and to compel PG&E to clean up unlined waste ponds at its two Massachusetts power plants, in Salem and Somerset.

The ponds were leaching arsenic and other heavy metals into groundwater near the plants, says CLF staff attorney Carol Lee Rawn, lead CLF counsel in the waste pond case. She adds that Ehrlich was a key player in helping to negotiate a September 2000 settlement under which PG&E avoided a lawsuit by agreeing to a \$21 million cleanup.

"It's funny," Burrington adds. "Lori's an accountant, but she seems to take to advocacy like a fish takes to water. She's a natural."

E-mails at Midnight and a Crowded Calendar

Send Ehrlich an e-mail at midnight and chances are good that you'll get an immediate reply, claims her husband, Bruce Ehrlich.

"A lot of people realize there are a lot of problems and sit around and complain about them. Lori is definitely not like that. She's a doer, not a complainer," he says, referring to their "busy house," and how his wife "has gotten into a rhythm and somehow it works."

During a week at the height of this year's tax season, Ehrlich's busiest time professionally, she advised a reporter attempting to follow her around, "Wear sneakers - I move fast." She wasn't kidding.

Her first stop was at Boston's Coalition for an Environmentally Responsible Convention (the 2004 Democratic National Convention). Nursing the remnants of a bout with flu, she scribbled notes about the group's "green" strategies. Two days later, she was among 20 business, education, and nonprofit group leaders flanking Governor Romney at a news conference designed to demonstrate widespread support for his proposed state budget. Sprinting from the State House to South Station (she hates to fly), Ehrlich managed to wedge in a business trip to meet with a New Jersey tax client. Upon her return, she gave an interview to WCVB-TV's "Chronicle" for a segment on PG&E's Salem plant.

The station's interest immediately followed Romney's rejection of PG&E's proposal to postpone compliance with cleaner air-emissions regulations - an announcement made at a Salem news conference where Ehrlich was shouted off the podium by plant workers. Within days of the budget news conference, she was presenting a coal ash (fly ash) workshop at the TAC conference. Among all the professional duties were the usual details of Ehrlich's suburban life - meals to plan, children to pick up and drop off, homework to shepherd, two dogs and four tree frogs to feed, and an at-home business to run. Ehrlich confesses that she's an insomniac. That may be a blessing, given her personality and crowded calendar.

"She is just tenacious, in that she doesn't stop. Once she has something in her head and sees a problem, she just zones in on it and stays until it's solved," says Matthew Wilson, director of the TAC, which in 2001 honored Ehrlich for her work on issues related to the Salem plant.

The Multiple Roots of a Deepening Devotion

Like many, Wilson met Ehrlich through HealthLink, an organization founded in 1998 by Lynn Nadeau and Mark Rodgers. It grew from an ad-hoc group initially called the Marblehead Cancer Prevention Project, formed after Nadeau and Marblehead's Linda Weltner attended the funeral of a friend who died of breast cancer. The two decided to probe possible connections between the health of local residents and environmental toxins. Ehrlich attended the first meeting of the group, which eventually broke up into various "links" to address topics such as pesticides, air pollution, and clean water. She gravitated toward issues relating to the Salem plant, a complex she's been looking at - and smelling - since childhood.

In a few short years, Ehrlich scaled a steep learning curve, educating herself about everything from how the plant's fuel is mined, to health problems associated with smokestack emissions, to the history of a Beverly dump filled with the plant's waste. Ehrlich's relationship to Salem is tightly woven with the fabric of her own family. She peppers conversations about the need for a cleaner plant with that fact, and it lends authenticity to her appeal to ease "the incredible burden" borne by adjoining communities.

She contends, "Our air is polluted, our drinking water has three to six feet of power-plant waste in it, and the groundwater near the plant is contaminated. What else is there besides land, air, and water?"

Ehrlich's father, Harvey Litman, lived his whole life near the plant, and in January 2001 he died of a form of brain cancer that his doctor told her was "likely due to environmental factors." Litman was only 68. Ehrlich grew up in Swampscott and Marblehead, at one point living in a house on a hill overlooking Salem and the plant. One childhood memory features her mother, Diana Litman, scolding her for making frozen maple syrup with the snow in her yard, which was coated with a black film.

"The snow was always dirty. The whiteness didn't last very long," Litman recalls, adding that she didn't suspect until later that the plant might be the culprit. "We never thought about it. It was part of the landscape. She [Ehrlich] has lived around it all her life."

The plant continued as a backdrop to her life in 1991, when Ehrlich and her husband moved to their peaceful Marblehead neighborhood. Its smoke-belching stacks were visible from their home until last year, when the town built a new high school that blocks the view. One summer day in 1998, the consequences of living so close to the mostly coal-fired plant came into sharp relief. Recently, sitting on a stool in her kitchen, Ehrlich described the chain of events that became an epiphany for her.

She and her family were preparing to visit her mother, when the two Ehrlich daughters - then two and five - ran in from the deck, tracking small black footprints across the white kitchen floor. Whatever was causing the mess didn't wash off easily, from the floor or the girls' feet. On the deck, Ehrlich found black soot on everything, and she thought, "What the heck is this?" Then, glancing at the smokestacks in the distance, she was fairly certain of the answer.

Ehrlich contacted PG&E, which promptly sent an insurance adjuster to collect samples from the deck. After several weeks, she received a letter from Eastern Adjustment Co., stating that 35% of the grime was made up of "oil soots," and 10-15% of that "could in fact be related to emissions from the Salem Harbor station." Plant officials offered to power wash Ehrlich's deck and outside furniture. She decided that wasn't an appropriate response.

"I realized they missed the point," she says. "It wasn't about my deck or my stuff. It was about the health of my family."

Energized by Statistics, Energizing the News Media

She briefly considered moving, but now she recalls, "When I heard what the cancer statistics were in this area, I became concerned and enraged. I decided we had a real shot at fighting this, and encouraging PG&E to play by the same rules as the other power plants." (Under a provision of the federal Clean Air Act, plants built before its 1977 passage - such as PG&E's Salem and Somerset plants - were exempted from the more stringent pollution controls required of newer power generators.)

A series of scientific reports influenced Ehrlich and other HealthLink trailblazers. In 1997, the Massachusetts Cancer Registry, a division of the state Department of Public Health, found statistically significant elevations of breast cancer in Marblehead and Swampscott, and higher than usual leukemia and melanoma rates in Marblehead. A year 2000 report by the Harvard University School of Public Health stated that 159 premature deaths annually in the Northeast were attributable to PG&E's two Massachusetts plants. (Ehrlich says that number has since been reduced to 110.)

In July 2000, Ehrlich and Health-Link board member Lisa Evans decided to illustrate the alleged health impacts of power-plant pollution. From black paper, they created 159 silhouettes - adults and children - and taped them to the plaza outside PG&E's Boston headquarters. The display attracted national media attention - a modus operandi that has become a hallmark of Ehrlich's strategy. The newspapers and cameras returned when Ehrlich forged an alliance with none other than Erin Brockovich, convincing the legendary California environmental activist to weigh in for cleaner plants in Massachusetts. HealthLink member Jody Howard calls Ehrlich the organization's "media maven."

By all accounts, HealthLink is blessed with an abundance of smart, passionate people with a wide range of talents. Cofounder Nadeau says Ehrlich has told other members that

"she's feeling squirmy" about being singled out for so much attention lately. But, Howard points out, Ehrlich's mix of brains, courage, and "gracious nature" inevitably ups her profile. Nadeau adds that the group as a whole benefits from Ehrlich's media skills.

"We get glory from it," Nadeau said. "We get Mitt Romney to come to Salem."

A Discovery at Salem Begets a Cause Célèbre

At the TAC conference, Ehrlich easily fielded questions on issues ranging from groundwater pollution to grassroots organizing, while giving an hour-long PowerPoint presentation on the "hidden issues of coal," a fuel that, she says, "wreaks havoc on the environment every step of the way." She spoke of the day she and her daughters drove past the Salem plant as a dump truck exited the gate, "with all this stuff coming out of the seams...and I thought, 'what else is coming out of that plant?'"

The dust was fly ash - a byproduct of coal combustion that contains a variety of heavy metals. Her curiosity piqued, Ehrlich began tracing the history of Salem's combustion waste. She spoke with people and pored over papers that documented the disposal of ash at a North Beverly fly-ash pit that, from the mid-1950s to the late 1970s, accepted waste from the then-New England Power Co.-owned plant. The city of Beverly took the site by tax title in 1980, and still owns it.

Local residents had long known that there was a problem at the landfill. It's situated about one-half mile from Wenham Lake, a reservoir that provides drinking water for 80,000 residents of Salem and Beverly. Airport Brook runs through the property, and for decades it carried eroded fly ash to the lake, creating a black delta.

One consumer of Wenham Lake's drinking water was Jan Schlichtmann, the Beverly attorney who brought the celebrated 1980s toxic waste case against W. R. Grace & Co., on behalf of Woburn, Mass. plaintiffs. Schlichtmann's story became the basis for the movie "A Civil Action," starring John Travolta. The tall, articulate orator was prone to speaking in media sound bites, and, perceiving that he could be a perfect ally, Ehrlich proceeded to win him over.

When she first phoned him, Schlichtmann was about to depart on a business trip, and he asked her to fax him some information on the road. She did, but after receiving no response, she recalls, "I grabbed the materials, went to his house, and said, 'This is ridiculous - sit down and read this.'" He said, 'My God - why didn't you tell me?' And he became as obsessed as I was."

In January 2001, Ehrlich and Schlichtmann cofounded the Wenham Lake Watershed Association (WLWA), and the budding alliance between the "mom with an agenda" and the intrepid lawyer proved to be a winning combination for the lake. Wasting no time that winter, Ehrlich and other HealthLink members were soon accompanying Schlichtmann onto the frozen lake, where he borrowed an ice fisherman's auger, drilled through the ice, inserted Lucite tubes, and collected bottom sediments. What the sediments revealed,

before an audience of reporters and public officials huddled on the frozen expanse, was a bottom layer of fly ash that was three feet deep. While testing had consistently shown that the lake's water met government standards, the existence of so much toxic material at the bottom of a drinking water supply was unsettling.

Public meetings and hearings in Salem and Beverly quickly ensued. Before long, officials at the New England Power Company (NEP), which owned the Salem plant from the mid-'50s to the mid-'70s, when the fly ash was deposited, agreed to reimburse the WLWA for monies spent testing the lake's sediment and water. More important, the company volunteered to coordinate and finance a total cleanup of the lake and brook, and remediation of the landfill. With most local, state, and federal permits now in NEP hands, the company plans to begin vacuuming the ash from the lake bottom late this summer. It will also cap the fly ash pit, and reroute Airport Brook to avoid future erosion.

The TAC's Matthew Wilson points out that it took 100 days for Ehrlich and Schlichtmann to elicit a cleanup promise from NEP, something other people had "been working on for a dozen years." Joseph Kwasnik, the NEP Vice President Environmental, says that Ehrlich's style was the key. He had previously dealt with environmentalists who "don't want to listen to us," but that Ehrlich "seems to be willing to have an open mind when it comes to coming up with solutions for what I consider some difficult environmental problems." He praises her "ability to listen objectively, and to really consider everything before her."

Take that ability, plus the discipline to educate herself thoroughly about the issues, a talent for connecting environmental problems with public health, and a politician's ability to network and remember names, and, as Schlichtmann adds, "She's just somebody you must have as part of your brain trust.

"Put all these things together, and you'll see her next to Mitt Romney, or any other leader who cares about these issues."

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