

CAN WE LIVE?: CONTINUING THE STRUGGLE AND PRESERVING THE LEGACY OF MARIE HARRISON IN BAYVIEW/HUNTERS POINT

By: Malik Washington, Destination Freedom Media Group



"We have the right to live, work, play, and worship on land that is clean. We have a right to breathe air that doesn't have all of the contaminants in it that our air does. Clean land and clean water and clean air is a God-given right. Environmental justice is the free access to that."

~Marie Harrison, an excerpt from Gregory Dicum's article entitled: "GREEN/Marie Harrison and the Fight for Bayview/Hunters Point."

Link: <https://www.sfgate.com/homeandgarden/article/GREEN-Marie-Harrison-And-The-Fight-For-2733707.php>

"Marie Harrison aka The Mother of Environmental Justice was a Bayview/Hunters Point and San Francisco legend. Marie Harrison taught us how to survive and inspired us to thrive, to fear nothing and no one and to speak truth to power."

~canwelive.org (Marie Harrison Community Foundation)

On May 5th, 2019 in Stockton, California, Marie Harrison joined the ancestors 'after suffering a respiratory arrest secondary to a chronic lung disease called Idiopathic Pulmonary Fibrosis' (IPF) Link: <https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/idiopathic-pulmonary-fibrosis>

Most people who contract IPF are chronic cigarette smokers. I interviewed Arieann Harrison specifically for this article. Arieann is the daughter of Marie Harrison and the Founder/Executive Director of the Marie Harrison Community Foundation, Inc. (MHCF).

In response to my question regarding whether or not her mother was a chronic smoker – Arieann said: *"My mother was not a chronic smoker, in fact, didn't smoke anything."*

I am not a doctor, but the only thing that I know of which may have caused my mother to contract this rare lung disease are the toxins that she and I were exposed to in Bayview/Hunters Point.” (BVHP) end of quote

BVHP has a long history of toxic radioactive contamination in the soil, air, and water. I was inspired to write this article after studying the life and activism of Marie Harrison. Marie Harrison’s life was another stellar example of Black excellence, and she should be celebrated and never forgotten. The fact that Mother’s Day is approaching was also a factor. Timing is relevant especially for journalists. I was further motivated after reading a piece written by journalist Audrey Mei Yi Brown for the San Francisco Public Press entitled: “Toxic Waste Cleanups Take Longer in Marginalized Communities.” Link: <https://www.sfpublicpress.org/in-marginalized-sf-bay-communities-toxic-waste-cleanups-take-longer-2/>

Ms. Brown’s article was republished by the San Francisco Bay View National Black Newspaper. The SF Bayview has covered the toxic contamination of BVHP for well over 27 years. The research and analysis conducted by Journalist Brown and their team at the SF Public Press was impressive and compelling to say the least. The analysis and empirical data illuminated by Audrey Mei Yi Brown reveals a pragmatic and methodical plan to prolong or slow down toxic cleanups in marginalized and underserved communities in the State of California.

With the help of my partner and colleague, Gale Washington, I conducted my own research of historical contamination of BVHP and other communities of color across the United States.

12 Examples of Environmental Racism You Should Know About

Link: <https://robertsmith.com/blog/examples-of-environmental-racism/>

Here is a quote that I found interesting from this article, especially as we consider the demographic of Hunters Point in the mid-1960s. The percentage of Black people in Hunters Point during that time hovered around 65 percent. 1966 was the year that Marie Harrison and her eight siblings moved to San Francisco:

“Oftentimes, the living conditions in these areas result in higher rates of chronic health issues, including cancer, asthma and pregnancy defects. A 2022 study from the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) found that Black Americans aged 65+ are three times more likely to die from pollution-related diseases than their white peers of the same age group, as they are more often impacted by environmental racism. Below, we discuss why environmental racism exists, its different forms and 12 environmental racism examples.”

What I found during my research was a pattern and program of environmental and economic racism. In BVHP, this “program” began decades ago in 1946. See **Operation Crossroads**: <https://thedirtydozenexpeditions.com/operation-crossroads>
In BVHP, the guilty parties and the entities who are culpable in an elaborate cover-up of toxic radiological contamination are:

- The U.S. Navy
- Tetra Tech
- Lennar (corporate developer)
- Five Points (another developer)

The community members of BVHP most certainly will have their day in court. However, when you begin to study the life of environmental activist Marie Harrison, and focus in on the alarm she was raising during her lifetime, you wonder where were and where are our U.S. Representatives, U.S. Senators, and local politicians on this issue?

Is it okay to poison Black, Brown, Asian, Arab, and poor/lower income White communities and then act as if it didn't ever really happen?
I THINK NOT!

Hunters Point vs. poisoners: 'We goin' to trial!'

<https://sfbayview.com/2025/04/hunters-point-vs-poisoners-we-goin-to-trial/>

Now, if you are really interested in how the beautiful City of San Francisco became a dumping ground for radioactive waste and a key location for unethical radiological experiments on human beings, I highly recommend you read and listen to the following:

Radiological and Redevelopment History of Hunters Point and Treasure Island Briefing Book (Nuclear History of the Bay Area), by Kevin Chen, Research Assistant - <https://nuclearbayarea.home.blog/radiological-history-of-hunters-point-and-treasure-island-briefing-book/#:~:text=In%201946%2C%20the%20Hunters%20Point,ineffective%20in%20reducing%20radiation%20levels.>

Revealed: how a San Francisco navy lab became a hub for human radiation experiments by Chris Roberts – San Francisco Public Press -

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/nov/25/san-francisco-navy-lab-human-radiation>

Additional reporting on this subject was done by Rebecca Bowe on Episode 1 and Episode 2 on the **Exposed** documentary podcast. Links:

<https://focmedia.org/2025/02/exposed-part-one-the-human-radiation-experiments-at-hunters-point-from-sf-public-press/> and <https://focmedia.org/2025/02/exposed-part-two-the-human-radiation-experiments-at-hunters-point-from-sf-public-press/>

In light of the plan by the U.S. Government to defund NPR (National Public Radio) and PBS (Public Broadcasting System), I cannot emphasize enough how important it is to support and fund independent nonprofit new organizations such as the Davis Vanguard, SF Public Press, SF Bayview, and Destination Freedom Media Group (DFMG). Our organizations produce content which serves and protects our communities. I want our readers to know and understand **that Democracy dies in darkness.**

MARIE HARRISON, A TRUE SERVANT OF THE PEOPLE



Once you study the life of Marie Harrison, you are immediately struck by her integrity, fearlessness, intelligence, and commitment to the struggle. Marie Harrison was a long-time member of Greenaction for Health and Environmental Justice (Greenaction) ([link: greenaction.org](http://greenaction.org))

Years ago, the U.S. Navy contracted with Tetra-Tech ECI, Inc. (Tetra Tech) to clean up the radiation and toxic waste that still exists in BVHP. In 2016, the story broke that Tetra Tech had been falsifying and swapping radioactive soil samples for clean soil that they obtained from locations outside the Hunters Point Shipyard area. On September 16, 2016, Greenaction issued a press release. Here is a verbatim quote of Marie Harrison's contribution to that 2016 press release:

"We demand that Tetra Tech be fired and that they pay for a trustworthy and independent entity to conduct comprehensive retesting of the entire Shipyard site and adjacent areas. We demand a full and proper cleanup of radioactive and toxic waste at the Shipyard site," said Marie Harrison of Greenaction, a long time Bayview Hunters Point community leader. "With climate change causing the sea levels to rise, leaving so much radioactive and toxic waste along the waterfront is a disaster ready to happen."

Link: [Press-release-USEPA-DTSC-Navy-Halt-New-Transfers-of-Land-from-Shipyard-due-to-Tetra-Tech-Scandal marie harrison.pdf](#)

These were Marie Harrison's thoughts and words nearly 10 years ago. And one can't help but think how accurate and relevant her analysis of the situation was then and now.

Preparing Bayview for Rising Tides 🌊 | Yosemite Slough Neighborhood Adaptation Plan

<https://youtube.com/watch?v=AjQyE16JH1o&feature=shared>

In 2006, Marie Harrison was one of the primary organizers of a non-violent protest which sought to shut down a PG&E power plant in Hunters Point. The PG&E plant in question was located in close proximity to where Marie Harrison lived with her

daughter, Arieann. The fight to close the plant became very personal to Marie Harrison, because her grandson's health was being negatively impacted by the toxic emissions blowing out of the stacks of the looming power plant.

Marie Harrison, tireless fighter for environmental justice, dies at 71

<https://missionlocal.org/2019/05/marie-harrison-tireless-fighter-for-environmental-justice-dies-at-71/>

In April 2006, Marie Harrison had this to say about the struggle to close the power plant: *"It'll be either champagne (celebrating the closure of the plan) or rocks and chains."* Marie Harrison had no problem whatsoever in engaging in Direct Action in order to accomplish her goals. Another aspect of Marie Harrison's personality and character that I admired was her integrity. While other community leaders were being silenced through corporate money and mega-donors, Marie Harrison remained unbought and unbossed until her untimely death.

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW WITH ARIEANN HARRISON



I believe that an article whose focus is honoring and preserving the legacy of Marie Harrison would not be complete without including an exclusive interview with her daughter, Arieann Harrison, who is continuing her mother's fight.

Malik Washington (MW):

Question #1: When did you realize that your mother, Marie Harrison, was fully committed to fighting against injustice in the Bayview/Hunters Point community?

Response Arieann Harrison (AH):

"I realized that my mother was fully committed when we were living in Bayview Hunters Point AKA middle point to be exact. It was me and my three children. We lived directly across the street from the old PG&E plant. Fire and soot would permeate through the community quite often."

*“My children were experiencing headaches, nausea, skin rashes, bloody noses, and rapid weight loss. However, this was something that was also being experienced by every neighbor and resident living in close proximity to the PG&E plant. Our concrete blocks and window seals collected black soot that was hugged by the floor beneath our feet while we inhaled the accumulation of black dust particles into our lungs. As a young parent, I wanted to understand why this was happening. Upon rushing my children to the emergency room, I was asked a series of questions by “medical professionals” as if I were to blame for my children being sick. Now, let that sink in for a minute. I described to medical staff when I first noticed the difference in behavior in my children and the decrease in appetite as well as the regurgitation of food. There was a nurse that was extremely abusive in her lack of communication skills and understanding -- to say the least -- when it came to **a scared young mother who loves her kids more than life. Thank goodness for the intervention of a culturally competent doctor who came to the rescue to actually examine my children and rule out any unsubstantiated foul play.** This behavior by itself leads into addressing a whole additional different set of issues experienced by women that meet a certain demographic within our healthcare system.”*

MW: Question #2: Can you tell our readers about the Marie Harrison Community Foundation, what services and programs it offers, and your vision for the future?

AH: Response:

“The Marie Harrison Community Foundation (MHCF) is a love letter to the community and City of San Francisco. It embodies the fierce love and hope that Marie and Arieann Harrison carried for their neighbors and our home. Rooted in the legacy of environmental justice and health, MHCF stands as a powerful affirmation that every life -- especially in communities too often overlooked -- is worthy of clean air, water, land, safe neighborhoods, and a future free from environmental harm. The MCHF uplifts the voices of those who have been silenced and honors the stories that built Bayview/Hunters Point. This carries forward the unshakable belief that true justice begins at the grassroots.

“In every action, every campaign, and every partnership, the MCHF reflects the deep care and unbreakable spirit that defines San Francisco at its best. We are unapologetically bold and committed to leaving no one behind. As a Bayview resident, it is not lost upon me that our medical professionals estimate that the unassigned residents of BVHP have 15 years automatically taken off of our life expectancy from living and raising our children in an environmental sacrifice zone.

“If I was asked today what I want for the future, my response would be the impossible. I want my 15 years back! I am a single parent whose children and the generation of community members’ children coming behind me deserve a fair shot at education which includes science, modern technology, and a positive ecological experience with more healthy and fulfilling outcomes in our young peoples’ lives. The change makers are among us if given the opportunity to flourish right here BVHP. You and I, Malik, have talked about how amazing and full of potential these young people are in the

City. By taking care of District 10 and the South East Sector of San Francisco, it could create safety from an environmental lens for all San Franciscans.”

BaySpark 2024: Youth Climate and Environmental Justice Summit

<https://youtube.com/watch?v=Y7S3Bh8SwrQ&feature=shared>

Some of the services and programs offered by the Marie Harrison Community Foundation:

- Marie Harrison Environmental Academic Scholarship environmental, health and social justice. Selection process can be found at www.canwelive.org
- YES Camp youth lead summer camp-internship program servicing transitional youth with an emphasis on science, air, water, and land aquatics.
- Popular education model, ran by educators, scientists, doctors and college students
- BaySpark: Igniting youth for Climate /Environment and Health Bay-area wide event - Science fair

MW: Question #3: Arieann, you and I have discussed California law AB 617. Can you describe in your own words what it is and why the law is important for communities like BVHP?

AH: Response:

“AB617- Formerly known as Assembly Bill 617 was signed into California law in 2007. It is a landmark piece of legislation that focuses on frontline communities in the fight for clean air and environmental justice. It was born from the urgent need to address the neighborhoods, especially those located near highways, ports, refineries, power plants, and industrial facilities. What makes AB617 important is that it recognizes that traditional statewide air quality regulations don’t go far enough to protect the people who are the most vulnerable. Instead of a “one size fits all” approach, it brings the community into the conversation of identifying air quality problems in the community and promotes cooperation in order to come up with solutions that improve quality of life when confronting stationary and mobile sources of pollution.”

MW: Final question and comment: Arieann, I want to thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to answer my questions. Are there any final comments that you would like to make?

AH: Response:

“Marie Harrison and Tessy Ester ran a community food pantry right in the heart of Bayview/Hunters Point. My mom and Tessy would organize community gatherings like basketball games, hot meals, and candy houses. They would also have birthday parties and every so often, your occasional politician would come through to gain support and give false hope to a community that had been abandoned a long time ago. These fake politicians would come through so they could have Kodak moments or photo ops that would benefit their political aspirations. My mom was also instrumental in forming the Bayview Hunters Point Mothers and Fathers. My mom

had an existing relationship with all of the residents and service providers in the community, as well as family members from every walk of life. We are a village and Hunters Point is the tribe. I miss my mother dearly, and I thank you, Malik, as well as your wife, Gale, for providing me the opportunity to speak about the work we are doing now. I also want to thank the Davis Vanguard for protecting the community from corrupt politicians and crime polluters.

“If anyone feels a desire to help the Marie Harrison Community Foundation continue my mother’s work, please visit our website: canwelive.org and click on the “Donate” button.”

As is customary, we share this video and song:

Gifted Hands - One Of Them Ones

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IG6Tlv9uMLg>



Malik Washington is a freelance journalist and Director at Destination: Freedom and Destination Freedom Media Group. For over twelve years, Malik has been a published journalist and news reporter focusing on criminal justice issues, conditions of confinement in jails and prisons, as well as hot-button political issues. You can reach him via email or you can write to him directly.

Suggestions or Leads on Stories Are Always Welcome

Malik can be reached at mwashington@destination-freedom.org
or write him directly at: Keith Washington #711060, San Francisco County Jail #3, 1
Moreland Drive – Pod 1B-Cell 4, San Bruno, California 94066