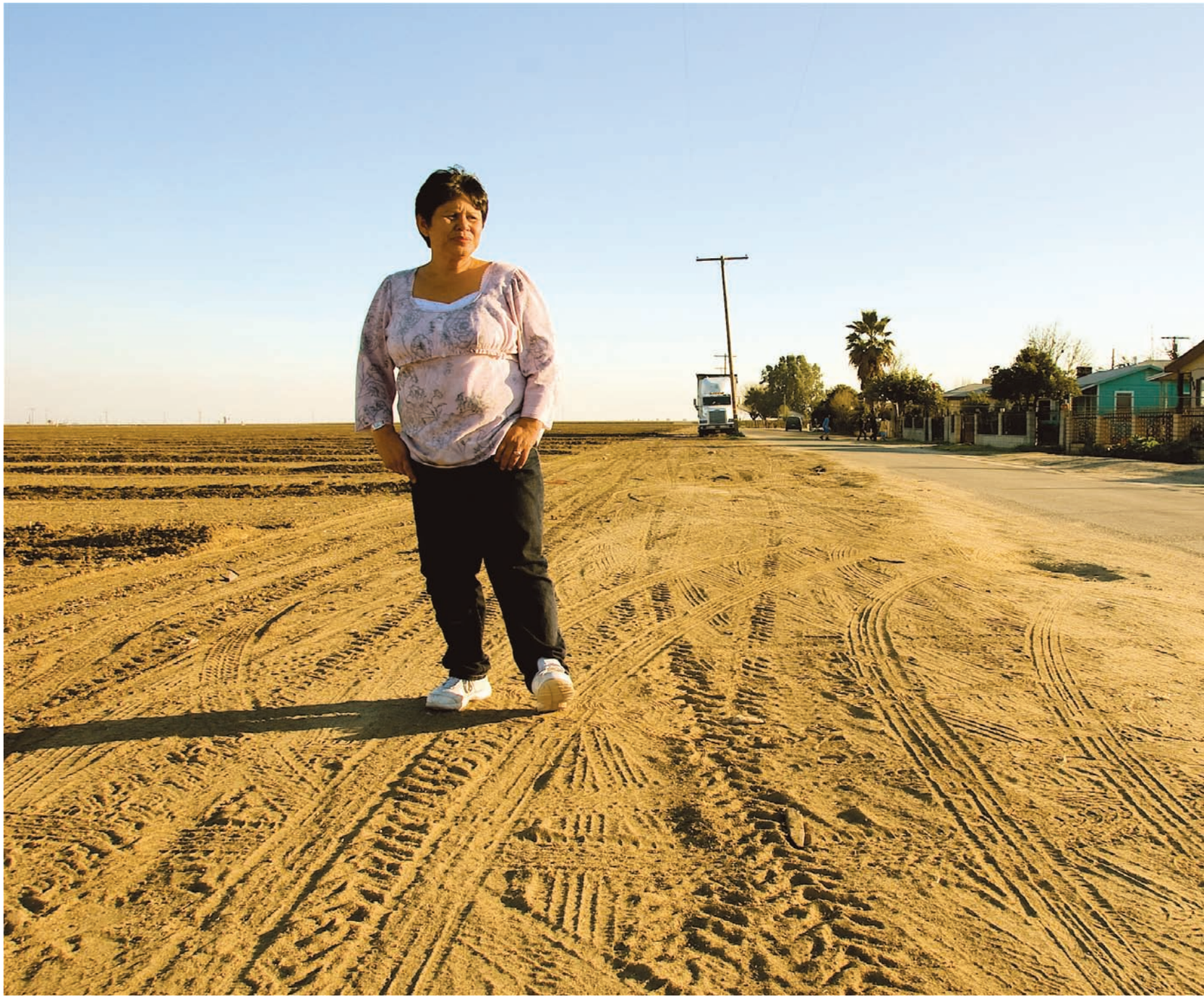
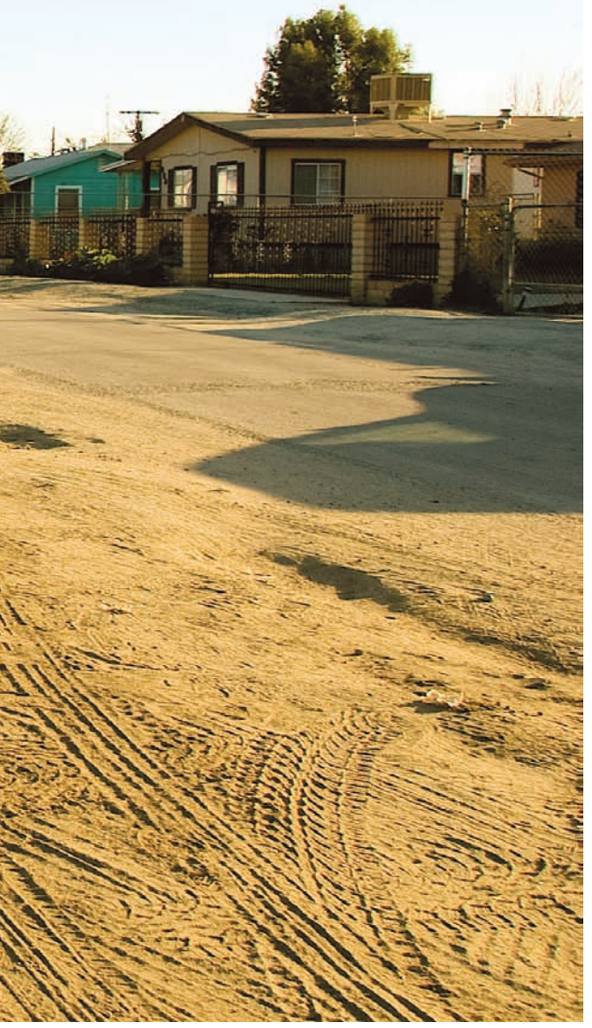


Earlimart, CA, March 7, 2008: Teresa DeAnda stands on the narow strip of dirt and road that divides her home form the fields next door. Pesticides regularly drift into her yard.

TRACY PERKINS AND JULIE SZE

Images from the Central Valley



When Californians think of the Central Valley, they often think of its problems: poverty, pesticides, disputes over the allocation of irrigation water, farmworker deaths, and, most recently, a cluster of babies born with birth defects in the small town of Kettleman City. These are some of the ways this region makes the statewide news. But the Central Valley also has a rich history of community organizing and its own stark beauty. These photographs by Tracy Perkins and the oral histories she collected to accompany them document an important aspect of life there: environmental-health problems and the diverse network of advocates who are fighting to solve them.

Practically speaking, the Central Valley is all but invisible to those who live outside it. Over the course of the twentieth century, legislators and growers turned this 500-mile-long stretch of land into one of the most intensively farmed regions in the world, watered by one of the world's most ambitious irrigation systems. Although California leads the nation in agricultural production, many Californians have little sense of what goes on in the agricultural regions of their state. This invisibility helps to explain why California has located two of the state's three hazardous-waste landfills and many of its prisons there, while also continuing to allow high levels of toxicity in the air and water.

Nonetheless, the politics of the Central Valley have implications outside the region's boundaries—as its history shows. From farm families migrating there in search of a haven from the Dust Bowl of the 1930s to César Chávez and the farmworkers' movement in the 1960s and 1970s, the Central Valley has played an important role in shaping California and the nation. More recently, Central Valley advocates have entered the debate about global warming as part of a statewide coalition that has sued the state on the grounds that its landmark new law, the Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006, would, ironically, increase air pollution where they live. Under the law's current implementation plan, new energy plants would likely be built in the Central Valley to phase out older, less efficient, and more polluting energy plants in other parts of the state. New incinerators that burn imported wood debris would also be built to create "renewable energy." Both types of plants would add to the toxic burden residents already bear from pesticide drift, diesel exhaust, toxic waste, drinking-water pollution, and high

Boom: A Journal of California, Vol. 1, Numbers 1, pps 70–80. ISSN 2153-8018, electronic ISSN 2153-764X. © 2011 by the Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Rights and Permissions website, http://www.ucpressjournals.com/reprintInfo.asp. DOI: boom.2011.1.1.71.

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Tulare County, March 8, 2008: Anhydrous ammonia flows into an unlined irrigation canal. Later it will find its way through a sprinkler system onto the fields. It provides nitrogen to the crops, but also seeps into the groundwater that Central Valley townspeople drink.

air pollution levels. You may be surprised to learn that in 2007 the Environmental Protection Agency listed the small Central Valley town of Arvin, population 16,200, as having the worst smog levels in the US. Arvin continues to be smoggier than Los Angeles. Residents already suffering from asthma and other health problems linked to air pollution are unlikely to welcome new pollution sources. This struggle is surely being watched by other states as they consider their own responses to global warming.

Nor is this the only national issue in which the Central Valley plays an important role. In the 1990s, advocates pioneered the use of civil-rights law to reduce pollution in communities of color. This strategy was first used as part of a campaign to stop the building of a toxic-waste incinerator in the largely Latino town of Kettleman City, which was already neighbor to the largest hazardous-waste landfill west of the Mississippi River. Civil-rights litigation has since been incorporated into environmental struggles in communities of color across the country. Similarly, between 2008 and 2010 pesticide buffer zones were created in Tulare, Madera, Stanislaus, and Kern Counties. All of these counties banned the aerial spraying of restricted pesticides within a quarter-mile

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Visalia, November 17, 2007: Tap water samples from small towns in the vicinity of Visalia. Their contents include nitrates from fertilizers and cow manure from the area's mega-dairies, as well as dibromochloropropane, a pesticide banned in 1977 but still present in groundwater, and arsenic. Some of the water smells like sewage.

of schools, and three counties protected farm-labor camps and residential areas as well. Environmental and farmworker groups have petitioned the Environmental Protection Agency to create similar buffer zones across the nation, and have recorded 42,000 statements of support for the cause.

The region also represents demographic shifts that are important beyond its borders. White people became a minority in the Central Valley long before they did so in the state as a whole. However, the racial makeup of Valley politicians has yet to follow suit. According to Jonathan Fox, a scholar at the University of California, Santa Cruz, many Latino citizens in the Central Valley are not yet voting regularly and large numbers of those eligible to become citizens have not yet done so. If both groups became active voters, they could replace many of the area's traditionally conservative elected officials with more progressive representatives of their interests and have a hefty impact on state politics.

The growing advocacy networks in the Central Valley are key to helping people link their everyday problems to the political process. The pages that follow offer a window into their lives and labor, from an activist for prison reform to a woman whose town was poisoned by pesticide drift to a

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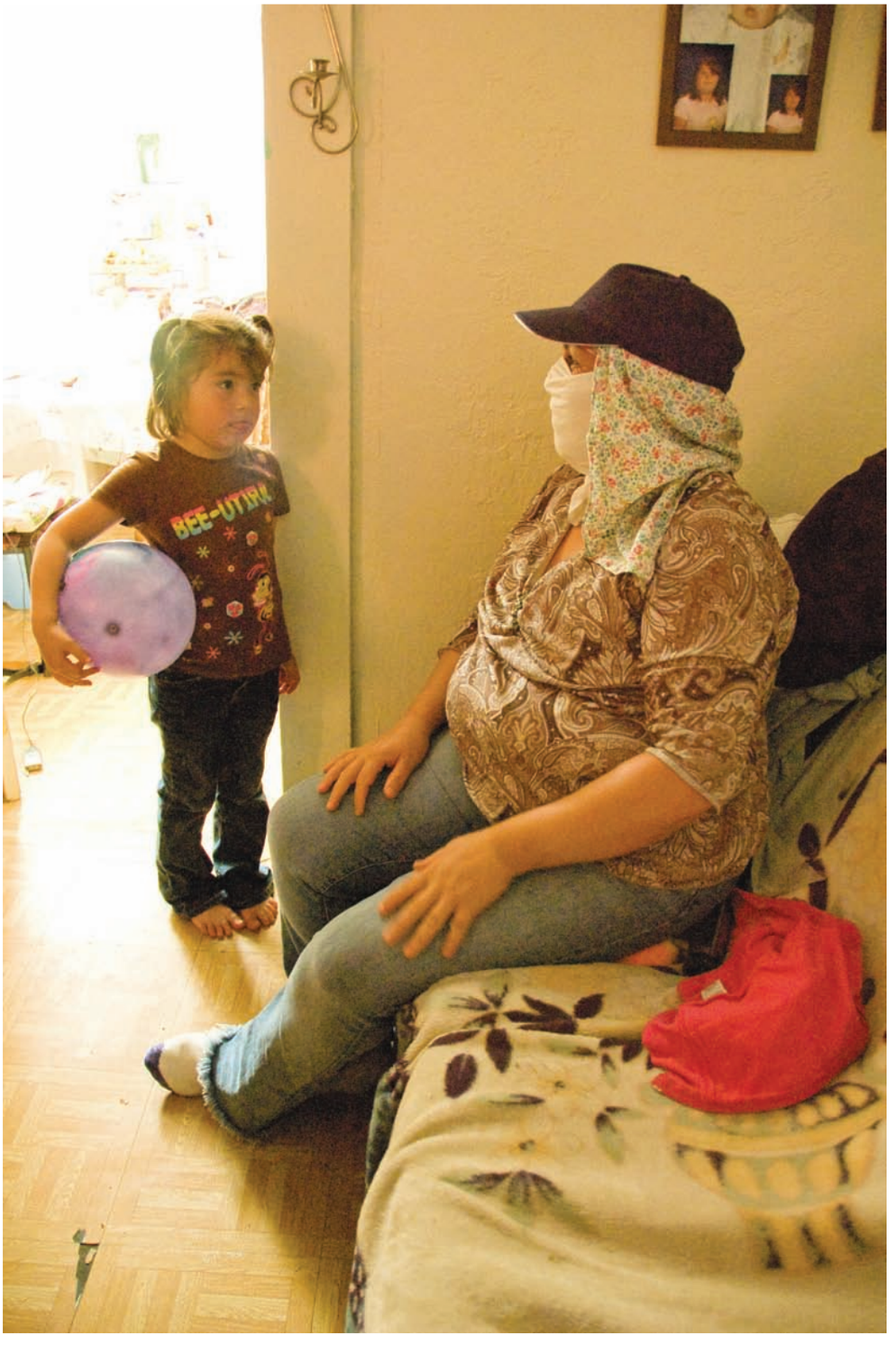

Earlimart, March 7, 2008: Josefina Miranda shows her daughter how she protects herself when she works in the fields. When Miranda was four months pregnant with an earlier child, she and her coworkers were sent to work in a field still wet with pesticides. By the time they left, her clothes were so soaked that she could wring the pesticides out of them. She miscarried the next day.

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Kettleman City, July 18, 2009

community leader who helped defeat a proposal to build a toxic-waste incinerator just outside her town. These photographs and stories are taken from "25 Stories from the Central Valley," a multimedia project that documents the women leaders of the Central Valley environmental justice movement. Visit http://twentyfive.ucdavis.edu for additional photographs, stories, and teaching tools to use in college classrooms.

Debbie Reyes, Fresno
Central Valley Coordinator
California Prison Moratorium Project

There were folks that came from all over the state to the Central Valley to discuss the issues. It was pretty empowering for our Valley to have something like that in Fresno, the place that I left many years ago because I thought there was nothing for me—"That place will never change," you know? I've seen a tremendous change from the first year I got back, thirteen years ago to now. Then, the Ku Klux Klan was standing on the corner of a gay pride parade; now, in 2007, we have Rally in the Valley, which is like a peace march. We had the Environmental Justice Network Conference. We're having the Uncaging the Valley Prisons conference, Black and Brown Unity marchers. And now, here I'm sitting at a table with folks that are working to create change in the state to regulate pesticide spraying in communities. So inside I was going, "Yeah, finally!" It's taken twenty-five years but here we are.

Teresa DeAnda, Earlimart
Central Valley Coordinator
Californians for Pesticide Reform

Our street was the first street to get evacuated [after the pesticide drifted off the fields and into our neighborhood]. I'd driven to Delano, and when I came back there was a sheriff standing at our gate. It had just gotten dark, and my husband said, "We need to get out, because there's something happening." I smelled it a little bit, but I didn't smell it that

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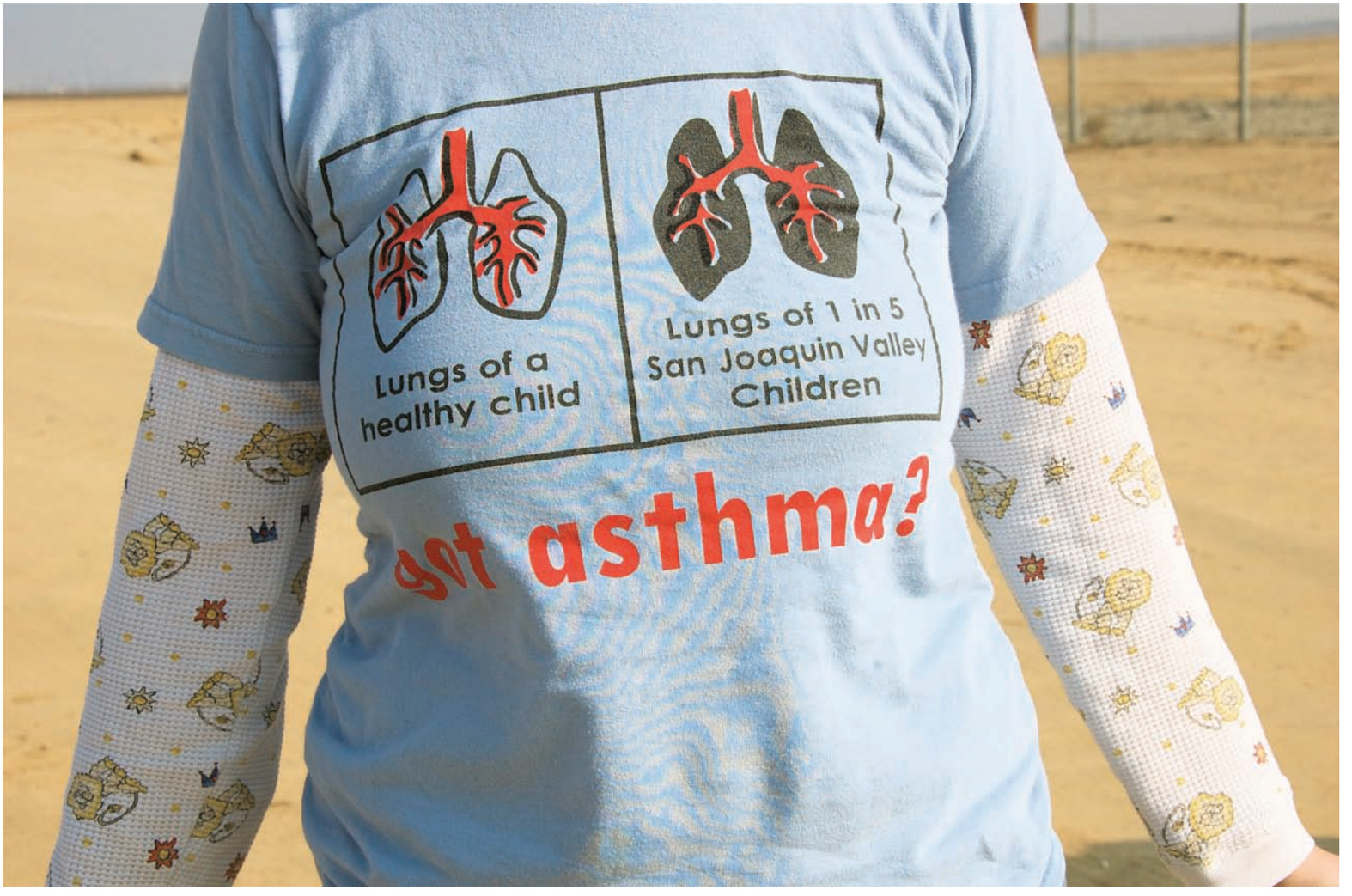

Wasco, CA. January 30, 2009

strong. But I was still very disturbed. It's a horrible feeling, getting told you've got to get out, that there's something that you shouldn't be smelling. I got the kids, and we left in the van. My husband got my blind uncle and my 87-year-old *compadre*, and then we drove. But I was just so fearful for the people that were staying.

Days later, we found out what happened to everybody. I had read the newspaper, but it didn't mention what happened to the people that Saturday night, November 13, 1999. On Wednesday the UFW [United Farm Workers] had a meeting and they had all the agencies there: the county air commissioner, the fire department, an expert on pesticides, Pesticide Watch. It was just packed with mad, angry people. That night, I found out what had happened when we left.

[When the pesticide drifted over the town] the people who were the sickest, they were told to go to the middle school. And at the middle school they told the men, women, and children to take off their clothes and go down the decontamination line. Keep in mind: these people were vomiting and had burning eyes, just coughing and coughing, and so they were scared to death. They were given no privacy, just two tarps on either side, and they were told to take off their clothes. And the people didn't want to.

One lady said, "Where's my rights? Where's my rights?" They told her, "Listen, you have no rights tonight; you've

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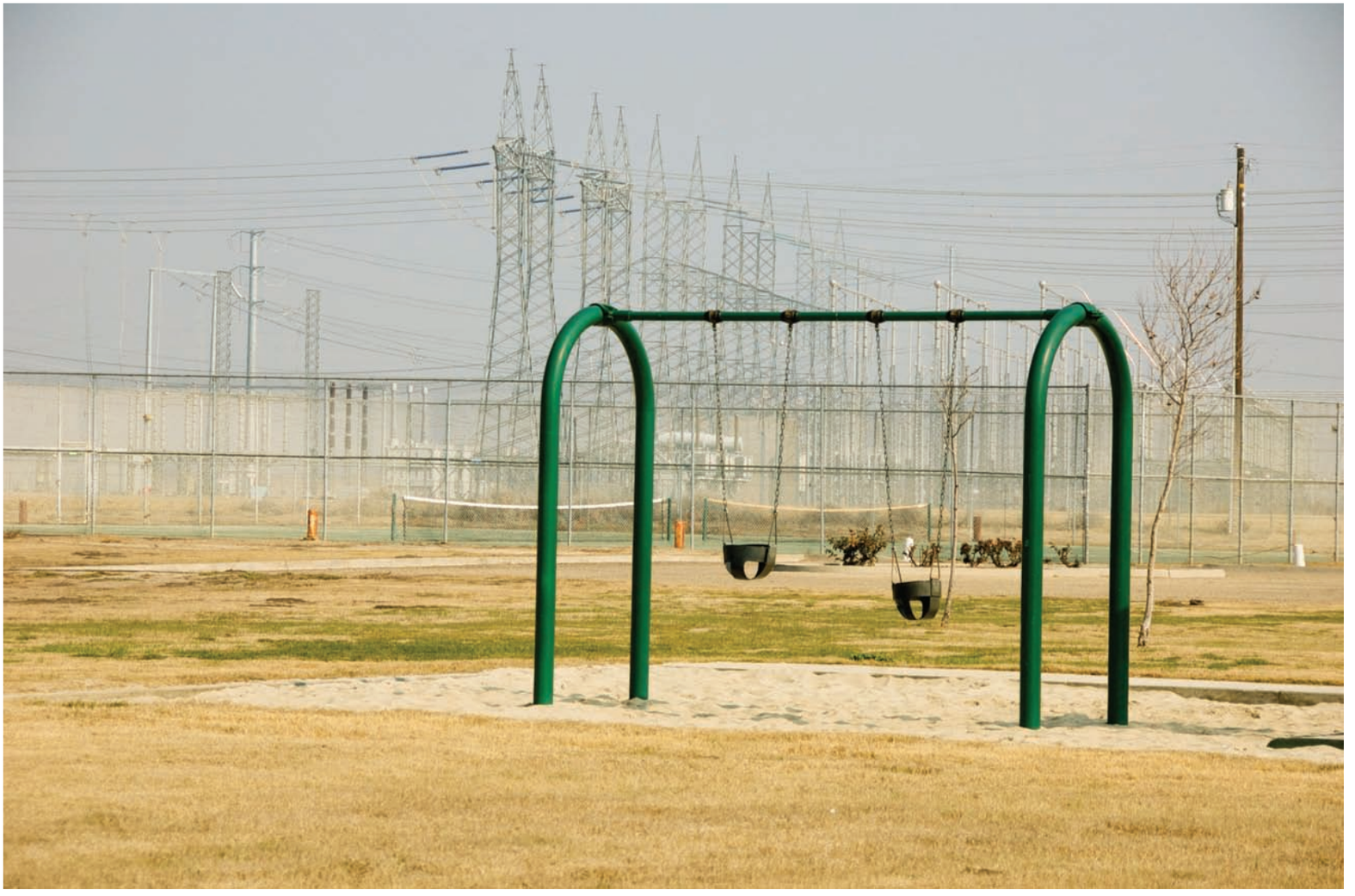

Buttonwillow Park, Jan. 30, 2009

lost your rights." And so she took off her clothes, and she said that that was the worst feeling in the world, because her kids had never seen her without her clothes, and they could see her. This is indicative of how they did the decon [decontamination]. She took off everything, absolutely everything, but she wouldn't take off her underwear, so they yanked it off. They yanked off her Nikes, and so there she goes through the decontamination line, which was a fire-department water hose, on a cold November night. A fire-department water hose with a guy standing there holding it. She went through one line and then the other, but they didn't wet her hair. At the end of the decon line they were supposed to have ambulances waiting, but the ambulances weren't there yet, so they just gave them little covers and told them to sit on the ground.

So I'm finding all this stuff out at the meeting. All these mad people are just yelling at the agencies, telling them, "How could you do this to us?" And then they told us what had happened at the hospital. The people did get transported to the hospital. Some went to Tulare Hospital, some went to Porterville Hospital, some went to Delano Hospital. Well, the lady with a lot of kids, she was baby-sitting kids too, they couldn't take all of her kids to the same place, so they wrote their phone numbers on their stomachs, like they were animals. At the hospitals, they took their information, their names, their number, their

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Earlimart, May 7, 2008: Orchards in bloom present a beautiful vision of agriculture in the Valley. At certain times of the year, pesticide applicators are required to notify beekeepers within a one-mile radius of their targeted spraying areas so that hives can be moved away. In most cases, however, human residents receive no such notification.

address, but they didn't even triage them. The doctor called poison control, and poison control said, "There's nothing happening to them, just tell them to go back home but to try not to get re-exposed." That's all poison control told them. So they were sent on their way and they were given the clothes that they had been in before they got decontaminated. They just gave them back to them. Didn't have them cleaned.

So I started learning more and getting more and more angry. I couldn't sleep at night, 'cause I was so upset at how it had changed my kids' health and my health. When I was growing up, my dad had always said, "Trust the government. The government's never going to lie; the government's good," and all that. And I thought, "No, they're not," because they really let us down that night, they really, really let us down. So much for trusting the government. I couldn't sleep at night because it bothered me so much that it happened and that still nothing was being done about the people who had gotten sick. I learned a lot about pesticides. And then at press conferences they would always ask me to speak. Even though I wasn't one of the victims that got deconned, I was one of the ones speaking all the time. They

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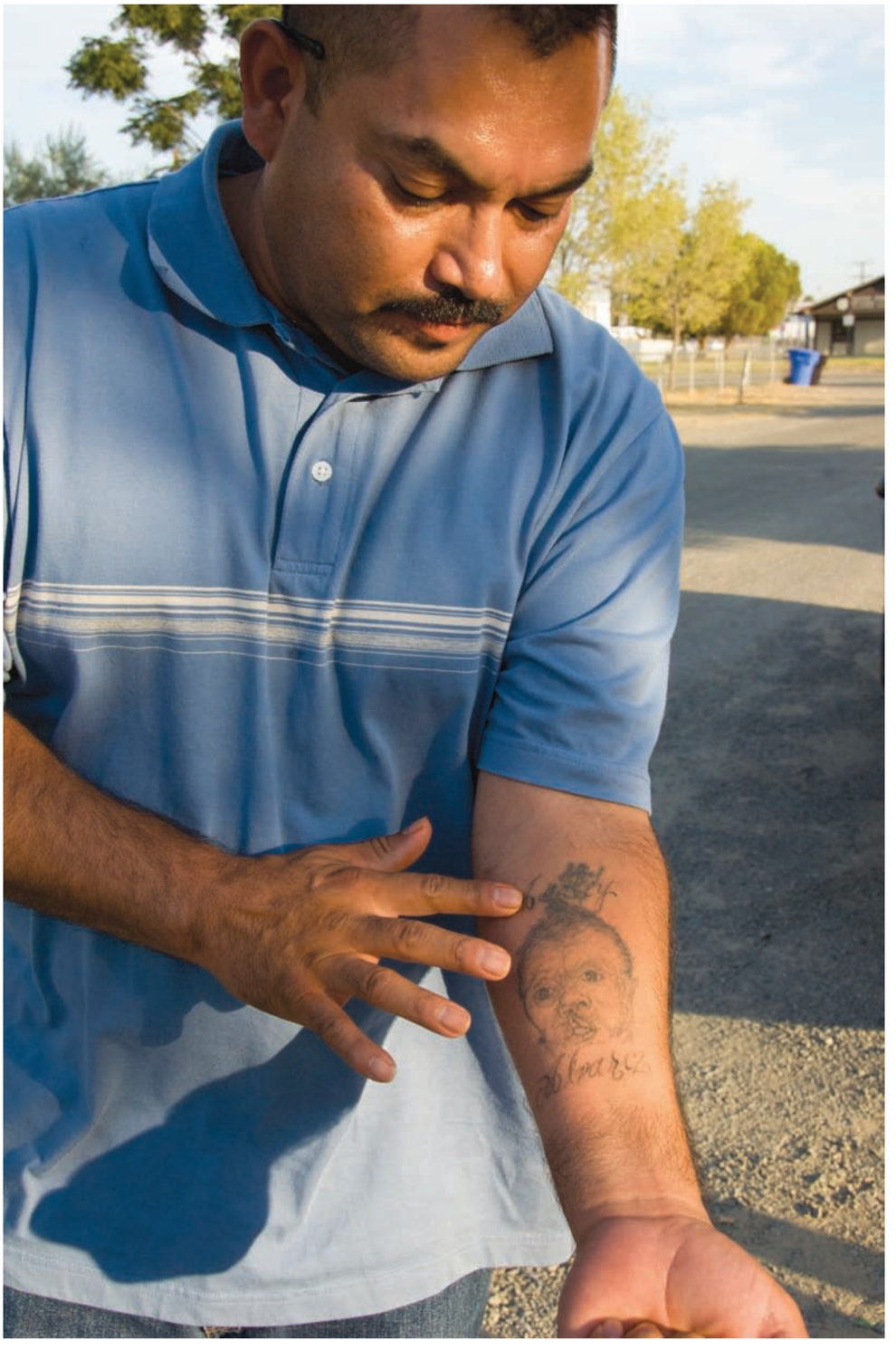

Kettleman City, July 18, 2009: Alejandro Alvarez touches the image of his daughter, Ashley, one of a cluster of children born with a cleft palette and other birth defects in Kettleman City and neighboring Avenal. Residents fear that the hazardous-waste landfill located between their towns may be causing the birth defects. Alvarez got the tattoo shortly after his daughter died in January 2009, age 10 months.

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When I was growing up, my dad had always said, "Trust the government. The government's never going to lie; the government's good."

were calling me for meetings and conferences and stuff to talk about what had happened.

What happened in Earlimart was in November, so by September UFW and us, we had formed El Comité Para el Bienestar de Earlimart [Committee for the Well-Being of Earlimart]. All of the people were victims of the accident. They were all mostly farm workers. Just a couple weren't. We started having meetings, our own meetings without UFW, still supporting UFW in any press conference they wanted us to, but then we started having our own meetings.

And then in September of 2000 we asked the farmer and the chemical applicator to pay the medical payments for the people that had asthma. It was coming out that people had gotten asthma—didn't have it before that night in 1999—just like that, from that night, that exposure. And it had gotten in their mucus membrane and then in their lungs. And so they needed long-term treatment. We got Wilbur-Ellis [the company hired by the farm to apply the pesticide] to pay for that.

We had a big press conference, right here at the house. And that was a big victory. The State of California Department of Pesticide Regulation gave Wilbur-Ellis the biggest fine that had ever happened. It's still peanuts compared to other fines for toxic spills and stuff, but it was the biggest for pesticides. [Note: Pesticide specialists later told the activists from Earlimart that the particular chemical they had been exposed to is activated by water and that they should not have been hosed down as part of the decontamination process.]

Mary Lou Mares, Kettleman City
Organizer, El Pueblo para el Aire y Agua Limpio
(People for Clean Air and Water)

I remember people that lived in town, [where a toxic-waste incinerator was planned], they would say, "Well, Mary Lou, if you don't like it, why don't you move out?" Because I like it here; this is my town, this is where I bought my house, and I want to be here. You can't always just move and go away from the problem and just leave it there; it's going to follow you. No matter where you go, this kind of stuff is going to follow you, so you might as well stay and fight. Can't do anything else. You have to. **B**

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