

**Award:** Lifetime Achievement Award  
**Recipient:** 5<sup>th</sup> & Hill Resident Leaders: Ebbie Cook (in memoriam), Magnolia Cook, M D Pelmore, Jerry Lewis, and Eileen Oldham  
**Presenter:** Claudia Lennhoff

And now I would like to ask Maggie Cook and Jerry Lewis to join me for this next award presentation.

It is truly my great honor to be presenting the Lifetime Achievement Award to 5<sup>th</sup> & Hill Neighborhood Rights Campaign resident leaders: Ebbie Cook (in memoriam), Magnolia Cook, Jerry Lewis, M D Pelmore and Eileen Oldham.

Mr. Pelmore and Ms. Oldham are unable to be here tonight.

And we are recognizing Ebbie Cook in memoriam – Ebbie passed away last year, on April 22, and I know that there is not a day that goes by that his family, friends, and his 5<sup>th</sup> & Hill family don't think of him and miss him. We miss him at every single meeting, and every event. And I don't exaggerate when I say that Ebbie was – still is – one of my all-time favorite people.

The Lifetime Achievement Award is rare and special because it recognizes someone for a body of work over a lifetime – or a period of time that must surely feel like a lifetime.

Although we have recognized these leaders in the past, we thought that it was fitting to recognize them again, with this award tonight because they have truly dedicated their lives to this environmental justice struggle, and because their work will profoundly change the lives of others for the better.

These residents are the core group and the driving force behind the 5<sup>th</sup> & Hill Neighborhood Rights Campaign.

For those of you who don't know, the 5<sup>th</sup> & Hill Neighborhood Rights Campaign is fighting to clean up the contamination from a toxic site owned by Ameren. The site is a former Manufactured Gas Plant that was located at 5<sup>th</sup> & Hill Streets.

It is really important to understand that this is a toxic site – registered with the IL EPA – in the middle of a residential neighborhood with mostly single family homes. There are three day cares around the site, and people who live in this neighborhood have been, and continue to be exposed to toxic contamination, especially in the form of indoor vapor intrusion.

This year marks the eleventh year of the campaign. That's right – these leaders have been waging a grassroots environmental justice campaign for over 11 years!

And they don't show any signs of quitting or retiring, even despite having their health affected – most likely – by exposure to toxic contamination.

I've been a community organizer with Health Care Consumers for 22 years now. This has been the longest and toughest campaign I have ever been involved with. I have never seen anything like it, including the staying power of these leaders.

Since the residents started the Campaign, there have been many victories along the way, none of which would have been possible without the consistent and strong leadership of these individuals.

To name just a few:

They forced the IL EPA and Ameren to make the results of environmental tests public.

They forced Ameren to actually clean up its property, including excavating toxic soil down to 24 feet below ground.

They forced the City of Champaign to plug a toxic pipe that was used to dump coal tar into the Boneyard Creek.

They brought the US EPA in to the neighborhood to do an investigation of off-site contamination in the neighborhood, outside of Ameren's property. (This is still an ongoing project.)

And not only have they been fighting for a clean-up of their neighborhood, they have gotten involved with City zoning issues, redevelopment, and giving input into the City's Boneyard Creek Redevelopment Project.

Beyond that, they have had a lot of involvement with various projects with University of Illinois professors and classes, including providing a great deal of oral and public history.

After attending dozens of classes and working on lots of projects, they like to joke about how they've never been to college but they are professors now.

But despite the brief listing of some of their major victories, we didn't really bring them here tonight to recognize any specific victory or activity.

We really wanted to recognize this group of amazing individuals for their sheer dedication and tenacity, and their staying power in this struggle, which seems unending and sometimes moves at an unimaginably slow pace.

The ultimate goal of the Campaign is to make Ameren clean up all of the toxic contamination that is in the neighborhood, outside of Ameren's property line.

What's at stake for the residents, for generations passed and passing, and generations to come, is their health and their lives.

What's at stake for Ameren is money, and the setting of a precedent, creating expectations for thorough clean ups in other communities where Ameren or other companies have former manufactured gas plants.

Some people think that being in a struggle this long means that we are losing or we are not getting anywhere. Nothing could be further from the truth. Ameren likes to do these half-assed clean ups of their manufactured gas plant sites in a couple of years – coming into communities with some fanfare and praise for being good corporate citizens and doing their “voluntary” clean ups. They like to get in and get out within a couple of years, getting positive press and attaboys from local government bodies and leaving undetected and toxic contamination behind in their wake after an inadequate remediation.

Believe me when I tell you that the fact that Ameren is still involved in doing testing and remediation after 11 years is something that they detest. They wish they were gone from our community as of about 8 years ago. The IL EPA feels the same way.

Neither Ameren nor the IL EPA are fans of the 5<sup>th</sup> & Hill leaders and this campaign.

Maggie and Jerry and the others have held their feet to the fire, demanding a thorough clean-up, which Ameren absolutely does not want to do.

In fact, we are in a skirmish right now with Ameren and IL EPA, and in recent local media, both entities had some interesting things to say.

When residents were demanding transparency and an update on environmental data and remediation plans, an Ameren spokesperson said that “Ameren does not consider themselves to be answerable to the 5<sup>th</sup> & Hill Neighborhood Rights Campaign” and that the immediate stakeholders are the City of Champaign and the Illinois EPA. We’ll just see about that.

Meanwhile, IL EPA’s Kim Biggs says that the toxic contamination in the neighborhood, underneath 5<sup>th</sup> Street, will likely be allowed to remain in place, “as the contamination is not expected to migrate further”. That’s an interesting perspective on groundwater... one not based in science. We’ll see about that too.

We are recognizing these 5<sup>th</sup> & Hill leaders because they will not be moved!

We are recognizing them for the work they will continue to do and the victories they will achieve, because we know that no matter how long it takes, they will get there!

The leadership group of the Campaign meets once a month, Every. Single. Month. If a meeting falls on a holiday and I have the day “off,” they meet on that holiday and I go to that meeting. They don’t take holidays from working for justice.

Under the leadership of Ebbie Cook, M D Pelmore, Magnolia Cook, Jerry Lewis, and Eileen Oldham, this group has become like a family, and it is a growing family, with more people joining and being welcomed in all the time.

We know that this struggle will continue for a long time – Ameren is not going to willingly clean up the toxic soil and groundwater that poisons this neighborhood. We can’t count on Ameren. Or the IL EPA. And probably not the US EPA. But we can count on these resident leaders; they will be there every step of the way.

Maggie and Jerry – I’m so glad that y’all could be here tonight to accept this award, and to accept also on behalf of Ebbie, Mr. Pelmore, and Eileen.

For your important and truly good work, and your sheer, unwavering dedication and tenacity, on behalf of Champaign County Health Care Consumers, it is my tremendous honor to recognize you tonight with the Lifetime Achievement Award. Congratulations!