



# Champaign County Health Care Consumers

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*Grassroots organizing for health care justice and access since 1977.*

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May 3, 2021

Re: Recommendation of Kathryn Oberdeck for Campus Award for Excellence in Public Engagement

To Whom It May Concern,

I am writing to offer my highest recommendation of Kathryn Oberdeck for the Campus Award for Excellence in Public Engagement. Kathryn exemplifies the highest standards for ethical, principled, and consistent public engagement.

I have known Kathryn Oberdeck and worked closely with her for over six years in the context of her work with the Champaign County Health Care Consumers (CCHCC), where I serve as Executive Director and am the lead Community Organizer in a local environmental health/environmental justice campaign. Kathryn's public engagement work has focused on the 5<sup>th</sup> & Hill Neighborhood Rights Campaign, and she has been a stalwart ally and volunteer with the Campaign for many years now, exemplifying the best of what a university professor can do to engage with the community.

Before I explain Kathryn's work with CCHCC and the 5<sup>th</sup> & Hill Neighborhood Rights Campaign, I would like to provide a quick overview of CCHCC, in order to provide context for Kathryn's work and my recommendation of her for this award.

CCHCC, founded in 1977, is a nationally-recognized, award-winning non-profit grassroots citizen action organization that provides advocacy, education, and community organizing resources for consumers' involvement in the health care system. Most of our members and clients are low-income Champaign County residents who are facing financial hardship and have experienced discriminatory practices or disparities in the health care system. We work to make concrete improvements in people's lives, in the health care system, and to ensure that consumers have a voice in local health and environmental policy and planning. We carry out our community organizing efforts through direct action campaigns, where the people most affected by the problems are involved in the research, strategy, and actions necessary for achieving justice. Much of our work involves participatory democracy, collective learning and teaching about policy, and the policy change process at the local, state, and national levels.

Beyond our long-standing health care related work, CCHCC is also working on an environmental justice campaign, the 5<sup>th</sup> & Hill Neighborhood Rights Campaign. This is a campaign to address the needs of the low-income African American residents who are affected by a toxic site locally, which is the result of an Ameren-owned former manufactured gas plant (MGP). Ameren is a powerful utility company. Until CCHCC organized the Campaign, beginning in 2007, residents had been kept in the dark about the toxic site, and Ameren had made no moves to clean up the toxic site, even though it had been registered on the IL EPA's Voluntary Site Remediation Program for over 20 years. The 5<sup>th</sup> & Hill neighborhood in Champaign is the oldest historically African-American neighborhood in our city. The vast majority of residents are low-income African-American people. Many of the neighborhood's

needs have been neglected by the City of Champaign and the infrastructure in the neighborhood is in poor condition (storm sewers, sewage system, etc.), and the poor infrastructure contributes to increased risk of exposure to the toxic chemicals from the MGP that are in the neighborhood's soil and groundwater.

Kathy Oberdeck's involvement with CCHCC and the 5<sup>th</sup> & Hill Neighborhood Rights Campaign began over six years ago, when Kathy reached out to me and asked if she could attend Campaign meetings. Our meetings at that time took place twice a month and they were at Mr. Pelmore's home in the 5<sup>th</sup> & Hill Neighborhood. Kathy started attending meetings, and was immediately welcomed by the 5<sup>th</sup> & Hill resident leaders, who were pleased that someone at the University cared about their neighborhood and their struggle.

From the very beginning, Kathy impressed me and the resident leaders as a very intelligent, insightful, resourceful, and generous Historian, who demonstrated the researcher/practitioner model, and who was also a sensitive, patient, and effective teacher, helping me, our staff, and the neighborhood residents learn about the city and the history of the neighborhood and surrounding community.

Besides attending our meetings and participating in our activities, Kathy has consistently contributed to the campaign efforts by engaging students to participate in the Campaign, and then developing various history projects to help document the history of the residents, the neighborhood, and the surrounding community (as it impacted the neighborhood). Kathy developed many projects over time, including the History Harvest Project, where neighborhood residents interacted with History students to document various aspects of their lives and the neighborhood's rich social and economic/entrepreneurial history. This work, and the work products that resulted from it, are a source of pride for many of the residents, who know all too well that their neighborhood has been maligned and ignored. Doing this work helped instill pride and wonder in the resident leaders, and helped show a different portrait of the neighborhood – a beautiful tapestry of the lives and historical impact of neighborhood residents on our community.

As part of Kathy's engagement with the 5<sup>th</sup> & Hill neighborhood, she often invited neighborhood resident leaders to come and guest lecture at her classes. These guest lectures, for the residents, were some of the highlights of their involvement with our campaign. Many of the resident leaders felt that it was an honor to be able to go and speak to students at the UIUC. Mr. Pelmore, Ebbie and Maggie Cook, JB Lewis, Eileen Oldham, Sandra Jackson, and others thoroughly enjoyed the times that they spent speaking with, and working with students. Many of the resident leaders often joked about not having college degrees, yet being University Guest Lecturers.

The resident leaders' interactions with students led to many collaborations between the 5<sup>th</sup> & Hill Neighborhood Rights Campaign and the students and student groups. For example, as a result of one of the guest lecture opportunities that Kathy created, students were so impressed and moved by the resident leaders (and charmed by them, to be sure!), that several who were in a sorority dedicated a year's worth of fundraising activities to help the Campaign.

But Kathy did not just ask the residents to come and speak and to work with students, in order to benefit only the students and Kathy's course plans. Kathy worked with the residents to develop projects that the residents thought would be helpful to the Campaign and that would be important for the legacy of the neighborhood.

Kathy's work has enriched the lives of neighborhood residents, and their own sense of their own history. It is very unusual for people who are disenfranchised due to race, poverty, geography, or other factors, to be asked about their own lives and their history. The process of asking, and valuing

and elevating their voices and what they have to say, is, for many, a revolutionary and consciousness-raising experience that leads to a heightened sense of being valued and appreciated. Kathy's respectful and resident-driven engagement in history projects has provided extremely valuable experiences for the residents, and has helped advance the work of the 5<sup>th</sup> & Hill Neighborhood Rights Campaign immeasurably.

But Kathy's work with the 5<sup>th</sup> & Hill Neighborhood Rights Campaign is not just limited to her work on history projects associated with the curricula that she develops. Kathy has genuinely committed herself to the Campaign and to the residents. Kathy participates in our regular monthly meetings; she attends events put on by the Campaign; she helps share information about the Campaign; and significantly, she has become a beloved person to our resident leaders.

This Campaign all too often involves exposure to tragedy and sorrow, as we lose beloved resident leaders as a result of illnesses most likely associated with toxic chemical exposure from the MGP site. Kathy is so much a part of the 5<sup>th</sup> & Hill family that she has visited dying residents in the hospital, and attended funerals and memorials, and she has mourned with us as we have lost truly beloved community members like Ebbie Cook and JB Lewis.

Kathy's public engagement work with CCHCC and the 5<sup>th</sup> & Hill Neighborhood Rights Campaign runs deep, and has been unending. The ways in which Kathy has worked with the Campaign and the neighborhood residents exemplifies the very best in principled, ethical, and enduring public engagement. And in so doing, Kathy represents what is the best of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in relation to our community.

In closing, I must apologize for the length of this letter of recommendation. There is much more that I could write about the many ways that Kathryn Oberdeck exemplifies excellence in public engagement, but I will stop here and close by saying that I am giving my full, unqualified, and enthusiastic support for Kathryn Oberdeck for the Award for Excellence in Public Engagement. I know of no one more deserving for this award.

Should you have any questions or would like additional information, please feel free to contact me at (217) 390-4531 or [claudia@shout.net](mailto:claudia@shout.net).

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Claudia Lennhoff".

Claudia Lennhoff, Executive Director  
Champaign County Health Care Consumers