

Award: Lester T. Pritchard Citizen Leadership Award
Recipients: David Holt, Terry Hoffman, Sherrie Brown, George Wissmiller, Bill Spencer, and Steve and Nancy Bridges
Presenter: Barb Pritchard

Good evening. I'm Barb Pritchard, and I'm the Co-Chair of the Health Care Consumers Board of Directors.

I'm thrilled to be presenting the Lester T Pritchard Citizen Leadership Award to these individuals who began the struggle to protect the Mahomet Aquifer against toxic contamination.

My late husband, Lester was courageous and stubborn. He would not be intimidated or deterred and his life exemplified a dedication to the pursuit of justice and civil rights. This Award, named in memoriam after Lester honors Citizen Leaders whose activism demonstrates these same important qualities.

Standing here are the individuals from DeWitt County we all have to thank for alerting Central Illinois about the threat of toxic contamination to the Mahomet Aquifer and who, for years, worked in isolation and suffered retaliation from powerful corrupt local players for their efforts to protect the Aquifer. Let me introduce Terry Hoffman, Sherrie Brown, George Wissmiller, Bill Spencer, and Steve and Nancy Bridges and David Holt who was unable to be here this evening. These individuals and their efforts have been nothing short of heroic.

Before I tell you about our Award Recipients, I want to give some background on the threat to the Mahomet Aquifer.

The Mahomet Aquifer is the sole source of drinking water for us and for 800,000 other residents in 14 counties in Central Illinois. The threat to the Aquifer comes from the Peoria Disposal Company, also known as PDC/AREA disposal, which owns the Clinton Landfill in DeWitt County. The Landfill sits directly above the Mahomet Aquifer, and is a Municipal Waste Landfill that PDC/AREA Disposal wants desperately to turn into a massive toxic waste landfill to receive Manufactured Gas Plant waste (known as MGPs) and PCBs.

Everyone who knows about this thinks it's obviously a bad idea. That is why several years ago, PDC/AREA Disposal tried to sneak their plan through the DeWitt County Board. The DeWitt County Board has the authority by state statute to allow a change in the siting of a municipal waste landfill and the small county board has an oversized responsibility and power in this situation. Unfortunately, there is outrageous corruption in DeWitt County involving PDC/AREA and units of local government.

We don't have time to go into details, but David, Terry, Sherrie, George, and Bill found out what was happening and started to lead efforts to shine a light on the situation and put a stop to it. Keep in mind there is big money to be made from a toxic waste landfill, making this a high stakes struggle, and that is where the intimidation and harassment these individuals have faced comes into play.

David Holt used his newspaper as a vehicle to inform and rally the public. His newspaper was eventually shut down as advertisers were pressured to pull their business from his paper. He is now a truck driver and that is why he can't be here tonight.

Sherrie Brown, Terry Hoffman, and George Wissmiller got themselves elected to the DeWitt County Board on a platform to protect the Aquifer. George chose not to run for re-election in this last round, so he keeps busy with filing Freedom of Information Act requests, maintaining an informative website, and talking to anyone about the Aquifer who will listen. Sherrie and Terry continue on the DeWitt County Board, and I'll tell you more about that in a minute.

Bill has devoted himself to providing incredible technical analysis and information on the situation and has used all kinds of government avenues and proceedings to challenge the permits that were awarded to the Clinton Landfill for the MGP and PCB toxic wastes. He and Terry monitor the Landfill closely and they try to alert the State and the public about toxic plumes that rise all too frequently from the Landfill.

And Steve and Nancy Bridges have been tireless in their efforts to spread the word and educate the public. They have incredible presentations and materials that they bring to all sorts of venues at every opportunity.

What you need to know about these individuals is that they have been vocal and relentless and because of their efforts, intergovernmental legal efforts have been initiated and have succeeded in getting the US EPA Sole Source designation for our Aquifer. And now there is promising legislation that might provide permanent protection to the Aquifer.

This is why we call them our heroes!

We have been astonished to see the level of backlash and intimidation efforts directed at these individuals, especially at the DeWitt County Board Meetings. Sherrie and Terry are openly mocked and ridiculed, yet they keep incredible composure. They, along with Bill, George, and Steve and Nancy have been harassed in the parking lot after the meetings on numerous occasions.

Claudia, our Executive Director, has attended several DeWitt County Board Meetings with our Aquifer volunteers, and she has said that she has never seen a government meeting like this. She describes the Board Meetings as having very vigorous audience participation where name-calling and threats are not off limits. She has heard people say that Sherrie should just be taken out back and shot. Audience members frequently tell Terry to 'shut up' as soon as he starts to ask a question about any topic at all. Claudia says these meetings are like the Jerry Springer Show of government meetings.

There are hundreds of stories we could tell, but in recognizing David, Terry, Sherrie, George, Bill, and Steve and Nancy, we wanted to give you a sense of what they have been and continue to be up against, just because they want to protect our precious source of water, even for the people who are against them. The reason you know about the threat to the Aquifer and have an opportunity to do something about it is because of them – because they started this and against all odds, they keep going.

It is for this kind of stubborn, insistent, righteous courage that I am so pleased to present the Lester T. Pritchard Citizen Leadership Award to David Holt, Terry Hoffman, George Wissmiller, Sherrie Brown, Bill Spencer, and Steve and Nancy Bridges tonight.

Thank you for all you've done, and congratulations!