

Award: Henrietta De Boer Volunteer of the Year Award
Recipient: Serena Hou
Presenter: Claudia Lennhoff

Good evening. My name is Claudia Lennhoff and I'm the Executive Director of the Champaign County Health Care Consumers. I am thrilled to be presenting the other Henrietta De Boer Volunteer of the Year Award to the other of our newest Board Members, Serena Hou.

Like Ellie, Serena joined our Board last fall, but she had been involved with our organization for a couple of years prior – mainly working on the 5th & Hill Neighborhood Rights Campaign.

The 5th & Hill Neighborhood Rights Campaign is the community organizing effort to clean up a toxic site in Champaign, located in the neighborhood at 5th & Hill streets. The Campaign has been working to get all of the contamination from a former manufactured gas plant, owned by Ameren, cleaned up. You'll hear more about that later this evening and you'll meet the long-time resident activists with whom Serena has been working.

Anyway, I met Serena in the spring of 2003 when the 5th & Hill toxic site was the subject of an exercise in a graduate class on environmental Remediation Design, led by Professor Charlie Werth. At that time, Serena was working on a dual master's in environmental engineering and business administration.

Unbeknownst to me, Serena had persuaded Prof. Werth to pick a real life problem for the exercise – the 5th & Hill contamination.

The students were broken off into teams and they were to study the environmental testing data from the 5th & Hill site, identifying hot spots or problem areas, and then each team was to come up with a proposal for how they would remediate the contamination.

Besides convincing Dr. Werth to choose the 5th & Hill site as the exercise for the class, Serena also convinced him to invite the 5th & Hill group to attend the class where the student teams would present their final projects.

Professor Werth agreed, and so the 5th & Hill residents and I and a couple of volunteers attended the class. We had pizza with the students, and we were asked to help judge the presentations and the strategies they developed. It was very enlightening and it was a great experience.

It was very empowering for the residents because they all knew that there was an ongoing problem with contamination in the neighborhood, even after Ameren dug up most of the toxic

soil on its property. The students' presentations provided the data to prove that there was still contamination in the neighborhood. It was a great experience.

So, after the class was done, I was in the parking lot talking to another volunteer, when Serena came bounding up to us, all enthusiastic and energetic and with a big smile on her face.

She talked to us about how she wanted to get involved and help the residents, and she offered to provide technical assistance to help us understand test results and contamination and the ongoing remediation efforts.

It all sounded great, but I was very skeptical about whether she would follow through, since lots of people are enthusiastic in the moment, but when the moment fades, they forget all about it. I wasn't going to hold my breath.

But then, true to her word, Serena e-mailed me and wanted to come to the next meeting of the 5th & Hill Neighborhood Rights Campaign. We were meeting at Mr. Pelmore's home in the neighborhood, and Serena showed up and right away, everyone took to her. She was bright and kind and helpful.

And since then, Serena has been the person that helps us review testing data, hot spots of contamination, groundwater flow, and helps us communicate our concerns with various entities, such as the City of Champaign, the IL EPA, and the US EPA.

When Serena graduated from U of I with a master's in environmental engineering and her MBA, she was offered a high-paying financial sector job in New York. But thankfully for us, she turned it down and chose to stay and work here in Champaign and continue her involvement with the 5th & Hill Neighborhood Rights Campaign.

I was ecstatic when Serena told me she would be staying here. I right away thought about the care and dedication she had shown to the 5th & Hill Neighborhood Rights Campaign and I thought she would be great on the Health Care Consumers Board of Directors. Just as I expected, she has been an exemplary Board member.

Serena exemplifies the kind of dedicated and supportive volunteer that any organization would be fortunate to have. She brings her fierce intellect, her sunny disposition, her profound sense of justice, and her kind heart to all her efforts.

Serena, we are so grateful for all your volunteer efforts, both with the 5th & Hill Neighborhood Rights Campaign and with Health Care Consumers. On behalf of Health Care Consumers, it is with tremendous gratitude that I present you with the Henrietta De Boer Volunteer of the Year Award. Congratulations and thank you!