

Ivory Perry's Crusade Against Lead Poisoning: A case study in community activism

On this video:

*The person at the center of the film, Ivory Perry, is an inspiring example of how a poor, uneducated person can make a major contribution to society. Perry started out as one of many grass roots activist **followers**--a "foot soldier" in the lingo of the 60s. His sensitivity to conditions of the poor lead him to take paint chip samples to local scientists (including Barry Commoner), eventually proving lead poisoning as a major health hazard in slum housing, a remarkable discovery in itself since this took place before "environmental racism" was a familiar concept. However, as with many social problems, discovery isn't enough. Perry had to lead a movement to overcome **denial** -- denial by the medical establishment, city officials and even his own community. It took years of grass roots activism to achieve basic recognition leading to policy change. The work Perry started has not been finished. We are using the film to teach, recruit and inspire current day activists who wish to eradicate lead poisoning, along with many other problems of a society out of balance...I think a universal story emerges in tracing how he perceived and responded to the challenges in which he found himself and his community. Lack of money, education, and political clout did not deter him.... Actually, we didn't even start out to make this documentary. We were asked to simply videotape an interview. But the story and the person drew us in.*

---Kriss Avery, Co-producer,
*Ivory Perry: Pioneer in the
Struggle Against Lead Poisoning*¹

On “organic intellectuals”...

“People like Ivory Perry rarely appear in history books, but they often make history. Without them, leaders have no followers and ordinary citizens have no means of translating their wishes and desires into coherent political contestation. The story Ivory Perry told me about his life had its unique elements, but he personifies a broader social type. Everywhere social conflict takes place, people like Ivory Perry emerge. The Italian Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci called such people ‘organic intellectuals,’ and his term helps to identify what is representative and significant in the life of Ivory Perry...”

¹ Remarks from an e-mail (21 November 2006) from Kriss Avery, co-producer of *Ivory Perry: Pioneer in the Struggle Against Lead Poisoning* (Rainbow Sound, 2006). For more information about the film, see <http://www.rainbowsound.us/> This film, produced by Kriss Avery and Jim Rothwell, won the Bronze Telly Award and the Best Documentary Award at the St. Louis Filmmakers Showcase, 2006.

Organic intellectuals direct the ideas and aspirations of their class even though they hold no formal status or employment as ‘intellectuals.’ ...Unlike traditional intellectuals...organic intellectuals learn about the world by trying to change it, and they change the world by learning about it from the perspective of the needs and aspirations of their social group. ...Organic intellectuals cannot be merely troublemakers or loudmouths; they succeed only when their organizing efforts articulate and activate ideas already present in the community, and when they tap existing networks of communication and action...Ivory Perry has drawn others into his activities through the use of participatory democracy, both as a goal and a tactic, as a vision of an ideal society and as a way to involve people in solving the problems of the one we now have.”

---George Lipsitz²

Ivory Perry speaking out to business and community leaders:

If you have so much education, how come you are not out there helping your people? Ivory Perry doesn’t have a degree; I am out there every day trying to teach these kids to do right.”

---Ivory Perry³

Ivory Perry’s words on his military service in the Korean War:

If I can fight for a country and come back and can’t enjoy the fruits and the benefits, then there isn’t any need of my fighting over there. My fight is here.

---Ivory Perry⁴

Reflection by Ivory Perry’s (second) wife on the meaning of his life:

People kind of look for the Martin Luther Kings and the Malcolm Xs. And a lot of youngsters nowadays, they don’t think about somebody right there in an old common neighborhood who’s just an ordinary person, that is doing and has done all these things. They’re geared and they’re programmed to look for the big guys. But an ordinary person, who suffered all the human things, who did some things that were extraordinary, and got away with it, and helped people in the process! I think it would mean a lot to the generation coming to know that you can start out right here in your own neighborhood, start getting on folks’ backs about old people’s gas being turned off, start making sure that the slumlords fix up their places and don’t rip people off. Do what you can, right on your own street.

---Anna Cox⁵

² George Lipsitz, *A Life in the Struggle: Ivory Perry and the Culture of Opposition*, revised edition (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), pp. 9-11. Lipsitz is Professor of Black Studies at University of California at Santa Barbara.

³ Quoted in *A Life in the Struggle*, p. 263.

⁴ Interview with Ivory Perry, 3 October 1982, St. Louis, conducted by George Lipsitz, and quoted in *A Life in the Struggle*, p. 57.

On social activism:

*We do not need allies who are more devoted to **order** than to **justice**, and who would prefer a negative peace which is absence of tension, to a positive peace which is the presence of justice.*

---Martin Luther King

On the “drum major instinct:”

“I want you to be able to say on that day [that is, on the day of his funeral, which he expected would be soon] that I did try to feed the hungry. I want you to be able to say on that day that I did try in my life to clothe those that were naked. I want you to say on that day that I did try to visit those that were in prison. I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity. Yes, if you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice. Say that I was a drum major for peace. And all of the shallow things will not matter. I won’t have any money to leave behind. I won’t have any of the fine and luxurious things of life to leave behind. But I just want to leave a committed life behind.”

---Martin Luther King⁶

On a demonstration in St. Louis on January 20, 1986 (the first date on which MLK Day was observed as a federal holiday):

I believe that Dr. King’s blood was my blood, his life is my life, and my life is his life. I’m committed.

---Ivory Perry

Some internet resources for further information

About Ivory Perry:

Lipsitz, George. “Ivory Perry & the Fight Against Lead Poisoning in St. Louis.” *Synthesis/Regeneration* (Fall 2006). <http://www.greens.org/s-r/41/41-06.html>

About continuing lead poisoning dangers in our own time:

<http://www.counterpunch.org/fitz05272006.html>
<http://www.gateway-greens.org/compost-dispatch.htm>
<http://www.greenparty.org/lead.html>
<http://www.stlconfluence.org/article.asp?articleID=292>
<http://www.stlimc.org/newswire/display/2420/index.php>

⁵ Interview with Anna Cox, 27 December 1983, Sacramento, conducted by George Lipsitz, and quoted in *A Life in the Struggle*, p. 255.

⁶ Sermon delivered on 4 February 1968 in Atlanta, GA, quoted in *A Life in the Struggle*, p. 250. Lipsitz notes that Dr. King “presented his sermon about the drum major instinct as a solution to America’s serious social problems, but he also intended it as personal advice to his followers about how to live their lives (p. 251).