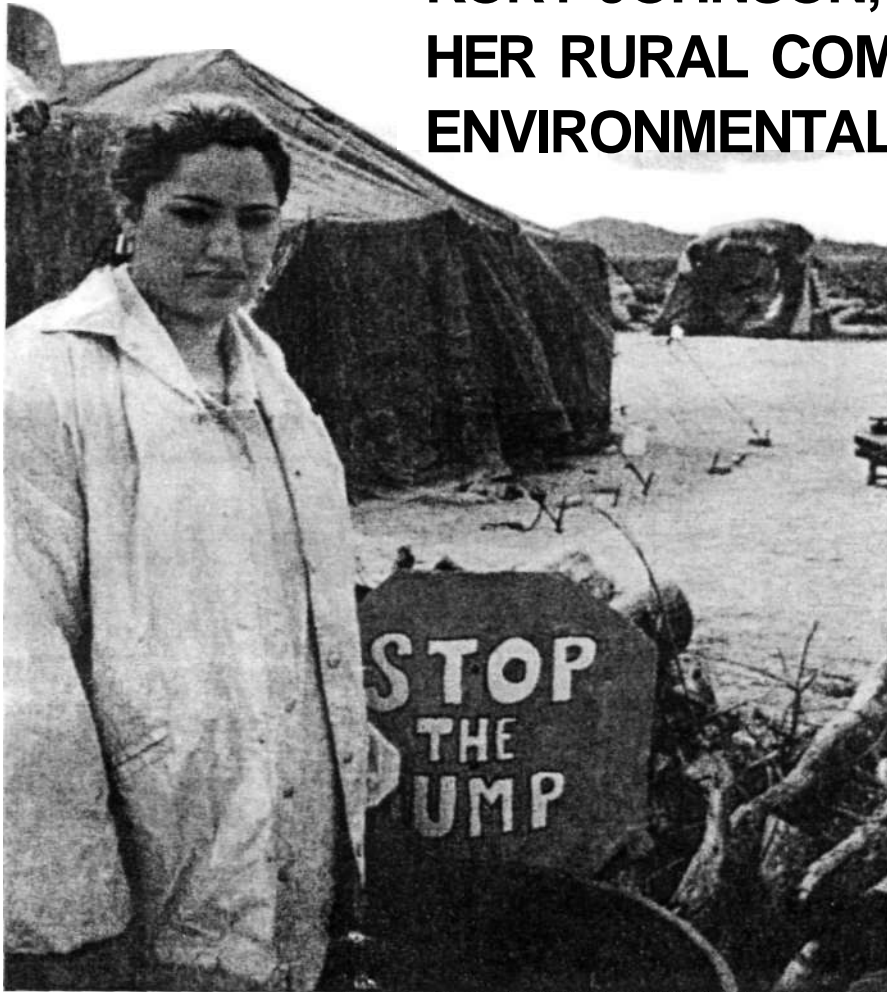


toxic avenger

KORY JOHNSON, 19, HELPED SAVE HER RURAL COMMUNITY FROM ENVIRONMENTAL POLLUTION.

BY KRISTEN ARANT



world's largest award given to grassroots environmentalists. Nominated by a network of 21 environmental organizations worldwide, Johnson was honored with a prize of \$100,000—no strings attached. At age 19, she's already made history, and has a decade of environmental activism under her belt.

When Johnson was nine, her sister died from a heart ailment. The culprit was tainted drinking water—the cause of many other child deaths in Johnson's rural hometown of Maryvale, in Maricopa County (near Phoenix, Arizona). Maryvale is a low-income community and often bears the brunt of environmental racism. The valley is a cancer cluster, where nitrates from farming and industry saturate the ground and seep into the water supply. Pregnant mothers drink the water, and the nitrates cause their babies to be born blue. Johnson's sister Amy was born with nitrates in her bloodstream, and lived just under 17 years.

"My sister was sick all the time when she was growing up—she was always in the hospital," Johnson recalls. "After she died, my mom found out the city council knew about the contaminated water and blue babies, but they didn't think there were enough [cases] to do anything about it."

That's when Johnson's mother first spoke out against environmental injustice. Meanwhile, a nine-year old Kory gathered other kids from a local bereavement group, and started a children's environmental organization.

When I was nine years old, I loved to play outside. Sometimes I would notice a bit of litter here and there while running around the woods, or I would admire the colorful, swirly oil pools I occasionally saw in the nearby creek. But in my privileged, middle-class life, I rarely thought about the state of the environment. I was nine, and

all I wanted to do was play. Little did I know there were kids in other places who weren't so fortunate. Kory Johnson was one of them. While I was frolicking away the days of my youth, she was saving her community from the devastation of environmental pollution.

A freshman at Arizona State University, Johnson is the 1998 recipient of the prestigious Goldman Prize—the

"All the kids who had lost brothers and sisters would get together once a month and have meetings, but we always ended up crying," Johnson said. So they got proactive. In 1988, Johnson founded Children for a Safe Environment, which today has 359 members—all dedicated to cleaning up and preventing the pollution that has poisoned their lives.

What makes people think they can just mindlessly pollute the environment?

"Money," she answers firmly. "Human rights just aren't in style or something. People get frustrated and think it's too much work."

What about anti-pollution laws?

"Well, there are a lot of laws, but the politicians are pretty crooked," she says. "It's hard to fight them. They put products before people all the time, especially in minority communities."

Johnson, who is of Mexican and Native American descent, works with low-income communities of color like her own. When she started CSE, high-tech research and systems engineering company ENSCO was planning to build three hazardous waste incinerators in Maryvale, with the support of the Arizona government. Seventy percent of the waste was to be imported from outside the state, according to the *Arizona Republic*. Greenpeace got word of ENSCO's plans, and arrived to protest. Kory's mother invited Greenpeace to set up an office in the Johnson's spare room. For two years, Greenpeace and CSE worked together, battling the state and ENSCO and spreading the word about Maryvale's hazardous waste problems.

They held public hearings, hosted candlelight vigils, wrote letters, organized children's art projects and demonstrated on the front lawn of the Arizona capitol building. "The kids were always in the forefront," Johnson says. "The press was impressed by what we were doing. At first they thought our parents had put us up to it. But we had educated ourselves about hazardous waste, and when they tried to make us look dumb, we shocked them and earned their respect." But

respect wasn't the only thing CSE earned. Their efforts helped convince the state to cancel ENSCO's plans. The incinerators were never built.

Unfortunately, peaceful protesting wasn't always met with a similar response. In 1990, more than 300 people gathered for a public hearing and the Maricopa County sheriff's deputies crashed the party. Government authorities requested the most disruptive people be removed. According to the *Arizona Republic*, about 20 deputies arrested 18

sites. Presently, she's battling Bureau of Land Management plans to build a nuclear waste dump in Ward Valley—an Indian reservation in Needles, California. She's been taking food, water and blankets to tribal members standing on ground zero to keep the bureau off their land.

Johnson also takes her experience to other low-income communities. She trains people on everything from poster-making to picking the most strategic spokesperson for public hearings.



Above: Kory demonstrates with CSE and Greenpeace at the Arizona Capitol building

people and used stun guns on at least two Greenpeace members.

In 1996, Johnson organized a large group to gather at a railroad spur in Mobile, Arizona. Their mission was to stop a 45-car train carrying DDT-contaminated dirt to a local landfill. The protestors stood in the crossing holding signs that read "Stop the Toxic Trains" and "Don't Dump on Arizona." Johnson was arrested for "blocking a public thoroughfare."

So, why does she keep at it?

"I see how [poor people] get dumped on, and I know dirty industry goes into the poor neighborhoods," says Johnson. "These communities rarely have the technology to fight back. They have to hold a bake sale just to buy posterboard."

In the last ten years, Johnson has led CSE in shutting down 20 pollution

Johnson is sure she'll always be involved with environmental activism, but also hopes to pursue a career in child psychology. She's beginning her second year of college, and her ultimate goal is to counsel kids who have lost brothers and sisters.

Besides all of Johnson's environmental justice work, she was also captain of her high school cheerleading squad, homecoming queen and state champion in hula dancing.

Where did she find the time?

"Well, my mom just didn't make me clean my room, I guess," she answers. "When she would tell me to clean it, I would just say, 'Mom! I can't clean the environment and my room!'"

If only we all had such a good excuse.