



Oral History: Robert (Bob) Ellison

Excerpted from:

Measuring What Matters: Neighborhood Research for Economic and Environmental Health and Justice in Richmond, North Richmond, and San Pablo



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The full report is available at http://www.pacinst.org/reports/measuring_what_matters/



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ROBERT (BOB) ELLISON

“ I’ve lived in North Richmond all my life. I’m about 74 and I was born here and raised right on the street where I live now. I’m third generation here. My grandfather was a slave, he came here in 1898 and lived out on south 23rd which is out where the police department is now. The wide streets, the open air, the breeze coming over the bay and cooling us down—these are the things about this neighborhood I want to pass on to the next generation.

When I was a boy, the federal government came out here and told me, “You have asthma.” And we still have asthma out here. So you think, “I’ll just move out of here.” When I was younger, you’d think the same thing: “If you don’t want to die, don’t live and work here.” But then again, we were black and couldn’t work anywhere else. Boy, what a rock and a hard place.

If I get in the car to go to San Rafael and spend the day, when I get on the bridge coming back into Richmond, it hits me. This place smells bad. But while I’m here, I can’t smell it. I’ve asked others about it, and they too are used to it. The Standard Oil (Chevron) refinery emits an odor. It’s here. It’s present now. And it affects our health: asthma, allergies, and the coughing. They are polluting the air, we are getting sick. Don’t you think they owe something to the community?



I would feel better if we worked in concert with Standard Oil. If their needs were our needs and our needs were their needs: if we had the same need, then we could get it together and resolve it. We have the technology to do that. We have the means to do that. I want to get the motivations together. Richmond people especially see that we’re all tied in together.”