

Interview with Dulce Bodden, who has been a resident of the Reservoir Triangle neighborhood for 28 years. In the interview, Bodden talks about how the neighborhood has changed, her experiences with the environmental hazards of Mashapaug, and what types of remediation projects she hopes will happen to the pond in the future.

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92 Alger Avenue, Providence, RI

Dulce Bodden (interviewed by Megan Hauptman)

Megan Hauptman: I'm going to wear headphones while I'm recording you just to make sure it's picking up noise just in case the machine for some reason stops working. I know it's a little bit weird but I can hear you fine. I'm still learning how to use this equipment as well so it's a process.... So I'm just going to start this. This is Megan Hauptman interviewing Dulce Bodden and it is May 19, 2014, around 10:10am and we are at her mother's house off of Elmwood Avenue. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself and how long you've lived near the pond, just kind of background details?

Dulce Bodden: Yes, my name is Dulce Bodden and I live at 8 Sibley Street in Providence, Rhode Island. That's near the pond. And I've been living in that area for approximately 28 years.

Hauptman: Alright, and when did you first move to the pond?

Bodden: I think it was around 86. 85, 86.

Hauptman: And what did it look like when you first moved there? Were there different animals, what were people doing around the pond, was the factory still there when you moved there?

Bodden: I think it was closed already. To tell you what, I don't know much about if the factory was still there but I think it was not operating, at least there were not employees I don't think so.

Hauptman: Why did you move to that area?

Bodden: Because I bought a house around there. It seemed like a quiet place to live. It was different from what it is now. It was mostly like American people, now there's a lot of ethnic people around, Spanish people and all that. When I moved there I was the first Spanish people that lived there. And I don't know, I kind of liked the area. When I moved there there were more trees in the streets. Now there're hardly any. I have planted myself two trees. But the neighborhood has kind of gone down a little bit.

Hauptman: Can you tell me a little bit more about how its changed—either in terms of trees and wildlife or like, businesses being built. Just sort of how you've seen it shift over—28 years is a long time. And has any of that been connected to the pond or just the neighborhood itself?

Bodden: The neighborhood itself; it has changed, I don't know. I think the neighborhood have gone down quite a bit since I moved.

Hauptman: In what ways?

Bodden: I don't know, the way the houses are kept, the ways the streets are kept. And the quality of people around it too. Even though where I live, you know, I have pretty decent people, but there's not like anyone monitoring the noise, no control. Like if you have kids, kids all over. Without supervision, that's what I meant. And I don't know, that's what I think of the neighborhood.

Hauptman: And have you, in your time living near Mashapaug pond, do you interact with the pond, do you sit near it, go boating on it?

Bodden: Not really. I had one bad experience from the pond back in—around 1993—I had a dog, I had a labrador retriever, which we had for about seven years when this happened. And he got loose one day, because it was my son's birthday, my older son's birthday, and we had gone to eat, and he got loose in the meantime. And the dog happened to—when he came back he was all wet. [4:09] I think he went in the pond. He definitely went in the pond. And the next day I saw him like acting real funny and throwing up, and he had ingested like some heavy metal from the pond. And we lost him. I spent a lot of money, I took him to the hospital and it was diagnosed that he had taken in a good amount of—the doctor said "heavy metal poisoning." So he had licked from the water—he was in the pond. That I know because he was all wet. And he died from that. We tried to save him but his whole skin, underneath his coat, underneath the hair, was all yellow. And they determined it was heavy metal poisoning.

Hauptman: Before this happened were you aware of the history of the pond?

Bodden: No I wasn't. I think if I had known I probably would have, I don't know, think differently. But I was not aware that there was such much poison in the pond.

Hauptman: Yeah. Did you at some point learn more about the history of the pond, or the environmental risks about it?

Bodden: No I didn't know, I was really unaware of it, until recently. That was brought up, and I heard about the high school that was gonna be built there. And I was concerned about it. When I heard about all the residue from the Gorham factory. And when the thing happened to the dog, I became a little bit aware. But I wasn't quite aware of the magnitude of the, you know, that Gorham had left there. And I know there was some burial, like some tanks were buried underneath. So all that poison. And I also heard that a lot of residents of that street, Adelaide Street, there's significant increase in cancer from the people that live in that section, like right near the pond. Because I am like two streets up from the pond. I'm not right on that Crescent or Adelaide Avenue. I'm on Sibley, so one, two streets over. So, I don't know, that's—And also, the kid in the house in front of me, there's a family that lived there. And they have a younger guy—

he's in his twenties now—he's more or less my son's age, a little younger than my older son. And he came up with cancer of the throat or something like that. Thyroid cancer. And I was always wondering if that has anything to do with all the exposure around there. And I remember feeling a little bit guilty because I thought oh god, if I'd have known that I would have never let my son play like, in those lots around where the school was built.

Hauptman: Can you describe the lots to me before the school was built? Did kids play there a lot?

Bodden: Yes. Kids played there. There was sand, like sand bank. And you know, it was an open field so people, kids played ball in there before that. And even my kid went a couple of times to play there and I said oh my god I didn't know that was such a dangerous area. And I remember one guy, a long time ago, somebody that knew more—I was ignorant of that danger—I remember one guy that came by and I was putting tomatoes in my backyard and he said “Are you sure you're not getting any green tomatoes?” Like he was kind of—like glowing tomatoes. And that left me thinking—God is it that bad? So, basically that's my story around the time that I've been there.

Hauptman: And how did you—Can you tell me a little bit about your involvement in the Environmental Justice League and sort of how you got involved in that?

Bodden: I haven't been too too involved. I should have been but i haven't been too too involved. I went to a meeting over at one of the neighbor's house that lives right on Crescent. And you know—I noticed that it's a good thing, that you have to be aware of what's going on around you. And I went to the meetings and after that, Amelia, I think, no not Amelia, I'm sorry, another lady—I forgot her name—came by and she told me about the project where they do, like part of the sidewalk. They fix that—put like flowers and perennials, you know. The storm water project, you know, is that how they call it? [9:43] So she told me about that, and she told me about the water from the top of the roof, from the gutters, that there is a way that you can preserve so that you can save water. I got involved with that and they put two tanks, like connected to my gutters, to preserve water. And you know, it seems like a great project. I think it can help. But you have to make people aware. And she also gave me like some pamphlets that I went around and I gave it to the people, but I haven't got too much response.

Hauptman: Do you think that there is involvement from people in the neighborhood with the Environmental Justice League or other efforts to sort of clean up the environment around the pond or do you feel like it's coming more from people outside the neighborhood?

Bodden: I think it's coming more from people outside. But I think eventually people are going to wake up and say yes! I think if you approach them the right way they realize you know, that this is something good. That it can help the neighborhood to do that. Make them aware that you know, this is something vital. I think so.

Hauptman: Do you have children in school at Alvarez, or any of the schools surrounding the pond?

Bodden: No, but I did. One of my kids—I have two sons, and the youngest one went to Alvarez High School. But I was always concerned about the situation. There used to be a supermarket, right in that same plaza, right next to the... And I remember, I always remember that every time I bought fresh vegetables from that supermarket, they wouldn't last too long. They would you know, go bad, within two or three days. I noticed a difference between the vegetables that I would bought in that supermarket and the ones that I bought in others faraway.

Hauptman: Did you see those as being connected—someone was telling me that there's a rumor that the supermarket closed because of this problem—did other people talk about that?

Bodden: Yes, people were talking about that. I heard about that. And I knew that—I went to a meeting where they had like some kind of breathing tube at the school to make sure the fumes from the underground escaped. I heard about that. I don't know if it was actually happening, or they were really working the proper way, but I heard about that too, about some underground breathing system so that you don't breathe the vicious air around there. But I know there is a lot of residue, and I really believe that somebody should be—Texaco, I think, what's the one—should be responsible for cleaning that up. And let us have some clean breeze. Because even if we are the ones closest to the pond, this affects everybody because you know, we are all one. Whatever goes on there goes on—the air will spread it to other places too. So, I don't really know much about it but I think they should do something about cleaning up that pond, and making it viable for the fishes and the other species too. Including us!

Hauptman: So, some people still seem to use the pond to kayak on, or to spend time on. You said that you had never really done that—

Bodden: Yes, I had. [13:20] I went once—I forgot when it was but they were renting boats and things like that, so we went on it once. I took my youngest child, he was about seven when that happened, maybe 6. And we went around—it's a beautiful sight. It's a beautiful, beautiful—and we saw waterlilies, we even found a little bird. It was a fun. I even have pictures of it. It was really, really beautiful.

Hauptman: Do you think people have been using the pond more or less for recreational activities since—it seems like the wildlife has maybe gone down a little bit since you moved there—do you still see people using the pond to boat on or—

Bodden: I don't go around that much, but I know I went—I've been on it about two or three times. And I'm not much of a sports person, outdoors person, but I've been out there about three times. And I don't know, it would be wonderful, if they could clean it up and make it more—less dangerous, I guess, to the environment.

Hauptman: Can you compare the neighborhood around Mashapaug, or the pond itself to where you moved to Mashapaug from?

Bodden: Oh, I was living at—I was renting—near Atwells Avenue.

Hauptman: So you were living in Providence.

Bodden: Yes, I was living in Providence.

Hauptman: Were you happy with the decision to move to Reservoir Triangle?

Bodden: I was happy because I got my own house and I had a place for my kids and me, but when that concern came, I was really worried about the health of my kids, and myself too.

Hauptman: So—I don't know if this a common practice or not—but when you took your kids to the doctor, did you ever ask them about potential effects from the pond? Were doctors in the area aware of that?

Bodden: No I didn't, because when they were little I wasn't too aware of the dangers, you know. So, my youngest kid came when there were high levels of lead. I don't know if that had to do with the pond but I know that, you know, he used to play around there and he had high lead levels.

Hauptman: I don't have too many more questions, I think I've sort of asked the ones I had—do you have anything else that you're thinking about, either about the history of the neighborhood, how the neighborhood is now, really anything around this. Sometimes I don't know what kinds of questions to ask because I don't know—

Bodden: I don't know, I always think about what kind of remedies they're going to apply to make sure that this is something safe. I'm concerned about all the other kids that are younger, that are playing around there. There's a lot of kids there that are at risk if there is something there that we should be worried about. Because I think there's a high level of heavy metal on the ground and I don't think they've been properly treated to be around.

Hauptman: Yes, that's really scary. Are there a lot of families with kids right around—

Bodden: Yes, oh yes.

Hauptman: More so than before?

Bodden: More so than before—way more than before. Because you can see it, especially in summer. All the summers—I've never seen so many kids around—so, so, many running around.

Hauptman: Where do kids play often in that area? I know there's the ballparks; do a lot of kids play right around the pond or is it more like fields or parks that are further away?

Bodden: Around the pond, and right in the streets of the neighborhood. But around the pond, yes, you know how kids love water and you know, adventure. I even remember walking around the pond with my kid, I remember that. Unaware that there's so much danger in there. And I lost my dog because of it. I do have that story to tell.

Hauptman: Yes.

Bodden: And I remember specifically, the doctor saying "high level"—he said "arsenic." Arson? Arsenic? Yeah, he said it was some kind of heavy metal—"How did he get to heavy metal?" I wasn't even aware. So I thought, oh my god, what was it? But then afterwards, when I found out about the pond and all the tanks that were buried and all the things that were dumped in the pond... So he went in because he came home wet. So I think that did it for him. So I'm afraid that what happened to my dog can happen to anybody. And I was concerned about the cancer on that kid right in front of me. And I heard in one of the meetings that I went to—there were a couple of ex-residents of Adelaide Avenue right in front of the school—there were quite a few people in that meeting saying that they got cancer. Quite a few. It was like amazing. I don't know if anyone is collecting that data but there was quite a few people that were diagnosed with cancer around there. And I wonder if that had anything to do with it.

Hauptman: That's really scary. Unless you have any other—

Bodden: No, that's about it.

Hauptman: Well, thank you so much for being interviewed today.

[End of interview] [19:09]