

# Editorial: Why Houston can breathe more freely

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"What's the point of being an environmentalist if you're only going to clean up one river?" Jane Elioseff used to tease her out-of-state friends. "Come on down to Houston, where you can go up against the big boys, the ones who tell the United States when to go to war."

Elioseff, who died June 29 at age 72, didn't shy away from big fights.

Never mind that, in many ways, she was a small person. In 1988, when she moved to Houston to be near her sister, she was a 4'8" medical secretary in her late forties, a vegetarian Buddhist feminist proud that she'd been sober for a dozen years. She couldn't even drive: Because of the severe hip problem that forced her to use a cane, she couldn't press a regular car's brakes or accelerator.

But Elioseff arrived looking for a cause, and she found it every time she inhaled: Houston's smog inflamed her asthma, to the degree that on a bad air day, she struggled to leave her bedroom. She threw herself into the city's tiny environmental community, including GHASP, the [Galveston-Houston Association for Smog Prevention](#). "My contribution at the beginning," she told an interviewer for the Texas Legacy Project, "was simply to serve as a kind of [March of Dimes](#) poster child for the hazards of air pollution."

Over time, Elioseff morphed from a volunteer to staff, becoming the projects coordinator and spokesperson for GHASP. Often she worked at home, unable to leave her bedroom on a smoggy day, but able to make phone calls, to write grants, to cajole and pester and do research.

On clearer days, she seemed to be everywhere - at meetings for GHASP, for Mothers for [Clean Air](#) (which she helped found), for the [Green Party](#), for human-rights causes, or just going out for lunch or to the opera.

In June 1995, as one of the founders of an umbrella group called the Smog Action Task Force, she called a press conference at the San Jacinto Monument - not just a Texas icon, but also, as she put it, a place that offered a "spectacular view of industrial pollution." With white haze as their backdrop, she and her allies demanded that Houston begin issuing smog forecasts.

Opposition from petrochemical industries ran high. The [Greater Houston Partnership](#), the city's most powerful business group, resisted the move. Business leaders said the reports would hurt Houston's image, and might impede its economic development.

But after that press conference, public opinion began to turn in the environmentalists' favor. In August, Mayor [Bob Lanier](#) approved the alerts. Since then, Houston's attitude toward its air has changed enormously. Ozone forecasts are now a staple of our weather forecasts; asthmatics, runners, the elderly, pregnant women and daycare teachers all use them to plan their days. And the Greater Houston Partnership - once Elioseff's chief nemesis - now backs clean-air measures as an issue important to business; skilled workers, the group argues, won't move to a city with filthy air.

But it's not just attitudes that have changed; Houston's air itself has improved, too. Consider this: In late June, Houston's ozone levels hit an eye-burning, lung-searing 136 parts per billion. But notably, it was the first time in eight years that our air had been so bad; of the decade's ten worst smog days, the other nine all occurred before 2007.

Elioseff would have argued, correctly, that our air still isn't good enough - that Houston remains a smog machine, that pollution wreaks havoc on our health, and that we can and must do much, much better.

But because of her, Houston's air has come a long way. Because of her, we all breathe more freely.