

US EPA ARCHIVE DOCUMENT

# MATTIE NASH

Community Member—  
RSR Smelter Superfund Site

**Date:** August, 2005  
**Location:** West Dallas, Texas

[NOTE: The initial portion of the interview was not recorded and therefore is not in the transcript.]

[From 1968 through 2004, Ms. Nash was a community leader in a primarily minority community west of downtown Dallas, TX, known as West Dallas. From 1968 through 2004, Ms. Nash worked to improve housing and quality-of-life conditions in West Dallas and advocated for the cleanup of lead contamination from the RSR Smelter Superfund site. She was 82 years old at the time of this interview.]

EPA Interviewer: Now, Ms. Nash, the community went through what they would call a very difficult time.

Nash: Oh yes.

EPA Interviewer: What was the most significant issue that you dealt with in getting the site cleaned up?

Nash: What was the most difficult because... All the different promises that people would make us and would not come through with them. We were seeing children affected really more than adults from the smelter. But the main thing was people would promise us but they would not come through with it. After they was elected, they would go on and forget about us. I is dying now and thank God that he is there and thank EPA as I have said and Vicenta West for the Superfund.

EPA Interviewer: Thank you. Are there any things that you think could have been done differently when the site was cleaned up?

Nash: When the site was cleaned up? No, I don't think anything differently. I think that was really monitored well, because nobody I know made any complaints about any dust or anything as it was being torn down. I guess it had been vacant for a while before they tore it down. Thank God it's gone so we are ever so grateful for that.

EPA Interviewer: Were there any particular expectations when you got involved with the Superfund program in getting the site cleaned up?

Nash: Yeah, there was a lot of spectators, and I said it wouldn't be done because we were poor people and nobody cared about us. We felt like we were kinda step-children, but thanks goodness that the Superfund did come through. I think the Commerce woman did have

something to do with us also getting the Superfund, but really to follow up with it, nobody but Vicenta West followed up with us to get the Superfund.

EPA Interviewer: Ms. Nash, we know that you have been involved for many, many years with stories of EPA and the community. What is your most memorable story that you can share with us about your involvement with Superfund?

Nash: Well, at first we did not believe EPA was going to do anything, because so many people had promised us but they did go through with it, and we gave EPA a hard time—I know we gave them a hard time. But thank goodness for them for sticking with us, with Vicenta West and others. That helped us, because really, the community was really involved in it. They spent money on top of money trying to find out ways that we could better ourselves to help get that thing into the Superfund.

EPA Interviewer: What is happening with the site now, Ms. Nash? What is going on there?

Nash: Nothing is going on there now, but you better believe I ride through there every now and then just to see what is going on. We are so in hope that DART [Dallas Area Rapid Transit] would have put a station there, because it was right on the rail line. It would have served the whole entire West Dallas. We are looking for something to go on that site that would help everybody in this community. I said, “We do want to see that wall torn down.”

EPA Interviewer: I know you were involved with practically everything that went on with that site. What is one of the high points of your involvement with cleaning the site?

Nash: When they came to us and told us that they had the means and Superfund was gonna bring that stack down. That was the happiest days of my life! I remember that Mary Kirk came out and slung the first brick. I had a hand in it—you know I was so excited—tearing it down, and I was so grateful. I must give the city manager at that time, Alice Grate, ‘cause she also wanted that stack torn down. She did not want to see people suffer from that. But my highlight was when the day—oh the day when they broke ground, that they were gonna take... And the bulldozers were there. Oh, that was the happiest day of my life! EPA was there, oh they were so excited, but not like we were. We were so excited. And I kept my hat—they gave me a hard hat, you know, like I was gonna do construction. I kept that hat, because—ooo, the bulldozers—I had never seen anything as beautiful as those old worn out—I don’t know whether they were worn out—but beat-up, whatever, bulldozers. They wasn’t brand new, but they was good bulldozers. I was just so excited to see that, and EPA was right there, and I stood there until they knocked the first stone down. And that was the happiest day when I was able to go back through there—because everyday I would go see how the progress was. And when it was done and all clean and Vicenta had a meeting with us, [and] said, “It is down, are you satisfied?” And I was one of the ones hollering, “Yes, we are satisfied!” But there still are some people that suffer from the cause of that smelter.

EPA Interviewer: Thank you for that. That was so beautifully said. That was wonderful. Now with that, Ms. Nash, what are some of the positive impacts that tearing down the smelter has brought to the community?

Nash: Well, I think that now people want to come to Dallas West. Because the smelter's gone, they don't have the fear of the lead anymore. But so many times they make decisions without the input of the community. We was the one that buried that smelter. We was the ones that worked hard to get it torn down. But now we find that so many developers are coming in everyday and wanting to say that we are not too close to the downtown, and they want to take this area and develop it into something for our connection with the west end. They want to close up the Continental Bridge, which is really our outlet. So we see now that people want to come here and build up. We are glad for them to come and make it a home, but we don't want to see them come in and try to take it from us.

EPA Interviewer: We have been talking for awhile now, but with that, was there ever a point that you felt that the Superfund process wasn't working for you and your community?

Nash: No, we never felt like that because, I always, myself, had faith that it would workout. I just thought that the more pressure we put on EPA, the more EPA did for us. And I am so grateful. I would say that about any group of people. The more pressure you put on them to let them know that you are really caring and involved, I think the better job that they would do. But my hat's off to EPA for what they did do and I am so grateful. And like I said, I don't guess EPA or no other organization would have done had the people not really been involved in pushing behind it.

EPA Interviewer: How did you interact with the citizens in the community? How did you keep them focused and involved and making sure that they were involved?

Nash: I wouldn't take credit for all of that, because everybody was involved. There was more than I was involved in that smelter, because there was a group across West Boulevard and they were really...and Carlyn... oh so many people were really involved. John Furnaroy worked so hard with us to get something done about that smelter, and I would not take credit for myself keeping 'em together. We all knew how important it was that we get rid of it. I think we all worked together on it. No one somebody could say that I did it. I wouldn't dare say I did it. We all did. The community did it. That was one thing we stayed focused on and together.

EPA Interviewer: Thank you for giving your community credit as well. Do you think that the Superfund program has an impact on preventing future hazardous waste sites here in West Dallas?

Nash: Yes, I do, and we are asking EPA to look at another place that is in the West Dallas. It's throwing off a fume that is damaging also. So we're going to be looking at that real, real hard, because a different one in the community has been monitoring it to the point—where I say monitoring, has been watching it—to see how much hazard it is throwing off. So we don't want anything or anybody to bring anything into the West Dallas that is going to bring hazard to our health.

EPA Interviewer: Alright, thank you. That's great. Did you have any direct contact with any of the state officials?

Nash: Oh yes, we did. I think even when Mark White was Governor we petitioned him. In fact, Mark White came to West Dallas and he promised us he was going to do something about it. Until we was able to get into the Superfund—and I give the Congresswoman lots of credit for that also—the state, yes, we called our Representative and oh yes, they did know about it. Alonzo was a Representative also at that time, so he was interested and also helping us get that smelter closed.

EPA Interviewer: Great, thank you for that. What role, if any, have you observed the Superfund program playing in the redevelopment of properties in the West Dallas area?

Nash: Not really any I can pinpoint to say that EPA has offered us as of now. But we are going to be calling on EPA as never before, because we are so concerned right now about the pollution we are going to be getting if they widen Singleton—and all the cars coming down. Cars put out lots of pollution, and we are, what you would call, a downgrade. We would say it's below sea level—we are below land level, more or less, because if you go up on some of the hills you can look down into the Dallas West. A lot of this pollution is going to be staying down in the community until it is brought out, and lots of people will be affected.

EPA Interviewer: Have you noticed some of the redevelopment for property, apartment complexes, and homes?

Nash: Oh yes, yes, yes. We are having some new apartments going up now in Hammerton that there was an old—I don't want to say the smelter did as much damage there as the Armond Fertilizer Plant. It was located there, where these new apartments are in Hammerton. And it throws off something like an ammonia odor. When they did throw it out, you could stay within miles—you had to almost leave because it would choke you down. So lots of people believe that that caused lots of asthma and lots of other complaints that people are now suffering for it because of that pollution. We do think that pollution is damaging to the health.

EPA Interviewer: Great, thank you.

Nash: And the housing development has built so many new beautiful homes over there. Dr. Wilson is putting up a school over there. We can see lots of improvement since the Superfund helped us with.

EPA Interviewer: Now that the site has been cleaned up and we've had our construction completion ceremony, are you still involved with the Superfund program?

Nash: Oh yes. I will always be.

EPA Interviewer: Great, thank you for that. Thank you. Are there any questions, or is there something you would like to discuss that I haven't raised during this interview?

Nash: No, not about the Superfund or anything. But we do want you to know, and all of EPA to know, that we do want them to still monitor the pollution in the Dallas West, because we feel like we're going to be getting a lot of damaging pollution from the cars and the trucks that will be coming through this area.

EPA Interviewer: OK, thank you. I don't want to repeat questions, but I do want to make sure that I asked the question if you could have changed one thing about the program back when you were involved—just one little thing—what would it have been and why?

Nash: We would have cleaned up earlier. We would have cleaned the site up earlier than later. And we would have worked hard—well, we couldn't work any harder—but that was the one thing. Had they cleaned it up when we really asked back in the early '60s, when we started asking them to clean up, I think we would have been much better off.

EPA Interviewer: Thank you. Do you see a day when hazardous waste sites will be cleaned up and the Superfund program as we know it today will no longer be needed?

Nash: No, I don't see that day as long as men find ways of making our means to make better progress for themselves. I think we will always need EPA because of the pollution. I am a firm believer that pollution is damaging.

When the smelter was first built back in 1922, well, there weren't many people living in the Dallas West area. They had their own little compounds around there and their little houses and so forth. But people there working in the smelter really did develop lots of diseases, and they died from it. But as I said, there wasn't many people living here. As the war came on, there was nowhere else to live, so lots of people flocked to West Dallas. I was very, very much concerned about the pollution, because it would stop—it would take your breath it was so strong. As people began to move in and move around and all, then the smelter became a real problem. Then the housing development came along, and lots of people was affected from that. But the smelter kept on polluting. They did not care. But now that it's gone, I am so grateful. I am so grateful that it's gone, because it really did do its share of damage while it was up.

EPA Interviewer: Thank you, that was great. Is there anything else that you would like to talk about?

Nash: No, I just want to thank everybody that was involved in helping us get the lead smelter down: the community, Vicenta West, Dr. Ron Edison, everybody that had a hand in helping us get this smelter clean. And everybody. I'm so grateful to EPA that stood with us. I know so many times that they wanted to pull up and pull out. I can remember—and I pray that Carlos forgive me—but oh, we had him sweating so many times, but he stayed with us anyway. But anyway, we are ever so grateful for EPA for all they have done from the state level to the national level to whatever level they were. I thank the community—they stayed focused on getting that smelter down.

EPA Interviewer: Thank you, Ms. Nash. You have been so wonderful and so great in conducting this interview and agreeing to have this interview with you. We are so pleased that you agreed to that. Thank you so much.