

# RECLAIMING THE SACRIFICE ZONE



In partnership with the Southeast Youth Alliance



# RECLAIMING THE SACRIFICE ZONE

The youth-led campaign for environmental  
justice on the Southeast Side

Reported by Maria Maynez  
Illustrated by Mike Centeno  
Art direction by Michelle Kanaar  
Edited by Nissa Rhee

Thanks to the Crossroads Fund for their support of this project.

The Southeast Side can be easy to miss as you speed across the Chicago Skyway on the way from downtown Chicago to Indiana. But look closely and you'll see the mix of church towers and smokestacks next to the highway that mark the predominantly Latinx community.

This last year has been a hard one for residents of the East Side neighborhood in particular. The COVID-19 pandemic has meant deaths of loved ones and the closing of businesses. Many people here did not have the luxury of working at home during the pandemic lockdowns. Over half of East Side residents work in essential businesses or operations, putting themselves at risk of the disease or death to feed their families.

The pandemic has also exacerbated existing challenges of racism, poverty and pollution in the East Side. In a largely working class neighborhood, the factories and heavy industries of the Southeast Side provided residents jobs that many Chicagoans don't want to do. But the toxic byproducts of heavy industries have meant residents here suffer increased risk of lung cancer and asthma. Longtime organizer Peggy Salazar calls the area the city's "sacrifice zone," a place where people's health has been sacrificed for the benefit of other richer -- and whiter -- parts of the city.

In this moment of darkness, a group of young Latinx organizers have come together with a message of hope. With their first meeting in 2018, the Southeast Youth Alliance knew they wanted to amplify opportunities and make resources available for young people in the area. To many SYA members, the proposed move of recycler General Iron from a largely white North Side neighborhood to one where 70 percent of residents speak Spanish at home feels like yet another example of how their city has failed them.

"Reclaiming the Sacrifice Zone" follows the work of SYA organizers at this critical moment on the East Side. Illustrated by local Venezuelan artist Mike Centeno and reported by local journalist and SYA member Maria Maynez with support from Borderless Magazine's staff, the comic tells the true story of how young Latinx people in Chicago have built power among some of those most marginalized in our city.

"We want local youth to know if you don't like something, you have the power to change it," says SYA member and co-founder Sara Galván Orozco.

We hope that after reading this comic, you too see this power in yourself.

HIDDEN BETWEEN BRIDGES AND STATE LINES, HUDDLED UNDERNEATH THE SKYWAY, THE SOUTHEAST SIDE IS EASY TO MISS. FOR OSCAR SÁNCHEZ, IT HAS BEEN HOME SINCE 1997.



BORN AND RAISED IN THE AREA, HE CAN REMEMBER THE DAYS HE WOULD SPEND PLAYING AT THE LOCAL PARKS AND BEACHES WITH HIS FAMILY. BUT THE DAYS OUTSIDE WERE OFTEN DARKENED BY THE LOCAL FACTORIES AND STEEL MILLS, WHICH HAVE OCCUPIED THE SOUTHEAST SIDE FOR DECADES.



ME AND MY BROTHER WOULD PLAY A GAME, AND WE WOULD COUNT HOW MANY DIESEL TRUCKS WOULD PASS BY. THAT'S HOW BAD IT WAS, IT WAS NORMALIZED.

SÁNCHEZ'S YOUNGER BROTHER SUFFERED FROM ASTHMA AND OTHER BREATHING ISSUES TO THE POINT THAT HE HAD TO USE A BREATHING MASK CONNECTED TO A MACHINE AT NIGHT. FRANCISCO WOULD ASK THEIR PARENTS WHY HE HAD TO BE THAT WAY.

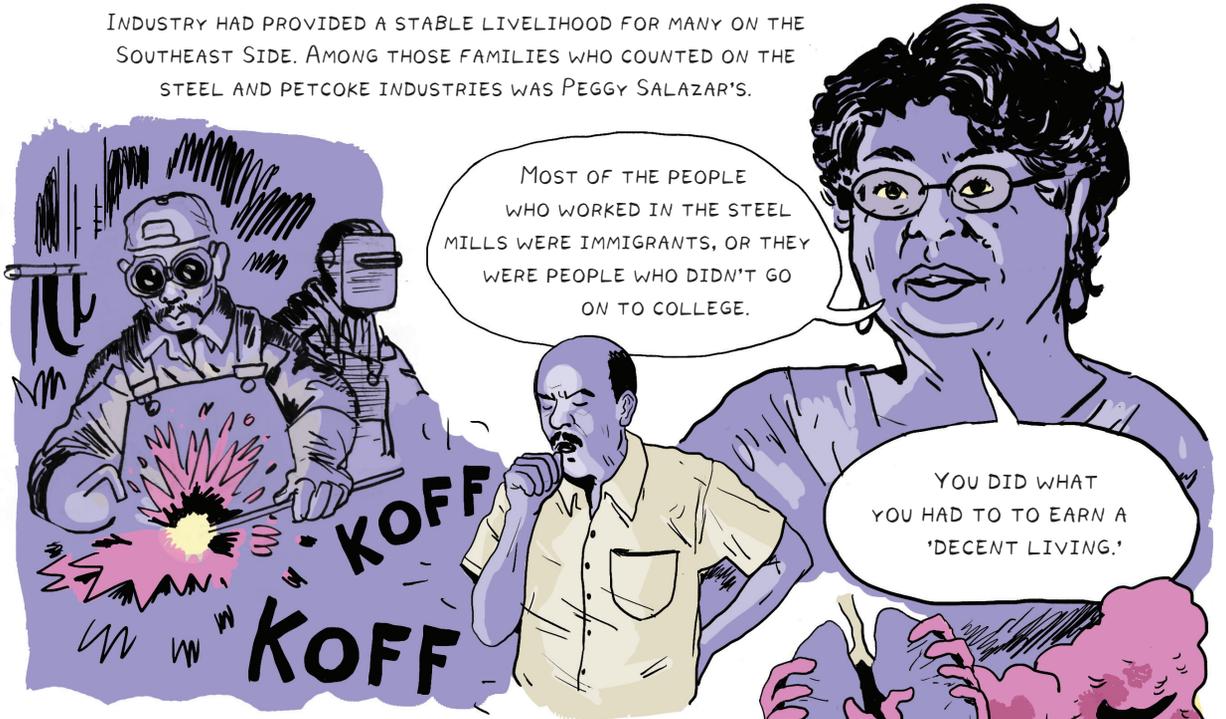


WHY CAN'T I JUST BE NORMAL?



THE SOUTHEAST SIDE HAS SOME OF THE WORST AIR POLLUTION IN THE CITY. ASTHMA RATES HERE ARE OVER DOUBLE THE CITY'S AVERAGE. LUNG CANCER RATES IN THE AREA ARE ALSO ABOVE THE CITY'S AVERAGE.

INDUSTRY HAD PROVIDED A STABLE LIVELIHOOD FOR MANY ON THE SOUTHEAST SIDE. AMONG THOSE FAMILIES WHO COUNTED ON THE STEEL AND PETCOKE INDUSTRIES WAS PEGGY SALAZAR'S.



BUT IT CAME AT A COST. SEEING THE ENVIRONMENTAL AND HEALTH COSTS TO HER COMMUNITY, SALAZAR BECAME AN ENVIRONMENTAL ORGANIZER. SHE RALLIED AND LED TOURS TO BRING ATTENTION TO WHAT SHE CALLS "THE SACRIFICE ZONE" — WHOLE SWATHS OF THE SOUTHEAST SIDE THAT THE CITY HAS DECIDED CAN BE BURDENED WITH POLLUTION.

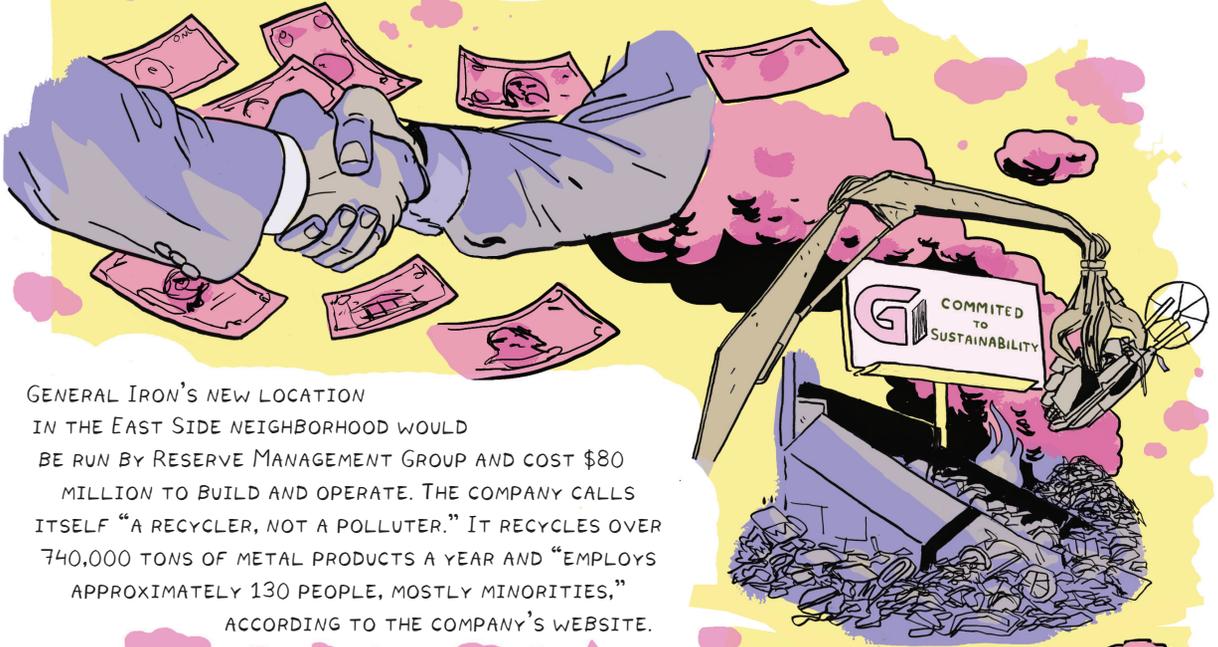


WHEN U.S. STEEL CLOSED ITS MILLS IN 1992 AND PETCOKE PRODUCERS WERE REQUIRED TO COVER THE DANGEROUS BLACK DUST FROM THEIR OPERATIONS IN 2014, SALAZAR CELEBRATED THE VICTORIES. SHE AND OTHERS HOPED FOR DEVELOPMENT, FOR SOMETHING BETTER TO COME AND PROVIDE CLEAN, SAFE JOBS. BUT THE LAND SCARRED BY INDUSTRIAL WASTE SAT EMPTY FOR YEARS.

WE SAW THE PATTERN OF THE GENTRIFICATION AND REVITALIZATION GOING ON ON THE NORTH SIDE. AND I QUICKLY BECAME AWARE THAT WE WERE GOING TO BE ACCOMMODATING OF ALL THAT BEAUTIFUL REVITALIZATION WHILE OUR COMMUNITY CONTINUED TO GO THROUGH DEGRADATION.



THAT PATTERN COULD NOT BE CLEARER WHEN, IN 2018, THE LONGTIME METAL SCRAPER GENERAL IRON\* ANNOUNCED ITS PLANS TO MOVE FROM A WEALTHY NORTH SIDE NEIGHBORHOOD TO THE SOUTHEAST SIDE. DURING ITS SIX DECADES IN LINCOLN PARK, THE RECYCLING FACILITY HAD MAJOR FIRES AND EXPLOSIONS, AND IT RECEIVED CITATIONS FOR EXCESSIVE AIR EMISSIONS.



GENERAL IRON'S NEW LOCATION IN THE EAST SIDE NEIGHBORHOOD WOULD BE RUN BY RESERVE MANAGEMENT GROUP AND COST \$80 MILLION TO BUILD AND OPERATE. THE COMPANY CALLS ITSELF "A RECYCLER, NOT A POLLUTER." IT RECYCLES OVER 740,000 TONS OF METAL PRODUCTS A YEAR AND "EMPLOYS APPROXIMATELY 130 PEOPLE, MOSTLY MINORITIES," ACCORDING TO THE COMPANY'S WEBSITE.

SOUTHEAST SIDE ACTIVISTS QUICKLY REALIZED THAT THIS WOULD BE A NEW KIND OF FIGHT WITHOUT THE SUPPORT OF "BIG GREENS." THEY WOULD BE ON THEIR OWN.



THE PROPOSED GENERAL IRON LOCATION IS HALF A MILE FROM THE LOCAL ELEMENTARY AND HIGH SCHOOLS. FOR YOUNG PEOPLE ON THE SOUTHEAST SIDE LIKE SÁNCHEZ AND LUIS CABRALES, THAT WAS UNACCEPTABLE.

REGARDLESS OF WHAT THEY PROMISE, I DON'T CARE. WE DON'T WANT HISTORY REPEATING ITSELF. PEOPLE JOIN THE FIGHT AGAINST GENERAL IRON BECAUSE AS A COMMUNITY WE'RE HEALING, WE'RE MOVING ON. WE WANT BETTER JOBS, NOT JOBS THAT CONTINUE TO CONTRIBUTE TO THIS CONTAMINATION.

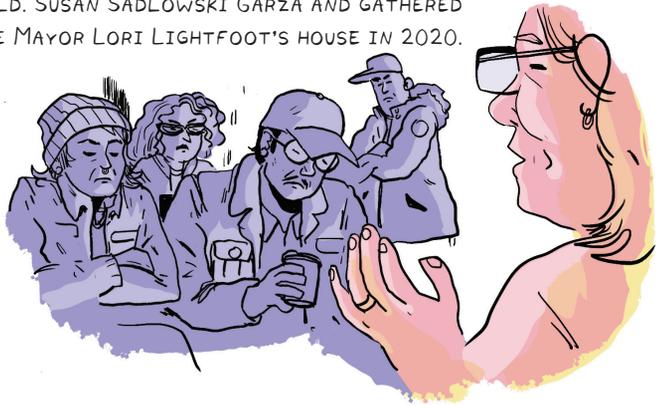
\*RESERVE MANAGEMENT GROUP, GENERAL IRON'S PARENT COMPANY, DENIED BORDERLESS MAGAZINE'S REQUEST FOR AN INTERVIEW.

SÁNCHEZ AND CABRALES JOINED OTHER MEMBERS OF THE SOUTHEAST YOUTH ALLIANCE AND LOCAL HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS TO SPEAK OUT ABOUT THE PROPOSED RECYCLING FACILITY. TO THEM, IT WAS NO LONGER JUST ABOUT KEEPING GENERAL IRON OUT OF THE EAST SIDE. IT WAS ALSO ABOUT BEING SEEN AS A COMMUNITY DESERVING OF A BETTER WAY OF LIFE.



AS THE GENERAL IRON MOVE GAINED TRACTION, COMMUNITY MEMBERS AND ACTIVISTS TURNED TO CHICAGO'S POLITICAL LEADERS FOR HELP. PROTESTERS MET WITH 10TH WARD ALD. SUSAN SADLOWSKI GARZA AND GATHERED OUTSIDE MAYOR LORI LIGHTFOOT'S HOUSE IN 2020.

UNDER PRESSURE, GARZA ASKED THE STATE TO STOP ITS REVIEW OF GENERAL IRON'S PERMIT DURING THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC TO ALLOW FOR GREATER COMMUNITY INPUT. BUT LIKE GENERATIONS OF ENVIRONMENTAL ORGANIZERS BEFORE THEM, SOUTHEAST SIDE RESIDENTS FELT LARGELY ABANDONED BY THEIR GOVERNMENT.



TIRED OF RELYING ON ELECTED OFFICIALS, YOUNGER ACTIVISTS BEGAN TO ORGANIZE AS THEY LED THE FIGHT AGAINST GENERAL IRON.



THE FIRST RALLY HOSTED BY YOUTH ACTIVISTS WAS ON THE STEPS OF GEORGE WASHINGTON HIGH SCHOOL, LOCATED RIGHT ACROSS THE STREET FROM THE NEW LOCATION FOR GENERAL IRON. IN JUST TWO SHORT MONTHS, THE ANGER OF A FEW ORGANIZERS HAD TURNED INTO A MOVEMENT.



TIME SEEMED TO SPEED UP FOR EAST SIDE RESIDENTS AS THE DAY WHEN GENERAL IRON WOULD FINALLY MAKE ITS BIG MOVE NEARED. THE ORGANIZERS REALIZED THAT THEY WOULD NEED TO ACT FAST IF THEY WERE GOING TO CONVINCE THE CITY OF CHICAGO TO DENY GENERAL IRON'S REQUEST TO MOVE TO THE EAST SIDE.



IN JANUARY 2021, SÁNCHEZ JOINED CHUCK STARK, A TEACHER AT GEORGE WASHINGTON HIGH SCHOOL, AND BREANNA BERTACCHI, A MEMBER OF THE UNITED NEIGHBORS OF THE 10TH WARD, IN A HUNGER STRIKE AGAINST GENERAL IRON.

"WE DO THIS BECAUSE WE CARE NOT ONLY ABOUT OUR ANCESTORS WHO WERE EXPLOITED, BUT ABOUT OUR FUTURE GENERATIONS." SAID SÁNCHEZ. "THE HUNGER STRIKE IS A CULMINATION OF BOTH REFLECTING ON OUR DEMONSTRATION AND SEEING WHAT IS THE NEXT ESCALATION THAT WE CAN DO TO GET THE MAYOR'S ATTENTION AND THE CHICAGO DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH'S ATTENTION."



EVERY TIME ANOTHER INDUSTRY COMES DOWN HERE, IT'S ANOTHER NAIL IN OUR COFFIN.

DURING THEIR MONTH-LONG HUNGER STRIKE, MORE THAN 100 PEOPLE PARTICIPATED IN A ONE-DAY HUNGER STRIKE TO SHOW SOLIDARITY BOTH IN CHICAGO AND NATIONWIDE. MORE THAN 70 HEALTH CARE AND SOCIAL JUSTICE ORGANIZATIONS AND 500 INDIVIDUALS SIGNED A LETTER TO MAYOR LIGHTFOOT SUPPORTING THE HUNGER STRIKERS AND DEMANDING THAT THE MAYOR DENY THE RECYCLER'S PERMIT.

A WEEK LATER, THE CITY ANNOUNCED THAT IT WAS DELAYING GENERAL IRON'S PERMIT IN ORDER TO ASSESS THE IMPACT OF AIR POLLUTION IN THE AREA.



THIS FIGHT HAS BEEN GOING ON FOR YEARS IN THE CITY. WE DON'T WANT THESE POLLUTERS HERE DESTROYING OUR HOME. THEY ARE PUTTING OUR HEALTH ON THE LINE.

ON EARTH DAY, ORGANIZERS GATHERED TO PLANT TREES ACROSS THE STREET FROM THE PROPOSED GENERAL IRON SITE. THEY STILL DID NOT KNOW WHETHER THE CITY WOULD APPROVE GENERAL IRON'S PERMIT.

BUT WHATEVER THE CITY'S DECISION, THE DISCUSSION ABOUT THE HEALTH OF THE SOUTHEAST SIDE WAS JUST BEGINNING. THE SOUTHEAST YOUTH ALLIANCE MEMBERS ARE DREAMING OF A FUTURE THAT IS NOT BOUND BY THE CHAINS OF ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM AND CORRUPTION.



"I'D LOVE TO SEE A CENTER THAT IS DEDICATED TO SPORTS AND ACADEMICS; TEACHING THE YOUTH DISCIPLINE ON AND OFF THE FIELD. PERHAPS A CENTER WITH BASKETBALL COURTS AND CLASSROOMS WITHIN THE FACILITY."

-ROGER RODRÍGUEZ



"I WOULD LOVE TO SEE A SUSTAINABLE FARM WITH FREE FOOD FOR ANY COMMUNITY MEMBER. OR MAYBE A REC CENTER WITH A NICE BASKETBALL COURT AND TRACK."

-LINA AVALOS



"LOCAL BUSINESSES, ESPECIALLY DOWN EWING, YOU KNOW, LOCAL SHOPS, COFFEEHOUSES, AND MAYBE A LITTLE THRIFT STORE. THAT WOULD BE CUTE."

- MARITZA DARLING-RAMOS



"THIS IS A FIGHT FOR RESOURCES. IT'S A FIGHT FOR SURVIVAL, AND WE DO IT WITH LOVE."

-OSCAR SÁNCHEZ

Reclaiming the Sacrifice Zone tells the true story of the youth-led campaign for environmental justice on the Southeast Side. Reported by Borderless Magazine in partnership with youth organizers at SYA, this piece of comic journalism is available in both English and Spanish.

The Southeast Youth Alliance (SYA) is committed to establishing an inclusive environment for youth to come together and expand perspectives in the community.

[www.facebook.com/SoutheastYouthAlliance](https://www.facebook.com/SoutheastYouthAlliance)

Borderless Magazine believes in the power of immigrant voices. We are your multilingual source for immigration stories in the Midwest.

Based in Chicago, we're a women- and BIPOC-run nonprofit news outlet reimagining immigration journalism with a lens on justice. Your donations pay for our work.

[www.borderlessmag.org](https://www.borderlessmag.org)

