Midwest Environmental Advocates Honors Recipients of 2023 Bill Iwen Environmental Justice Award

Deanna Branch of Milwaukee, Maria Powell of Madison and Lisa Doerr of Cushing Honored at Awards Event

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Madison, WI— At an awards celebration this evening, Midwest Environmental Advocates (MEA) honored Deanna Branch of Milwaukee, Maria Powell of Madison and Lisa Doerr of Cushing (Polk County) for their work to protect public health and natural resources.

The Bill Iwen Environmental Justice Award was established in 2019 by MEA, a nonprofit environmental law center, to recognize and honor those who are working to advance environmental justice in Wisconsin.

"Midwest Environmental Advocates has had the honor of working closely with this year’s award winners,” said MEA Executive Director Tony Wilkin Gibart during the awards celebration. “We have witnessed their transformative advocacy up close, and the persistence, integrity, and successes of these three individuals fill us with hope.”

Deanna Branch is a co-founder of Coalition on Lead Emergency (COLE), which seeks to end childhood lead poisoning in Milwaukee through education, policy changes, legislative action and governmental accountability. Thanks to Deanna’s leadership, COLE has successfully advocated for increased resources to remove lead hazards from Milwaukee homes and secured commitments from government officials to speed up the removal of lead water service laterals in the most impacted parts of Milwaukee. Together with her son Aiden, Deanna has also authored a children's book, Aiden the Lead-Free Superhero, to educate young readers about the dangers of lead exposure while instilling a sense of empowerment and resilience.

Maria Powell is a co-founder of Madison Environmental Justice Organization (MEJO), an organization dedicated to working with low-income communities and communities of color throughout the Midwest to identify and reduce sources of toxic contamination. She has worked tirelessly to break down cultural and language barriers between community members and decision makers. Her efforts to get fish consumption advisories posted in multiple languages throughout the Madison area were crucial to protecting subsistence anglers, who are predominantly comprised of members of the Black, Latinx, and Hmong communities. Maria was among the first to bring attention to the planned deployment of F-35s at Truax Field where impacts to surrounding low-income communities would be profound. She successfully urged the Madison Water Utility to proactively communicate about PFAS contamination, to shut down one of Madison's municipal wells when it was found to be contaminated, and to test all the city’s wells to ensure that no one was being exposed to toxic PFAS substances without their knowledge. In addition, Maria investigated Madison-Kipp
Corp.'s ongoing vapor intrusion and PCB contamination issues, which affected the surrounding neighborhood and led to a successful lawsuit for affected neighbors.

Lisa Doerr is a proud part of Wisconsin's family farming tradition. She and her husband produce hay in Polk County for family-owned livestock producers. Over the last several years, Lisa has organized and educated residents of Polk and Burnett Counties about the impacts that large-scale corporate agriculture facilities could have on the community. Lisa spearheaded efforts to develop more protective regulations after local residents learned in 2019 about Iowa-based Cumberland LLC’s plans to build a massive confinement facility that would house up to 26,000 hogs. Laketown, Eureka and four neighboring towns declared moratoria on new CAFOs in their jurisdictions to allow time for the towns to study the potential negative impacts of large livestock facilities on their communities. The six towns formed a joint committee, which was chaired by Lisa, to review the latest scientific literature related to groundwater, surface water, air quality, disease transmission and property values. Four of the towns now have ordinances in place that incorporate the findings and recommendations of the committee. Burnett County officials have also taken action to strengthen county CAFO ordinances. Through her work with the Sustain Rural Wisconsin Network, Lisa continues to support communities looking to hold large livestock operations accountable for their environmental, health and social costs.

Photos of Deanna Branch, Maria Powell and Lisa Doerr can be found here.

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Midwest Environmental Advocates is a nonprofit law center that combines the power of law with the resolve of communities facing environmental injustice to secure and protect the rights of all people to healthy water, land, and air. Learn more about MEA at midwestadvocates.org.