


Cincinnati has cleaner air and water thanks to Marilyn Wall

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POLITICS

Sierra Club's Marilyn Wall made local air and water cleaner | Women of the Year



Sharon Coolidge

Cincinnati Enquirer



Marilyn Wall was a systems programmer at a health insurance company in the 1980s when she started paying attention to the environment.

She read about how Lake Erie was polluted and the fish were dying and thought, "How does society let this happen?"

So she started volunteering with the Sierra Club Miami Group, a national grassroots environmental organization.

You might not know Wall's name, but the region's air and water is cleaner for the decades Wall has spent watchdogging the environment – all on a volunteer basis.

Wall has worked on a number of the Sierra Club's biggest initiatives. There have been efforts to improve Ohio's brownfields. There was a petition to the United States EPA to revoke Ohio's authority to implement environmental laws due to past failure to enforce environmental laws that led to major reforms. There was an effort to stop pollution at the Cleveland-Cliffs steel mill in Middletown.

And then there's what she is most known for: working to stop sewer overflows in Hamilton County.

"Marilyn Wall is driven to defend that which cannot defend itself," said Chris Curran, Sierra Club Miami Group vice-chair. "She speaks for the trees and for our region's rivers and hillsides and wildlife. Her success has been borne in those quiet moments when no one is paying attention. In those moments, when most of us are taking a stroll, binging on the latest show or relaxing over a glass of wine, Marilyn is working, poring over documents, making needed calls or writing comments on a new environmental rule or regulation. She is relentless. She is fearless. And she never, ever, gives up."

Because of Wall's work, Cincinnati and Hamilton County are under a consent decree, the first recognition that sewage was seeping into people's basements in violation of the Clean Water Act. Cleanup is ongoing.

When Wall first began paying attention to the environment, she quickly found she didn't have to look all the way to Lake Erie to find pollution problems. The Mill Creek was so polluted that rocks along the creek bed turned the color of the dyes dumped into it by chemical companies.

She championed cleaning up the creek.

By the 1990s she took up the cause of eliminating odors from the Metropolitan Sewer District of Greater Cincinnati. And then she tackled the issue of combined sewer overflows.

Through it all, she served in positions with the local, state and national Sierra Club.

In the 1990s, the EPA took an interest in the sewer system. After seven years of negotiating, the EPA filed the lawsuit that led the consent decree that governs the cleanup to this day.

Wall, as a citizen, is a named party in the intent to sue and the intervention.

"I never gave up," Wall said.

"Sewage carries disease pathogens that can kill people," Wall said. "It remains a risk to people's health and to the environment. I take a dim view of the lack of interest by politicians to fix this. It doesn't get better or cheaper. There is still so much broken."

Wall, in 2000, was also an integral part of the push to clean up air pollution from what is now Cleveland-Cliffs Middletown steel plant that operates under the company AK Steel. She led a coalition of citizens, Sierra Club members and steel workers to make major charges. Wall said air quality improved, but in 2017, it's an issue she began looking at again.

Wall said she knows there is still more to do to clean up local air and water quality.

"We have to stop overflows and fix equipment," she said.

And she's worried about new environmental issues like PFAS, potentially harmful chemicals used to make fluoropolymer coatings and products that resist heat, oil, stains, grease, and water.

"I've put a lot into seeing this fixed," Wall said. "I would like to see it fixed before I'm in the grave. At the rate I'm going, that won't happen."

About Marilyn Wall

Birthplace: Cincinnati, Ohio.

Current residence: Glendale.

Family: Married to Mike Fremont for almost 30 years.

Education: Bachelor's degree in applied mathematics from the University of Cincinnati.

Occupation: Volunteer. Retired systems programmer and technical manager for Community Mutual Insurance.

Q&A with Marilyn Wall

What inspired you to give back?

"I've benefited from help from others."

What need in the community would you like to see addressed?

"Many areas, including racism, equity, education, criminal justice reform, political representation and environmental pollution."

Who most influenced or inspired you to care about others?

"My aunt, Rita Zimmerman."