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Looking Around America  
**Riding the Hyphen -  
Navigating a Multicultural Life**  
Page 3

# THE REAL DEAL PRESS

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## This Week in Politics

# Citizen action pressures Council, civic leaders to address lead crisis

By R. T. Andrews  
EDITOR

Politics in Cleveland this week has been all about who governs, as an ad hoc but intensely focused group of grassroots community organizations, operating under the banner CLASH — Cleveland Lead Advocates for Safe Housing — made a major civic statement when they filed initiative petitions with the clerk of Cleveland City Council.

With dedicated volunteers collecting 10,338 signatures in just over six weeks in the dead of Cleveland winter, CLASH has in all likelihood assured that council will consider and adopt strong legislation addressing the city's lead poisoning crisis, or engage with an electorate that will have a chance to do so in November.

The county board of elections is now reviewing the petitions to verify they contain the 5,000 valid signatures of registered voters required by Cleveland's charter for the process to continue. That

finding could come as soon as tomorrow, and will likely send fresh tremors along the fault lines that separate Cleveland's philanthropic, business, and political elites from the city's largely impoverished residents.

Successive generations of Clevelanders, mostly black and poor, have been marked by lead poisoning, which typically occurs when lead particles are absorbed into the bloodstream through breathing lead dust that permeates the homes and yards of tens of thousands of city residents. More than 100 Cleveland children every month are diagnosed with lead poisoning, placing them at elevated risk for permanent brain damage, disability, or even death.

An estimated 97% of Cleveland homes were built before 1976, and much of it is dangerously unhealthy for its occupants.

From a political lens, the CLASH initiative represents another assault upon the civic and political regime that has governed Cleveland since at least 1979, when populist mayor

***"The current citizen initiative around the lead crisis is the third uprising against the powers-that-be in the last several years."***

Dennis Kucinich was ousted after one tumultuous two-year term and business-friendly, risk-averse George Voinovich was recruited and installed as his successor. The business and philanthropic interests that set Cleveland's agenda and control its politics clamped down on neighborhood and nonprofit groups to prevent the resurgence of anything resembling popular will finding a foothold in local politics.

The story of how they did it and how proud of themselves they were for the doing was [recently excavated by Scene magazine's Sam Allard](#), who recounted [Fortune magazine's glowing account](#) of the how and why of this "benign conspiracy".

Globalism, continued deindustrialization and the concur-

rent weakening of Cleveland's corporate community, and apathetic political leadership, have combined to eat away at formerly tight reins, especially as economic inequities are fostering greater pushback.

Seen in this light, the current citizen initiative around the lead crisis is the third indigenous uprising against the powers-that-be in the last several years.

First was the "fight for fifteen", an effort to establish a \$15 minimum wage in the city of Cleveland. Broad popular support for this initiative was stymied when Cleveland mayor Frank Jackson asked the Ohio General Assembly to bar cities from enacting such legislation, a request the anti-urban state legislature was only too happy to grant.

Continued on Page 4

# CLASH initiative is chance to remediate toxic city culture

The initiative filing by CLASH this past week is an opportunity for all of Greater Cleveland to hit the reset button on our civic spirit.

More than 10,000 of our fellow citizens signed petitions imploring Cleveland City Council to act with a sense of urgency in addressing a crisis it did not create but which we have all ignored far too long.

When CLASH [Cleveland Lead Advocates for Safe Housing] announced in January its intent to lead a grassroots initiative campaign for an accelerated and effective solution, it immediately surfaced a coalition of the community's most esteemed and distinguished philanthropic and civic leaders who said they had been meeting for almost a year on this very issue. They had a name — Lead Safe Cleveland coalition — so similar to one of CLASH's leading members that even close observers were left to wonder why there were suddenly multiple groups with apparently similar goals all rushing to lead on lead.

But appearances are not always what they seem. A house that poisons its occupants with a silent but debilitating toxin is not a safe space for a family to call home. An enforcement regime that relies upon treating our children as proverbial canaries in mines that we already have every reason to suspect harbor noxious elements is not a moral or efficacious way to treat widespread lead poisoning.

While some civic and political leaders have feinted at cooperation with CLASH, saying they welcome their input and are willing to incorporate any useful suggestions, this reception misses the mark. It suggests that petitioners are amateurs who have somehow wandered into the Red Room without proper attire or demeanor. This is neither an accurate depiction of petitioners or a benign approach to meaningful dialogue.

Leading CLASH members have been researching an effective solution to

Cleveland's lead crisis for years. They have studied model legislation, consulted experts, carefully considered and balanced the interests of landlords and tenants.

They have sought to incorporate existing tools, such as the city's rental registry, into an effective regulatory system that even recognizes and incorporates market forces.

It is conducive neither to civility or efficacy to imply that the groups comprising CLASH are outside agitators or well-meaning rubes. When the Board of Elections validates the petitions, perhaps as early as tomorrow, it will certify that at least 5,000 of the signers are registered Cleveland voters. That's an impressive number of concerned citizens in a community acclimated to dismal voter turnout.

The most astute response Cleveland's elite could make is to applaud this citizens' initiative, pull up more chairs to the table, and use the already vetted proposed legislation as at least a coequal option for action.

The elephant in the room at this time is this town's top down Father Knows Best culture. But neither fear of being uncomfortable, the desire to retain power, or the felt need to keep the barbarians under control, can be allowed to undermine the excellent public service the petitioners have performed.

Let's be honest. If our town fathers were as smart as their mirrors tell them every morning, there would be no need for that other Summit scheduled to take place this summer to address why Cleveland ranks at the bottom of so many national indices. And we wouldn't be living in a place where 97% of the housing was pre-1976 unless we were leaders in restoration, revival, and environmental sustainability.

Now is the time for us — heirs of the once-proud Forest City — to discard the Sheriff of Nottingham mentality and embrace a Round Table.

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**QUOTE of the Week**  
**"Lead toxicity is ... a pathway through which racial inequality literally gets into the body."**

— Sampson & Winter,  
**The Racial Ecology of Lead Poisoning**

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## Looking Around America

# Riding the Hyphen - Navigating a Multicultural Life

By Marilyn Dyson  
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Sometimes I need to remind myself that I “*ride on the hyphen*”. It’s necessary because when I bridge from my African-American background into a predominantly white situation. I start my journey by deciding what to wear and how to carry myself. At the event, I’m on alert. I pay attention the way I project myself and my ideas. Most of the time, I only take a quick pause before I act.

I came across the phrase “*riding on the hyphen*” in 1988. It describes a member of an ethnic community trying to cross over into “mainstream” culture. From the moment I started reading the article, I embraced the phrase. What better way to describe the strain of switching between cultures? But the phrase only names the overall lifestyle; it doesn’t give instructions for navigating the individual situations that I encounter. I need to find ways to adjust as I go along.

As I examine how I’ve developed my coping techniques for the *ride*, I realize that it has been a lifelong process. As a child I listened as my parents talked at dinner about their workday. Both my mother and father discussed incidents with white coworkers on government jobs. I learned about racial slights, coded conversations and misplaced blame. On weekends, my mother took me on shopping trips into segregated downtown Washington; we patronized specific stores and eateries where she knew people would treat her well. She taught me to be on my best behavior. Always saying, “Please”, “Thank you” and assertively standing in line without being aggressive. “Don’t let white people push in front of you. Stand strong.”

At times, an incident would prompt one of my parents to remind me that I needed to improve my behavior. They’d say, “You can’t get away with that. Only white people will” or, “You need to make sure that you have everything right. A white kid will get

an ‘A’ but you may not. Do it right.” Before I started my first full-time job, I received specific instructions not to be the office flunky, especially, “Never get anyone’s coffee.”

Then, I faced the acid test: working in an office. There are no handbooks or written rules for anyone walking into a new office environment. Worse, within the same company each department is different. Determining the rules is a process of observation along with trial and error. As a career coach, I tell people, “There’s the procedures manual and there’s how things get done. The methods are probably not the same.” The key to adapting is observing coworkers’ roles and behaviors as well as selecting the appropriate role models and mentors.

Equally as important as adjusting to the work environment is having a great personal life. This is my hyphen – my separation of professional life from social life. Socially I’m with people like me, family and friends as well as people in faith based and fraternal organizations. People I can turn to knowing they will fully understand my situation. With them, there are entirely different rules for conversation styles and behavior. With them, I drop my daily routine and my mistakes become jokes rather than life altering misdeeds.

Within all of my separate groups, there are multiracial places where *riding on the hyphen* is not necessary: knitting groups. When I’m with knitters everything changes. Whether it’s one-on-one, a small group or a few thousand people, knitters are generally friendly, cheerful and will stop and chat with anyone. I’ll confess we have our own language, manuals and processes but we share them openly and most of us are willing to help anyone who wants to join us. I’m sure other hobbyists have the same rapport with each other. It’s just finding them.

*Marilyn Dyson is a career coach. Born and raised in Washington, DC, she now lives and works in Philadelphia, PA.*



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## Citizen action pressures Council, civic leaders to address lead crisis

Continued on Page 1

The next assault on the levers of power came when a broad-based coalition of ecumenical faith leaders and their congregations, under the banner of Greater Cleveland Congregations, sought to delay and renegotiate a lopsided city and county investment into an expansion of Quick-En Loans Arena. Citizens in that case used a referendum petition to force a public showdown on the issue. Ultimately, for reasons not fully understood or reported, the citizens retreated, but not before the establishment, desperate to maintain a political status quo that kept them in full control of public policy and purse, deployed virtually every tool in its bag to thwart challenge to its authority.

This current challenge may be the most serious yet, with all parties fully informed by the 2017 struggle over “the Q”. While CLASH has nowhere near the army, organizational allies or the resources that GCC mustered, it nonetheless has some monster assets.

First, fighting for children is pretty much the highest moral ground. Second, there is an indefensible track record of inaction — Council President Kevin Kelley acknowledged in an interview with this reporter that

the City has a 1993 remedial plan that remains unimplemented.

A third advantage petitioners have in the coming policy debate is the relative clarity of the issue. It’s not about relative investment in downtown vs. neighborhoods, or economic development, or ownership duties, or fear of Dan Gilbert. It’s about fixing a problem. Or not.

And this time, there may be a crack in the usual alliance between the business and philanthropic communities that are focused on the cost of the fix, and the councilmen who will ultimately vote on the fix. Whether they acknowledge it or not, those 17 elected officials know that just over the horizon is the battering ram of yet another pair of initiatives on pace for November 2020. One would reduce the size of council by more than half; the other would reduce their pay by roughly a third. A spokesman for that campaign says they are more than 70% towards their signature goal and plenty of time on their schedule.

A quick look ahead: County Executive Armond Budish is scheduled to give the State of The County address on April 18. It’s hard to imagine what he might say, given the chaos of his administration.



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