

MOM-AND-POP SHOP:  
Hilton Kelley and his wife,  
Marie, in front of their  
restaurant, Kelley's  
Kitchen, on Austin Avenue  
in Port Arthur, Texas.

THE  
MAKEOVER  
ISSUE

# The *Avenge*ing Angel

What do you do when your hometown is dying—wheezing in the shadow of massive oil refineries spewing poison through parks and playgrounds around the clock? If you're Hilton Kelley, you get angry. Then you get smart—raising your voice, raising money, and raising awareness as one of the most effective, exciting activists of your generation. *By Howie Kahn*

**A**LL ALONE ON AUSTIN AVENUE, in downtown Port Arthur, Texas, Hilton Kelley is standing outside his empty restaurant between the two concrete lions he's got stationed at the door. Six feet two and 240 pounds, with a clean-shaven head, a wedge of gray scruff terminating at his chin, and a tendency to wear sunglasses at night, Kelley—at 51, one of the most important and accomplished environmental justice activists in the world today—possesses the air of a man who will not be intimidated.

The shingles on his slanted roof are the color of orange soda; a bunch were blown off during 2005's Hurricane Rita and have yet to be replaced. We pass through the restaurant's screened-in porch, with its purple trim and gauzy curtains. "Keeps the bugs out," says Kelley. "They're big down here. They bite." Inside, the 1,700-square-foot space has nine four-tops, each bearing a white plastic tablecloth and a battery-operated, vanilla-scented "candle." The upholstery on the chairs is Band-Aid hued. There's a plywood DJ booth near the door and a raised, balustraded dance floor that Kelley built himself in case anybody has the urge to swing out. More practically, Kelley opened this place so people on his side of town could gather, sit, and savor a home-style meal in a neighborhood lacking warmth and hospitality. Even ▶

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: THE LOOMING MOTIVA REFINERY IN PORT ARTHUR; A PLAYScape WITH THE VALERO REFINERY IN THE BACKGROUND; KELLEY AND HIS ORGANIZATION'S YOUTH COORDINATOR, THERRIN JUNEAU, IN KELLEY'S OFFICE; AUSTIN AVENUE, HOME TO NUMEROUS VACANT BUILDINGS.

though Kelley has a proper office nearby, he prefers to conduct his environmental and community work here—conference-calling with EPA offices in Washington and Dallas, and convincing kids to go back to school, all while Sade videos play on a constant loop.

"After Marie feeds you," says Kelley, "I'll drive you over to the fence line to show you some of our problems." Marie Kelley, Hilton's effervescent wife of nearly seven years, comes out of the kitchen smiling ear to ear, holding a large bowl brimming with gumbo. "Roux, ham, hen wings, chicken gizzards, sausage, and shrimp," she says, setting it on the table. "You're not one of these vegan activists, are you?" says Kelley, grinning. "I get a lot of vegans coming through here. It's okay if you are."

I'm not, but the fact is, Kelley's Kitchen, due to the decade-long advocacy of its proprietor, has become a critical refueling station on the small but powerful "Toxic Tours" environmentalists organize to bring burgeoning activists, deep-pocketed foundation members, and clueless politicians to the front lines of America's industrial pollution epidemic. Naturally, some of the green-minded don't eat meat—an act as radical in Southeast Texas as fighting the oil industry.

White twinkle lights are strung throughout the dining room in a way that's surely meant to bring some romance, some magic, to this desolate part of town, but unintentionally, they also mimic the strobes of the sprawling refinery visible through the window. It's just one more reminder that no matter where you go in Port Arthur, the oil is everywhere. Port Arthur, nearly a hundred miles east of Houston and about six from the Louisiana border, sits on America's chemical coast—a stretch of shoreline dominated by one of the highest concentrations of hazardous waste and petrochemical facilities and refineries in the country. The city itself has eight major ones within its limits. Dozens more plants are close by. Millions of pounds of toxic emissions float up into the air annually. The area between Port Arthur and neighboring cities Beaumont and Orange is called the Golden Triangle—from the air, the image of innumerable industrial flares can give the appearance of an epic triangular fire on the ground.

The stacks and towers of the 3,600-acre Motiva refinery at the end of Austin Avenue forge a skyline like an industrialized Oz. The shipping channel at the other end of the street offers views of supertankers that tower above Port Arthur's buildings. From the sidewalk in front of Kelley's Kitchen, it often looks like a larger, stronger city is passing this smaller, weaker one by. Last year one of those tankers, an 807-footer called the *Eagle Otome*, collided with a barge being pushed by a tugboat, spilling at least 396,000 gallons of crude oil into the water and making the air so noxious that the neighborhood surrounding Kelley's Kitchen had to be evacuated.

Kelley always sits facing the door. "I'm an environmental activist in Texas," he says. "I've gotta see what's coming at me." He says grace and eats two helpings of gumbo before getting into his car,



*"Clean, breathable air is a basic human right."*

a black SUV, and driving toward Carver Terrace. "I drive around the West Side a couple of times a day," he says, "just to feel the mood." Sometimes he brings along a machine called a Cerex UV Hound that looks like a giant lunch box and measures toxicity in the air. Other times he brings his checkbook and pays off electric bills so residents won't get evicted, or so a high school senior can afford her college application fees. Once in a while, Kelley will just stand in a vacant lot and dream up plans for new businesses and better housing.

The emptiness and darkness here are staggering. Downtown, glass crunches beneath your feet when you walk. Otherwise it's

silent. "On the West Side, you don't see much traffic," says Kelley, "because people cannot afford cars." Dozens of buildings are empty. Port Arthur Savings, with its grand Ionic columns, is bolted. The arched Roman windows of the old Federal Building are boarded. A windowless metal-and-brick structure on the corner of Houston and Howard actually has the letters HUH suspended, in relief, above its door.

HUH, the building says—a remnant of signage that once reflected commerce. Now it seems to ask everybody who passes by: *What on Earth happened here?*

Carver Terrace is the federally subsidized housing project that

was built in 1952 opposite the Gulf and Texaco refineries, which are now considerably expanded facilities belonging to Valero and Motiva. They pump out almost \$60 million a day in refined crude. That's \$21.9 billion a year, roughly the gross domestic product of El Salvador. Hilton Kelley was born in the back bedroom of apartment 1202E, in 1960. "There are 200 families here," he says, slowing his car, cruising among the symmetrical rows of two-story, barracks-like dwellings. At Kelley's Kitchen, we were 27 short blocks away from the refineries. Here, we are less than one. This is what is meant by the term *fence line*, residential developments literally abutting acres—in this case, more than 7,000—of industrial might, hardly any distance between homes and toxic conditions. "People are breathing benzene out here," says Kelley. "That's a known carcinogen. They're breathing sulfur dioxide, a toxin that messes with your respiratory system. People call that the rotten-egg smell," which grossly understates the issue, making it sound more comfortably domestic than it should—inhaling sulphur dioxide feels like swallowing burlap. "Clean, breathable air," says Kelley, "is a basic human right the folks out here have been deprived of."

Tonight there are precisely zero people outside at Carver Terrace. The only signs of life are the empty swings being pushed ghostlike by the wind, on a playground that overlooks the massive fractionation towers and flare stacks. Some fluorescent light emanates from a shabby food van parked at the back of the complex. "That's their grocery store," says Kelley. "There's no grocery store on the West Side. People walk up to that truck and buy bologna and cheese for three times what it costs at the supermarket because the truck is here and can charge whatever it wants." Across the board, this is a neighborhood in need. There are 3,500 people on this side of town, Kelley estimates. Jobs are sparse. The unemployment rate in Port Arthur as a whole is approaching 15 percent. On the West Side, Kelley thinks it may be as high as 20 percent. There's no healthcare clinic here, either, in a region where pediatric asthma is common and the cancer rate is higher than in the rest of the state. As we turn out of Carver and drive up Terminal Road between the refineries, Kelley is listing the issues, explaining how he must address all of them in order to even begin resuscitating these streets.

IN 1895 the railroad baron Arthur Stillwell was looking for a terminus for his Kansas City Southern line. Originally, he wanted to end it in Galveston, but spirits, he claimed, warned him that the city would be destroyed (eerily, it was, by a hurricane, in September 1900). As a backup, Stillwell chose the current location of his namesake city: Port Arthur. It was meant to be a resort destination with a grand hotel, a pool, a pier with amusements, and a farm that would pioneer new agricultural techniques. But in January 1901, oil was struck at Spindletop, just up the road, in such large amounts that the domestic refining industry was born out of necessity and Port Arthur went forever industrial, erecting its very first refinery that year.

As the refineries grew, the land around them became less and less residentially desirable, although it continued to be developed through 1970 for low-income housing. An urban-renewal report from the 1960s reveals that in 1956, 1,480 families lived in a 60-block area of the West Side that needed *(continued on page 227)*

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: ROB HOWARD (2); GOLDMAN ENVIRONMENTAL PRIZE; ROB HOWARD.



**THE AVENGING ANGEL**  
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rehabilitation even then: “Seven white families and 1,473 Negro families,” it says. Prince Hall and Louis Manor, more low-rise barracks, went up right behind Carver Terrace, and two Port Arthurs had already emerged—one black and depressed by its proximity to refining; the other white, with comfortable homes and cars, and proof of our absolute dependence on it.

East Port Arthur, where we’ve come to drop off Hilton’s truck at the mechanic for unscheduled repairs, seems light-years away from the West Side. Life here—right up through Mid-County—is the civic and commercial sum total of the processes initiated and carried out in all those industrial complexes. Oil here is only for good. By no means is this part of Port Arthur rich, but the people here have the oil jobs, the chemical jobs, and direct, convenient access to everything those jobs produce. Their cars, of course, are all fueled with gasoline. But beyond that, the components in those cars—the plastics, the fabrics—are derived from oil, too. Tires start as oil. The asphalt paving the roads, the parking lots: oil. The Lowe’s, the Target, the Walmart with the mini McDonald’s inside it and the full-size one out front—they all fill their shelves and aisles with products born from oil. Out back on the loading docks, the big rigs and all those foamy packaging materials? That’s processed oil. Plastics as well as many cosmetics, pharmaceuticals, paints, and some clothing all start dark and sludgy. There are, in fact, so many racks full of oily

goods in this part of town—and where you are, too—that it’s almost impossible, six-degrees-of-Kevin Bacon-style, not to somehow link everything we touch to the refining of crude. Or, as one oil executive told me in a chilly conference room overlooking a field of steaming, scaffolded stacks and giant, combustible orbs: “We’ve got what you need.”

On the way to the church in Beaumont where Hilton Kelley first learned the ropes of environmental activism, we stop at a small cemetery on a country road. Kelley is drinking coffee from a Styrofoam cup (origin: oil) and wearing a chunky gold chain supporting a large gold and diamond ornament: his zodiac sign, Leo, embedded beneath the arms of a cross. There’s a BASF chemical plant nearby and more facilities belonging to Motiva and Valero. Tiny yellow birds zag overhead, chirping twangy country chords once they settle into the trees. Standing over the low, modest memorial that bears his mother’s name and life span—BERNADINE KELLEY BRANCH / JULY 12, 1943—FEBRUARY 27, 1979—Kelley starts to cry.

On February 26, 1979, Kelley, then 18 and taking college drafting classes, returned to his house around 2 A.M. with his younger brother, Billy, after a night at a local disco. They found their mother, fully dressed in a polyester pantsuit, lying on her bed, groaning, “Dale, Dale, Dale,” the name of their stepfather. The walls were blood-streaked. “We didn’t know what was going on,” says Kelley. “She was bleeding from a little mark on her temple. I thought maybe Dale had hit her with something during a fight.”

Later, when Kelley went to check on his mother and noticed Dale hadn’t come home, he hopped on his green 27-inch Schwinn and rode to the Branch family store that his stepfather helped open every morning. Kelley barged through the door and got in Branch’s face. Branch aimed a gun at him. “My heart dropped,” says Kelley. “Here’s this man who had been treating me so kindly for years, and he’s pointing a gun at me?” Kelley ran out the door, peddled home as fast as he could, and told Billy, “We gotta get Mama to the hospital. Now.” Bernadine died the next day of brain trauma, the result of a gunshot wound to the head.

Kelley had always been his family’s designated protector. He’d stuck up for Billy until Billy became a karate champion. He’d put himself between his mom and numerous hotheaded men, too. As a boy, Hilton Kelley

was already known by everybody as “Pop.” Avenging his mother’s murder seemed like the automatic response. “Me and Billy were planning on killing Dale,” says Kelley. “We didn’t give a damn about our freedom, our life. We just wanted to get him, and everybody was expecting us to do just that. You’d hear it around town, ‘Those two boys gonna kill that man. Them boys ain’t gonna stand for that.’”

They started plotting. “I wanted my mom to come to me and tell me what to do,” says Kelley. “And one night, a woman in white came to me in my dream. I was dressed in a prison suit in an old Western town. She kept saying, ‘I told you not to do it.’ In the morning, I told Billy. He said he’d had an identical dream. Our mother had come to us from the grave to save our lives.”

From the dream, Kelley established both a strong belief in God and, eventually, a plan to leave home. He joined the navy, wanting to free the American hostages in Iran, but instead sailed around the world on the *USS Roanoke*, a replenishment oiler that carried fuel for jets and other navy vessels at sea. After four years in the service and two in the Navy Reserve, Kelley set up as a civilian in Oakland. He married and divorced twice, fathering three kids, and tried his hand at show business—acting in the theater and appearing as a stuntman, a stand-in, and an extra on TV shows and in movies with Robin Williams and Eddie Murphy. He habitually held several jobs at a time, collecting skills like the merit badges he’d earned as a kid on the way to becoming an Eagle Scout: Kelley worked as a carpenter, a plumber, a handyman, an electrician, a welder, a storyteller at the zoo, an armored-vehicle guard, and a director of an antidrug program in a Bay Area housing project. Cumulatively, his jobs would form the foundation for the community organizing and environmental activism he would later do in Port Arthur. It’s a task that demands infinite resources. Each broken thing here requires a different kind of fix.

When Kelley returned to Port Arthur for a visit in February 2000, conditions struck him as more appalling than they had on previous trips. The place he grew up in, rough as it was, had certain amenities even in the refineries’ shadows. The liveliness he remembered, the stores, the restaurants, the nightclubs were either vestiges of what they had been or simply gone. “It was like seeing the place for the first time,” he says, heading past the ▶

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turnoff for Spindletop, nearing both the church in Beaumont and an ExxonMobil facility that produces 365,000 barrels of oil a day. “The odors from the refineries were pungent,” says Kelley. “There was a large number of people sick with cancer and respiratory problems. Kids were just running, unsupervised, in the streets. It seemed all anybody could do was pray.”

The scene haunted Kelley after he returned to Oakland. He’d stay up nights thinking of ways to help and concluded he’d become the protector once more: *Gotta get off your knees and roll up your sleeves*. He boarded a Greyhound and headed south. But again, the question would become, had Hilton Kelley come home too late?

On the fence line, common wisdom holds that you raise your voice for God and shut your mouth for oil. It’s a *Do not bite the hand that feeds you* kind of edict, and it sticks. But at the Shining Star Baptist Church in Beaumont a decade ago, around the time of Hilton Kelley’s homecoming, God and oil were uncharacteristically clashing. The Reverend Roy Malveaux had been trained by the activist Denny Larson—executive director of Global Community Monitor, a California-based environmental justice and human rights organization—to assess pollution levels with a device made from a five-gallon bucket, a pump, and a plastic bag. Through Malveaux and Larson, Kelley learned the bucket, too. He read up on the chemical compounds in the air and learned what they do to the body. It was all around him: millions of pounds of volatile emissions. Hexane, xylene, toluene. He started knocking on doors. “Do you know what you’re breathing?” he’d ask, and he’d tell them—methanol, benzene—and they’d look at him, angry or helpless or indifferent, like, *Yeah, but what can we do? What can you do?*

Kelley wouldn’t settle for ineffectual help-line dialing. He would become all their voices if he had to, and take all those years acting, writing plays and poems, all that time performing, and channel it into a new kind of gospel for his community. He attended a media-training boot camp in Austin, run by the League of Conservation Voters, and learned to write press releases and get the attention of reporters. “They’d wake us at 3 A.M.,” he says, “and make us write about breaking stories to understand

the urgency of things.”

Putting his new skills into action, he showed up on the steps of city hall in Port Arthur towing a coffin. He painted it black, with an image of a smokestack on the lid, and spoke with conviction to the television and newspaper reporters he had gathered. “This is what our kids are ending up in, and nobody’s doing anything about it,” he remembers saying. “And I charge the local government here for a lot of our kids becoming ill and dying and ending up in boxes like this.” In a later incident, as Kelley tells it, when Port Arthur’s then mayor, Oscar Ortiz, suggested to a reporter that a massive shipment of VX nerve agent waste, headed for incineration at a local facility, was as safe as bathwater, Kelley, who was staunchly opposed to bringing the toxin to town, promptly told him to go bathe in it. “My first protests were wild,” he says. “After that it got easier and easier. I couldn’t sit back and be scared of government and of industry, because the images I keep in my head are the bald-headed women going through chemo and the children hooked up to machines, struggling to breathe.”

Soon Kelley was raising his voice wherever he could. Environmental justice issues, after all, are not limited to Port Arthur, Texas, and so Kelley, fueled by his rapid education—and tapping into his long-standing desire to be famous—began visiting other fence line communities. Kelley traveled to Louisiana’s “Cancer Alley” to jaw in front of a Shell refinery. He joined efforts in Addyston, Ohio, to protest the proximity of a school to a plastics plant. He went to Louisville, Kentucky, to challenge toxic emissions spewing from 11 chemical facilities in a poisoned neighborhood called Rubbertown. He visited polluted sites in Alabama, Mississippi, and West Virginia. He landed in Washington, D.C., and protested at the White House. And he flew to London and The Hague to give it to the Shell brass (multinational, multibillion-dollar Shell co-owns Motiva) at their annual shareholder meetings. Kelley, in his cowboy hat, even wrangled some impromptu face time with Shell’s then chairman, Sir Philip Watts. “Watts listened to me for about 20 minutes,” says Kelley. “When the conversation was over, he knew exactly where Port Arthur was.”

At last the city had, in Hilton Kelley, unyielding, round-the-clock environmental leadership. Which happened just in time for Motiva—whose other owner is Saudi

Aramco, the largest producer of crude oil on the planet—to announce a huge expansion project in September 2005. Its 275,000-barrels-per-day facility would increase output to 600,000 barrels per day. Motiva Port Arthur would become the largest refinery in the United States and one of the largest in the world. Kelley, who by then had founded CIDA, the Community In-Power & Development Association, would team up with his old friend Denny Larson, along with Neil Carman, PhD, at the Sierra Club in Austin, Eric Schaeffer at the Environmental Integrity Project in Washington, D.C., and environmental attorney Jim Blackburn in Houston to block the expansion permit.

“The idea wasn’t to keep the expansion from happening,” says Kelley. “I’m not against industry. Industry brings jobs and money here.” For Kelley the notion hits close to home. Marie’s kids all perform various tasks for the oil companies. And until Hilton convinced her not to, Marie worked at ExxonMobil—as a security guard, inhaling chemicals over the course of 12-hour shifts. “At least 60 percent of the city’s tax base comes from industry,” says Kelley. “It’s not going anywhere. But the question is: How do we coexist?” With that in mind, Kelley and his gang tied up the expansion efforts in formal hearings for months. He wanted the new construction to include measures to lower emissions. He wanted money for healthcare on the West Side and a fund for development and possibly some help demolishing Carver Terrace and moving its residents away from the fence line.

“Stalling projects like these,” says Larson, “throws these guys into a panic. It brings them to the table to start talking.” When the expansion got under way in 2007 (it will be finished next year), Motiva agreed to better emission standards (though environmentalists say the whole system of monitoring emissions is a flawed, bureaucratized science, so “better” is loose terminology at best); the company has spent millions of dollars implementing state-of-the-art emission-recovery programs. And in a landmark settlement, it awarded the Port Arthur Communities Fund \$3.5 million to be put to use on the West Side. All together, Kelley has brought in nearly \$10 million in settlement and community-partnership money that will ultimately help people here buy food in an actual grocery store, complete school, and see doctors.

In April Kelley won a prestigious Goldman

Environmental Prize, often billed as the environmentalist’s Nobel. He is the first African-American male and the first Texan to win the award in its 22-year history. As a result, Kelley has enhanced his standing with policymakers in Washington—at least the sympathetic ones. He was honored at the EPA, in the Oval Office, and by members of Congress, although Kelley’s own congressman, Ted Poe, tried to send a staffer in his stead to a scheduled meeting with Kelley. Kelley declined to see the aide, and Poe, whose voting record indicates his pro-industry positions, met him the next day. Back home, at city hall, site of his coffin protest, Kelley was also recognized for his Goldman win. He spoke to the chamber during a city council session, thrust his weighty bronze Goldman prize forward, and gave his best You’re Going to Have to Deal with Me for a Very Long Time speech. Afterward there was a reception in the fifth-floor lobby with Hawaiian Punch, a sheet cake, and a panoramic view of all the refineries and chemical plants sending puffy white clouds into the sky.

AT EAST MOUNT OLIVE Baptist Church, there’s a funeral in progress for Port Arthur’s senior pastor, Reverend Dr. Arthur Trainer. A line stretches out the door, and Kelley takes his place at the end of it. He’s wearing a seven-button pinstriped suit, red shirt, red tie, red silk handkerchief folded into his lapel pocket. Trainer officiated at Bernadine Kelley’s marriage to Dale Branch. “He was like a father to the entire community,” says Kelley. A band is tuning up inside. A bass line thrums soft and close like a pulse. While waiting to enter the sanctuary, dozens of people want to shake Hilton Kelley’s hand. “I saw you on the news,” they say. “Keep doing it, brother Hilton.”

This is a solemn event for Kelley, and a strategic one as well. You can do all the protesting you want in West Port Arthur, you can win Goldman prizes and score meetings in Washington, but you’ll never really get the people here on your side unless they see you standing with them in prayer. And Hilton Kelley is still looking for a congregation of his own—not just followers but fellow activists. CIDA has 120 members in a city of 54,000.

A couple of nights later, Kelley calls a CIDA meeting at his restaurant. Seventeen people attend, including his wife and brother. “The first time I called one of these,” says Kelley, “it was just me and some empty chairs. So this is progress.” He sits on a stool at the front of

the room, blocking the pull-down screen where Sade is usually singing. His 9-year-old grandson, Nook, Marie’s daughter’s kid, is teetering on a football on the dance floor. “This’ll be short,” he says. But 20 minutes pass, and he’s just getting started. “We’re going into Carver Terrace,” he says, evangelically, “to teach the mothers how to take care of their kids’ breathing.” He asks the assembly to raise hands if they know somebody who’s died of cancer. Everyone does.

Twenty more minutes pass. “Leaders are needed,” says Kelley. He takes another 20 explaining how he became one, until he arrives at this: “Nobody can do it alone.” Kelley slams his hand on a table. Even with its deep faith, the West Side doesn’t have all the time in the world. His disciples respond with yeses, amens. Nodding and clapping. Nook starts doing something like a dance.

Elsewhere on Austin Avenue, Motiva is flashing its lights, blowing its smoke, groaning with expansion while, in this dimly lit dining room, the self-appointed savior of Port Arthur, Texas, is giving his sermon late into the night. He’s come home—this time, from Washington—pounding his fist, waving his hands, speaking as if thousands are listening. Outside, there’s no telling what’s ascending. In here, Hilton Kelley is rising. **□**

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