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THE MIAMI MONSTER TAMER THE THING THAT'S EATING SOUTH FLORIDA -- AND ED BENSON -- HATES POLLUTION. HE'LL GO TO WAR TO CLEAN IT UP

They are spoken softly, almost gently, these words, but they are terrible nonetheless, echoing condemnation and regret.

"We're right on the borderline of having decimated this beautiful environment," says Edmund Benson, shaking his head in the same studied, measured way in which he does everything. "I'll tell you the thing that gets me, that motivates me to do what I've done. It's my generation that's created this. We created this mess, and the least I can do is to help clean it up and prevent future generations from sitting and wringing their hands and saying, 'How could they have done this?' I say it myself. I don't know how we could have let this happen. It's greed. It's unconcern. It's not caring. It's sadness. It's pure sadness."

For the past five years, 60-year-old Ed Benson has waged an almost obsessive, virtually nonstop battle to clean up South Florida. Targeting the public bugbears of ignorance, inertia, apathy and neglect, he has carried on what is sometimes a one-man war against pollutants, pesticides and those bureaucrats and politicians who by their disinterest or inactivity condone the spoilage with which such substances assault the region's air, soil and water.

As chairman of the county's Solid Waste Recycling Task Force, he worked with Dade officials to implement the curbside recycling plan -- destined to become the largest in the country -- approved Tuesday by Metro commissioners. As chairman of the Dade School Board's Nutrition Task Force, he has fought for healthy alternatives to the stereotypically discouraging lunchroom menus of the past and organized awards for outstanding food-service workers.

However, during the past few years, Benson probably has been best known for spearheading a successful grass-roots crusade to get Dade officials to clean up the county's 160-acre incinerator complex northwest of Miami International Airport.

When the \$165 million incinerator was cranked up in 1981, it was hailed as the largest installation of its kind in the country and touted as capable of processing

18,000 tons of municipal solid waste a week. Known technically as a resource recovery facility because it converts garbage to electricity, it quickly acquired an even more socially awkward nickname: the Miami Monster.

Residents of nearby upscale Doral Park and Costa del Sol, where Benson lives, began to complain of airborne soot and ash so dense the stuff had to be scraped off car windshields before driving. They griped about odors that at times were so revolting golfers at area courses demanded "stink passes" instead of rain checks.

"What did it smell like?" says Benson, curling his lip in rumination of the distasteful memory. "It depended on what they were burning. Usually, it smelled like wet garbage. It also smelled very caustic, as if, you know, something bad, like plastics, were being burned, which they were. . . . If you took a toothbrush and put a match to it, that's what it smelled like."

But that was not all. Benson's wife Susan, an elementary-school teacher for the hearing impaired began to be seized by uncharacteristic coughing and sneezing fits.

"First, we had this horrible smell," says Benson, "and then when we had the ash, and we didn't know where it was coming from. People said it was the Everglades on fire. Then one day when Susan was leaving for work and coughing and her eyes were all red she turned to me and said, 'Ed isn't there anything you can do about this smell and this smoke?' She could ask me to go to the moon, and I guarantee you I would be building a rocket.

"So, I just devoted myself to finding out what was causing the smell, what was causing the smoke, and when I found out it was the incinerator, well, the rest is history."

Benson took a survey of nearby residents that revealed similar outbreaks of tearing eyes, runny noses, allergies, rashes, coughing spasms and headaches all over the neighborhood. Not only that. The annoying symptoms quickly disappeared whenever the sufferers went out of town. Benson organized an anti-pollution committee. He wrote letters to Metro commissioners, begging for help.

"I think it was just after I had been elected," Commissioner Sherman Winn recalls. "He sent me a letter. He sent everybody a letter. I went out to his home, picked him up and went out to the incinerator with him, and we walked through that rat-infested slop, and it was quite an experience for him and for me."

A Boston-born retired rental furniture executive savvy about the powerful ways emotions can be stirred by clever marketing strategies, Benson was galvanized by

his tour of the incinerator. Calling his efforts the Garbage Wars, he formed an anti-pollution committee, published fliers and a newsletter (The Gruesome Times: All The Garbage That's Fit to Print), gathered petitions, collected information, led protest marches and hired a helicopter and took aerial photographs of the incinerator complex with its overflowing leech ate ponds and unappetizing mountains of raw garbage, ash and discarded tires.

He also circulated a public relations packet full of screaming diatribes and frightful graphics, brandished "Stop the Dump, Dump the Commission" bumper stickers at public meetings, flew to Tallahassee to lay his cause at the feet of the state Department of Environmental Regulation and conceived a particularly grating "When you come to Miami, bring your racket, clubs and gas mask" ad campaign that he and fellow activists threatened to run in major northern newspapers.

Gradually, the efforts paid off. In March 1985, the State of Florida sued the county and the plant's operator, claiming both were guilty of polluting the neighborhood. In the suit's wake, the county installed new plant management and allocated more than \$40 million to refit and sanitize the facility and its operations.

The last phase of improvements, the installation of another \$40 million worth of scrubbers to keep noxious elements from being spewed into the atmosphere, is in the permitting stages.

"We're about 85 percent cured," says Sherman Winn. In September 1988, the county, poorer but wiser, recognized Benson's efforts by naming an eight-block stretch of Northwest 97th Avenue Edmund F. Benson Boulevard.

Last month, Benson received an award from the Giraffe Project, a nonprofit organization that recognizes people -- Joan Baez, Ed Asner and homeless advocate Mitch Snyder among them -- who stick their necks out for the common good.

Does all this make Ed Benson happy? Yes and no. "The fact remains -- and I don't know why people can't understand it -- but it isn't healthy living near a garbage incinerator," Benson says. "I mean, it's never going to be as clean as a McArthur's milk operation. Those people who appreciate clean air ought to leave. Move away. It's not safe here environmentally."

So, why does he stay? "Oh, I'm leaving. I don't know when, but I'm going to. I'll probably move to the Beach. I feel that fate has held me here to protect those souls who really aren't familiar with problems like this. People live in a fool's paradise." Face-to-face, Ed Benson comes across as a serene and authoritative man, better known for the dapper suspenders he affects than for verbal pyrotechnics or personal bombast.

"I have only one gear. That's it," he says. "It's first, or slow. But I have no reverse. I think one of the reasons I've been as successful as I have is that I am non-confrontational. I don't believe in demeaning people. We have enough trouble trying to jack ourselves up in the morning as it is. So, I don't make enemies. I don't ridicule people. It's not my style."

His preferred technique, by now honed to virtual perfection, is to persuade by erosion, pecking, pecking, and pecking away until resistance collapses.

"If you get a letter from him, and you don't do something about it right away," says one long-suffering county employee, "you'll get 25 more letters from him."

Dade School Board member Janet McAliley, upon whose Environmental Awareness Advisory Committee Benson serves: "People like him succeed because they're very single-minded, they're smart, they know a lot about their area of interest, and they are bulldogs. You almost hate to see them coming sometimes, but they get things done."

Earlier this winter, he was instrumental in derailing a proposal to build a new elementary school near the incinerator. "I lost some of my constituency over that," he says. "Somebody even called me a crackpot. That was a first." The father of two grown daughters, Benson makes it a habit to be particularly sensitive to how uninspired, unhealthy environments might affect children.

"They don't have any choice about where they live or what they eat," he says, "and they're going to have to carry this load in the future."

That unpleasant prospect keeps Benson going. "This is all I do," he says. "I don't do stock markets. I don't do golf. This is it."

His latest efforts include mapping out a public awareness campaign to ban pesticides from hospitals, other public buildings and households; stressing pre-cycling (buying only items that will not pollute the environment) and getting published *The Homo Sapiens' Parts, Operation and Maintenance Manual*, a hefty tome he wrote to help individuals live healthily by learning to deal with everything from constipation, guilt and stress to massage and illness prevention.

"This is the best time of my life," he says. "Nothing frustrates me. I'm doing my best, so how can I possibly be frustrated. If my best isn't good enough, I just accept that. So far, it's been pretty good."

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Other articles about The Bensons and the ARISE Foundation include:

“Fathers Are Crucial in Children’s Lives” Miami Herald June 6, 2004

“ARISE Recognized For Creative Safety Leadership” Miami Herald October 29, 1998

“Enviro-Cops Go On the March” Miami Herald May 19, 1994

“Kids Celebrate Four Years of Policing the Environment” Miami Herald May 19, 1994

“Parent Questioning Environmentalist’s Agenda” Miami Herald July, 20, 1993

“200 Elementary Students Sworn in as Enviro-Cops” November 7, 1992

“Self-Esteem, Spirits Soar at Rally” Miami Herald October 25, 1991