



Denise Hoagland on the deck of her Marine Terrace home

"America Needs Us to Win"

Denise Hoagland has seen more sunrises in the past 14 years than most people see in a lifetime.

But, these days, the peacefulness of those early morning hues is fleeting.

"Besides waking up to an ocean view, I have to say our family is under more stress than we've ever been," Hoagland says. "It's turning quite ugly."

Hoagland has led the fight against eminent domain abuse in her neighborhood. She has spent hours at city hall, poring over documents, attending meetings, talking to lawyers and town officials, trying to understand how she could be losing her home without ever knowing it.

"I thought, 'I live in America. That can't happen,'" Hoagland explains. "If they were going to take my home, wouldn't they at least have to send me a letter?"

Hoagland had closely followed the Long Branch redevelopment project, fearful that her home might be a target. She remembers going to a meeting at the Hilton Hotel in Long Branch fairly early in the process. A display depicted the entire beachfront redevelopment project. She could see her home. It was still there, porch and all.

"We felt safe," she remembers.

That feeling of security was shattered when the Hoaglands applied for a permit to install a deck around the house. The city said she would have to sign a waiver stating she would not seek compensation for the improvement if redevelopment were to become a reality, Hoagland says.

That raised a huge red flag. "They went about this in a very silent way," Hoagland says.

She and her husband began to consult with lawyers, intent on keeping the home she had fallen in love with 14 years ago. She wanted to preserve the place where she had planted her garden and given birth to her daughters.

In the beginning, she had no idea of the long, bitter fight she faced. Now, there are some days when Denise Hoagland wants to give up.

"A lot of our neighbors have left. The neighborhood has changed a lot. It's affected my children. I've lost friends. I don't feel comfortable at PTA meetings anymore," she says. "My husband and I are very happy together. I have three wonderful honor-roll children. We could drive off into the sunset and live happily ever after."

But something keeps her going.

Hoagland recalls an incident several years ago when an African American man drove into her neighborhood. Hoagland was in the yard, working on her garden. The man stopped and asked about the signs scattered throughout the neighborhood that protest eminent domain abuse. She explained the situation to him.

He was quiet for a minute and then he drove slowly down the street. He parked on the ocean road and walked along the beach. Then he got back in his car and cruised around the neighborhood for awhile. Finally, he stopped again in front of Denise Hoagland's house, where she was still working in the garden.

"Can I ask you a question," the black man said.

"Sure," Hoagland replied.

"How does it feel to be oppressed?"

Until that moment, it had never occurred to Hoagland that she was being oppressed. But she suddenly understood. And so she keeps fighting, not only for herself and her family, but for people everywhere.

"I think America needs us to win."