

"Federation Corner" column
The Montgomery Sentinel - February 13, 2014

Civic Fed honors electric utility activists Milstein and Hensal

by Paula Bienenfeld
MCCF First Vice President

The cold winter month of February was an appropriate time to present the Civic Federation's Community Hero Award to two individuals who have been working hard to push PEPCO, the County, and the State government, towards a reliable, sustainable and safe energy system for our community.

Abbe Milstein and Eric Hensal both saw the need for a new relationship with PEPCO, the monopoly energy provider in Montgomery County. When power went out during unseasonably hot and cold periods of the year, both stepped up in order to make a change and demand accountability, with Abbe starting Powerupmontco, and Eric, Public Power for Montgomery County (<http://mocopublicpower.org/>).

Together the sustained pressure and publicity they have brought to bear on the government and PEPCO has shed light on the doings of PEPCO and the Public Service Commission (PSC). They have also explored the history of how the county came to be held hostage by a monopoly business that answers only to its stockholders; as well as our options for sustainable energy and accountability from an energy organization. Both Abbe and Eric have long histories of civic activism and political action.

Abbe Milstein received her B.A. from Goucher College and her J.D. from Widener University School of Law and was admitted to the Pennsylvania Bar in 1994. After working for several years at a law firm in her home state of Pennsylvania she became a law clerk for Sen. Patrick Leahy, on the Senate Judiciary Committee. She then joined the Democratic Leadership Council's Progressive Policy Institute where she worked on domestic policy issues. She next moved more into the political arena, becoming deputy campaign manager for Democratic Congressman Joseph M. Hoeffel, the first time he won his Congressional seat representing Pennsylvania's 13th Congressional District.

Abbe founded Powerupmontco as a response to the frustration citizens experienced from unreliable energy service, and lack of responsiveness from both PEPCO and the government. The primary function of Powerupmontco is to educate consumers and elected officials about the utility rate case process before the PSC.

After hearing from many Powerupmontco supporters who struggled financially with power outages because they had home-based businesses, the group decided to intervene in its first rate case, Case No. 9311 last year. 9311 is currently under appeal by many parties. That turned out to be a pivotal case because the decision by the PSC to grant a tracker to Pepco broke with historical legal precedent. Another issue she identified is the existence of contact voltage risk zones, risk areas for contact or stray voltage, located throughout the state. The contact voltage zones issue came about as a result of reading through COMAR statutes in preparation for Powerupmontco's/AARP Reliability Seminar.

Eric Hensal received his B.A. from Kent State University, holds a certificate from the National Labor College, and has a Masters degree in Public Administration from the University of Baltimore. He has worked on labor and progressive issues for many years, and is the owner of Murray Hill, Inc. a Public Relations and Communications firm. Eric founded Public Power for MoCo (<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Public-Power-for-MoCo/127828317261890>) in 2011, an organization that is fighting to end the legal perpetual franchise owned by PEPCO and win some measure of local accountability. Public Power focuses on the public power option. Public Power is requesting that the

county hire an independent consultant to conduct a feasibility study for a publicly-owned electric utility in the County, similar to what has been done, for example, in Boulder, Colorado.

The two organizations came together last December 11th when Eric and Abbe held a joint news conference to highlight the contact voltage risk zones, which can be deadly. The best known tragedy in our area is the death of 14-year-old Deanna Camille Green of Baltimore, who died in 2006 when she touched a fence while playing softball in a neighborhood park. Two hundred and seventy-seven volts of electricity leaching from faults in underground wires killed her. PEPCO has identified 190 acres in the Bethesda Central Business District, 186 acres in downtown Silver Spring and 69 acres near Courthouse Square in Rockville as contact voltage risk zones.

At their meeting on February 10, the Civic Federation was honored to present the Community Hero award to Abbe Milstein and Eric Hensal for all of the work they do in our community.

The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800-1000 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to the montgomerycivic@yahoo.com