

# Rachel's Environment & Health News

## #542 - Activist Mom Wins Goldman Prize

April 16, 1997

[People in the Ohio Valley have spent 15 years fighting one of the world's largest toxic waste incinerators, known as WTI.[1] One grass-roots community leader in the WTI fight, Terri Swearingen, was honored this week by receiving the Goldman Environmental Prize for North America --the environmental equivalent of the Nobel Prize.

The WTI incinerator, in East Liverpool, Ohio, was initiated in 1982 by one of President Clinton's wealthy political backers in Arkansas -- Jackson Stephens of Stephens, Inc., in Little Rock.

President Clinton and Vice President Gore visited East Liverpool while campaigning for election in 1992; at that time, Mr. Clinton said that, if he were elected, WTI would never be allowed to operate. Mr. Clinton was elected in 1992.

In 1992, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) admitted during Congressional hearings that it had illegally issued an operating permit to WTI. The huge incinerator began burning hazardous waste in 1993, 1100 feet from an elementary school. Mr. Clinton has not returned to East Liverpool since he became President.

Here is Terri Swearingen's acceptance speech for the Goldman Environmental Prize, given April 14, 1997.]

by Terri Swearingen

I am like the turtle on the fencepost. I did not get here alone. In addition to the many caring and courageous people I work with in the Ohio Valley, special recognition goes to Greenpeace, and to Dr. Paul Connett and his wife, Ellen.[2] And all my love, respect and deepest gratitude go to my husband, Lee, my daughter, Jaime, and my family. I accept this award on their behalf, and on behalf of all the environmental activists across the country who are working just as hard, but whose work has not been recognized in such a profound way. It is appropriate that the work of grass-roots activists be recognized. I am excited about this award, not just for personal reasons, but I believe it vindicates the efforts of thousands and thousands of grass-roots activists in this country, and around the world, who work on environmental issues on a daily basis. To the Goldman family, my most heartfelt thanks.

I am not a scientist or a Ph.D. I am a nurse and a housewife, but my most important credential is that I am a mother. In 1982, I was pregnant with our one and only child. That's when I first learned of plans to build one of the world's largest toxic waste incinerators in my community. When they began site preparation to begin building the incinerator in 1990, my life changed forever. I'd like to share with you some of the lessons I have learned from my experiences over the past seven years.

One of the main lessons I have learned from the WTI experience is that we are losing our democracy. How have I come to this sad realization? Democracy is defined by Merriam Webster as "government by the people, especially rule of the majority," and "the common people constituting the source of political authority." The definition of democracy no longer fits with the reality of what is happening in East Liverpool, Ohio. For one thing, it is on the record that the majority of people in the Ohio Valley do not want the WTI hazardous waste incinerator in their area, and they have been opposed to the project from its inception. Some of our elected officials have tried to help us, but the forces arrayed against us have been stronger than we or they had imagined. Public concerns and protests have been smothered with meaningless public hearings, voodoo risk assessment and slick legal maneuvering. Government agencies that were set up to protect public health and the environment only do their job if it does not conflict with corporate interests. Our current reality is that we live in a "wealthocracy"--big money simply gets what it wants. In this wealthocracy, we see three dynamics at play: corporations versus the planet, the government versus the people, and corporate consultants or "experts" versus

common sense. In the case of WTI, we have seen all three.

The second lesson I have learned ties directly to the first, and that is that corporations can control the highest office in the land. When Bill Clinton and Al Gore came to the Ohio Valley, they called the siting of the WTI hazardous waste incinerator --next door to a 400 student elementary school, in the middle of an impoverished Appalachian neighborhood, immediately on the bank of the Ohio River in a flood plain--an "UNBELIEVABLE IDEA." They said we ought to have control over where these things are located. They even went so far as to say they would stop it. But then they didn't! What has been revealed in all this is that there are forces running this country that are far more powerful than the President and the Vice President. This country trumpets to the world how democratic it is, but it's funny that I come from a community that our President dare not visit because he cannot witness first hand the injustice which he has allowed in the interest of a multinational corporation, Von Roll of Switzerland. And the Union Bank of Switzerland. And Jackson Stephens, a private investment banker from Arkansas. These forces are far more relevant to our little town than the President of the United States! And he is the one who made it that way. He has chosen that path. We didn't choose it for him. We begged him to come to East Liverpool, but he refused. We begged the head of EPA to come, but she refused. She hides behind the clever maneuvering of lawyers and consultants who obscure the dangers of the reckless siting of this facility with theoretical risk assessments.

I always thought of the President of the United States as an all-powerful person, who could even, if necessary, launch a war to protect his nation's people. But in the case of WTI, we have this peculiar situation where the President dare not come to East Liverpool, Ohio. It may be the one place in the whole of this country, maybe even the world, where he cannot go. He cannot go to East Liverpool to see for himself what he has allowed. He cannot go to East Liverpool to see with his own eyes where this incinerator is operating. We know that if he came to East Liverpool to see it for himself, he would not be able to say that it is okay. We know that he would never have allowed his own daughter, Chelsea, to go to school in the shadow of this toxic waste incinerator. And that's precisely why he dare not come to East Liverpool. He knows that it is wrong. He knows that it is unacceptable. The decision to build the incinerator there was political, and the decision to allow it to operate, despite the stupidity of its location, is political. The buck stops with President Clinton. No child should have to go to school 1000 feet from a hazardous waste facility, and no president should allow it. He cannot shove off the responsibility to a bureaucracy. I believe you cannot have power without responsibility.

The third thing that I have learned from this situation, which ties in with the first two, is that we have to reappraise what expertise is and who qualifies as an expert. There are two kinds of experts. There are the experts who are working in the corporate interest, who often serve to obscure the obvious and challenge common sense; and there are experts and non-experts who are working in the public interest. From my experience, I am distrusting more and more the professional experts, not because they are not clever, but because they do not ask the right questions. And that's the difference between being clever and being wise. Einstein said, "A clever person solves a problem; a wise person avoids it." This lesson is extremely relevant to the nation, and to other countries as well, especially in developing economies. We have learned that the difference between being clever and being wise is the difference between working at the front end of the problem or working at the back end. Government that truly represents the best interest of its people must not be seduced by corporations that work at the back end of the problem --with chemicals, pesticides, incinerators, air pollution control equipment, etc. The corporate value system is threatening our health, our planet and our very existence. As my good friend, Dr. Paul Connett, says "WE ARE LIVING ON THIS PLANET AS IF WE HAD ANOTHER ONE TO GO TO." We have to change the way we look at the world. We must change our

thinking and our attitude. This is so important. We MUST change the value system. We have to live on this planet assuming that we do not have another one to go to! We must get to the front end of problems so that we avoid the mistakes of the past. Thinking about our planet in this way puts a whole new perspective on what we do and how we act. For example, if we are dealing with issues of agriculture, we need to be thinking about sustainable agriculture with low chemical input. If we are looking at energy, we need to look at solar energy, energy that is sustainable. If we are discussing transportation, we should be looking at ways of designing cities to avoid the use of cars. And when it comes to hazardous waste, we should [be] talking about clean production, not siting new incinerators. We should be trying to get ahead of the curve. People at the grass-roots level get taught this lesson the hard way --they get poisoned by back-end thinking. They learn that we have to shift to front-end solutions if we are to save our communities and our planet. Citizens who are working in this arena --people who are battling to stop new dump sites or incinerator proposals, people who are risking their lives to prevent the destruction of rainforests or working to ban the industrial uses of chlorine and PVC plastics --are often labeled obstructionists and anti-progress. But we actually represent progress --not technological progress, but social progress. We have become the real experts, not because of our title or the university we attended, but because we have been threatened and we have a different way of seeing the world. We know what is at stake. We have been forced to educate ourselves, and the final exam represents our children's future. We know we have to ace the test because when it comes to our children, we cannot afford to fail. Because of this, we approach the problem with common sense and with passion. We don't buy into the notion that all it takes is better regulations and standards, better air pollution control devices and more bells and whistles. We don't believe that technology will solve all of our problems. We know that we must get to the front end of the problems, and that prevention is what is needed. We are leading the way to survival in the 21st century. Our planet cannot sustain a "throw-away society." In order to survive, we have to be wise, not just clever. This is why, ultimately, it is so disastrous that there are people who think that they've solved the WTI problem with more technology. You cannot patch up an injustice --an unjust situation --with technology. The developers behind WTI made a fundamental mistake in the beginning by building the incinerator next door to an elementary school and in the middle of a neighborhood. This is a violation of human rights and common decency. As Martin Luther King said, "INJUSTICE ANYWHERE IS INJUSTICE EVERYWHERE."

Even after seeing so much abuse of the system that I have believed in, I still hold on to the slender hope that my government could once again return to representing citizens like me rather than rapacious corporate interests. If they do, then perhaps there is a future for our species; if they don't, we are doomed.

--Peter Montague (National Writers Union, UAW Local 1981/AFL-CIO)

=====

[1] See RACHEL'S #255, #287, #288, #298, #315, #320, #325, #326, #328, #341.

[2] Ellen and Paul Connett publish the weekly WASTE NOT, 82 Hudson Street, Canton, NY 13617; phone: (315) 379-9200; fax: (315) 379-0448; E-mail: [wastenot@northnet.org](mailto:wastenot@northnet.org). \$48/year for individuals and well worth the price.

Descriptor terms: hazardous waste incineration; wti; citizen activism; terri swearingen; goldman environmental prize; paul connett; ellen connett; waste not; jackson stephens; bill clinton; carol browner; epa; speeches;