



FIGHTING FOR POLLUTION CLEANUP IN A COMPANY TOWN: LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD SILVER VALLEY PEOPLE'S ACTION COALITION (SVPAC)

“When you live in a community like this, it becomes normal to see one out of ten kids that can't walk or can't concentrate. And not just kids, grownups. It becomes the norm; you get used to it.”

Silver Valley City Councilman and Local Businessman

For Barbara Miller, it was a simple journey home that inspired her to do the unthinkable: take on the company in a company town. “When you live here, you may see the devastation of the hillsides, denuded and destroyed, but you don't grasp the severity. The same is true for the health of the people. When I came home and did some research, I understood.”

Miller had grown up surrounded by the environmental and health consequences of 100 years of mining in Idaho's Silver Valley. Located just east of Spokane, Washington, the valley was awash in polluted mine tailings, and saturated with residue from smelter stacks accumulated over 100 years of mining activity. Lead was the principle pollutant left behind, but there was also arsenic, cadmium, mercury and zinc. Like most who grew up in Silver Valley, the severity of the impact of that pollution hadn't really hit Miller while she was growing up there. It wasn't until she had lived elsewhere and then come back that the contrast hit home. But it wasn't just an environmental and health disaster that Miller would have to tackle when she helped found the Silver Valley People's Action Coalition to address the environmental and health consequences of unbridled mining. Not a coalition of other organizations, but a coalition of local activists, the group certainly was looking at an uphill fight. The local power structure was badly lopsided, having been dominated by mining interests for generations. “The company town mentality was so great that people were often confused and very afraid of speaking out,” says Miller. So before Miller could even begin to address the physical problems of pollution and lead

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poisoning, she had to figure out some way to even the political odds. "And so what we attempted to do," says Miller, "was level the playing field. To give people the knowledge and the platform to respond." What Miller would discover is that trying to raise awareness and foment for change, a combination of a rural culture (the area is 70 percent rural) and a company-town mentality would make her task very difficult. She found a pervasive lack of open-mindedness among local citizens to her message that the community was in real danger. And she found a local business and political culture that was downright hostile to it. In other words, in trying to help those who for so long had been exploited and then ignored, the coalition would still be in for the fight of its life.

Old-Fashioned "Door Knocking"

In canvassing the community, Miller discovered that she wasn't entirely alone. Doing what she calls some old-fashioned "door-knocking," she contacted churches, labor unions, social service groups and other community leaders and activists. Even though she found that activists in the valley were "oppressed, depressed and suppressed," 20 of the groups she contacted were interested in joining forces in a coalition that would focus on the environmental and public health of the valley. After a series of meetings the 20 activists had a list of 11 issues that they thought would be worth tackling in order to "improve the quality of life" in the valley. But of all them, one issue in particular seemed to hold the key to progress on all the rest. It made no sense to push on public health or economic development if the pollution in the valley wasn't going to be cleaned up. And so the coalition decided that their key issue would be to leverage the 1983 listing of 21 square miles of Silver Valley as a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Superfund site—a designation that came just two years after the last mine closed down.

The coalition met with EPA officials and learned that the agency had already spent \$25 million studying pollution in Silver Valley. EPA officials agreed that it was time to get to work. "We thought it would be a short-lived project, that it was just a matter of EPA doing the cleanup in a short amount of time," says Miller.

The problem, as it would become apparent to coalition members, was that despite the listing and EPA's apparent willingness to move forward, there was still a lot of community skepticism and opposition to such action. Indeed, some—particularly those in the business community—viewed the designation as stigmatizing. At the same time, there was a strong streak of denial community wide when it came to the impact of the mines and even the future of mining in the valley. The mines had had such a powerful hold on the psyche of the region's residents for so long that convincing people of the damage they had inflicted was one of SVPAC's toughest jobs. "Most of the people in this valley just go about their day to day lives," says one SVPAC activist. "Many of them are still praying and hoping that the mines are going to open back up, and we'll have prosperity in this valley again." Even more basic, many residents still weren't even aware of the potential damage from lead poisoning. "When you live in a community like this, it becomes normal to see one out of 10 kids that can't walk or can't concentrate," says a city councilman and local businessman. "And not just kids, grownups. It becomes the norm; you get used to it."

Keeping up the Pressure

Given the region's ambivalence about the designation and cleanup, it took constant pressure from the coalition to maintain the cleanup's momentum. Despite the fact that the coalition had successfully pushed the EPA to hire predominantly local contractors, which led to jobs and wages coming back into the badly depressed economy of the valley, local politicians and business leaders worked steadily to try and undermine the coalition's credibility. It took non-stop grassroots action by the coalition to keep community pressure on. Using door-to-door surveys, meeting with civic groups, dissemination of as much information as possible about the scope of the pollution and its impacts, the coalition was able to keep tipping the playing field—slowly and surely—in its ongoing struggle for public credibility. Miller was attacked personally and continually; many of those who were active behind the scenes with the coalition didn't want their names to get out for fear of being ostracized by others in the community.

As SVPAC pushed on cleanup it continued its own research into how extensive the pollution in the valley might be. In doing that research, activists made a disturbing discovery. Two retired miners had been to the local library, where the EPA had actually filed much of the Silver Valley pollution study material developed in the wake of the Superfund listing. The SVPAC quickly discovered that the pollution problem was far more widespread and far more serious than it had been led to believe. Lead levels in the soil - where EPA was concentrating its cleanup efforts - were bad enough, but lead levels in residents' homes—where EPA was doing no cleanup at all - were off the charts.

Despite the evidence of much more serious pollution problems than previously disclosed, and despite constant pressing by SVPAC, by the mid-1990s cleanup work in the valley had all but stalled. Repeated applications from the SVPAC to the EPA for a technical assistance grant to study the status and impact of the cleanup were being routinely denied. In the meantime, contamination from the 21 square miles had spilled into another 1,500 square miles as contaminants washed out of the valley and into the Columbia River watershed.

"What we eventually discovered was that the EPA had negotiated a deal with the mining companies, letting them off the hook for liability," says Miller. "And meanwhile we were getting a half-done cleanup."

Taking the Fight Outside the Valley

It was at that point that the coalition decided to switch strategies. They decided to make contact with outside groups that might be able to lend them support, on the one hand; they started bypassing the EPA's regional people and pushing to make contact with EPA officials in Washington, on the other. They held a regional summit on pollution and public health. They began getting national attention and national press coverage. And the coalition started to see some action. The stalled cleanup caught the eye of EPA's ombudsman Bob Martin, who was serving under then-Secretary Carol Browner. With

Martin's backing, SVPAC received its technical assistance grant and the coalition was able to document the continuing inadequacy of the cleanup.

Meanwhile, nothing at all was being done to address the public health impacts of the pollution. Sporadic blood testing of residents had not resulted in any concentrated effort to treat people, or educate them to ways in which they could mitigate the impacts of such conditions as chronic lead poisoning. "One problem is that lead doesn't stay in the blood," says a psychologist who has been working with SVPAC on identifying the neuropsychological impacts of toxic metals. "The lead is metabolized into bones and organs (lead displaces calcium in bone)." Anecdotal evidence abounds of the impacts of pollution on public health in the valley: cancer clusters, children and adults with the acute symptoms of attention deficit disorder, skeletal and neurological symptoms of premature aging. "I met a forty-year old man who'd lived here all his life. His doctor diagnosed his spine and bones as equivalent to an eighty-year old's," says the psychologist.

In it for the Long Haul

What had begun as a straightforward and presumably short-term push to get a valley cleaned up and residents' health needs addressed has turned into a nearly 20-year fight for environmental justice. Today, cleanup continues, but at a pace and intensity that environmentalists see as inadequate to the task. To address the health impacts of the pollution, SVPAC is in the process of fundraising in order to launch the Community Lead Health Project, a clinic that will be dedicated to researching and treating the effects of lead poisoning region-wide. Also, the push continues on cleaning up interiors of homes and schools of lead residue. A recent proposal by the EPA to expand the Superfund site has met with continued opposition from local businesses and most state and local politicians even though it could mean a re-energizing of the cleanup effort. At the same time, though, the very existence of the Superfund program is in jeopardy, says Miller, which is why SVPAC is also focusing on the larger battle of getting the Superfund law reauthorized, something the Bush Administration seems unenthusiastic about doing. And so while SVPAC continues to push hard on the cleanup locally, it is also trying to galvanize action on Superfund nationally.

"It has been slow and it has been a struggle," says Miller. "But the flip side is that people in a rural and oppressed community can distinguish between what's right and what's not right. And a lot of them have spoken out and we will continue to find ways so that more of them can."

Fighting for Pollution Cleanup in a Company Town: Leadership Story

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The LCW Research and Documentation Component is housed at the Research Center for Leadership in Action at NYU's Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service. LCW uses three parallel lines of inquiry ethnography, cooperative inquiry and narrative inquiry – to explore questions related to the work of leadership. RCLA is committed to developing participatory approaches to research and uses dialogue with LCW participants as a core of the research process. While the award portion of the program has concluded, RCLA continues to partner with nonprofit organizations to develop together new understandings of how social change leadership emerges and is sustained.

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