

CHEMICAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION

SHARON MCCORMICK

RESOURCES FOR EDUCATION AND ACTION FOR COMMUNITY HEALTH
IN AMBLER (REACH Ambler)

Transcript of an Interview
Conducted by

Lee Sullivan Berry

at

Sharon McCormick's home
Ambler, Pennsylvania

on

8 November 2013

(With Subsequent Corrections and Additions)

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ABSTRACT

Sharon McCormick grew up Northeast Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, moving to Ambler when her children were adolescent. She chose Ambler for its walkability, quaintness, and neighborhood feel. At that time she did not know about the asbestos dumps there.

McCormick first became interested in local politics when she opposed a merger of police departments. She increased her involvement when the Borough Council wanted to permit a high-rise on the BoRit Asbestos Area. She immersed herself in research about asbestos and the previous EPA remediation in Ambler. She encountered the frustration of dealing with a bureaucracy, but she persevered, helping found Citizens for a Better Ambler and then the BoRit community advisory group (CAG). The high-rise was defeated, and BoRit was put on the National Priorities List of the EPA's Superfund sites. More importantly, other residents became educated and were also galvanized to demand more comprehensive containment and monitoring of the waste.

McCormick was elected to the Borough of Ambler Council, where she hopes to continue informing people of health risks and to keep the EPA working as she thinks they should. She feels that if the seventy-two acres of the former asbestos factory were cleaned up entirely, natural water courses would solve flooding problems and provide a draw for future manufacturing. She does not think that covering the sites with geofabric and layers of dirt is adequate containment, and has been championing full removal and new technology to accomplish this task since 2009 . She is accepting of being known as a “crazy lady” for chasing children out of the polluted creeks and dumps, and for telling people not to smoke around asbestos.

McCormick's has taken pictures of the waste still extant and has compiled statistics of the area's deaths and illnesses due to asbestos. Ambler is enjoying a revitalization, however, and no one wants to discourage incomers or visitors, so McCormick is sometimes told to be quiet. She fights repeatedly against the appellation “acceptable risk,” which she insists does not mean safe. Nevertheless, McCormick loves living in Ambler. She likes the diversity, the schools, the neighborliness, and she is optimistic about the ultimate results of all her efforts.

INTERVIEWER

Lee Sullivan Berry earned a master's degree in medieval studies from the University of Notre Dame, and a bachelor of arts degree in religious studies from the University of Pennsylvania. As a staff member in the Center for Oral History, Berry conducts background research and oral-history interviews, edits transcripts of completed interviews, and coordinates with interviewers and interviewees to finalize transcripts. She was the lead interviewer for the REACH Ambler project and has presented her work at meetings of the American Society for Environmental History and Oral History in the Mid-Atlantic Region.

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| <p>Grew up in Northeast Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Moved to Ambler. Familiar with Montgomery County; wanted to be suburban, not rural. Loved house, renovation. Likes walkability, quaintness, neighborhood feel of Ambler. Did not know about asbestos. Father told her about pollution in Ambler. History of house, others like hers. Moved to Ambler just before economic recovery; now many restaurants and theater; increasing housing values; younger professionals moving in. County and state aid.</p> | |
| Early Foray into Politics | 5 |
| <p>Opposed merger of police forces. Heard about proposed high-rise project on BoRit Asbestos Area from neighbor; went to Council meeting. Meeting had much argument, little information; worried about Section 8 housing. Found out about asbestos then. Discovered Borough's liability (brownfield). Council wanted rid of land; no other development proposed.</p> | |
| High-Rise and Concern about Asbestos Pollution | 15 |
| <p>Influenced by William Baker and William Rose, read Remedial Investigation/Feasibility Study (RIFS) from U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) records. EPA said problem belonged to Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (DEP). Found Wissahickon Creek filled with asbestos-containing waste. EPA's previous remediation now breaking down. Difficulty of collecting remediation costs from polluters. Pollution control left to states when possible. Wanted to provide information to residents, especially to supporters of high-rise. Submitted three petitions; second one got site Superfunded. Feels EPA not aboveboard, discourages public participation.</p> | |
| Continuing Anti-Pollution Work | 20 |
| <p>Mary Maxion and McCormick are co-founders of community advisory group (CAG). Many at first meeting, but then EPA took over to promote its own agenda. McCormick wanted to help people understand workings to mitigate fear. Thinks Ambler at risk; EPA covering inadequate, poorly monitored. Other contaminants found as well. Not personally afraid but wants to know risk. Showed EPA pictures of asbestos-containing waste along creek, in other areas. Scientist at Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) appalled at pictures. Unable to examine asbestos piles already fixed; skeptical about containment. People better informed, less afraid, but worry about driving away potential incomers. West Ambler Civic Association meetings; multiple jurisdictions involved.</p> | |
| Pictures: Pollution Undeniable | 28 |
| <p>Elected to Borough of Ambler Council. Pictures of demolition debris from Nicolet Industries, Inc. Debris still there. Ambler Boiler House not part of asbestos manufacturing facility but powered the factory and town. Feels demolition not "on the</p> | |

up-and-up.” EPA removed derelict buildings but did not clean up. Feels reuse impossible unless asbestos-containing waste removed completely and monitored by EPA, not residents. Decrease in participation in CAG by both citizens and EPA. Four proposals for use. Liability for Ambler if land reused. Stratford, Connecticut, Libby, Montana, and Waukegan, Illinois’s experience with EPA. Statistics of deaths, illnesses due to asbestos exposure in area; biased low. “Acceptable risk” versus “safe.” Added risk from smoking. Her own children smoke. Chases children from creek; glad to be known as crazy lady.

Other Challenges for Ambler

40

Serious flooding. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) increased flood plain. Removal of hazardous waste from seventy-two acres of old factory site would redirect water and reestablish the flood plain. Water and sewer system old and inadequate. Manufacturing options for Ambler. Removing waste very time-consuming and costly. Site could be developed without long term risks if waste removed completely.

Conclusion

45

Still loves living in Ambler. Likes diversity of race, wealth, work. Schools good. Neighborliness. Continues to fight for complete removal of toxic waste. Other people for REACH Ambler to talk to.

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