

CHEMICAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION

TIM HUGHES

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

Transcript of an Interview
Conducted by

Lee Sullivan Berry

at

Tim Hughes's home
Whitpain Township, Pennsylvania

on

4 February 2014

(With Subsequent Corrections and Additions)

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ABSTRACT

Tim Hughes grew up in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, one of eight children whose father was a surgeon. Hughes took a degree in business from St. Francis University and started his own business, which has thriven and expanded. He now lives in Whitpain Township.

Hughes first heard about asbestos hazard when he bought a house in Ambler, but asbestos was only vaguely mentioned; the two remediated piles were considered safe, and the three remaining piles were unnoticed or ignored. By coincidence, his father, a thoracic surgeon, might have treated early cases of asbestos-related disease. Hughes first became really aware of asbestos when a developer petitioned to build a seventeen-story high-rise on one of the unremediated piles. Hughes put together a flyer with pictures of how the high-rise would make Ambler look, and he and his wife distributed the flyers to as much of the citizenry as they could. Many people became concerned then, and Citizens for a Better Ambler (CBA) was formed. The CBA paid for a feasibility study that demonstrated the infeasibility of the developer's promise to "take care of" the asbestos, and after a year the Borough of Ambler Council vetoed the high-rise; by then, however, the CBA's research, aerial photos, money spent, signatures gathered, and legal advice had persuaded the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to put the site on the National Priorities List (NPL), and the site became BoRit Asbestos Area. At that point the EPA formed a community advisory group (CAG), with CBA as its nucleus. Hughes credits Sharon McCormick with much of the hard work. Hughes remained on the CAG for a year or so and is generally pleased with the remediation done so far. He keeps up with the CAG's activities through emails from Robert Adams; he thinks Ambler is safe from asbestos right now, but points out that Kane Core, the proposed high-rise location, has not changed.

Hughes considers flooding to be Ambler's main problem right now. The town's revitalization has also led to a dearth of parking. He says that the Boiler House is a beautiful and ecologically friendly example of this revitalization; Richard Mattison's former mansion grounds are being developed into homes and condominiums, and the mansion itself retained. Hughes says the most important lesson for other communities is to discover the truth and to promulgate it; the CBA members were dismissed at first, but they persevered, and now Ambler residents are well-informed about asbestos problems. He also thinks that continuing institutional oversight is crucial, pointing out the decay of the previous remediation. He is very proud of the CBA-turned-CAG's accomplishments and success and of his role in that success. He is proud of the friends he made as a result of his involvement and proud of the citizens of Ambler.

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<p>Father's patients, workers at asbestos plant, often had lung disease. Asbestos vaguely mentioned when Hughes bought house in Ambler, but no one talked about hazard. Remediated two piles considered safe; three other piles unnoticed or ignored. Details of parts of site.</p>	
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<p>High-rise project caused stir, at first for loss of view and then for inappropriate size. Hughes made and distributed flyers with pictures in Ambler and Whitpain Township; got many phone calls as result. Citizens for Better Ambler (CBA) founded, aroused concern about asbestos. Opponents of opponents to high-rise project few; mainly Borough of Ambler Council, who wanted tax revenue. Shops in high-rise would help Main Street project, just beginning revitalization. Kane Core's promise to take care of asbestos incomplete and unrealistic. One year for Council decision against high-rise; four years to get on U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) National Priorities List (NPL) as BoRit Asbestos Area.</p>	
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<p>High-rise defeated, but asbestos still there and now recognized as hazard. Citizens for a Better Ambler continued, but founder Sharon McCormick now on Borough Council. Members assigned areas of research about site and remediation in general. Unremediated portions fenced and posted with warning signs. Remediation breaking down; animals burrowing, vegetation breaking through, etc. Pictures taken by CBA not permitted in Council, so emailed to each Councilperson. CBA obtained eleven hundred signatures, spent seventy-five thousand dollars on fight. Lawyer retained; remedial investigative feasibility study [RIF] procured from Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), and site put on EPA's NPL. McCormick indefatigable.</p>	
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<p>BoRit CAG started when site placed on NPL. Salvatore Boccuti, pilot and member of CAG, took aerial photos to help monitor progress. Hughes still on email list maintained by Robert Adams. Stayed on CAG for a year or so; pleased with work so far; though would have preferred removal. Thinks waterfowl preserve a "gem"; hopes Whitpain Park will rise again. Feels Ambler residents safe from asbestos hazard right now, but Kane Core remains the same; could happen all over again.</p>	

General Thoughts

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Ambler's main problems now: flooding, parking. Much new housing; new commercial properties. Boiler House beautiful example of Ambler's revitalization. Richard Mattison's former mansion (now St. Mary's Villa) being developed. Most important lesson for others: find the truth. CBA dismissed at first, but kept working and spreading the word. Feels Ambler residents well-informed about removal. Importance of continuing institutional oversight; make sure asbestos remains covered, is never exposed again, unlike first Superfund site. Very proud of CBA's accomplishment and success – a “big deal” – and of his role, the friends he's made, and Ambler's citizens.

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