

Email Interview with Kristen Iversen

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Kristen Iversen is the author of *Full Body Burden: Growing Up in the Shadow of Rocky Flats*, the story of growing up in Arvada, Colorado, near the Rocky Flats Nuclear Production Facility. Iversen is now an activist and author who works to tell the stories of the people of Rocky Flats. She holds a PhD and has taught at several universities.

1. Why did you decide to write this book? Was there one particular incident that incited you?

I have been thinking about writing this book ever since I was a teenager, because Rocky Flats was such a big part of my life. There was one day when I came home from work, put my kids to bed, and came downstairs and turned on the t.v. There was a Nightline show on tv, and it was an expose on Rocky Flats. They were interviewing people I worked with, including Department of Energy Manager Mark Silverman, who was one of the first managers to tell the truth about Rocky Flats. That was when I really began to learn what was happening at the plant and how dangerous it really was. I learned that I was working next to 14.2 metric tons of plutonium, much of it unsafely stored. I thought, how could I grow up next to this plant, and work at the facility, and not know the truth? That was the day that I knew I would quit my job, and the day I quit was the day I knew I would someday write a book.

2. What was it like to learn about all of these incidents that occurred during your childhood?

It was shocking. When I was younger, we always believed that the government, and the corporations that operated the plant, would tell us if they were putting our lives, our health, or our properties at risk. It was very difficult for my parents to learn the truth (especially my mother), as they believed they were raising their children in a beautiful and healthy environment.

3. Our project is about the rights of people to be safe from hazardous materials and the responsibility of the United States government to protect the people. What should the government have done to protect the people of Rocky Flats?

They should have told us the truth, and not lied to us about the fact that the plant was making plutonium pits and working with very dangerous toxic and radioactive materials for decades. They were aware of offsite contamination as early as 1957 and it went on, secretly, for decades. There were more than 200 fires at Rocky Flats (and other problems), and there was a great deal of contamination of the soil, water, and air in surrounding residential neighborhoods. Residents should have been informed, and allowed to evacuate the area during fires. Residents should have been allowed to make informed decisions as to whether or not they wanted to live in the area.

4. Knowing that people were largely in the dark about Rocky Flats during its time of operation, can you contrast how they felt about it then and now? Are people afraid, angry, upset, or apathetic? We are trying to get a feel for how people felt about the hazardous materials stored in their areas then and now.

Today, people are still very upset about Rocky Flats, especially given the increased level of cancer and other health problems in the area. They feel betrayed by the government, and by Dow, Rockwell, and EG&G. Some people feel that it's best to keep quiet about the plant and the "cleanup" because they are concerned about property values and the value of their home.

5. From your story about your sister Karma sneaking on the facility grounds, it sounds like security at Rocky Flats was pretty lax. That seems odd for a facility that makes nuclear materials. Is there a reason?

Security has always been an issue at nuclear facilities. It was particularly lax in the 1970s. For a more recent example, look up the story on Sister Megan Rice and Oak Ridge. Sister Megan Rice is an 84-year-old nun who was recently sentenced for trespassing at Oak Ridge. Part of her intention was to demonstrate lax security, although her larger mission was to call attention to radioactive and toxic contamination and the ongoing global problem of nuclear weapons.

6. We read about the lawsuit that started in 1989. After it was overturned and the Supreme Court refused to consider the case, the jurors were barred from talking about the case, but decided to anyway. What were their reasons and what did they hope to accomplish?

Only a few jurors spoke to the press; many were (and are) afraid of going to jail if they speak out. Their primary concern was to inform local residents that a great deal of toxic and radioactive contamination had occurred for decades, and that it was (and is) ongoing. They felt that local residents had the right to know what was going on.

7. Are you afraid that you will develop cancer one day (due to the fact that people in exposed areas develop cancers anywhere from 10% to 33% higher than the rest of the country)?

Yes, of course. I have had some serious health issues, and my siblings have, also. We try to stay very healthy. We know many people, residents and workers, who are sick or who have died, and feel that their illnesses were due to Rocky Flats.

8. The last clean-up efforts ended in 2006; do you think the government will take more responsibility and clean up the site more?

I don't believe there will be any further cleanup onsite, and of course there has never been any cleanup of contaminated off-site areas. The best we can do at this point is TELL THE TRUTH, tell the story of Rocky Flats and why it is such an important story, historically and environmentally. I believe the Rocky Flats Wildlife Refuge should always remain closed to the public. And I believe that studies show that there should be no home construction near Rocky Flats. They are building new homes right next to the site. It's unbelievable.