Lisa Arkin: I’m often asked how I went from being a university professor in the performing arts to becoming a full-time environmental health advocate. There was a defining moment, indeed. It involved an egregious land use fiasco and two inspiring people, and suddenly I wanted to help stop the construction of the Hyundai chip plant in the West Eugene wetlands.

At that time I was a mother of two young boys, and I often took them to explore the wetlands. It was a wonderland of wildlife and plants, but after Hyundai was built, and spewed toxic chemicals such as hydrofluoric acid into the air, most of the critters died off or went away. I started thinking about how industrial chemicals wreak havoc on the environment and on all bio-systems. I was incensed that people who never gave their permission to be poisoned were exposed to noxious chemicals against their will.

At the same time I met Mary and Bob O’Brien, two motivating environmental leaders who were working to change the way lenient land use laws allow chemical trespass to occur. The first phase of the factory was already built, thanks to cronyism. But I joined the successful effort to stop Hyundai’s plans for a second and third expansion of the plant; that was my first lesson in grassroots organizing.

The factory is now a mothballed wetlands eyesore, having ruined the landscape and siphoned off tax dollars that would have gone to school funding. But it would have been three times as devastating had it been built. I became a true believer in the effectiveness of citizen organizing to prevent harm to our community, both environmentally and economically.

Arkin serves on a number of state workgroups on toxics, health, air quality and water quality.

Lisa Arkin, Executive Director of Beyond Toxics, has 13 years of experience in research and teaching in higher education and 12 years of non-profit management experience. Arkin initiated legislation for the Oregon State Senate that changed the statewide discussion around pesticides, drift and children’s health and resulted in key legislation to reduce pesticides at all schools and state property in Oregon.

Her organization was also the first to research the relationship between field burning and underreported asthma in Oregon rural communities. This research helped make the case for the ban on field burning in the Willamette Valley.

Under Arkin’s leadership, Beyond Toxics organized the model Environmental Justice project in the West Eugene Industrial Corridor.

This project revealed correlations between children’s asthma and proximity to industrial sites emitting significant amounts of air toxics.

Beyond Toxics has successfully introduced and provided leadership for the passage of four significant laws: 1) Ban on Field Burning, 2) No topping off and vapor control at gas stations; 3) Oregon’s School Pesticide Reduction law; 4) State Integrated Pest Management.

We have set our sights on bringing forward strong legislation to reform the Forest Practices Act in 2015. Oregon has allowed itself to fall behind regulations in other states by continuing to follow a set of outdated, egregious laws that allow herbicide aerial sprays over homes and tributaries to salmon streams and drinking water. We have publically laid out our policy recommendations (for example, see http://www.beyondtoxics.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/ PoisonedParadise-85x5x11_PRINT-Ready.pdf ).

We believe that an informed public who breathe, drink, eat and absorb through our skin is safe, and does nothing to harm developmental processes. I believe that such a paradigm shift will involve inserting a human rights ethic into every aspect of regulation. Each of us has the right not to be chemically trespass upon.

We can go beyond toxics by supporting a system that stops using profit and efficiency as the excuse to poison the planet and all living systems.