



Lessons in environmental justice

By [Jane Stebbins, Pilot staff writer](#) February 07, 2015 12:26 am



University students visiting Curry County film and interview Cedar Valley resident Katheryn Rickard for a documentary about the chemical spraying of herbicides in the residential area near Gold Beach.

Nick Sanchez is on a mission — and he's ready to fight the state to accomplish it.

The University of Oregon student came to Curry County last year to hear the stories of Cedar Creek residents who were sprayed by herbicides in a timber operation in October 2013 — and he came away determined to spread the word and help change state law that seemingly turns a blind eye.

“It was really overwhelming,” Sanchez said of his first visit to Gold Beach last year. “This feeling of desperation, the pain and struggle. I can only imagine what they're going through.”

This year, he and 17 others in the Environmental Justice course and others taking a documentary class returned last weekend to see where those folks are, a year later.

“I was so inspired last year, I said, ‘Let's make this a course,’” said Aylie Baker, the graduate student teaching the class. “The power we have, as university students at a state college? It's important to band together, to listen. It's a really raw emotion, this anger. I'm a (native) Oregonian, and I can't believe this is going on in my state. We see. We care.”

Oct. 16, 2013

Forty Cedar Valley residents fell ill to stomach, eyesight, skin and respiratory illnesses immediately after the spraying operation on nearby timber lands in the hillsides northeast of Gold Beach. After months of delays, the Oregon Department of Agriculture determined the operator of the helicopter, Steve Owen of Pacific Air Research of Roseburg, was guilty of lying and withholding information in connection with the investigation.

He and his company were each fined \$10,000 and his pilot's license was suspended for a year.

But that didn't change how pilots can operate — how close they can spray to water sources and salmon habitat, how they truly clean tanks between application and whether they spray during optimal weather conditions — so the neighbors banded together and filed suit.

And Owen's back in the air again, although giving the Cedar Valley neighborhood a wide berth, one resident said.

Last year, eight UO students came to Gold Beach to talk to the residents, see the land where grass and flowers will no longer grow and the ponds where frogs no longer sing. They saw some residents' bright red, scaly rashes and waited through their coughing spells to hear their stories.

“It was heartbreaking to see these people, in a state and a community that betrayed them,” said Arielle

Shamash, a senior who hopes to find work in a field to combat such incidents. “We really appreciate where we live, but the fact that we live in the 21st century in the United States and people are still getting treated horribly and denied health care and help from the government is something we never thought was happening. Hopefully I’ll get to do something to make sure this doesn’t happen anymore.”

“The community has displayed such resilience and strength throughout this process, but there’s so much work left to be done,” said graduate student Timothy Chen. “It raises questions for me, such as, as an outsider, what kind of support could I offer that would make struggles like this more sustainable, effective, and ultimately successful, when industries so firmly hold the attention of our representatives?”

“I think the students were really deeply impacted by the personal stories they witnessed over the weekend, and are grappling with the fact that issues like this exist,” he added. “But they’re also driven to look at possibilities for change.”

Réna Nénot, a junior from France, said she was surprised the spraying incident even occurred.

“It’s very powerful,” she said of the stories. “I’m overwhelmed. I would never have to face this situation (at home). The corporations have to prove they’ll do no harm, to the environment, to the citizens. Not the other way around.”

Residents Lily Hansen and Kathryn Rickard both said they are disgusted with the manner in which state and local officials seemingly ignore the plight of their constituents.

“The county referred it to state — they didn’t want to deal with it; they said they don’t have the ability of handle a community health problem,” Rickard said. “The (county commissioners’) job is to help us navigate through this quagmire of bureaucratic crap. We’ve met three times, given them suggestions — an ordinance, buffers — they just give us lip service.”

“You can understand why people are so frustrated, especially because they never get any results,” said resident John Burns, who is spokesman for the group involved in the suit trying to change the laws. “It’s a sad situation. They’re our public servants and they’re not honoring the duty they hold.”

None of the commissioners listed the aerial spraying and water quality issues among their goals for the next term, Rickard noted.

“No one helped us,” she said. “Not the Department of Health, not the commissioners, no one. All they want is for us to go away.”

“We’re hopeful the state will do something, but there’s been a lot of resistance,” resident Mike Phillipshek told the students. “It’s been downplayed. It’s inherent in the agencies: ‘This is the way it’s worked in the past; this is the way it will continue to work,’” “They just don’t want to hear stories like this.”

Baker and her students do.

“(Cedar Valley resident) Chuck Ott asked, ‘You’ve been here a day, you’ve seen it, what does it mean? What are you going to do?’ Each student was profoundly impacted,” Baker said.

Kimmy Underwood spent four hours outside crying, she added.

“She said, ‘I knew I had to devote my life to this,’ that ‘This is something I can’t step away from,’” Baker related. “The students were really impacted by being down there. What does it mean to live in

Oregon, a state where they allow this kind of spraying?”

Spreading the word

Rowan Hardenbrook, a senior in the environmental leadership and documentary class called Just Stories, was impressed with how the Gold Beach community has pulled together.

“They’ve really bonded through this serious hardship,” she said. “It really says something about how small towns interact with the Department of Agriculture and forest service.”

Hardenbrook said she’d like to see legislation to enlarge buffer zones around waterways.

“And for the town to get some closure for what happened,” she added. “It was really an eye-opening experience.”

“Things are just now starting to change; people are taking notice,” Burns said, pausing. “It’s taken a long time to get to this point.”

Lisa Arkin of the Eugene-based nonprofit Beyond Toxics, said she’s impressed with the change she’s seen in the students pursuing the incident. She has been fighting for similar changes in the law in a similar incident in the Triangle Lake area west of Eugene where chemical contamination has sickened numerous people.

“The first time they met the (residents), they were in a state of shock,” she said of the students. “Now they have a deep admiration for the community’s reliance. The first time they didn’t know the difference between an herbicide and a pesticide. Now they’re talking about volatilization, organs that are affected by this chemical, how the chemicals interact with each other; they understand the laws and statutes — they own this information.”

How far the suit goes in court — or changes in the legislature — is anyone’s guess, and the students asked for advice.

“Get on the bandwagon and keep a lot of stuff from happening,” Smith said. “We want to see things healthier, whether it’s the crab from the ocean, the clams off the beach, the fish from the river.”

“They’re worried about our air,” Rickard said. “Why not worry about our water? I challenge all of you. You need to get on this. We’re speaking up, we started to make some change. We need you to help finish it.”

The students will take their film to the Public Interest Environmental Law Conference in Eugene March 5-8. More information can be found at <http://pielc.org>.



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