

EXPERIENCE—RUTH THOMAS, COLUMBIA, S.C. PIONEER ENVIRONMENTAL ADVOCATE HEIGHTENS AWARENESS

SGI-USA member and co-founder of Environmentalists, Inc., Ruth Thomas has been working to prevent pollution for more than 30 years. There are those who think of her as the mother of the environmental movement in South Carolina. Ruth shares her experience as a pioneer environmental advocate with World Tribune staff writer Stephanie Celano.

World Tribune: How did you get involved with environmental advocacy?

Ruth Thomas: I read an article in a local magazine about plans to process the radioactive waste fuel of nuclear power plants in South Carolina. I just couldn't stand by and do nothing.

So I called Townsend Belser, the lawyer and former nuclear engineer who authored the article, and said: "I'll do anything. Just tell me what to do." For months I tried to find an organization that would investigate the Barnwell reprocessing plant, and the proposal to recycle uranium and plutonium.

When I couldn't find any, with the help of two other people, I started Environmentalists, Inc. (E.I.), a non-profit organization committed to protecting the environment. With only a limited technical and scientific background, I became Mr. Belser's assistant. I evolved into a key contact for scientists and engineers as well as taking on some of the legal work in a licensing challenge, although I had no legal training. Mr. Belser taught me how to do research and bring out evidence—by the time I finished training with him I felt that I had earned a degree in environmental law.

WT: What is the purpose of Environmentalists, Inc.?

Thomas: E.I. is an educational organization. We're a unique organization that provides a needed service; all the services are provided by volunteers—including mine. What we do is make sure there is complete and accurate evidence and records for decision-makers to make as wise decisions as possible. We do this by many means, but mainly by gathering information through consulting with scientists, health professionals, technical experts and lawyers and studying and understanding the decision-making process of all the various agencies involved, in particular licensing agencies. We also are involved in raising questions and getting necessary hard-to-get documents that help clarify misleading information.

We don't concentrate on a particular environmental issue; for example, some organizations address only the pesticide problem while others limit themselves to preservation of wetlands or other natural areas.

We teach people to represent themselves when there is a pollution problem in their community. Writing one letter to the government is not going to change things. It takes numerous letters, questions, requests for meetings and reports. You will get more cooperation with this approach, rather than one of just expressing opposition.

E.I. has worked on issues related to nuclear power plants, economics of nuclear power and hazardous waste. Also the idea that decision-makers—governments and companies—need to take into consideration the waste problem before they go full-speed-

ahead with a technology. We've participated in the proceedings of more than 10 poorly planned projects.

We've also made numerous TV and radio appearances, taken part in educational conferences and seminars—including "The Ecology and Human Life" exhibition sponsored by the SGI-USA—related to nuclear power, reprocessing nuclear fuel, radioactive waste and hazardous waste.

Finally, we contact the press and give them information. Take, for example, the fires in California. The articles I have seen didn't explain how difficult it is to detect the extent of plutonium spread by fires on the Hanford reservation, but nobody tells the public this fact. One way to keep information away from people is not to tell the whole story. That's why we inform the press of relevant environmental information.

WT: Which people or groups solicit your organization's services?

Thomas: Sometimes it's a group of citizens in a neighborhood who come to us because they think their water is polluted or they think a particular facility in their neighborhood is releasing pollution. Sometimes we go directly to them and ask if they need help or if they know their rights. They might not understand the process.

E.I. also works with a variety of organizations, sharing information and providing technical and strategy services.

WT: Do you handle environmental issues primarily in South Carolina?

Thomas: We are involved on a state, national and international level.

Some say we spread ourselves too thin, but we select issues that other organizations are not following yet. We help out by not limiting the issues. Then we have a method of outreach for other cases.

People or organizations are receptive to us because we've worked with them, let's say, on a local burial site of hazardous waste, and then they will listen to us when we talk about a statewide or national issue such as radioactive waste.

WT: In 30 years of dealing with environmental issues, what progress have you made?

Thomas: E.I. was instrumental in exposing evidence about health and safety risks related to the Barnwell nuclear reprocessing plant in South Carolina. E.I. was the first intervenor in the hearings on the construction of the Barnwell plant. Our efforts attracted the attention and coverage of the press to the dangers nuclear reprocessing posed to the environment and people. This ultimately influenced key politicians to get involved, such as Jimmy Carter, then governor of Georgia, because reprocessing operations at the experimental facility would threaten Georgia's air and water.

It was a slow process that lasted more than six years, but eventually we won out. Through the licensing challenges, evidence was brought out, which forced the nuclear industry to pull out of the South Carolina project, and the federal government changed its policy banning the recovery and use of plutonium and uranium.

I was involved in a struggle where my work and the work of others prevented a multi-million dollar facility from opening that would have released all sorts of radioactive pollution into the environment—that's enough success to keep me motivated for the rest

of my life.

Some people don't believe that I could have been at the center of all that. They just see me as an ordinary former art teacher.

It's known that we have prevented certain sources of pollution from happening and that we're protecting people, particularly children. Children suffer the most from exposure to radiation.

WT: Your life has changed dramatically, hasn't it?

Thomas: Yes, definitely. People who knew me as a child would never have thought it was possible. I was shy and barely said a word; as a child I had a slight speech impediment.

In fact, sometimes as I go over transcripts where I'm cross-examining scientists, I think, "My gosh, is that me?"

My determination has grown over the years as an environmental advocate and as a Buddhist. Based on my roots, I never imagined that I would be considered by some to be a mother of South Carolina's environmental movement.

WT: What attracted you to Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism?

Thomas: I was attracted to this practice because I could see that this woman who introduced me to Buddhism had changed even in the short time that I had known her. I asked her what she was doing because she looked happier, more content. That's when she started taking me to SGI meetings in 1978. I was pretty miserable at the time. My husband had died and things were changing with my work with E.I.; the project I was working on had ended. Many environmental challenges remained, but my former fellow workers scattered and contacts went their separate ways. I was lonely and depressed. I was also frustrated at the time by a feeling of not knowing what to do next. There were those who discouraged me from continuing to work on environmental issues. I knew I needed something and I thought, "Well, if being a Buddhist helped her, it could probably help me." I was at a very low place in my life, thinking about giving up.

I was 58 when I was introduced to Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. I still remember my first meeting—it was a gathering of women.

WT: You're a pioneer in our Buddhist organization as well as the environmental movement. SGI President Ikeda has written: "Pioneers are self-motivated individuals, people who take the initiative. Therein lies their glory and victory. Those who have guts and make efforts to be pioneers in all areas are great; they are heroes who have broken out of the mold of the ordinary. Such an attitude gives rise to a true joy and sense of fulfillment" (*Daily Guidance*, vol. 2, p. 61).

Do you think this applies to you?

Thomas: Well, in the sense that it's a goal that I try to live up to. I think it's important to have a goal, something to work toward.

So often when I read guidance and poems written by President Ikeda, I feel as if he knows what I am experiencing. That he is speaking directly to me, offering me the direction and encouragement that I need. For example he says: "There can be no such thing as an easy practice. Understand that true Buddhist practice lies in persevering

through suffering and adversity, and overcoming them.”

Another favorite of mine is: “There’s a saying, ‘One lion is worth more than a thousand sheep.’ No matter what troubles you may encounter, courageously stand alone, like the lion. Faith of this kind is what we mean by the Gakkai spirit.”

WT: When did you first develop such a pioneer environmental spirit?

Thomas: I actually stopped some men from cutting down some trees to build an apartment complex. That was my first hands-on experience in 1969 or ’70 in South Carolina where I lived. There was no thinking about it. I just ran right up to them and told them to stop cutting the tree because the land was not supposed to be developed. That was *real* action. I was just an individual going for a walk.

That night I went door to door collecting signatures in the neighborhood, which I then took to the mayor, who stopped the apartment project.

WT: You’re not afraid to speak out, are you?

Thomas: I’ve criticized Secretary of Energy Bill Richardson and other people in the government. I’ve been critical of the Department of Energy for their decision-making. There are plenty of people who recognize me to be their critic.

These agencies need to be criticized. In fact, they need more people to criticize them, to hold them accountable. They’re not held accountable and they act like they don’t have to be.

I figure we’re helping the government and businesses. If they listened to us, they’d save a lot of money and we wouldn’t have as serious environmental problems as we have. We stopped the Barnwell plant and contributed to a national nuclear power policy change.

WT: You’ve received some recognition for your work, haven’t you?

Thomas: In 1989, I received the Jefferson Award from the Institute for Public Service in recognition of my continued efforts for the environment. This national award had previously been given to those who had significantly impacted involvement with children, medicine and other areas. My receipt of this award was the first time in South Carolina that environmental issues received their recognition.

Most recently, on April 22, the 30th anniversary of Earth Day, a local coalition of environmental groups in Columbia, S.C., presented me with The Century Award as a unique, one-time recognition for my 30 years of environmental advocacy in South Carolina. In addition, this coalition created a Ruth Thomas Environmental Advocacy Award that will be given out each year to honor others who contribute significantly to the environmental cause.

WT: You mentioned SGI-USA’s “Ecology and Human Life” exhibition. Tell me about your involvement in it.

Thomas: In 1996, when the exhibition came to Columbia, S.C., my attitude about this practice began a transformation. This activity gave me the opportunity to get many other organizations and colleagues and friends involved. I also organized a skit, participated as

a symposium speaker, designed an exhibit panel of my environmental activities and was invited to be part of the ribbon-cutting ceremony.

My chanting helps me to work through my feelings of anger and frustration, which so often go along with being in the environmental movement. The encouragement and support of the SGI-USA leaders and members contribute so much to my being able to continue to take an active part in a variety of pollution concerns.

This year I have become more focused on the power of an individual and how developing myself through Buddhist practice has a direct bearing on how I influence others in my efforts to challenge environmental issues.

WT: Do you feel you're making a difference? And how can an ordinary person help make a difference?

Thomas: Yes, I definitely feel I'm making a difference. That's why I continue to work as president of Environmentalists, Inc. My work has made life healthier by preventing radioactivity from contaminating the air, water and soil in the case of the Barnwell reprocessing plant, as well as limiting the pollution from other facilities operating South Carolina.

The way other people can make a difference is by getting involved in educating themselves. I encourage people to help us, as well as other environmental organizations. Their energy, input and creativity are needed to deal with problems in communities throughout the country, including those in their own neighborhoods. You count. Your presence and participation are needed to assure that consideration is given to the interests of the public.

As we go into the 21st century, I believe that we have many opportunities and struggles. For example, there is a need to continue raising questions and issues regarding the proposal for plutonium recycling from nuclear weapons. Ultimately, as the number of environmental advocates grows, decision-makers will be more responsive to the concerns of the people. As a witness of 20th-century war and violence, I would like the youth to inherit the spirit to ensure that our society is safe and beautiful for future generations. This will take a lot of work, such as influencing decision-makers to make their policies and determinations on as complete and accurate a record of evidence as possible.

WT: What do you see as your next challenge?

Thomas: I plan to develop an environmental youth internship program. The internship program would create an opportunity to teach young people what I have learned through my experience. It will also provide an opportunity for them to teach me how to use computers, videos, the Internet and other new developments for doing research and networking. We could learn from each other.

Tomo and Laura Kawaguchi and Scottie Hazelhurst contributed to this article.