A Crusader in ‘Cancer Alley’

Wilma Subra works to rein in environmental degradation along Cancer Alley, an eye-watering corridor of more than 150 industrial facilities along the Mississippi River between New Orleans and Baton Rouge that produce a quarter of the nation’s petrochemicals.

She's a winner of a MacArthur “Genius grant” who totes her grandchildren to public hearings, giving them crayons to scribble on the back of scientific papers. She's a fighter who has taken on refineries, chemical manufacturers and oil and gas companies, including BP over its cleanup of the Gulf of Mexico oil spill in 2010.

Most important, admirers say, she's a dedicated enabler, teaching people in some of the nation’s poorest communities to help themselves by using the latest technology to track air and water quality in their own backyards.

‘AIDS Granny’ Lives in Exile

The enormous brick fortress in West Harlem was built in the mid-1970s as a visionary housing project, a new model for an affordable, self-contained urban community. Today, on a balmy September afternoon, it is a low-income housing compound lined with security cameras, guards and triple-locked doors.

Pound for pound, though, the most dangerous person living here may just be a diminutive 85-year-old Chinese grandmother dressed in a stylish purple sweater set with black leopard spots.

This is not a slum. Neither is it where you would expect to find an internationally known human-rights warrior living out her golden years. In her one-bedroom apartment, Dr. Gao Yaojie—known to many as “the AIDS Granny”—moves with great difficulty through her tidy clutter.

She lost most of her stomach in surgery after a suicide attempt four decades ago and suffered multiple beatings during the Cultural Revolution.

A Reservation Rooted in Despair

On the Rosebud Reservation, which has a population of 13,000 and stretches across 1,970 square miles of South Dakota prairie, the effects of poverty and joblessness are all around.

In the emergency room of the only hospital here, suicide attempts by drug overdose are seen nearly nightly. Alcohol-related car accident injuries fill many of the Rosebud, continued on page 3

An Island Awaits Its Fate

A note Tong, a spruce man with a trim mustache and a grim-faced bodyguard, is dozing in his seat. A flight attendant leaves him a hot towel, and then another. The bodyguard, who wears the uniform of the Kiribati National Police—the shoulder patch depicts a yellow frigate bird flying clear of the rising sun—folds the towels and places them on an armrest.

The Fiji Airways flight is moving north across the equator to Tarawa, the capital of Kiribati. The passengers include a Japanese executive who represents important tuna interests.

Hate Obama, Love Obamacare

A cancer center in Houston had told Stephanie and Sean Recchi that their insurance was virtually worthless. So the hospital demanded $83,900 in advance to develop a treatment plan for Sean and cover his first $13,702 transfusion, along with routine lab tests for which he was billed tens of thousands of dollars.

Time magazine’s story in March 2013 on health-care costs reported that when Sean, then 42, was diagnosed with cancer a year earlier, the couple—who together were drawing about $3,500 a month from the small business they had just started in Lancaster, Ohio—had to borrow from her mother and max out their credit cards to try to save him.

Birth Defects on Marine Base

Jerry Ensminger, a former Marine Corps. drill instructor at Camp Lejeune in North Carolina, lost his 9-year-old daughter to leukemia in 1985. He said a recent CDC study that showed a link between the camp’s tap water tainted with toxins and increased risk of birth defects and childhood cancers is a vindication of what he’s been saying for nearly 20 years, but it Water, continued on page 3
Cancer Alley, continued

Subra has lived in the oil patch her whole life. When she bumps into people she grew up with or attends class reunions with her husband, Clint, she sees two sets of people in the room:

“The ones who look their age and the ones who look so old. The old-looking ones work in oil and gas or the chemical plants. You can clearly see the difference—the pallor of their skin, how shrunken.”

Subra understands that people here live near chemical plants because they don’t have the money to leave, and the workers won’t leave because of the money.

By any measure, this is one of the least healthy regions of the United States. Last year Louisiana ranked 49th in overall health and had the third-highest rate of death from cancer, according to the United Health Foundation.

Behind the wheel of her well-worn Chevy Impala on a recent morning, Subra navigates Highway 14 past oil refineries, natural gas transfer stations, bubbling waste ponds and oozing toxic dumps.

She worked at the Gulf South Research Institute for 14 years doing pharmaceutical and biotech testing for private businesses and the federal government. Since then, she has worked as an EPA contractor as part of an emergency response team sent to toxic spills and other disasters to perform quick assessments. She’s now helping the federal agency develop water toxicity tests for the regulation of hydraulic fracturing.

The energy industry, in particular, has frequently been across a corporate conference room from Subra. Tom Stewart, executive vice president of the Ohio Oil & Gas Assn., calls Subra “a ferocious advocate.”

“She worries people on my side of the fence because she’s very well-respected, and therefore she’s effective,” said Stewart. “We don’t always see eye to eye. However, I hold her in very high regard.”

Read the story, and more on Cancer Alley, cancer and its link to the environment, and other risks.
Exile, continued

Her journey began 17 years ago, six months after she retired as a gynecologist and professor at the Henan Chinese Medicine University hospital. She went from being a retired grandmother to China’s most famous AIDS activist, and became such a thorn in the side of the regime that she eventually fled to New York for safety.

In April 1996, Gao, then 69, was called from retirement to consult on a difficult case. A 42-year-old woman had ovarian surgery and was not getting better: Her stomach was bloated, she had a high fever and strange lesions on her skin. After finding no routine infection or illness, Gao demanded an AIDS test for the young mother.

The government said AIDS was a disease of foreigners, spread through illicit drugs and promiscuous sex. Gao insisted on a test. The results came back; the woman was not a drug addict nor a prostitute, so Gao began to investigate. She determined the source was a government blood bank — Ms. Ba’s post-surgical blood transfusion infected her with HIV. “I realized the seriousness of the problem,” Gao later wrote. “If the blood in the blood bank carried the AIDS virus, then these victims would not be a small number.”

Read the story, and more about HIV/AIDS in China, its treatment and prevention. ■

Obamacare, continued

As reported, Stephanie recalled that her husband was “sweating and shaking with chills and pains. He had a large mass in his chest that was … growing. He was panicked.” Nonetheless, Sean was held in a reception area and kept from seeing a doctor for about 90 minutes until the hospital confirmed that the Recchis’ check had cleared.

All of which explains why despite the negative — and in this case, completely inaccurate — scuttlebutt she says she had heard about Obamacare, Stephanie visited healthcare.gov repeatedly after it launched. And although they both had deep misgivings about the president and his “bad law,” she signed up for a new health insurance plan under Obamacare.

Now, what has happened to the Recchis and their health-care options more recently might be emblematic of the law’s potential.

Read the story, more on the Affordable Care Act and what hospitals charge for their services. ■

Water, continued

won’t bring his daughter back.

The long-awaited report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) shows a link between tainted tap water at the base and increased risk of serious birth defects and childhood cancers. It’s based on a small sample size and cannot prove exposure to the chemicals caused individual illnesses. It surveyed the parents of 12,598 children born at Camp Lejeune between 1968 and 1985, the year most contaminated wells were closed.

The study concludes that babies born to mothers who drank the tap water while pregnant were four times more likely than women in similar circumstances who did not consume the water to have such serious birth defects as spina bifida. Babies whose mothers were exposed also had a slightly elevated risk of such childhood cancers as leukemia, the study found.

The CDC was able to confirm 15 cases of spina bifida and anencephaly, 24 oral clefts and 13 cancers. More than 100 cases of birth defects and childhood cancers were reported, but only the 52 cases the CDC could confirm through medical records were included. The study did not look at the health effects on adults that drank the water. Eighty-two men with Lejeune ties have been diagnosed with an extremely rare form of breast cancer.

The contamination was traced to two primary sources—a leaky on-base fuel depot and a nearby dry cleaner. In prior public statements, Marine officials have emphasized the contamination that came from outside the base. But the new CDC found the greatest negative health impacts to be associated with benzene, from the on-base tank farm built during World War II.

Read the story, study and more about birth defects and childhood cancers. ■

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