

# Under the Iron Heel

*One woman's journey through chemical injury and activism.*

by Lucinda Hodges

"We're going to be with you for the long haul--five years, ten years, whatever it takes." Those were Bill Brodsky's words as he stood in the hotel conference room thronged by reporters, camera lights shining. At long last I could see the face of my nemesis. Mr. Brodsky was President of the railroad that had poisoned my family, polluted my home, and turned a bustling community into a ghost town by **derailing 133 tons of toxic chemicals** right into my slice of paradise: a quaint historic Montana town nestled between the course of the Clark Fork River and the weight of the Bitterroot Mountains.

To many of us, "hot zone evacuees," Brodsky's words represented a promise, and we intended to hold him and his railroad to the pledge of "*whatever it takes*." So for the next half decade, a small but very determined group, did just that. From the moment the chemicals hit the ground we were transmuted into the best kind of activists. We were sick, displaced and we were pissed-off; and despite our illnesses, anger, fear and desperation we quickly learned to use every tool available in the toolbox of activism.

**It is not what a lawyer tells me I may do; but what humanity, reason, and justice tell me I ought to do.**

By Edmund Burke

We began by acquainting ourselves with the world of toxic waste, grassroots activism and we learned from some of the best. We organized our community through information. Dr. Kaye Kilburn reached out to us and offered **community medical testing**. We conducted an environmental health survey, held frequent public meetings, prodding along a multitude of state and federal agencies. We gathered tens of thousands of pages of official documents, wrote reports, consulted with medical doctors and interviewed attorneys. We protested, sang songs, and generally caused a peaceful, but persistent

ruckus at railroad headquarters. And with the assistance of two very capable grad students, we also videotaped everything we did, and told our story through film with, **A Toxic Train Ran Through It.**

Those years of frontline activism transformed us from wide eyed "newbies" to seasoned activists. By reaching out to other activists, some of us were able to travel the country telling our story, networking with other victims of toxic waste, connecting the dots to see the larger story of a pandemic of people and places poisoned by chemicals. It was a real live baptism-by-fire.

**Surviving the Iron Heel**

Those were terrible years in many ways. The once closely knit town splintered like shattered glass as good people lost their health, livelihoods, and homes. A new caste system quickly emerged; those who chose to stay and live on toxic ground in toxic homes, and those who were forced to leave by ill health to search for safe housing and a new life. The stigma of illness proved to be a deep divide that all too frequently split spouses, friends, neighbors and co-workers. There were far too many goodbyes; but for all that broke inside us, and around us, a few of us forged a path, through activism that pulled us out of the depths of disaster. Of course, my story is not unique, many of you have similar experiences in your own battles with polluters, employers, and state and federal agencies. Most of us acquire a whole new set of skills wrangling our way through toxic torts, worker's comp and disability claims. Eventually, all of us win, lose, or draw in our personal battles with corporations and the legal system. But, then what? What do we do with the skills and lessons learned from these David and Goliath epics so many of us have lived through? How do we take this hard-won knowledge fighting for our own individual rights and translate those experiences into fighting for the rights of all us?

**It is cheaper, so much cheaper, to buy a general than to fight him and his whole army.**

Jack London  
from The Iron Heel

### **The Missing Link**

One thing I do know, there are not any easy or absolute answers when it comes to chemical injury. From my perspective, one component that seems to be missing is a bridge between the wide array of individual activists, regional groups, and the national environmental scene on the specific issue of direct advocacy for chemical injured people. Although there are many shared objectives among us as individuals and environmental health non profits, what is yet to emerge is recognition for chemical injury as a chronic illness or disease. We've seen advocacy for particularly insidious and well-understood hazardous substances such as lead, asbestos and mercury. But that still falls short of bringing the pandemic under one umbrella.

**For me, it seems an endless state of frustration being a chemically injured activist searching for the missing link -- a national organization for chemically injured people.**

For me, it seems an endless state of frustration being a chemically injured activist searching for the missing link -- a national organization for chemically injured people. A well-run, national non-profit for chemical injury would be the realization of decades of grassroots activism for the thousands of victims who lived this disease when no one even understood it. An achievement that would begin to unite us to develop a shared vision of what chemical injury is. A vital step towards defining the injury/disease pattern, which would progress us towards forging the crucial link to causation and prevention of chemical injury.

CFIDS, Fibromyalgia, Autism, AIDS, have strong, functioning, national non-profit

groups which are effectively lobbying Congress for legislative change, disability rights, medical research and funding. All these diseases were brought out of obscurity to national attention through courageous victim advocacy. Of course, some of these chronic conditions have garnered celebrity star power along the way; AIDS has Michael Jordan, CFIDS had Seabiscuit. Fibromyalgia even has a pill, as anyone with cable TV knows, thanks to Pfizer's slick promotional ads. There are days when I wonder: exactly where is our Oprah moment and when is it arriving?

### **Inside the Aspen Grove**

Google "chemical injury" and you will find thousands of individuals and groups with web pages designed to inform and educate on every kind of chemical injury. Google "chemical sensitivity" or "multiple chemical sensitivity" and you will find even more websites and blogs on topics from fragrance-free-workplaces and schools, sick building syndrome, to the mis-use of plastics and toxic personal care products. One thing easy to discern is that as individuals, regional groups, and web-based support groups we are out in full force on the world wide web supporting each other and spreading the word on how and why chemicals are harming all of us.

As well, national environmental non profits have taken the lead in using science to revolutionize our everyday access to accurate testing of our bodies, our food supply, and our environment. The EWG, [Environmental Working Group](#), is a great example of a national environmental organization tackling the issue of toxics through toxicology. Thanks to EWG and groups like, [Women's Voices for the Earth](#), body burden testing programs are educating all of us on how common chemicals are being stored in our body fat and tissues and adversely effecting our health. Bio-monitoring gives us valuable information and a powerful tool for activists who can in turn use that information to influence legislators and corporations.

**When morality comes up  
against profit, it is seldom  
that profit loses.**

Shirley Chisholm

**Justice is like a train that is  
nearly always late.**

Yevgeny Yevtushenko

Concurrently, a healthy mix of lay and professional people have formed trustworthy underground alliances and are examining all the issues invoked by chemical injury. Perhaps in these corporate times this is an effective way to incubate and develop strategies for chemical injury. Many of us as victims, activists, and even medical experts have felt the weight of the "[Iron Heel](#)" through corporate

reprisals and an unjust judicial system. We understand there are times when it is wiser to lay low in order to survive to fight another day.

Presently, the chemically injured community reminds me of a great colony of quaking aspen trees. An aspen colony is derived from one seedling. A grove of quaking aspens is symbiotic and each tree's survival is linked to the entire colony. A single aspen tree may only live above ground for perhaps one hundred years,

but the root system lives on sprouting new trees into life for thousands of years spreading the colony over many acres of forest throughout time. Aspens are also a pioneer species. They thrive in sunlight and take root after even the most intense forest fires and disasters, just like some of us.

Lucinda Hodges lives in Montana where she home schools her children, tends her garden, wild crafts herbal remedies, and writes and maintain websites, for [Pariah](#) and [Toxic Trains](#).