

No Borders: Communities Living and Working with Asarco

A Proposal for a Foundation Grant for Faculty

Submitted by Anne Fischel and Lin Nelson

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Anne Fischel and Lin Nelson are requesting a Foundation Grant for Faculty. We are requesting \$9,500 to support our interdisciplinary community-collaborative project, "No Borders: Communities Living and Working with Asarco." The project involves research and documentary filming in Ruston, Washington; El Paso, Texas; and Hayden, Arizona, communities that were shaped and impacted by their 100-year relationship with the American Smelting and Refining Company. The grant is requested for per diems for both faculty, travel to Arizona and Texas, and reproduction and rights costs associated with archival research at the University of Arizona in Phoenix and the University of Texas in El Paso.

Project Background: Asarco mined and smelted lead and copper on four continents for over 100 years. The by-products of copper mining and smelting are toxic metals, mainly arsenic, lead and cadmium, which can create severe consequences for human health. Starting in the 1980's the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) negotiated with Asarco to remediate contaminated U.S. sites; many were designated Superfund sites. In 2005 Asarco filed for bankruptcy after selling itself and its main assets to its Mexican affiliate, Grupo Mexico. The bankruptcy is enabling the company to shed many of the clean-up responsibilities it negotiated with the EPA and resume operations. As copper prices and demand continue to rise, Asarco is presenting a highly profitable profile, and its parent, Grupo Mexico, is the third largest copper producer in the world.

Our project is tracking the trajectory of this corporate giant while paying close attention to the lived experiences of people in three communities: Ruston, where the smelter closed in 1986 after contentious negotiations with the EPA; El Paso, Texas, where Get the Lead Out coalition has forged a coalition with groups in Mexico and New Mexico to keep Asarco's decommissioned smelter from re-opening; and Hayden, Arizona, a severely contaminated Mexican-American community and site of Asarco's only operating U.S. smelter. Our focus is on community efforts to educate themselves about the consequences of industrial contamination. Because communities often struggle to reconcile the need for jobs and economic development with the need for health, we are also looking at the complexities of organizations that try to connect labor and the environment. We are talking with the Sierra Club and the Steelworkers, Asarco's main union, who created the Blue-Green Alliance to link good jobs with healthy communities. We are also talking with public officials in El Paso and with the staff of Washington health and environmental agencies, who are attempting to protect community health, often with inadequate regulatory tools.

Why is this work important? This project is exploring how communities, through dedicated and strategic networking around shared conditions, can impact and strengthen the policy frameworks that shape environmental health. These include: 1) threats to public health and the environment faced by working class communities and communities of color from prolonged exposure to industrial emissions; 2) lack of corporate accountability to community and workers' needs for health and safety; and 3) weaknesses of public policies and agencies in regulating corporate behavior and protecting health, safety and environment. Recent research by El Paso's Get the Lead Out coalition indicates that in addition to exceeding its permitted emissions for lead and arsenic, Asarco also secretly incinerated hazardous waste at several U.S. smelters—some of the hazardous waste came from Defense Department chemical weapons facilities. (GTLO's research has been confirmed by the EPA, reported by *The New York Times*, and cited by Dr. Devra Davis in her recent book, *The Secret History of the War on Cancer*.) These findings raise urgent questions about community rights to knowledge and information about the conditions which affect public health. Public right-to-know is a key feature of environmental and occupational health legislation; it is also a foundational democratic principle. The communities and workers involved in the long Asarco story have seen their right-to-know challenged and eroded; they are re-activating that right to protect community and worker health and safety.

Asarco's bankruptcy—the largest and most prolonged in U.S. history—is significant to communities struggling with environmental health problems; unions concerned about jobs, working conditions and retiree pensions; and public agencies wondering where the political will and funding will come from to deal with unfinished clean-ups. There are an estimated 75 U.S. communities needing remediation. Superfund, a cornerstone of federal protection of community health, is being tested and violated by Asarco's corporate reorganization. The outcome of this bankruptcy could impact whether Superfund survives.

Finally, as Asarco filed for bankruptcy the Government Accounting Office warned that corporations often pursue bankruptcy in order to shed liabilities, violating the public trust. Asarco's bankruptcy is creating a political precedent which could decommission public health policy as we know it. This project bears witness to these policy struggles while contributing to community efforts to obtain and share information, document physical and ethical violations and act on people's emerging sense of community needs for prevention and protection.

Project Activities: We began this project in spring 2005 while teaching together in Local Knowledge. We have filmed over 25 hours of footage, participated in community conversations, observed meetings, worked in archives, and collected a vast array of documents. We are producing a documentary video for television (Link TV is our expected broadcaster). We are developing a collection of writings by community collaborators, entitled "Community Voices," which Evergreen's Labor Center is interested in publishing, using a model developed by the UCLA Labor Center. With members of the Sierra Club we hope to convene a Community Network Gathering in El Paso, where representatives of Asarco-impacted communities can share information and strategies. We are also planning a book-length study that will move from local struggles over hazardous exposure to the building of a labor-environment, cross-border coalition for public health. This year Anne is taking leave without pay and Lin is teaching half-time to work on this national case study of citizen-initiated research and activism, corporate mobility, public health policy, occupational safety and health, and cross-regional alliances.

Project Timeline:

- September 2007: Research and filming in El Paso. Planning for Community Network Gathering and collaborative writing project, "Community Voices".
- October-November 2007: Transcribe El Paso footage. Create No Borders Advisory Group. Website development. Continue research.
- November 2007: Research and filming in Hayden, Arizona.
- December 2007-January 2008: Transcribe Hayden footage, Develop format for "Community Voices" book. Organize Community Network Gathering.
- February 2008: Community Network gathering in El Paso.
- March-June 2008: Work with Community Voices writers. Manuscript development. Transcribe Community Network gathering. Rough-cut edit of No Borders film.
- June 23-July 25, 2008: Fine cut film edit. Prepare Community Voices for publication.
- August 2008: Community screenings of video-in-progress.
- Fall 2008: Release "No Borders" film and "Community Voices" publication. Ongoing research and writing for longer analytic text.

How will this project enhance our scholarly development? This project builds on our previous teaching that linked local experience with the environmental, economic and policy contexts that impact community life. We are producing a case study which includes texts, video, video transcripts, documents, photographs, and a website. This will support our teaching—we think faculty and students from Community Studies, Media, Environmental Studies, Business, Labor Studies and Political Economy will also benefit from these rich curricular materials.

This project builds on our previous professional work—Lin's research, writing and community collaborative work on environmental and workers' health; Anne's documentary filmmaking about organizing, labor, and community history and memory. At the same time it is teaching us new skills and perspectives. Anne is new to the field of environmental health and Lin describes herself as a technophobe. Our collaboration, which began in the classroom, is now continuing in the community, as we learn from each other and from our community partners.

As this project has moved to the center of our professional agenda, we've begun to share it in our region. We made a presentation to the Northwest Labor History Association conference and to students in the Masters in Public Health program at the University of Washington. We are putting together an advisory group to guide the labor, law, and policy features of the project. *No Borders* is contributing to our development as teachers, filmmakers and researchers, as well as developing the knowledge base of the campus community and the communities we work with.

Working on the "No Borders" project has helped us develop community collaborations that put in practice the relationships and efforts we encourage in students. In our 2005 sponsored research report, we wrote that we hoped to implement this project in the spirit of "research and mutual education with others." As documenters and researchers we must continually learn from the experiences of our community collaborators and rethink our work in relation to theirs. This increases our understanding of the opportunities and complexities of campus-community collaborations—something we hope to address in published writings.

Funding: We are requesting travel and per diem funds for travel to Hayden, Arizona for filming, research, and study in the University of Arizona archives in late fall, and travel to El Paso for the community network gathering, additional filming and research in the University of Texas at El Paso archive in early February. These trips will allow us to complete our filming. Research and filming are cost-intensive, and part of our work this year necessarily involves fundraising. A proposal to the Arca Foundation is pending (a decision is expected in December) and we are corresponding with a program officer at the Wallace Global Fund. Evergreen's Labor Center supported our work by providing an office and part-time research assistance. We also received Sponsored Research support in summer 2005 and sabbatical leaves in spring 2006. The college provided travel funds for travel to present our research. This has been helpful, but much more is needed. We subsidized our project this year by withdrawing from full-time teaching and committing our personal funds. A Foundation Grant would provide critically needed support.

Requested Budget:

Per Diem:

Researcher (Lin): 20 days at .5 rate:	\$2,000
Filmmaker (Anne): 20 days at 1.0 rate:	\$4,000

Travel:

Researcher (Lin): Airfare to El Paso:	\$ 340
Researcher (Lin): Airfare to Phoenix:	\$ 400
Filmmaker (Anne): Airfare to El Paso:	\$ 340
Filmmaker (Anne): Airfare to Phoenix:	\$ 400
Rental Car (20 days) at \$30/day:	\$ 600

Archival Research:

Photocopies and fees:	\$ 400
Duplication Fees (Photographs)	\$ 500
Total:	\$9,500