

October 25, 2007

Sponsored Research DTF

Dear Colleagues,

Please accept this sponsored research application. Anne Fischel and Lin Nelson are requesting five weeks each of paid summer leave to continue our interdisciplinary, community-collaborative project, "No Borders: Communities Living and Working with Asarco." We began this project in spring 2005 while teaching "Local Knowledge," a community studies program. As our students developed their projects, we combined our skills in documentary video and environmental health to explore the history of nearby Ruston—part of the Commencement Bay Superfund site—and its 100-year relationship with the American Smelting and Refining Company.

We started with research in local archives, including the University of Washington's Special Collections and the Tacoma Library's extensive collections of newspapers and EPA documents. In summer 2005 we received sponsored research support to continue our work in archives and the Ruston community. In spring 2006, during sabbatical leaves, we developed our relationships with people in Ruston, filmed a number of substantive interviews, documented the transformation of the former smelter site, and deepened our understanding of the environmental, economic and regulatory issues affecting the community and the region. Following Asarco's declaration of chapter 11 bankruptcy in summer 2005, we started to explore the national story of communities impacted by Asarco. We developed a power point presentation and we are working on a project website ([www2.evergreen.edu/fischela](http://www2.evergreen.edu/fischela)). Our research has been shared at Evergreen symposia. All our footage has been transcribed for editing and to support our own and others' research.

*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.

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. In Washington alone the smelter plume extends 1,000 square miles, affecting four counties and hundreds of schools and daycare centers. Washington, a creditor in the bankruptcy, estimates that remediation will cost \$400 million (Asarco insists its obligations to the state total only \$12 million.) Informed observers warn that the precedents set by the bankruptcy may signal the death-knell for Superfund as a remedy for environmental hazard.

We are tracking the trajectory of this corporate giant, while paying close attention to the lived experiences of 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 waged a campaign 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). 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.

*Purpose, Scope and Outcomes:* We are using documentary video, analytic and collaborative writing, and community networking to tackle three issues that directly impact public policy: 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 Asarco 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*.) Their research raises urgent questions about communities' right to know the conditions which affect their well-being.

We are producing a documentary video for television (Link TV is our expected broadcaster—see attached letter). 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 conducting research for a book-length study that will move from local struggles about hazardous exposure to the building of a labor-environment, cross-border coalition for public health.

We began this project with the understanding that communities' needs for jobs often coexist uneasily with their equally important needs for environmental health. We are talking with members of the Sierra Club and the Steelworkers, Asarco's main union, who together founded the Blue-Green Alliance to link good jobs with healthy communities. We've interviewed former smelterworkers in El Paso and Ruston, and present-day workers in Hayden—the interviews reveal deep concerns about health and safety within Asarco's plants, and a legacy of workers' efforts to educate themselves and their communities about the dangers of industrial exposure. This underground history poses important questions about the gap between scientific and medical research and citizens' on-the-ground experiences of illness, disability and risk.

We are also talking with public officials (we recently interviewed the Mayor of El Paso) and the staff of public agencies, including the Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department and Department of Ecology, who are attempting to protect community health and well-being, often with inadequate regulatory tools.

*Funding Sources:* A proposal to the Arca Foundation is pending (with a decision expected in December) and we are corresponding with a program officer at the Wallace Global Fund. Evergreen's Labor Center has supported our work by providing an office and part-time research assistance. We subsidized our project this year by withdrawing from full-time teaching. Sponsored Research funding would be an invaluable support to our work.

*Pedagogical and Professional Agendas:* This project builds on our previous teaching that linked local experience with the environmental, economic and policy contexts that impact community life. Several students worked on this project to develop their knowledge of labor, public health, and corporate history. We are producing a case study which will include texts, video and video

transcripts, primary documents, photographs, and a website. We believe that faculty and programs from a range of areas: Community Studies, Environmental Studies, Business, Labor Studies and Media will benefit from these rich curricular materials

This project also builds on our previous professional work—Lin's research, writing and community collaborative work on environmental and workers' health; Anne's documentary filmmaking which focused on organizing, labor, and community history and memory. As this project has moved to the center of our professional agenda, we've shared it with people in our region. We made presentations to the Northwest Labor History Association conference and the Masters in Public Health program at the University of Washington. We are putting together an advisory board which can guide the public health, labor, law, and policy features of this project.

Working on the "No Borders" project has allowed us to develop community collaborations that put in practice the kinds of relationships and efforts we encourage in our 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 are continually and productively challenged to learn from the experiences of our community collaborators and rethink our own work in response to theirs. It has been gratifying to forge relationships of mutuality with such extraordinary people and communities.

*Implementation Plan:* We are requesting five weeks each of paid leave: (June 23-July 25) to support editing of the "No Borders" film and completion of the "Community Voices" writing project. What follows is a schedule of project activities through summer 2008.

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 Board. 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 edit. Prepare Community Voices for publication.

August 2008: Community screenings of video-in-progress. Document discussions for further studies and for final video editing in early fall.

Attachments: 2005 Sponsored Research Proposal and Report  
Curriculum Vitae (Anne's and Lin's)  
Letters of Support from Bill Ransom, Liza Rognas and John Perkins  
Letter of Support from Link TV  
"Copper Plant Illegally Burned Hazardous Waste," *New York Times*, 10/10/06  
Community Newsletters discussing the "No Borders" project

*Lin Nelson*

*Anne Fusco*

A Sponsored Research Proposal  
Submitted by Anne Fischel and Lin Nelson

We are requesting sponsored research support to develop a project which we will begin through our teaching this year in Local Knowledge. Our project will expand efforts begun collectively with our students to document the impact of the Asarco smelter on the people who live and work near Commencement Bay in Tacoma. We want to produce a case study of people affected by a century of industrial activity and subsequent clean-up. The story of Asarco needs to be unraveled in the context of the broader set of stories and experiences that surround Commencement Bay, one of the most significant Superfund arenas in the United States. We intend to use audio, video, and writing to provide the community with materials needed to create a wide-ranging conversation about public health impacts and their implications for community life and work.

**Background: Purpose and Scope**

Our academic program, Local Knowledge, has been, and continues to be, the context in which our project work in Commencement Bay will be developed. Local Knowledge explores the theory and practice of community-based work. In 2001-2002 and now, as we teach a revised version of the program, we are focusing on 4 communities: Olympia, Tacoma, Shelton, and Centralia. We study local history, social movements, media, the environment, labor issues, and public health.

Our theoretical perspectives are drawn from the writings of Paulo Freire, Beverly Brown and Myles Horten, among others. We are developing skills and methodologies in video documentation, oral history interviewing, ethnographic observation, community mapping, and public documents research. We are starting to engage with local groups, including Mason County Literacy, the Jefferson Center, Welfare Rights Organizing Coalition, Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, and Citizens for a Healthy Bay. We are trying to understand both community experience and public policy; as Bev Brown writes in *In Timber Country*, it is the macro-level of public policies and broad forces that "defines the action" in local communities, but "the details are played out at the micro-level of everyday lives." This means being attentive to what local people care about and how they understand the play of economic/social forces in their community. We are developing dialogues and collaborative relationships with groups and citizens, who we hope will be teachers and co-learners with us in the classroom and the community.

Local Knowledge offers us the opportunity to deepen collective knowledge of our region and link academic and experiential bases of knowledge. It challenges assumptions about how knowledge is produced and how it should be used. Thoughtful listening, reflection, critical evaluation, context-building, and theory-making are daily processes we consciously engage in with our

community mentors, our texts and each other. Through this process we are learning a great deal about what is going on in local communities. We hope we are also democratizing knowledge and education, making direct connections between knowledge construction and the facilitation of more democratic and just communities.

Our community collaborators have supported Local Knowledge projects, helped decide about how they should be shaped and produced, and given feedback about their usefulness. A documentary film made by students in Local Knowledge 2001-2002, entitled "Homeless in Olympia" was shown at the Olympia Film Society and at Super Saturday to packed audiences, many of them homeless people and advocates for the homeless. (When we took the students of Local Knowledge 2004-2005 to meet members of the Coalition for Low Income Power, they reminded us that "Homeless in Olympia" was an important catalyst to community dialogues about poverty and homelessness.) In 2001-02 Local Knowledge students collaborated with Shelton residents to create Peace Matters, a community organization which sponsored educational forums on Afghanistan and the Middle East. (Peace Matters is still an active organization.) LK students concerned about polarization between environmentalists and rural communities developed their thinking about how to engage rural east Lewis County in planning projects that were both economically enriching and environmentally sustainable. As a group we learned, and will continue to learn this year, how oral histories, video documentaries, public art, and research reports can increase community self-awareness, focus attention on issues of concern, and provide tools to support community problem-solving and change.

### **Our Work in Professional and Pedagogical Context**

Local Knowledge is an interdisciplinary collaboration. Anne is a documentary filmmaker, while Lin is a sociologist with expertise in environmental studies and public health. Our proposed project expands on work we have done individually, in local community settings, with different organizations. Anne has just completed a documentary film entitled "Lewis County Hope and Struggle" that looks at past labor struggles in the context of current economic contraction and dislocation. This project was carried out in collaboration with area unions, Lewis County residents, and a citizen committee that produced a mural commemorating the Centralia Wobbly War of 1919. Lin has worked with community groups in the region, addressing public health concerns arising from the use of toxic chemicals. She is particularly active in the Washington Toxics Coalition and the Healthy Olympia Task Force. She has also worked with unions on workplace health issues and is a contributing writer to the current revision of "Our Bodies, Ourselves", particularly the chapter on Occupational and Environmental Health.

The project we propose: researching and documenting the experiences of people who worked at or lived near the Asarco smelter, or who rely on the

affected resources of nearby land and water, would enable us to develop a case study that could be used in teaching about labor, the environment, public health and community revitalization. It would help us develop curriculum for future classes—our own and those of our colleagues who want to engage in participatory research. It would enable us to produce a document that can circulate in the community and be used by community members. Finally, it will build a basis for continued collaboration with Ruston and Tacoma-area groups. The legacy of Asarco is complex and far-reaching; the implications are just beginning to be explored. Our project will help set a framework for exploring how the community can address both the benefits and long-lived consequences of the businesses that built its economy and compromised the health of its citizens and environment.

### **The Project**

In the early 1990's the Asarco smelter in Ruston, Washington, was dynamited and destroyed, ending a 100-year history of industrial activity that employed significant numbers of workers on or near Tacoma's Commencement Bay. The smelter discharged heavy metals, including arsenic, lead, and chromium into the air, and produced toxic slag waste that fell and leached into the bay. According to the Department of Ecology, the contamination from the former smelter has affected air, soil and groundwater as far north as King County and as far south as Thurston County.

Asarco was only one of the industries that built the economy of Tacoma while severely contaminating the water and soils of Commencement Bay. Thanks to the efforts of community activists, particularly Citizens for a Healthy Bay, Commencement Bay was identified as a federal Superfund site in the 1980's. Extensive work has been done to remediate the contaminated water and soils of the bay. Today, the city is beginning to build on formerly contaminated tideflats, and developing gentrified areas along the Thea Foss Waterway that constitutes part of the bay. Groups that pushed for the clean-up and participated in its implementation, like Citizens for a Healthy Bay and the Departments of Ecology and Health are helping to bring this phase of remediation to an end.

Less attention has been given to the public health risks experienced by working class people who live and work in proximity to the Bay. There has been little documentation of the complex experiences of people who have profound relationships to the waterway or to specific industries, through their jobs, fishing (Asian immigrants particularly fish out of the bay), recreation, or simply living close by.

Often the experiences of ordinary people escape public notice—they are not easily made significant, or transformed into rationales for public policy. For instance, the rates of cancer among former Asarco employees have not been documented, and may never be definitively linked to their work with Asarco, yet many people believe—or fear—that their health has been damaged by

their work and life-long proximity to the smelter. At the same time, people felt a sense of pride in their work and loyalty to the company that employed them. It will be a creative challenge to document and interpret this complex community experience. We hope to do so in a way that contributes to community discussion, awareness, resource-gathering and problem-solving.

We see our work as helping to develop a more sustained, durable and community-supportive documentation of community efforts. Tacoma's experience is an important touchstone for communities affected by superfund sites who are struggling to recover and chart out sustainable directions for the future. Our responsored research project would focus on the emerging community stories and would help identify lessons that could be shared across vulnerable communities.

We will begin this project this winter and spring in Local Knowledge as a collaboration with our students, Ruston/Tacoma community members, area agencies and our colleagues at the Evergreen Tacoma campus. We would like the sponsored research component of this project to be shaped by our collective learning as well as by what we discover about community need and interest. Our case study will be multi-perspectival and will utilize different research and media forms, including audio, video, and writing. We hope to analyze and document issues in a way that suggests directions for community discussion and engagement.

### **Preliminary Plan**

We are requesting 5 weeks each of paid leave during summer 2005. We plan to begin our project work on July 6<sup>th</sup> and complete it by August 10<sup>th</sup>. Our intention is to follow up on contacts already initiated with area organizations, workers, families, new immigrant residents, business owners, unions, public health personnel and public and civic agencies. Our work will include: interviews, research in area archives, and audio/video documentation. We will be exploring ways of sharing and displaying what we have learned, possibly through community websites, an exhibit, or community meetings and screenings. A more detailed plan for our summer work will be developed in response to the needs, concerns and hopes of our community collaborators.

We have not applied for other funding. This project is just beginning, and needs time to incubate. We appreciate Evergreen's support in developing this modest case study, which will also allow us to flesh out a methodology and more detailed plan for further exploration of the legacy of Asarco and Commencement Bay.

**Appendixes:**

**Local Knowledge syllabus**

**Lin Nelson's vita**

**Anne Fischel's vita**

**(Letters of recommendation--to be delivered separately: from TESC faculty members Russ Fox and Liza Rognas)**



NO BORDERS: COMMUNITIES LIVING AND WORKING WITH ASARCO  
A Report on a Sponsored Research Project  
Submitted by Anne Fischel and Lin Nelson

This is a report of activities and developments of a project that was launched this past summer (June-Sept 2005) with the support of Evergreen Sponsored Research funding.

Focus

Commencement Bay in Tacoma is one of the nation's largest pollution zones, identified as a major Superfund site in the 1980's. A key feature of the designated site is the Asarco smelter (demolished and removed in 1993) and the dispersal of arsenic and lead related to its operation. Over the years, an increasingly wide swath of impacts have been identified, now primarily the four counties of Pierce, King, Thurston and Kitsap, but with evidence of impacts into British Columbia. This presents a substantial public health risk, as well as imperiling marine health offshore. Public health/environmental agencies, from federal to local, as well as the State Legislature (which in 2005 passed a bill to help protect children from persistent exposure), are among the public sector agents involved in the continuing effort to track and remediate the problem. As well, the US Justice Dept, bankruptcy court (Houston) and many other legal venues are taken up with the impacts of Asarco.

Asarco's corporate story poses great challenges to researchers and community advocates – with all sorts of shifts in the political and legal narrative. The company, created at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was by the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century reconfigured as a subsidiary of one of its former subsidiaries – Grupo Mexico. Its filing for bankruptcy (restructuring) in August has posed tremendous challenges to the estimated 25 US communities, including Ruston-Tacoma, identified as Asarco-impacted Superfund sites as well as to its thousands of retirees (who are facing the withdrawal of pension/health benefits). Most recent bankruptcy documents indicate that as many as 95 communities in 21 states might be impacted by the bankruptcy filing. As our proposal indicates, we believe this is a very significant local-to-global story, one which raises critical questions of public/environmental health, workers' rights, community sustainability, public sector accountability, corporate malfeasance and social justice.

Grant Proposal (Attached) identifies the analytic terrain of the project and the relationship to our teaching and curricular development.

Activities Undertaken During the Summer Grant Period:

(1) We researched the social, political, economic, legal and cultural history of the Asarco Corporation and the many communities impacted. While our focus, and starting point for this ongoing study, is the Ruston-Tacoma community and its century-long relationship with Asarco, we are dedicated to placing that relationship in the broader context of the corporation's evolution and relationship

with many other impacted communities, from those in the US to others in Mexico, Peru and Canada. This research involves use of materials at the Tacoma Public Library Northwest Collection, the University of Washington Archives (particularly those of the American Lung Association/WA Chapter, among other organizations and agencies) and the collection of regulatory, legislative and NGO materials at Citizens for a Healthy Bay. We have been especially appreciative of the support provided by Brian Kamens, regional research librarian at the TPL, who has extensive knowledge of labor/industry history. We are also appreciative of our colleagues here at the Evergreen Library who help us locate critical materials. On-line research tools have also been valuable, particularly as we try to gather information on the Asarco bankruptcy (August 2005) and its impacts. Due to Asarco's purchase by and legal relocation to Grupo Mexico, access to corporate documents is a more daunting research challenge.

(2) We spent quite a lot of time in the Ruston/Tacoma area visiting the Superfund site, the Asarco Visitor Ctr, Ruston Town Hall and the general neighborhood. With a growing array of maps, documents and consultations with people from the area, we feel like we are better able to grasp the physical-environmental-social features of the old smelter area and the various ways it impacts the community. We observed and filmed the continuing remediation of the site, as polluted soil (some imported from Asarco's Everett site) was being relocated for capping and containment. We also attended a community street fair in Ruston, which allowed us to talk with a few more folks and gather materials from local groups. We also did some preliminary photography to characterize the Superfund area and the neighborhood. We used the film and photos for our presentation at the September Symposium at the Tacoma campus.

(3) We prepared materials for Evergreen's Human Subjects Review, as we are interviewing a range of people in the area. This involved drafting our letter of introduction (attached) and developing a project description that we thought could serve as an effective profile of our efforts as we talked to different people in and around the Tacoma area.

(4) Interviews are an essential feature of this project. But we use the word "interview" advisedly and cautiously here, as many of our most meaningful connections with people are through conversations, consultations and ongoing collaboration. We see this project as something different than "research on" or "research about." Over time, we intend that this project be more in the spirit of "research and mutual education with others." This past summer (and in the spring when we were in the early development stage) we spent considerable time talking with and checking in with a union leader who is considered a community leader and one who is relied on to see to the interests of Asarco retirees and their families. This "gatekeeper" welcomed us to the VFW Hall, which serves as a proxy union-retirees hall. He has provided us with invaluable information and insight. We've also interviewed/conversed with a few local business people. And most importantly, we had one lengthy interview with a

retired shop steward and his wife, both from union families and with a rich sense of the company-community connection.

(5) We interviewed/consulted with various staff of area health/environment agencies, including King, Pierce and Thurston Public Health, as well as the WA Depts of Health and Ecology. We've also established contact with the staff of the key legislator who framed a bill to protect children's health; he is available to us for an extended film interview, when his and our schedules allow. As precursor to our summer research, we attended several Legislative hearings that dealt with this bill. This was valuable in that it allowed us to identify the various interests – physicians, public health advocates, public school authorities, day care center operators – who will be impacted as state and local authorities monitor soil pollution as a risk to children's health.

(6) We have undertaken this project in collaboration with Evergreen's Labor Center, in that the Center has been able to orient us to the regional union context. The Asarco story, locally and nationally, is in part the story of labor-and-neighbor-- how the union, in this case the Steelworkers (once a Mine-Mill-Smelter local), connects with the community that's impacted. This is increasingly an important political, ethical and strategic question for unions as they explore their relationship to their home communities. Also, there is a much overlooked worker-health aspect of the Asarco story. Connecting worker-community-environmental health is essential to our project. A key part of the labor feature of this evolving story is the role of the Steelworkers nationally. Based in Pittsburgh, it has been active in its support of its striking locals (July-Sept 2005) in Arizona and New Mexico. Also the Steelworkers are working with environmental and justice organizations on both sides of the MX-US border, as they work to strategize a response to Asarco. The Labor Ctr has joined us in conference calls to Steelworker staff, as we together tried to decipher the impacts of strikes, pensioners' grievances, hazards in the workplace, community risk, the bankruptcy and the evolving corporate structure of Asarco/Grupo Mexico.

(7) We have tried, in this preliminary stage, to guide this project in view of its potential meaning for the curriculum. In the spring and into the summer, two students from our Local Knowledge class undertook research in relation to this project. We hope that this can continue in future classes. We were also able to develop the Asarco story for teaching purposes this fall. Its local/regional character presents a very evocative learning moment.

(8) Throughout our work, we have made an effort to stay in touch with our colleagues at the Tacoma Campus. They welcomed us for one of their summer planning meetings when we discussed our work. They have been very supportive and encouraging of this project. Peter Boccho had covered the Asarco story as a Tacoma News Tribune reporter and has offered his support.

### Preliminary Outcomes and Continuing Efforts

- Developed a collection of key materials regarding Asarco corporate history, relevant legislation and litigation, regulatory context, relevant Ruston/Tacoma documents, educational/monitoring efforts of county and state agencies, impacts and activities in other impacted communities.
- Developed a preliminary timeline “A Corporation, Many Communities” (attached) re: Asarco and its relationship with impacted communities, especially Ruston. Given the complexity of the historical and legal features of this story, the timeline is very much a provisional picture at this point.
- Developed selections from our interviews (attached). We are trying to cultivate a thoughtful sense of appreciation for what the functioning smelter meant to the life of the community, as well as the current impacts. A description of Asarco retirees. “Sometimes the workers will walk over there to where the stack used to be. And they come back up and there’s tears in their eyes. It’s a sad feeling, very sad.”
- Many months ago, in anticipation of our summer work, we submitted a proposal to American Public Health Association for their fall 2005 conference. This proposal (attached) was accepted and we were excited to participate and share our preliminary research on Asarco and communities. APHA had to postpone and relocate its conference due to the Katrina-New Orleans disaster. It’s rescheduling during our Evaluation Week meant that we couldn’t attend. We hope to reconnect with the APHA and WA Public Health Assn in the future.
- Based on our summer’s work, we made a presentation at Evergreen’s September Symposium. Peter Kardas, Labor Center, joined us in presentation and discussion. We were very heartened by the attendance and interest. We intend to continue to consult with our Evergreen colleagues who have so many vantage points to offer – economics, regional history, media, environmental health, etc.
- Our work has been very exciting, challenging and daunting all at once. We have certain broad themes, analytic goals and practical implications in mind – and these continue to evolve, as our path of discovery broadens. A persistent feature of our inquiry is whether and how impacted communities learn from each other, as they faced shared, yet distinctive, legal, environmental, health and social dilemmas. From the Ruston retiree to the Tacoma day care provider facing polluted soils to the miner in Hayden, AZ to the miners in Peru – all struggle to protect and preserve health, livelihood, community, environment. Our intent is to build on this summer’s preliminary work to learn more and effectively communicate the lessons we are uncovering.

# EVERGREEN

THE EVERGREEN STATE COLLEGE

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19 Oct 07

Sponsored Research Committee  
The Evergreen State College

Dear Colleagues:

I'm writing in enthusiastic support of Lin Nelson and Anne Fischel's sponsored research proposal to document the effects of ASARCO pollution in our region and in other areas of their operation. This project continues the long-term documentary work already begun by Lin and Anne in the north Tacoma/Ruston area, and it moves into the international sphere, following the heavy footprint of ASARCO into its Mexico operations. The company has attempted to avoid further sanctions by declaring bankruptcy, leaving land and people to suffer the effects of heavy metals pollution.

These effects came home to my own family. When my father came home from WWII, we were placed into the Lincoln Heights project housing near ASARCO in Tacoma. We became accustomed every day to wiping down the heavy accumulation of dust on everything. My youngest sister was born there, and as a toddler used the windowsills to help her stand. She had the dust on her hands constantly, and we had to be very attentive to keep her from licking the dust on the windowsills; apparently, it tasted good. Shortly after birth she began having serious health problems and, later, some neurological issues. Some of these are with her today, and to her credit she's made amazing accommodation. Even in the early 1950s we were sure that her difficulties, and my mother's subsequent ordeal of a stillbirth, were a result of our proximity to that ubiquitous dust. Other neighbors complained about similar issues, but we all were very poor (hence, the county housing) and had neither the knowledge nor the means at the time to take legal action.

Anne and Lin have the knowledge and skills to represent the thousands of poor people affected by this insidious company, and to alert further responsible people to the danger and the strength of such companies and their tactics for avoiding either cleanup or reparations. This is one of those truly important projects, well-deserving of our support.

Sincerely,



Bill Ransom  
Academic Dean and Member of the Faculty

**Letter of Support for Lin Nelson and Anne Fischel**  
**TESC Sponsored Research DTF**  
**Submitted by Liza Rognas**  
**October 19, 2007**

Dear Colleagues on the Sponsored Research DTF:

I am writing to enthusiastically and urgently encourage your full support of the proposal Lin Nelson and Anne Fischel have submitted for sponsored research next summer, 2008. Their dedicated work on the "Asarco Project" deserves and requires all the support this college can give. This project offers incredibly important opportunities for students and has already supported rich teaching and learning experiences at the college. It's much bigger than Evergreen, however, and promises international attention to issues of social justice and labor within an important environmental health context. Their work on the Asarco Project currently serves as one of a handful of "deep" ongoing teaching and research projects at the college that addresses sustainability across the curriculum, with an interdisciplinary focus.

During the last few years I've alternately lurked on the edges of and stepped into different parts of this huge project. Last January, I began my first sabbatical immersed in Asarco, using it as a test case while researching environmental law resources in Washington, Oregon and Arizona. I am also a Montana native, and using my resources there and my background in Public History, I'm currently undertaking research into Asarco's presence in Billings, Montana. It's as a fully committed member of their (un-funded/under-funded) research team that I write this letter. Additionally, for the last 5 years I have been, and remain, the lead library liaison to TESC's Tacoma Program. Lin and Anne's work in the Ruston, WA., community directly connects to the ongoing Local-to-Global teaching themes our Tacoma faculty create each year. I use their work when working with Tacoma students.

The members of this Sponsored Research DTF are certainly aware of the value Lin and Anne's combined teaching has offered to our curriculum in their "Local Knowledge" programs over the years. Whether teaching together or apart, both dedicate their teaching to connections between our campus and many local area communities.

Because this project includes a film documentary component, localized autobiographical interviews, public meeting documentation (some of which only Anne & Lin have captured) and complex and detailed research that includes 3 primary communities in three different states, with background material from other sites--anyone can see that this project far exceeds the intellectual capacities of any two people. Yet, what Lin and Anne have already accomplished would put many well-funded researchers from Brand -X research universities to shame.

In my dreams, I see this project as a campus-wide focus for several years, resulting in some of the most important participatory research in environmental health, law and labor, that has ever been performed by an institution of higher education. It's that big, that interesting, and that important. This rivals "Love Canal," and the Washington Public Power Supply System (WPPSS) debacle in this state (1957-1982) in national importance. The Asarco Project finds common cause with the environmental health issues highlighted by the United Farm Workers grape boycott and with the public/academic environmental focus Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* started 35 years ago. A dissertation could be written on Asarco and NAFTA--or perhaps an MES Thesis? The immigration connections stretch over a century of mining and smelting along the

Mexican border communities, into every Rocky Mountain state, straight through to the Pacific Northwest and Ruston, Washington.

Well-funded Tier-One university faculty haven't touched on this at all and this shouldn't surprise anyone on the DTF. They have big corporate dollars at stake, we don't. Anne & Lin have captured the interest and support of several nonprofit and labor groups and await funding from some philanthropic bodies. When they publish, I hope TESC has something in place to forward this stellar initiative--otherwise it will go elsewhere.


My sabbatical research using Asarco convinced me that someone other than lawyers needs to write, film and tell these stories. Most of the baseline, peer-reviewed research focused on arsenic poisoning among copper mine and smelter workers (1950-1985) was published by a company physician working for Asarco. All research in this leads to him and to two others working with him who eventually took over that publishing stream. Otherwise, the academic publishing history on Asarco--this huge national and international, often horrific and tragic human and environmental reality--has only been referenced by, or told by lawyers and intermittently, public health scientists. While newspapers have focused on this from time-to-time, the rest of the officially documented/academic research languishes in many, many **hundreds (thousands?) of unprocessed linear feet** of state and county records and reports, and among countless federal Superfund and EPA government documents and reports. Although these last are easily found in hundreds of file folders and boxes at dedicated "repositories" across the nation, none are organized or even analyzed. This hard-to-find data has never been seen or read by the "average" Asarco employee.

Currently, EPA data analysis and reports have been compromised/de-railed by federal administrative policies to de-fund and destroy environmental research. Last year, the EPA libraries were dismantled! Over 30 years of data has been destroyed or so badly fractured and dispersed that conventional academic data gathering and analysis becomes impossible to accomplish. Traditional venues for information gathering are now fragmented and very circuitous. Participatory research, like that Anne & Lin are currently conducting, remain, in my professional researcher's opinion, the only venue for capturing, analyzing and securing these multiple stories with any relevancy to the communities and people who are part of the "Asarco" legacy and current Asarco work environments.

Hopefully, my colleagues on the Sponsored Research DTF have caught a whiff of the urgency with which I began this letter of support. This is good work! It serves the college. It serves the curriculum. It crosses all kinds of disciplinary teaching and research areas. This project also serves our region, and so many more workers and communities, and informs the nation at a time when information is scarce. Please help this project grow and help those of us at TESC pay attention to it by giving Anne & Lin funded time and space to work.

Consider the multiplier effect. What you give to Anne and Lin, you give to me, and to others in the TESC world, who willingly volunteer our time for this project.

Sincerely,

  
Liza Rognas  
Faculty Librarian/ Historian  
TESC x.5851

# EVERGREEN

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Sponsored Research DTF

Dear Colleagues,

This letter **strongly** supports the application by Anne Fischel and Lin Nelson, "No Borders: Communities Living and Working with Asarco." This project is elegantly simple in its main idea: communities and individuals dependent upon companies that pollute suffer when those companies shut down. Potentially deadly contamination combines with loss of jobs to render communities unviable, and government policies end up of little or no use in protecting people and natural resources. Furthermore, company manipulations can enable them to flee responsibility for clean up, heaping injustice on an already depressed situation.

Their proposal develops this story by examining the events surrounding the Asarco smelter, which operated in Ruston, Washington, until 1986. Other Asarco facilities in their project include the last operating smelter in Hayden AZ and one in El Paso, TX which may be recommissioned amidst much public controversy. Their proposal explains how Asarco's smelting operations polluted surrounding areas with lead, copper, arsenic, and cadmium, all of which are poisonous to people and other organisms. After the US Environmental Protection Agency negotiated a clean-up program with Asarco, the company closed plants, sold assets, and, in 2005, declared bankruptcy. Now Asarco want to restart plants but may simultaneously succeed in shedding clean-up responsibilities. Communities, individuals, unions, and environmental groups all stand to suffer as the company potentially profits while gutting the "Superfund" law governing clean-up of pollution.

Although the basic idea behind their project is simple, they have a powerful and sophisticated set of four related activities to document and analyze the events. Furthermore, the outcomes they seek will be in a variety of formats that can effectively reach mass popular audiences, people in the affected communities, union and environmental organizers, and academic audiences. These four activities include:

- a documentary film suitable for TV;
- a conference for affected communities;
- an edited book based on writings of people affected by Asarco; and



