

## **Superfund Sites, the Toxic Release Inventory and Corporate Social Responsibility: A Toxic News Interview with Wilma Subra**

*India Holme, Toxic Expertise Project Administrator, University of Warwick*

Wilma Subra is an [award winning](#)[1] chemist who has dedicated her career to environmental justice. She has worked to protect the environment and the health of citizens for over 40 years. With her home and office in Louisiana, where she grew up, she has many high profile cases along the Petrochemical Corridor (Cancer Alley), right upon her doorstep. In 1981, Wilma started her [Subra Company](#) and since then this chemistry lab and environmental consulting firm has been providing technical assistance to people across the USA and beyond. By working with local communities and helping them gather information and combine technical research and evaluation, Subra Company is able to help communities' influence policy changes.

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I was excited and a little nervous to be conducting an interview with such a highly esteemed and amazingly dedicated woman (Wilma replied to my initial email from the recovery room at her doctor's surgery where she had just had a small area of skin cancer removed).

**India:** As you have been working within the realm of toxics and petrochemicals for so many years...if you had to pick one case to highlight the detrimental effects, which would it be?

**Wilma:** Ohh there are just so many... I guess the one that I have really worked on the longest was a facility that started as an oil field waste incinerator and they were not making enough money by just accepting oil field waste so they started accepting hazardous waste as a bulking agent and as a fuel source and they became one of the largest hazardous waste incinerators in the world and they were taking waste from all over the United States and a number of foreign countries. The scrubbers were not adequate and the emissions were just really, really bad and as a result the people in the community were made very, very ill ... they started up their permitting in '84 and they went into operation in '85 and it took to '96 – when we had a federal judge shut them down... (But) it took till 2013 to get that waste removed from the site even though the

federal judge had shut them down in '96. Meanwhile some of the waste was migrating off the site into the local water body.

But it divided the community. Either you were part of the process that was making money off of the operation or you were the community whose health was impacted. There was actually a cluster of neuroblastomas in the children and the grandmothers ... got involved and worked really, really hard to get the issues on the table and into the courts.

**India:** You said about the community being split, was there any physical split? Did you find that those that were profiting from it tended to live close to it or did they live further away?

**Wilma:** No, they basically all lived in the same area but they were making money as opposed to the ones that were being sick and even if they had been sick they weren't going to discuss it because they were part of the company.

**India:** So have you ever found that where you've got communities and there is profit to be made... that sometimes when people are getting sick... they don't want to pursue it anymore because their livelihood would be at risk?

**Wilma:** Well the most interesting thing... is when I get a phone call from somebody in industry who says – “I never agreed with you, but my wife, my child, is now sick or has cancer and I need to know where the exposure may have come from”. So even the ones that are making financial benefits, when it hits home in their own family then they wanna know what's going on and what they can do to reduce the exposure.

*... a phone call from somebody in industry who says – “I never agreed with you, but my wife, my child, is now sick or has cancer and I need to know where the exposure may have come from”.*

**India:** We've been looking at communities that aren't successful in their bids for environmental justice and that often a lack of 'concrete evidence' is to blame. But I often feel like there is a lot of evidence, say cancer rates increasing, miscarriages and birth defects and things like that. Can you think of a case that you've worked on where you've presented what you assume is a lot of evidence, to have it kicked out and have them say “no, that's not enough”?

**Wilma:** So there's a lot of data available in the agency files and we have what's called the [Toxic Release Inventory](#) where every year the facilities have to report what

chemicals they release into the air, land and water... so you put that information together... (with) the health impacts that citizens are experiencing. Then if the industry has an accidental release they have to report what chemicals they released and whether or not it was on site.

So you put all those pieces together and say this is what the data shows as far as contamination, this is the health impacts and this is how they tie together... and you ask the environmental agencies if they will come in and do additional testing or monitoring to help further documentation, because they're the ones with the money and the community doesn't have any money. So you lay it out in that fashion and frequently the agencies will come in and do some monitoring and confirm that what you have put together is really true.

The other aspect is that the industry has all these reporting requirements and... there are different people in one industry that do these reporting's ... there is not one person that looks at all the reports and sort of ties it together. So I've been able to get the various reports and say and this is what it shows and frequently the industry will say, "Oh no you're wrong" and I will say "well this is yourself reporting". So then they will have someone within the industry review the data and say "oh you were right, we had no idea we were having that impact because we had individual people doing individual tasks and we never looked at it all together".



**India:** So sometimes it could be because industries aren't collating all the evidence as you are and joining all the dots so to speak and just don't see their impact. Whilst this interview is for Toxic News, part of our [research project](#) is looking at how we can help corporations take more social and environmental responsibility. It seems this might be one of the ways then, to suggest they employ somebody that links it all together.

**Wilma:** Yes, that's right. Another aspect of the Toxic Release Inventory is that we were able to see how much of each specific chemical they were releasing, like [benzene\[2\]](#) which is a known human cancer causing agent.... So we also put together what was called the 'dirty dozen' which was the highest emitters into the air, highest emitters in to the land and highest emitters in to the water. And so we used that to go to the press and get that kind of information out there... So over the first couple of years we started

to see a lot of reductions from the industry. But they left their permit conditions in place, so ... they then started increasing capacity because they had a lot of permit capacity left. So ... the emissions then went back up to the top of their permit limits but their production capacity doubled and tripled. So it helped the communities for a few years and then it hurt the communities because emissions were way back up again.



Abandoned Love Canal area in 2012  
(Credit: rik-shaw)

**India:** My next question is about [superfund sites](#).<sup>[3]</sup> I saw a [video](#) of you talking about the case of [Love Canal](#), the first recognised superfund site. Are you currently working on a superfund site?

**Wilma:** So with Love Canal I was working at the research institute and we were ... testing the soil, sediment and the ground water... that data identified how it was moving off site and into the residential areas... a couple of days ago I received a request (for information) by a reporter...(because)... there is an old landfill in New York... which took Love Canal waste... and it contaminated the rest of the landfill, the groundwater, the soil and the sediment and it migrated into the neighbourhoods as this landfill is surrounded by residential housing. So I am getting ready to do an interview with him tomorrow.

I've done sites in Louisiana and Florida that are superfund sites and then I've worked on a lot of sites that are pre-superfund and then also one in Texas. I've also served on a number of EPA advisory committees dealing with a number of superfund issues.

We have a site in New Orleans that was a landfill in the early 1900's and it had incinerators on it and it was called the [Agricultural Street Landfill](#)<sup>[4]</sup> because it was accessible by agricultural industry. So all the waste that was generated in the city would be disposed of there or in the Silver City dump that was the other side of town...it was closed ... (but) then we had Hurricane Betsy in '65 or '66 and so they reopened it to take all the debris ... then the city built subsidised housing on top of the landfill, not on the edge of the landfill – on top of the landfill. And it became a superfund site. I had the technical assistance grant and we worked extensively to get the people relocated... you could sit in their yard and just pull up the waste.

**India:** So it was that shallow?

**Wilma:** Oh yeah... we had tried to get a relocation. It was the City that operated the landfill and the only thing we were asking for of the City was in-kind contributions but they said “no”. So the solution was removing and replacing 2 feet of soil ... but they only did this on 10% of the site... they only did it where there was grass. And so they



were left there and in 2005 we had Hurricane Katrina and it flooded all of that area and the winds just ripped up all the houses ... so the hurricane did what we were unable to accomplish... it was really, really sad.

*I had the technical assistance grant and we worked extensively to get the people relocated... you could sit in*

*their yard and just pull up the waste.*

**India:** So who would have given the go ahead? As it sounds like the site was developed on and then deemed a superfund site afterwards, did you say it was the City?

**Wilma:** The development occurred with a subsidy but the City is the one that developed it and then the EPA was the one that decided on the remedy after the City wouldn't do in-kind services.

**Old drum left behind in a Superfund site in Amsterdam, New York (Image credit: Amsterdam New York)**

**India:** This brings me onto my next question. I have recently read about corporations ‘glossing over’ or ignoring previous [toxic contaminations](#) and [similar](#). A bit like what we were just discussing. Would you say during your time working within the ‘toxic’ industry that there has been either an increase or decrease in the amount of issues that companies will ‘ignore’?

**Wilma:** There's a definite increase... Well because of the media coverage there has been a lot more awareness that there has been developments on top of contaminated property and so people will read something and they think “oh, well that happened somewhere else”, but then they start thinking about their health impacts and what is going on in their community ... they start asking questions, “is our subdivision on top of something?”. We had an example of a facility that was operated by Exxon ... it got shut down and the tanks were removed and then somebody bought the property and

developed it as a subdivision in the '60s. Then all of sudden now everybody has cancer, everybody has these health impacts.

**India:** So people are realising more because they read things in the paper etc. and then they think “oh actually I’ve experienced that” so they look into it regarding their developments which we built 10, 20, and 40 odd years ago. But do you also think that with new developments, that the development corporations pay any more attention to toxic problems?

**Wilma:** No, no... Even in new developments, like right now the next city over is Lafayette, Louisiana which is a hub of growing gas industry... people come in and buy a chunk of land and develop it as subdivision... they’re really nice houses and people are moving in... they never ask; “what was here before the subdivision was developed?”

There was one waste site in Vermillion Parish... it was in all the records and all the media had covered it and one day I go by and the whole property had a ‘For Sale’ sign in it and it has a subdivision schematic on the front and it says ‘waterfront properties’... the waterfront property is a waste pit! So I called up the estate agent and asked “do you realise what you are selling?” People don’t ask and the real estate agents don’t ask and you need to do full disclosure but without asking the right questions it (full disclosure) doesn’t work.

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**India:** We want to have an open, honest dialogue with corporations about their social and environmental responsibility. Arguably these companies have to exist and in an ideal world we want to work with them. What’s your experience been with talking to corporations and what advice can you give us?

**Wilma:** So first of all, I get requests from communities, I don’t go in uninvited. If there is something going on then I will do an E-alert, but you have to be invited. If you go to a company and say you are concerned about their operation and it’s just you and not you with the community – then they are probably going to just blow you off... If you go in having worked with the community and combined information *with the* community situation, so it brings those two things together ... you go in and say you

want to engage in discussions to improve these situations, then they are more than likely to talk with you.

### **Closing Comments**

Wilma's wealth of experience and dedication to helping the communities that approach her know no bounds. Her passion for her work and her commitment to righting environmental wrongs is somewhat awe inspiring. I am very pleased that Wilma has kindly agreed to keep Toxic News updated on the Love Canal case. It will be interesting to see how the story unfolds since this issue seemed to be resolved some time ago; but as I am learning with 'toxics' their consequences are very rarely short lived.

Whilst I and many countless others thoroughly appreciate Wilma's endeavor's to help people achieve environmental justice, perhaps unsurprisingly not everyone feels the same. In preparation for our interview I had read that [Wilma was once shot at](#) whilst working in her office. I just had to ask her about this experience and whether or not it was related to her work for environmental justice. This is what Wilma told me...

**Wilma:** ... My office has been broken into a tremendous number of times and every time my office is broken into I can always name two or three projects I'm working on where perhaps the company we're working against will come and hire somebody to break into my office. So I was working one afternoon ... to put together some recommendations for what the agencies needed to do prior to any other hurricanes... I was in the front office which has a window which faces the street. At that same time my husband was out working on the flower bed opposite our house which is around the corner from my office... he kept seeing this vehicle slowly going up and down the road in front on the office and when they came back one time the passenger shot at my office. So he (husband) immediately called the Sheriff's office on his cell phone and they stopped him (the driver) at the corner and at the time the passenger was gone, the gun was gone and the driver of the vehicle 'knew nothing about it'. The police wouldn't even allow me to know who the driver was, they said that would infringe on his civil rights.

*... this vehicle slowly going up and down the road in front on the office and when they came back one time the passenger shot at my office.*

**India:** And with the break-ins, have they ever been able to track down who it's been?

**Wilma:** Uh uh, no...they've gotten finger prints, they've gotten DNA... they've (Sheriff's Office) made no effort to find out who it is.

**India:** That's really surprising, I would have assumed with that kind of evidence they would be straight on top of it.

**Wilma:** Mmm hmm (in agreement)... the last time my glass man who has to keep changing the glass as they break in said I'm tired of changing your glasses on your windows, so he told me here's a man that's local that makes burglar screens – so ... now I have burglar screens on all the windows and since then they haven't broken into the office. They throw trash, they throw eggs at the door and the windows but they haven't tried to break in.

**India:** So do you feel that's it's an attempt to intimidate you?

**Wilma:** Oh yes, all of its intimidation, yeah, sure.

**India:** You seem so calm about it all.

*Wilma: Well if you let them make you quit working on the issues, the citizens are the ones that suffer ... so if I stop doing this, then they won – I will not let them win.*

**India:** That's very admirable, you're a brave lady...

(Featured images: credit to the Louisiana Environmental Action Network [LEAN](#))

[1] 'The MacArthur Genius Award' in 2004 – <https://www.macfound.org/fellows/625/>; Selected as a 'Lifetime Remarkable Woman' in 2011 – <http://www.mylifetime.com/my-lifetime-commitment/remarkable-women/wilma-subra>; Received the 2011 'Global Exchange, Human Rights Award' for her work with communities affected by the BP Oil Spill – <http://www.globalexchange.org/blogs/peopletopeople/2011/06/07/faces-of-the-2011-human-rights-awards-gala/>

[2] The World Health Organisation (WHO) describes exposure to benzene as a major public health concern. With exposure being 'associated with

a range of acute and long-term adverse health effects and diseases, including cancer and aplastic anaemia'. <http://www.who.int/ipcs/features/benzene.pdf> (accessed 26.01.2016)

[3] The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) website defines superfund sites as “the primary federal government program to clean up the nation’s uncontrolled hazardous waste sites. Under the Superfund program, abandoned, accidentally spilled, or illegally dumped hazardous wastes that pose a current or future threat to human health or the environment are cleaned up.” <http://www.epa.gov/superfund-redevelopment-initiative/frequent-questions> (accessed 26.01.2016).

[4] The referenced page from the University of Michigan website is dated in 2000, so the information is about the original state of the site prior to Hurricane Katrina in 2005.