

Interview with Phillis Engelbert

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This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Greetings take place

Anne: Our first question is, what was your background with environmental studies when you began this area of study? And why in particular did you choose this topic? And then maybe, if you want to go with that, how was the team of people that created this thesis formed?

Phillis Engelbert: I was studying under Bunyan Bryant, and he is a Professor [Emeritus], and he was one of two professors in the environmental advocacy concentration of, back then it was just called the School of Natural Resources. There was no E at the end, and there was no SEAS or anything like that, and as an undergrad and as a grad student I was a campus activist in a lot of different things. I mean, the eighties was kind of a big time on campus. Anyway, there was a lot going on, and so when... it came time to choose a project, you know, I wanted to find something that showcased not just an environmental issue, but also injustice. And in this case, there was kind of like a David and Goliath kind of thing going on, and the Goliath was the company called Gelman Sciences, which then became Pall Gelman, which became Pall, and I, you know, had read that there was evidence of contamination [that] was unearthed by a grad student named Dan Bicknell, and I knew that the company was acting really cavalier and sort of running roughshod over the community and acting like it wasn't their fault, and the community bore responsibility too somehow, which was really weird. But that was even sort of underscored in the School of Natural Resources.

I remember taking a class on resource management where, you know, the professor made it pretty clear that anytime there's a case of contamination everybody has to pitch in and put forth the resources to solve it. I remember arguing with him in class, saying 'that doesn't... no. That's not right. The corporation that did the polluting, they're the ones that need to deal with it. Not the people who... live in the area and are impacted by the contamination.'

It was timely, it was local, it was political... It just seemed like everything you've ever read or heard, starting from the Lorax onward about corporate polluters, was playing out right in front of us. And more than that, the polluter was a major contributor to both the School of Public Health and the School of Natural Resources at the University, so the University didn't want this project to happen. They didn't want our graduate project to happen. It was rocking the boat. It was very eye-opening for me to see professors and the dean who purportedly were environmentalists sort of circling the wagons on this one and... taking the side of the polluter... because that was a funder. Like you're not going to do anything to upset a funder, and it honestly put a really bad taste in my mouth about the University. Like what is the role of the University, and which side are you on? And so their opposition to my project made me dig in even deeper.

Cody: What was it like dealing with all of that pushback from the University while you were trying to do that?

Phillis: It was super frustrating. It really pissed me off, I remember that... I was just kind of livid that this was happening, and I felt a little bit betrayed by the University. The only person who stuck by us was Bunyan Bryant, our advisor, and, in fact, ...he kind of went to bat for us, and also suffered from it because he was sort of ostracized for ...facilitating our ability to do this project.

Cody: I can only imagine how frustrating that must have been.

Phillis: We were threatened we wouldn't get our diplomas and it wouldn't count and we wouldn't be able to graduate and all that kind of stuff. And we were like, keep your effing diploma, we're doing this project. We ended up getting our diplomas, but... it was the teaming up of the leadership at the school and the Gelman lawyers and the leadership of the School of Public Health, and it felt like the whole University and this powerful company were sort of lined up against us, which just made us more on fire. ...It definitely changed my opinion of the University and, I can't say I'm a U of M booster to this day.

...[W]hen you finish your master's thesis you have to pay. So to get 3 bound copies and they go in the library. Well, they disappeared. Within a week, they were gone. So we paid again out of our own pockets to have them rebound and put back in the library, and they disappeared again, and this happened 3 times until we finally gave up. And I, to this day, I don't know if it exists in the library. I know there was somebody who took our old floppy disc and created a PDF out of it

and now the report exists on PDF. And I, to this day, I don't know if it's accessible, or if it exists... in the school library where all the masters' theses are supposed to be housed.

Ariel: Well, I'm no librarian, so I can't tell you for sure, but I don't think that there is a physical copy. There is an accessible PDF version that you have to be part of the community, or here to access, but not one that people can pull off the shelves. Three times?! Three copies?!

Phillis: Three times. It's expensive, especially for, you know, a starving graduate student. And then we just finally gave up on it and moved on.

Cody: Yeah, well, thankfully that work was able to get out there regardless! So, since it is accessible online, we were able to give it a read-through, and it was very interesting. And the part that was catching our eyes the most was - because you broke up the thesis into about five sections - it was the 'Citizen Efficacy and Protecting their Environment and Health' section.

So along those lines, we're curious to know if, in the years since the thesis, you have seen any shift in Washtenaw County towards, you know, proactive citizen or government action required for protecting the environment and health that you call for in the thesis.

Phillis: You know, I can't really speak to that because my focus kind of shifted away from these projects. I mean, I stayed active in, you know, various other kinds of activism and community organizing. I haven't necessarily witnessed any shift. I know that the plume, the 1,4 dioxane plume, continues to spread, and I know it was tied up in courts for years, and it's in the Huron River now... in tiny concentrations.

It's a little bit painful because it could have been stopped. It could have been cleaned up at the beginning, and I'm certain that the company, the corporation spent more money on lawyers than it would have cost just to clean the damn thing up in the first place. But they fought it and fought it and fought it, and now, decades later, it's under the entire city of Ann Arbor. It was just very concentrated at one point in the neighborhood... over on Wagner Road where the company exists, but they let it go.

I, personally, feel like I have a personal relationship with the Huron River. I love the river; I have a kayak. In the summer in the warmer weather I'm out in my kayak whenever I can. And it's not easy to squeeze in time with my current lifestyle with... a restaurant, a bar, and a bakery, but even if it's just an hour to get out there and poke along the edges. Not to get all waxing

poetic, but I feel like I kind of know every inch of that river in our area. ...I know the wildlife that lives there, and I see the recreation that happens, and I think it's the most spectacular public recreation opportunity in our backyard. And anybody can go there. It's not a country club, right? All you have to do is drag your tube over to the Cascades or jump off the docks, or whatever. Jump in a boat, and you're on the river, and it's beautiful, and it's gorgeous. It's such a great equalizing opportunity. I love that about it.

And just to think that ...now there's PFAS too, and... God knows what else. But the 1,4 dioxane, if that really does continue to spread into the river. That would kind of be the thing, I think that would call it for people. You can't really eat fish out of the river anymore. And it's kind of painful because it's such a beautiful resource that should be there for everyone and it's just kind of... being taken away. And now, 40 years on,... that plume still threatens our ability to enjoy the river.

Ariel: At the beginning, you said you haven't really gone that direction anymore. Would you say that a lot of that is because of the pushback and what happened when you looked into dioxane?

Phillis: No, I just got distracted by other things like wars and working with migrant farm workers and things like that.

Ariel: So other good fights!

Phillis: Yeah [the pushback] did not at all dissuade me. Jeff Gearhart, one of my co-authors, you know, he's still doing environmental work. He works for the [Ann Arbor] Ecology Center. He's doing really great stuff with... trying to protect the environment. The rest of the people on the project, I don't know. I haven't talked to them. I don't know where they are.

I think something like that... solidified my desire to fight, if anything.

Ariel: Because you have [experience] community organizing and fighting, and you do love the river so much, do you have suggestions for, like a regular community member out there about things that they could do to protect the river, or should do? One of the things that your thesis talked about was like land planning and use.

People, maybe we need to be paying more attention to who we allow to be near the river, and where their waste is going.

[Any] particular things that you've been thinking about or want to share.

Phillis: I don't know if I have any expertise on that right now. I would just say that when you hear about this or that threat to the river, listen carefully and get involved. Demand action from the government entities that are supposed to protect our public resources.

I don't think, the case of Gelman Sciences' contamination of the Huron River is unique in any way. It's just more emblematic if anything of 'if you have the money, you have the power' and it shouldn't be that way. ...If there is a resource, a public resource like a river, it should be there for the use and enjoyment of all. Not to be polluted by somebody with money or power.

And then the watchdog agencies, they need more funding. They need more teeth to be able to actually tackle these issues because I think it's easier for these corporations to sort of run roughshod and do what they want because the oversight isn't what it should be. We shouldn't wait till something gets to the point of being a superfund site.

I'm sure there are rivers out there that are in a lot worse shape than the Huron River, and Ann Arbor is a community where the people have education and wealth and resources, right? So I think, if it weren't for that, it could be even worse. But there are a lot of communities that their rivers are just destroyed. You can't go in them. They're uninhabitable. Nothing lives in them. You can't swim in them. You can't fish on them.

I'm not sure what the answer is here. I struggled with questions like this for decades now, and it's not just about environmental destruction, either. It's housing and homelessness and addiction treatment and all kinds of things. Mental health treatment. It's kind of like, what is our society prioritizing?

I mean, I think the Gelman Sciences contamination case just fits neatly into sort of that... [I]t could be one cell in the honeycomb of what resources need to be redistributed and what are our priorities as a society.

It's toxic landfills being situated in poor neighborhoods. People who can't fight back get run over. But a lot of people can fight back, maybe more than they know, by banding together and making a lot of noise. Like at Standing Rock with the pipeline. It's worth it. It's worth it to fight for what's right. But it also can get discouraging.

I have, in my own personal history, lots of stories of wins and losses, and they were all worth fighting. But there are some victories in there, too. And you know, like I said, I branched out from environmental activism after grad school.

[M]y freshman year of college, 1981, I started recycling in East Quad. There was no campus recycling, and it was a fight just to get boxes on every hall so students could recycle their newspapers. And we had to fight with the building director because they said if we put all that stuff in the loading dock, it would attract rats and blah, blah, blah, which it didn't do.

And then, you know, I worked with friends who lived in other dorms to get it going in other dormitories. But environmental activism wasn't really entirely my thing. I've been much more focused on direct people like injustices. Stuff in prisoner rights and labor organizing, and wars in Central America and that kind of thing. But I don't think any of them are really any different. It's just creating what kind of society... we want to live in. What do we want to be known for? What's going to define us?

Okay, I've been going on and on. *laughs*

Anne: No, this is great! I love hearing about all of this. I live in East Quad right now and the recycling is there, and it's in a more organized system and not attracting rats.

Phillis: I mean we had to call these two hippies with a truck to come pick it up every week and that's what became Recycle Ann Arbor. I mean, they started Recycle Ann Arbor. I think one of them, I still remember it was Dan Ezekiel who became a school teacher, now he's retired and he's still an environmental activist. But yeah, those were different days for sure.

Ariel: I was gonna ask you, how do you not let it bring you down, you know, the same thing is ongoing since the eighties, but then I feel like you just answered it with people have more power than they know, and just seemingly small, just talking to your dorm manager and being like. 'No, we can put a box there. It'll be fine. At least try it.' Just agitating for someone to just try something and believing that you can do something. It sounds to me, it's a good antidote.

Phillis: Yeah, even just start small. just with a little step like that, like getting a box on your hallway. Though, I'm not as optimistic as I used to be. I also am a little burned out from, you know, I was sort of in the trenches for 30 years, and I sort of changed gears and started vegan restaurants. It just sort of happened. But I don't think I would be ready to go back in, and I also just kind of wanted to pass the baton, you know? I've talked to a lot of younger people who are

interested in doing things, and I've helped train people on things like... organizing petition drives and things like that, and I'm happy to still do that. But... I'm not in the trenches anymore like I used to be. This stuff sort of does take a toll after a while, and I don't know. I think we've kind of dug ourselves into a hole with climate change.

I mean, everything is worth it, and even just for your own soul, it's worth it. But there's a lot of irreversible damage that's happened and that does get me down. It gets me really down. It probably gets you guys down, too. I mean, it's sort of like an existential crisis that we're all sharing, right?

Cody: Oh, definitely.

Ariel: Yeah, absolutely. Every day. But, you know, hearing you say, 'even for your own soul' like that's a really good point. Like just because it's easier, and seems even almost the logical choice, to just give up, that's not gonna feel good as a human being who has to wake up and live every day.

Phillis: Yeah, how do we define ourselves? How do you define yourselves? What's the point of even being here, right? We're still humans on this planet. So we might as well do the best we can.

And, you know, people react differently during crises. I think some people just sort of get numb and withdraw. Some people... are opportunistic and try to exploit it for their own gain. And some people just continue to help.

You know, I'm a big fan of Albert Camus, and in *The Plague*, he talks about what's the role of a healer. And healer doesn't have to be in the medical sense of a healer, but somebody who tries to heal their society, their community, their environment, whatever. And so I think there's a lot to be said for sort of the exercise of going through it, and sometimes you have to put energy out there without knowing what the returns going to be and be okay with that. You're going to keep doing it, even though you don't have a whole lot of confidence that... you're going to result in a victory of some sort.

But what else would you do if you're that kind of person? You're not going to be content to just roll over, right? Why else are you here other than to stand up for what's right?

Anne: Me and Cody really like that. We were snapping under the table. *laughs*

Ariel: I guess that wraps up nicely because you had a half an hour to talk with us, so it just really fit it in there! Thank you for talking with us even though you are covering a shift like immediately!

Phillis: Yeah, If you guys want to talk again just let me know!

Ariel: We will. Thank you so so much!

Phillis: Yeah, you're welcome. Take care.

Cody: Thank you, you too!

Anne: Thank you!

Ariel: Have a good evening!

Phillis: Thanks, you too. Bye bye!

Ariel: Bye!