A TEI Project

Interview of Paula Wansa

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Collings
: Good morning, Paula. This is Jane Collings interviewing Paula Wansa at the Ayres Suites Hotel in Diamond Bar on December 17th, 2007.

Collings
: Good morning, Paula.

Wansa
: Good morning, Jane.

Collings
: Why don't you just start by telling me where you were born, where you're from?

Wansa
: I was born in Worthington, Minnesota in 1941. My father moved to Riverside, California in 1945 and he was a turkey rancher. He raised turkeys for, probably, fifty years, and that's how we ended up in Glen Avon. He had a large turkey ranch north of the freeway in Glen Avon, California.

Collings
: So your family was part of that Midwestern migration?

Wansa
: Right.

Collings
: That's just like Penny Newman's family, as a matter of fact.

Wansa
: Right.

Collings
: Were there a lot of people in the Glen Avon area with that background as far as you know?

Wansa

At that time there was a lot of small ranches and things like that around that area. Now, it's just small homes, not so many ranches. Maybe a few chickens still.

Collings

But were there a lot of families from the Midwest?

Wansa

The ones my father and mother knew were from all over. A lot of Midwesterners, too, but they kind of made friends with other turkey ranchers in the area.

Collings

Right.

Wansa

Everybody getting out of the cold, though.

Collings

Did you have a lot of turkey growing up or did you just kind of hate it?

Wansa

No, actually, I still like turkey. I love my Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners with turkey, but that's about all we ever had during the time.

Collings

So you moved to the Glen Avon area with your own parents?

Wansa

Parents, right. My father raised up to 40,000 turkeys at one time in Glen Avon. He had good years and bad years. Some years they had the Newcastle disease and destroyed all the turkeys just before market. That was some sad times. But other than that, it was a good place to grow up, lots of fun in the area.

Collings

You met your husband there?

Wansa

No, he actually is from Detroit and he came to--he was at March Air Force Base and I was working at pizza parlor during the summer of college and he came in to have pizza and he never left me a tip and so I got even with him. [laughs]

Collings

But you did stay in that area?

Wansa

Yes. In fact, my folks, when we did get married, they gave us a half an acre and we built a home on it right on the turkey ranch. So we stayed right there for--and then I taught school in that area, too.

Collings

Now, when you were growing up did you hear anything about the Stringfellow site?

Wansa

There was one incident where a truck turned over right in front of the freeway on our ranch and it was loaded with chemicals and that kind of like was a red flag at the time, because they were cleaning it up. But they didn't do the hazardous waste stuff like they do today, it was just kind of mop it up. But they did say this was a truck that was on its way to the Stringfellow acid pits.

Wansa

When my children were young, well, we had a horse and my husband would take one of my girls out horseback riding on his horse and go past the Stringfellow acid pits and then go into the fields behind it where there's a lot of--they had sand and vineyards where they grew grapes for wineries at that time. So he'd ride past it and see it, you know, there was nothing keeping you from it at that time.

Collings

Right, and from what people say it was like a big open expanse, it was actually very pretty.

Wansa

Open area, right. Yes. Kids would think it was a nice little old pond and lake that's out there.

Collings

Yes. Did you know Ruth Kirkby when you were growing up?

Wansa

It was Ruth who probably sounded the alarm first and who kind of let everybody know that there was a big problem there and she was the first one to really want to get the area cleaned up and was concerned about it. So we got to know her. Then she also had the Jurupa Cultural Center and so she--then when I was going to junior college we even went up to where she had her house and in the basement they were really into rocks and minerals and brought us, the college class, down to see the rock and mineral collection they had. So I got to know her a little bit.

Wansa

Then her son also went to the, I believe he went to the college, too, so I kind of knew him slightly.

Collings

What college was that?

Wansa

The junior college in Riverside, Riverside City College.

Collings

Oh, okay. Yes.

Wansa

Then I went to San Diego from there to graduate, San Diego State.

Collings

Yes, because you were planning to be a--

Wansa

Elementary school teacher, yes.

Collings

Yes, that's right. Okay. Now, as I understand it, even though Ruth Kirkby was talking about the Stringfellow site, there was not a lot of interest in the subject in the town?

Wansa

Probably not right at the beginning. It was probably because she was kind of--well, some people considered her a little hysterical about it and so they didn't take, probably, her serious at first, and it wasn't until things really started happening there and the overflows and everything and people got more concerned about it and realized that she was really right in the beginning.

Collings

So maybe it was her communication style or something.

Wansa

Right, I think so. Exactly. Yes.

Collings

But what tipped her off as far as you know?

Wansa

Well, she felt that she was getting--the Jurupa Cultural Center and her house were in direct line with the air currents and she felt she could smell things and felt it was a danger to her health or anyone that lived there. Because she was into geology and everything, she realized this really wasn't a good place to have something like that, and even though they said the soil could not be penetrated, she knew enough about geology to know this was not the truth.

Collings

Oh, that's interesting. Yes. Now, once the Parents of Jurupa got started with this and particularly once Concerned Neighbors was formed, did she play a role with those groups at all?

Wansa

In Parents of Jurupa she was very involved with that. Then when we kind of branched off into CNA or Concerned Neighbors, there was kind of a clash of personalities, I think, and she wasn't too sure that this was the way we should go, and so she kept her own--kept the spark going in her direction, but did not join with the other group.

Collings

But in the end she must have been happy. I mean, she's passed away now, so--

Wansa

I'm sure she was, yes. Right.

Collings

She must have been satisfied in the end.

Collings

So you had heard a little bit about the site here and there growing up, you mentioned that there was that spill and you'd heard things from Ruth Kirkby. But at what point did you become involved in an actual concerted effort to do something?

Wansa

Probably not until it really--well, I think the first time, as we were going to sell our house in about the time of the first spill, and right after the first spill they announced they would come out, the county would come out and test our wells. Well, where we were, we were on a well.

Collings

Are you talking about the controlled release in 1978?

Wansa

Yes, I believe that was the one.

Collings

Okay.

Wansa

They said, because there was some concern about people having contaminated wells and we were only actually a mile west of the acid pits, probably directly west.

Collings

Oh, wow. Really?

Wansa

Yes, on the ranch. We were by the hills and everything. So we opted to have our wells tested. So they tested our wells for bacteria and E. coli. So it was like that was a strange thing, you know, that wasn't exactly what we were concerned about, you know.

Collings

Yes. No, I was thinking, gee, that's the first time I heard about that.

Wansa

Right, they just did it for E. coli and they came back and they said, "Oh, your well's fine, you have no E. coli," and so we weren't that knowledgeable about all that stuff.

Collings

Yes. I mean, how could you be at this point?

Wansa

Then right after that we had our house up for sale and we were actually going to build, we had another three acres that we bought from my parents on the ranch, and we were going to build right behind our house, the house we were

selling. So in fact, it was three days before escrow was going to close and the escrow company finally goes, "Oh, my goodness you have a well and we can't close escrow until we test it." So by this time we had moved out and we were moving into a small trailer and my kids were going to stay with my parents while we built this other house. So the people were all ready to move in. Something we would never do again, we let them move in and we moved out and said, "Oh, everything's fine, we just had the well tested and everything was okay."

Wansa

So they came and tested the well and lo and behold a couple days later they said, "You have the highest contamination of nitrates we have ever seen in the state."

Wansa

We go, "Well, we didn't know anything about that," and the people were in there and we said, "Well, we don't know what to do. We can't sell you the house until we have good water, potable water to give you." We said, "Well, we'll talk with the water district," which is across the freeway, "and see how much it would cost to bring it over."

Wansa

So we called up the water district, and the first person we talked to said, "Oh, maybe $50,000." Then later on it was like $100,000. Then it was like it would be too much for you to pay by yourself.

Wansa

So we finally told the people that were in our house, "We can't sell you the house."

Wansa

Well, they were very upset, so they were going to sue us for breach of contract. So they got a lawyer, so then we had to get a lawyer to get them out. So it was three months before we got them out and meanwhile we're living in a little tiny trailer, like fifteen feet, fifteen-and-a-half-foot trailer.

Wansa

So then they were mad at us, so they didn't water any plants and when they finally did leave they poured stuff down the lines in our house, so it was like cemented, you know.

Collings

Oh, my gosh.

Wansa

It was awful. It was just awful.

Collings

Didn't they understand the bigger picture?

Wansa

Well, they were just--well, they were planning--this was going to be their dream home, too, I guess, and they were just really--thought we should bring water to them, I guess, because we thought we could at first.

Collings

Well, of course, you thought that, yes.

Wansa

We said, "Well, we need water, too, so we'll try to get water," and then we just found it was just economically impossible.

Wansa

So that was, anyhow, our first little treat to Stringfellow. So then it was right after that then the school overflowed. Well, oh, then at that time Penny and some people were getting involved, and so we actually contacted a lawyer in Los Angeles who might handle the case for us and see if he could get enough money for us to just get water across to us. So he went and started the case and then he found out that it was just too much for him to handle if he was only going to do one person. It had to be a lot of people. At that time we didn't, the community wasn't involved in it, so we just said, "Never mind and we'll just move back to our house and do the best we can."

Wansa

So the County Health Department at that time said we could take showers in this water and wash clothes in it, but not to drink it. So from then on we just had bottled water to drink until we--

Collings

And they provided the bottled water.

Wansa

Not at this time, no. This was before anybody got involved. We had to do our own thing, because we were the people who lived there, it was our responsibility, I guess.

Collings

Yes.

Wansa

So other people, it's funny when you have something like that a lot of people will say, "Well, why don't you just move?" But I mean, this is our house, this is our equity, you just don't get up and leave it.

Collings

Right.

Wansa

So anyhow, I continued teaching and we went on with our lives and forgot about building the other house. Then the overflow happened at the school and then--

Collings

The one where they--the specific, the controlled release?

Wansa

The specific, right. Right. Because I was teaching there I did get involved at that time, the group CNA started, and I got involved in that and that was the real beginning of some community action.

Collings

Right. Okay, well, we'll go back and sort of get that in a little bit more detail, but when you say the real beginning of some community action, let's just talk a little bit about how people that lived in the community responded to the news.

Wansa

Of the water being released around the school and everything?

Collings

Yes.

Wansa

Well, I was at school and I remember after it was released we had--they were also concerned that more would be released and the dam would be breached. So the principal called a meeting in the morning and said the school district has a plan, and if you hear one bell we want you to line the kids up and we're going to take them to another school off site, because that means that the dam might break at any time and the school ground could be flooded. Then if you hear two bells it means it's too late, get the kids up on their desks and hope for the best.

Wansa

So during that day we stayed inside all day and actually nothing ever happened, but some of the parents found out about it and then after that we also had parents picketing the school saying this is unsafe and stuff like that. The principal who was a really nice man, but he did not understand all this, that it was anything, he just was making fun of the parents saying, "If they were really concerned, they wouldn't be out there picketing," blah, blah, blah.

Collings

What would they be doing?

Wansa

They would stay away from the area, in other words, if it was really a concern to them. Then he wanted to just keep it quiet, he didn't want the parents in his school to get upset, you know, or pull kids out of school or anything like that.

Wansa

But after the parents started picketing and got organized and they wanted the water tested and things like that, then I, because I lived in the community and because I taught there, then I started getting involved, too, and getting involved in this group of parents, which didn't always make me a friend of the principal. [laughs]

Collings

Now, how did the parents learn about this, because it was supposed to be just something that--

Wansa

Quietly, yes.

Collings

Quiet, yes.

Wansa

Right. Well, I think some of the teachers, and also some of the aides at school, were parents in the community and they knew what was happening and pretty soon it just--the PTA would find out and the PTA would let people know. So it was just--

Collings

Just word got out.

Wansa

Right, word got out.

Collings

The reason that the kids were supposed to get up on top of their desks was not because of fear of drowning, but fear of contact with this?

Wansa

With anything that might come into the classroom.

Collings

Yes, any of the, like, toxic chemicals or anything like that.

Wansa

Right.

Collings

When you were living in your home using this well did anybody in the family have any--

Wansa

Any problems?

Collings

Yes.

Wansa

My youngest daughter always--well, she had problems with asthma quite a bit and also she had skin problems, rashes, but whether that was directly caused by that or not, you know--

Collings

I know, but you hear so many people say that.

Wansa

Right, so many people say that. Right. After a while you start beginning--

Collings

You start to wonder.

Wansa

Right, what it's all caused by. But she did have a lot of problems. I had some skin cancer removed and we had funny things happen to our dogs or they'd die or things like that.

Collings

Oh, really? Oh, wow.

Wansa

But other than that, you know, you just figure diseases happen to the family, you know, colds or things like that.

Collings

Yes, right, but still the minute you found out about the--

Wansa

Then you start thinking, you know, you go back and you go, well, was this caused by that or that caused by it. My dad always had skin cancer. I mean, by the time he died I think he had his whole face replaced, because he was out, of course, out in the sun all the time, too.

Collings

Yes.

Wansa

But out in that air and taking showers in the--because they also had a--the whole turkey ranch was on a well, so the whole family had wells.

Collings

Right. But, I mean, in the community, you know, among sort of the older folk when you were growing up were there any little stories floating around or any little rumors or were people just not touching that?

Wansa

Just kind of oblivious to it, yes. I don't think many people really knew it was even up there. I mean, it was just kind of hidden in the hills there and unless you were up there bike riding or horseback riding you probably didn't even know it existed. There was a time that it seems like I remember they were talking about cleaning it up and it was going only cost like $500,000 to clean it up. That didn't quite happen at all. At that time toxic wasn't something people worried about, you know, there were other things. I mean, it was air pollution, smog and stuff like that, but toxic chemicals wasn't something we were ever taught to worry about, I think.

Collings

Yes. So if it hadn't been for Ruth Kirkby do you think that--

Wansa

Everything would have--I think after--

Collings

Do you think that she was the one who really--

Wansa

She was actually the catalyst that kind of got it all started, yes.

Collings

People would never have started connecting the dots.

Wansa

Connecting the dots, until maybe the overflow. I think then it would have happened, but up to that time she was the main catalyst, yes.

Collings

So there's like stories about the overflow, of the kids playing in the foamy water.

Wansa

Foam and everything, right.

Collings

And the tennis shoe disintegrating in the water.

Wansa

In the water, right.

Collings

Do you know anything about those stories?

Wansa

You know, I've heard the stories. I didn't see the tennis shoe, but I know that it--I remember seeing the foam and everything come down and the kids were, you know, I mean, that looked like fun, let's go play pick up some foam and play with it. And nothing was put out to protect them at all, they just let it overflow and it was the parents who put the signs saying, "This is toxic, stay away from it." Even I think the county, probably, didn't know that it was as bad as it was, or toxic chemicals just weren't--at that time, go dump it in the desert, go dump it there, and don't worry about it until it shows up in the water later, I guess.

Collings

Well, I mean one of the things that, you know, there's an interview on the website for the CCAEJ with Linda Burke, who worked with Assemblyman Steve Clute, and she suggests that the county understood the problems and was working well with the community, but that the problem was just that the county was working too slowly, they weren't able to address things in a timely manner, whereas some of the other people I've talked to feel like they were not, really not cooperating and actually even hiding things.

Wansa

Exactly. That's the way I feel, because when--okay, so when we did want to--when we thought we were going to find a lawyer in the first place, the county sent out some people to look at our land, or the turkey ranch. Well, my mom, who's an avid gardener, had a pile of--had my dad haul in a pile of fertilizer for her garden from a cow farm or someplace they had cows. It was just a big pile

there. So the county came up and tested that area and said, "Oh, there's high concentrations of fertilizer here and that's what caused the high concentration of nitrates in the thing." It was just this one little pile and I mean they just came up onto the land, didn't ask anything about it or where it was and decided that was why we had high nitrates in the soil because that was leaching down 300 feet or 360 feet into our water supply, like this one little pile did it all, you know.

Collings

Yes.

Wansa

I mean, they were just looking at a way to get themselves out of trouble, not a way to help the community. That's how I always felt. In fact, if I hadn't been a democrat, I would have been a democrat by the time I finished this, because we got absolutely no help from any republican, senators, congressmen, anyone who worked in the community. It was all, anyone that we contacted was a democrat that helped us. The only way we finally got Deukmejian to help us was because Penny was a pain in his neck. [laughs] So they were the ones that helped us get out of it. It seemed like the further we went up, too. If it was the county they didn't want to have any responsibility for it, even the state, at first, kind of backed off. We had to go up higher and they kind of put pressure on back down to the smaller communities to get going on this.

Collings

Was it because they didn't really believe in the scope of the problem or was it because they were so aware of the scope of the problem, but didn't want to address it?

Wansa

That's the way I felt, they were aware that it was going to be a problem and did not want to have it come back to their back door, that they would have to--in any way have to be responsible for cleaning it up or for letting it get there in the first place.

Collings

Right. So you were saying that before this all came up you were trying to sell your property. One of the things that Penny was talking about was how, in fact, in the early days some people did want to sell and maybe another person in the family would say, "No, we can't just pass it on to another person."

Wansa

On to someone else, right.

Collings

Are you aware of any of the sort of soul searching and conflicts that would go on among community members in the early days?

Wansa

I mean, after we knew there was a problem we wouldn't have wanted to give these people--we wouldn't have sold the house to them without giving them good water. I think, so we just gave up selling the house until we could get some potable water. In fact, that whole side of the freeway there was nothing we could do. I mean, actually our land was worthless until we--we in good conscience wouldn't let it go to anybody else and just decided we would just have to stay there until we could finally get water across. So later on when we did the state gave us--

Collings

You were hooked up, yes.

Wansa

Yes, when we got hooked up it was--in fact, we're all out of there now.

Collings

So you did sell at that point?

Wansa

We finally sold, right.

Collings

And what was the reason for that?

Wansa

Well, we sold because my husband was transferred to Torrance, so we had to--we moved to Torrance. But actually we sold before that, we moved into Riverside, too. So we had sold it. So we moved into Riverside for three years and then he was transferred to Torrance, so we moved to Huntington Beach for ten years.

Collings

Do you think that if you hadn't had those, like, job changes and things, that you would have wanted to stay?

Wansa

No, we were kind of ready to have a little bit of a change. So we kind of were ready to move out. Now, my mom was still there until three years ago and then my father passed away and she still had about three acres left of the original ranch. So when we moved to Arizona we told her she had to think about selling it because we couldn't be coming back and fixing--it's like she'd been there for over forty years and things were like, pipes breaking and things needing to be fixed, and she had so many flowers and everything, that we couldn't just be there to help her all the time. So she finally sold it, too, and we all moved to Arizona for retirement.

Collings

Yes. But she wasn't having any kind of health problems?

Wansa

She wasn't. My dad died of a cancerous tumor, but mom's doing pretty good.

Collings

Well, that's good, yes. Let's go back to the overflow at the school, and you're a teacher there and this is kind of like the moment when everything gets ramped up.

Wansa

Rolling, yes.

Collings

Yes. What was it like trying to organize community members around this issue? Was it easy or difficult?

Wansa

There was probably a core of maybe ten women who were already active in PTA and things like that who were revved up and knew how to get the ball rolling. They would organize meetings and pretty soon we got--once the community got organized and knew what was going on our meetings just were overflowing with angry parents and businessmen and everything. So if we put out the message we were having a meeting, people showed up. So they were all getting a little upset with what was happening and how it was being handled.

Collings

You didn't have many people who were just entirely dismissive of the issue?

Wansa

I think there was probably some businessmen who felt that if we did too much advertisement that this was a problem in the community that housing prices would go down and their businesses would suffer and things like that. So they were more or less wanting to keep it a little quieter. But in order to get anything really done forever we had to make waves, you know, so we did.

Collings

Yes. Was that in any way, like personally sort of difficult for anyone? I mean, Penny talks about how she always grew up not making waves and that she had to make a kind of a change in her own thinking.

Wansa

Well, and also if you know my personality, I'm one that will sit in the back and let someone else do it, but I'll help you. [laughs] So it was hard as a teacher, because you knew the principal didn't really want you to make--

Collings

Yes, and that's your boss.

Wansa

Right. He didn't really want any waves and so you had to kind of stand up and make yourself heard too. The classroom and the teachers became very supportive and they were all very much to clean it up and they showed up, started showing up at meetings and talking, too. So it showed that a few people can make a big difference.

Collings

Yes. Did the principal ever change his view?

Wansa

He never did to me, but Penny said later on that he did talk to her and say, he thanked her for doing what she'd done for the community.

Collings

Oh, that's wonderful.

Wansa

Right. Then later on I was made Teacher of the Year because I was involved in this, and so the school district even noticed that there were people who stood up and did things.

Collings

Yes, that's wonderful. How much knowledge of the events is there within the schools, of the area? I mean, is it taught in the high school?

Wansa

Oh, at this time?

Collings

Yes.

Wansa

You know, I really don't know if much is said about it anymore, because there's so much growth in that community and such an influx of new people.

Collings

I know, you can just see the new development just everywhere, yes.

Wansa

So things have, after everything calmed down, I think, everything just kind of boomed and people have, for the most part, except for like Penny has set up where we want to have the park in the community and things like that. Since I've been away for ten years, I really don't know what is going on.

Collings

Yes, right.

Wansa

If the schools are doing anything.

Collings

How much did you have to tell the people who bought your property?

Wansa

You had to tell them that they lived within a mile of the pits, the Stringfellow pits. Also you had to tell them that they were near the Ontario Airport. All those things, environmental things now, you have to let people know.

Collings

Yes. So the Stringfellow pits didn't just like stand out then as the one thing?

Wansa

As the main thing, yes, it was just one of a list of things you had to kind of tell people when you sell property to them anymore, any kind of environmental impact things there.

Collings

So do you think that that kind of sort of minimizes the pits to include it in a list like that?

Wansa

Well, especially if you're new to the area, you might not have heard. I mean, now that I'm in Arizona I'll say, "Oh, yes, I lived near one of the biggest toxic waste dumps in the U.S.," and they'll go, "I never heard of that." It seemed like it was in the news all the time in Southern California, but if you're not close to the area I think you just, you don't pay attention to it.

Collings

Right, yes.

Wansa

About the name or where it is, if it's not affecting you.

Collings

Right, yes. That's right. So when you say once everything settled down, would you consider things to have been settled down once the hookups to the county water system took place and once the clay cap was in place? I mean, what would you consider--

Wansa

What would I consider settling down?

Collings

Yes.

Wansa

Well, I don't think anything really settled down until after the lawsuit was--the people were concerned until that was kind of finished up and I think a lot of them thought, well, if the lawsuit is settled, then those companies will pitch in--I mean, they were supposed to come up with money to clean it up. I think they could start seeing things happening back there, so they felt a little safer. But the clay cap never was the finishing thing. People were not happy with that. So they wanted, mostly they wanted it picked up and hauled away, but since that couldn't happen we had to go for the next best thing.

Collings

I mean, one of the problems with that was the realization that it would just be--

Wansa

Be put somewhere else.

Collings

--put in somebody else's backyard.

Wansa

And then also it would be transported. So what was going to happen with the transportation. So that wasn't something we wanted to do either, because like you say it would just go to someone else and some day they'd have to deal with it.

Collings

Right. Penny talks about that realization as being an important step in her thinking, because then she realized that it wasn't just that we all had a problem, but that she had--

Wansa

It was a broader one, right.

Collings

You need to start thinking about the larger picture.

Wansa

Larger picture, right, yes. I mean, where there are more toxic waste and some more places to clean up. Stringfellow kind of was the eye-opening, one of the--other than the Love Canal, then Stringfellow, and then all of a sudden we go, "Well, maybe there's more places like that, and how are we going to deal with this in a wide range way to take care of toxics."

Collings

Right.

Wansa

Other than that, you know, most people never heard of or thought about it. I mean, even dumping your DDT on the ground, you know, that was just like, oh, well, some day it will disappear.

Collings

Right, yes.

Wansa

Now we can't do it. But then, well, like I went down to Nicaragua with a church group not too long ago and they had--I could smell the DDT in--we went through a marketplace and it was like they had put it all over to get the flies out. Then they were saying, "Well, we're still manufacturing it," but sending it to these Third World countries, which seems like a terrible crime, and these people don't--you know, it got rid of the flies, but they don't know that they're also poisoning themselves.

Collings

Right.

Wansa

So I think we still have a big problem to deal with.

Collings

Yes. Now, did anybody in the town start thinking differently about like the household cleaning products that they were using and how those are manufactured and disposed of or anything along those lines?

Wansa

I think a lot of us did, you know, try to minimize what--from birth to grave stuff, you know. You know, just because it does the trick it is really something good for the environment and this is a big awakening of America. I think we're having another one now with the global warming.

Collings

Yes. But was that anything that was ever discussed, you know, like formally in the community meetings?

Wansa

Not so much formally, but when we did the lawsuit the people who were against our--the lawyers, they would come into the houses and check. Well, if you really are so concerned about this what do you have in your house?

Collings

Oh, interesting.

Wansa

Yes, they would go through and see if they had DDT put here. Well, if you were really concerned about what was coming out of the pits, why do you have DDT in your garage? You know, things like that. So they were looking for things to catch us.

Collings

Right. Right. But just like really egregious stuff like DDT, not like Pine Sol and Windex and all these others.

Wansa

Yes, they would do all those things. Clorox and things like that, or what cleaning solutions you used in your house. They were doing it just with the first plaintiffs that we had in the group, going through their houses. At least that's what I heard, they were doing that.

Collings

But nobody ever sort of within their own home sort of questioned those products or anything like that?

Wansa

I think the women who were especially active, and also I think the teachers started talking more to kids about what toxics were and things like--you know, to get more concerned about what they were really dumping into our earth.

Collings

Yes, that's an interesting, really interesting subject, isn't it?

Collings

Okay, once again, when sort of the early group was forming, I understand that Tom Hayden visited the town and was an important sort of mentor for the group.

Wansa

Right.

Collings

You know, given his left stance, was that a problem for everybody that you recall?

Wansa

Well, we were all quite impressed with him, but there were, I'm sure, some people who just thought anybody who was associated with him would--or socialist on the outer fringe. But he was very helpful and very down to earth and trying to do everything he could to get us moving in the right direction. I think people who didn't want to see our name, Glen Avon, associated with things like that, the more conservative end of the spectrum, weren't happy to see him in town. But he got us off the ground and running and told us how to get things moving. So he was one of the helpful people. But we were very appreciative of him.

Collings

So was that something where you had to kind of, where the group as a whole had to overcome a problem with his left politics or was the group sort of there to begin with politically?

Wansa

Well, I think we were--yes, we just weren't there to begin with, but I think we were to the point where we'll take what--anybody who's going to help us, we realize we need help and we need a direction. So he was one of the people who just showed us how to get things going. He didn't seem to--I mean, we were, oh, I don't want to say middleclass or lower class or lower middle, poorer class, and he just walked into our homes and made himself at home and didn't seem to stick his nose up at us at all. [laughs]

Collings

I hope not.

Wansa

He just got in there and helped us where he could. But we, in fact, anybody who talked against him, we would just say, "Where were you when we needed you," right?

Collings

So people would sort of say stuff against him?

Wansa

Yes, right. There were people--there's always going to be the Jane Fonda and the Tom Hayden haters, you can't overcome them.

Collings

Yes. So what about some of the--you said that Penny made life for Deukmejian a pain in the neck and there were all of those sort of activities that the group participated in, the Polluter of the Month Award and so on. Did you participate in those?

Wansa

Yes, I carried some signs a few times, but I always have had a hard time knocking on doors. I couldn't do that one.

Collings

Yes.

Wansa

But yes, when I went up to Sacramento the first time with a group and we lobbied for, I believe we were asking for water at that time and that was when we got the bottled water for the community, and we testified before a group up there. So I was able to do that. So that was kind of exciting to see that people actually listened to the communities, if you could get organized and knew how to approach people. Sometimes you could do it nice ways, and if you couldn't do it that way you'd figure out another way to make yourself known. So yes, we did, we carried placards and put up signs and showed up where we needed to show up to make ourselves heard.

Collings

As I understand it, the group wasn't always able to attract a lot of media attention.

Wansa

Yes, so we always--Penny knew when to--well, I think Hayden, at the time Hayden helped us, you know, say, "You really need to get attention, you need to make yourself seen and heard." So we always contacted media and said, "We're going to be at so-and-so." Then they were always calling up later saying, "Where are you going to show up next so we can be there?"

Wansa

So once you know how to make your case heard that's a helpful way to--without media attention sometimes you just kind of blow away.

Collings

So would you tend to have like somebody from the newspaper or local television station at just the regular meetings, as well, or would it just be at these picketing events?

Wansa

Yes, we would invite them if we knew there was going to be a big meeting, a lot of people there. We would also let them know we were having a meeting and if they wanted to come, and a lot of times they did, because we were pictured in the paper a lot of times. So it was important to do that.

Collings

Yes. Do you think that this effort could have gone forward without Penny's particular media savvy and so forth, or was it more of a group effort?

Wansa

She was the main person in the group because all of a sudden she just bloomed and knew this was her calling almost. So when Penny spoke she knew her facts, she knew how to deliver it and she would have you crying by the end of the meeting. [laughs] So she was--I would give her credit for keeping it going for all these years, and then still working on it, still being a community activist.

Collings

Yes, in the broader--

Wansa

Right. In the broader sense, right.

Collings

It's taking that message that, gee, we can't just dump this in another neighborhood and then looking around to see--

Wansa

Right, and then being there to organize other groups now, to teach them how to be an effective group to get things done.

Collings

Yes. How much educating did people have to do, self-education did people have to do to learn about the technical issues involved?

Wansa

Well, I just had to re-read the Stringfellow thing. I was going, I haven't done this for a while and there is so much technical stuff in there, and if you don't know that it's PCPs or hydra whatever, all those big names are. Penny always knew it right. Nobody could whitewash her, she had it down pat. So we tried to learn what we could, but she was really actually the one that headed it all and could come up with those words and know what they meant and fire back if they were trying to bury us.

Collings

Right. So do you think that possibly people who were less, actually like less technically knowledgeable about the site might have been like among those who wanted to discount the reality of it? Do you think that knowledge of the site was important for--

Wansa

Oh, I think that's always important that you know what's up there and how long it's been there. Of course, her husband had--I think he was up there fighting the fire once when two chemicals mixed together and there was a fire up there.

Collings

Yes.

Wansa

So then you knew something's going on up there that shouldn't be.

Collings

Right. Right, a spontaneous combustion on a lake is a tip-off. [laughs]

Wansa

Right. Yes, isn't something that usually happens. [laughs]

Collings

That's right.

Wansa

So I think the more you can learn about something, of course, the more people will listen to you, too, when you act like you're knowledgeable.

Collings

Right. Right, yes. What about any involvement of the local, like churches in the community? Did the Stringfellow site ever come up, you know, from like sort of a taking care of the earth standpoint or anything like that? I mean, it sounds like it was all based around the school and through the PTA leaders.

Wansa

Right. You know, now that you mentioned that, I don't really remember any churches actually getting involved in it. In fact, I think the churches now are taking the environment much more seriously than they did at that time. It was save your soul and forget about the earth, but now the earth is part of the broader plan.

Collings

Because didn't you mention that your trip to Nicaragua was with a church?

Wansa

Nicaragua was with a church, right, and that was in Huntington Beach later, you know. That was more or less not to change what they were doing, but to become aware of what a Third World country, how they live and how we influence their lives, Americans, by buying cheaper stuff and always demanding the cheapest price from--the Third World countries are the backbones that are doing all our work.

Collings

Right. That's right.

Wansa

It's something that all of us should do, I think, is get out and see what the other 80 percent of the world looks like.

Collings

Now, did you always hold these views or did having the Stringfellow site struggle influence your thinking in this way?

Wansa

I think I was always pretty concerned about other people. Well, I was in the Peace Corps, too.

Collings

Oh, were you?

Wansa

In the sixties. Then I always felt that every kid should go out and spend some time in a Third World Country. I was in the Philippines and I was there to teach English and science in the elementary school. And to see what our--sometimes what your government tells you and what really is happening over there don't quite add up. We were there supposedly to spread democracy and help them have a democratic government. But it was like they need a middleclass to really have a democracy and when you have very rich and very poor, it's hard to have a democracy. So that was where I kind of like I came from and then I just kind of built on that going through the years.

Collings

Where did you get the idea that you were--you know, here you are growing up in Glen Avon, where did you get the idea that you would go and join the Peace Corps?

Wansa

Well, I was in college and then I thought it was about--I was going to graduate, and I thought, if I graduate and start making money I probably would never do this. So before I went out and got a job I thought, this is what I should do first. Otherwise, I would get caught in that money-making thing, you know, and then you own a home and you get a car and you can't leave this or that. So it was right after college that I went.

Collings

So do you think this was sort of like the thinking of the sixties or maybe something from your church?

Wansa

Yes. Well, it was also Kennedy gave his speech about doing what you can for your country and so it was like, okay, I think this might be something I'd like to try. So it was something that I wanted to do. I still, I mean I still feel like--I mean, like even going to Costa Rica you see the rich and the poor. It's still--well, you even see it here, too.

Collings

Do you think that there was a class dimension to the Stringfellow struggle?

Wansa

Oh, I'm sure it was put out in an area where middle to lower class people live on farms, people who probably didn't know any better would question what was back in the hills there, and you could always find someone who would give you--say, "Oh, it's safe, don't worry about it." I think a lot of times you just say,

"Okay, if the government says so, it must be so. They would never want to hurt their people."

Collings

Yes. Well, that's what Penny said that she always thought and that it was actually extremely painful to--

Wansa

To find out that they--yes.

Collings

What about you, did you have to go through that painful conversion?

Wansa

Yes, I think so, too. Then also another time our group went to a meeting in Louisiana and we were protesting at that time that they were putting metal plants and everything in the very, very poor sections where these people were suffering and everything, but they were poor so nobody cared and they didn't have much of a voice. You know, until somebody speaks up for them and tells them that this is--that they're being taken advantage of.

Collings

Yes.

Wansa

You know what has always worried me, though, is that my children have never fought the battle. It was like, okay, mom's doing it all and I've seen that with other people. I remember I joined one, or was in one meeting with some ladies who were fighting nuclear plants or something like that. She said, the organizer said, "Well, I asked my kids why they weren't involved, and they said, 'Well, Mom, you're doing it all for us, so we don't have to do it.'" Then I started thinking about my own kids, and I mean, they're good kids, my own two daughters, but they just kind of live their life and they have never gotten involved in projects like this or felt a calling to do these things, and I thought, "What did I do wrong? How didn't I pass this on?"

Collings

Did they see what was happening with the Stringfellow site?

Wansa

Oh, yes, they were concerned. In fact, they were out holding their placards or helping when they could, but I mean now that they're into the working world and everything they recycle their tin cans and the newspapers and that's about it.

Collings

Well, do they worry about, like, the chemical products that they buy and where is the waste from the production of those products going or anything?

Wansa

Oh, my one daughter will say, "I can't believe what we throw away every day," I mean, but does she reduce, I don't think so. She'll just say, "It's awful what Americans throw away."

Wansa

"Then why don't you do something?"

Collings

Well, where did you get these views then, did you get them from your parents?

Wansa

Well, my parents, I think, went through the depression, so they were very--they didn't waste anything. If they had it, my dad would keep it and he'd make something out of it. He could fix any engine, he would never throw any part away, because he could use it for some other part. So those kind of things, I think, were ingrained in me, and probably my kids they came from--we didn't buy them a lot or anything, but now I see my grand kids, it's horrible. I don't even know what to get them for Christmas because they have everything in the world and it's just a crime I think. [laughs]

Wansa

But that kind of worries me about whether--and then I see people who are, in that generation who are concerned and I go, "Oh, good, there are kids growing up who do care and they're still doing their part." So there's hope.

Collings

But you don't find that, like, in Glen Avon you have kind of like this island of total environmental awareness that came out of the Stringfellow struggle?

Wansa

I wouldn't say there was. It's still that core group and they're still quite involved and they're trying to make the community better, but there's such a growth in the community that I bet if you asked one in--or half of the people probably wouldn't even know about Stringfellow anymore.

Collings

Right, yes.

Wansa

Because there's so many more people there.

Collings

Yes. As far as what you were saying about getting to the point where you didn't trust what you were hearing from the government, is that something that in your thinking now is only attached to the Stringfellow or is that broader at this point?

Wansa

I think it has broadened into--I question a lot now, I mean, and I get really upset about people who go, "Well, I read it on the Internet, so it must be true." Why would the Internet give you the facts anymore than anything else?" I mean,

people just pass things around the Internet, especially about politics now and things like that, that you have to question a lot and go back and research and find out what really happened or what the real story is instead of just trusting what you read or see or what you're told sometimes.

Collings

Is that something that came from Stringfellow or is that something that you brought to Stringfellow?

Wansa

I think it started with the Peace Corps, because I think I had this, you know, young thing, I was going to go change the world and you go over there and you go, "Oh, my goodness, this isn't quite what I thought it was going to be." Even with teaching, I guess I thought I was going--I always kind of give the idea that I was just going to be a teacher and just fill up the little minds with knowledge, and instead I found out I had to unlock the doors of all those little minds and find a key to open it up. So I think it's something you just--through growing and not believing everything you see or hear, just trying to find out the facts yourself.

Collings

When you were working with the core group of women in Concerned Neighbors, and maybe you could just sort of tell me who you believe that core group was.

Wansa

We had Spotsworth or what is her name? I forget now, it's been so long.

Collings

Linda Spotswood?

Wansa

Linda Spinney was one of them, and Penny and Sally Merha, those were the ones I worked with on the thing. At the very beginning we had some PTA women who--

Collings

Lynn Spotswood, I'm sorry.

Wansa

Lynn Spotswood, yes. They were the ones that kind of started it and then they all moved off or moved on after a while.

Collings

Yes, here's the list of the founding members, 1979.

Wansa

Theresa Streetmatter, she was one who was quite ill at the time. Eiola Smith worked at the school. And Ricky Clark. But Sally was always PTA, into everything, so she was always into everything and her husband was a big help, too. Connie Alexander lived close and had kids in the school. So they were all

mothers who were involved in the school and were worried about their kids, but a lot of them, well, not a lot of them, but a few of them moved on and then I haven't heard from them since.

Collings

Oh, you guys should have a reunion.

Wansa

Wouldn't that be fun?

Collings

Yes. So I guess the reason that I was mentioning that now is that when you talk about this core group, do you feel like this was a like group of like-minded individuals? Here you've brought all these wonderful impulses from your work in the Peace Corps and so it wasn't so--so you were already ready to help out.

Wansa

To do things like that, yes.

Collings

Yes. Do you feel like you were sort of meeting this group of individuals that sort of saw things the way you did?

Wansa

Probably they didn't. I think they were just, at that time were just so concerned about their kids growing up healthy or having problems along the way. So a lot of them didn't have the same, probably, background that I had where they--there might have been some of them who probably came from churches or organizations that were concerned, but for the most part I think it all started with just concern for their children and that was the driving force. Then from then we just kind of gathered steam and away we went. But I think once we got Penny in there to really lead the way, that's when we started really affecting the community.

Collings

Yes, but your concern was not specifically for your children, because you didn't feel like they were really having that much. You were more concerned--

Wansa

With all the children in my school and everything. Actually, my children went to that school, went to Glen Avon School and so they would have been affected, too.

Collings

Yes.

Wansa

They went all through the sixth--kindergarten through sixth grade with me, at the same school I taught at. In fact, when they were ready to go to junior high, they go, "Mom, you're not going to teach junior high are you?" [laughs]

Collings

Oh, yes, I am. [laughs]

Wansa

I'm following you all the way. [laughs] But it was what had to be done for all the kids, I think.

Collings

Because Sally Merha, when I talked to her, was saying that it was just the group got along well together, they celebrated each other's birthdays, and just really tried to provide a lot of moral support.

Wansa

Moral support for each other, right, yes.

Collings

Yes, and that one of the reasons for that was that there was like friction from the community a lot of the time about what they were doing. Did you feel any of that?

Wansa

Well, it just it was--there were, like I said, some of the businesses that just wanted to keep this quiet, they were afraid it was going to affect their property values and their businesses and how things would ever be looked at at Glen Avon, the Glen Avon community again.

Collings

Right. So like if you went into a local business would somebody say something to you about that?

Wansa

They probably wouldn't know who I was.

Collings

Okay. All right. It wasn't that small at that time, yes.

Wansa

Right, yes.

Collings

Yes.

Wansa

Very few would--there wasn't that many businesses that I probably wouldn't go into. I mean, it was like a lumber store or the local market.

Collings

Yes. Okay. What about that story, that image of the peeling horse hooves, you know, the contaminated water washing--

Wansa

Yes, going through there.

Collings

Do you know anything more about that particular story?

Wansa

I have heard those stories, but being I was locked in school, I wasn't out viewing the community, so I really don't know what--I would hear parents or kids talk about our dog had a litter of puppies and they died or something like that, but you just hear the stories, but I never saw any of it.

Collings

It's interesting how like a few dramatic images are always so important.

Wansa

Images always--yes, right, like the tennis shoe.

Collings

Yes, exactly.

Wansa

Right, kind of keep the stories going.

Collings

Right, yes. Is there anything else that you would like to say, just sort of wrapping up about your experience with the Stringfellow site?

Wansa

Just to say that I think I worked with some of the best women and the funny thing is most of them were women, too, come to think about it.

Collings

Yes, why do you think--

Wansa

I guess the men were busy making a living at that time and these were housewives or some working women and they knew they could make a difference and they did. We hope we inspired others to get up and do the same.

Collings

Yes. Well, the park is going--once the park--

Wansa

Park gets going, that will be--

Collings

--gets in there, it's going to be a sort of a historical center, as well.

Wansa

Center, right, and there will be, I guess, archives for the Stringfellow thing and everything.

Collings

I mean, are this wonderful group of women that you know, that you speak of, are they sort of remembered, are they known in the community, I mean, at this time? Local heroes, perhaps?

Wansa

No, there have been no monuments. [laughs]

Wansa

Is there anything that you remember, Ronald, that you wanted to put in, any of your two cents?

Mr. Wansa

My two cents? I know when Ruth Kirkby first started out I was involved with her organization, I was the vice president. I was a private pilot and one of the members of our Riverside Pilots' Association was a chemistry professor at Riverside, University of Riverside. I showed him my test and I asked him to get involved and he told me confidentially, he says, "I can't." He says, "I have grants here at the University of California, Riverside, for chemistry, but I can look at your reports, and you've got a serious problem." Because we even had some--we had our well tested privately, we even had levels of radioactivity in our well.

Mr. Wansa

Ruth Kirkby was a very knowledgeable lady about faults and geology and she says, "That proves to me that--we have a fault system right in these mountains, because these mountains, this didn't pop up about some fracture in the underground layer." Her contention from day one, that I can remember, that where the pits were at was a fault zone, there were fractures, even though it was [unclear] rock, which is supposed to be impervious to a lot, if there's a fault in there this stuff is going to eventually percolate to where the fault is and then get into the water system.

Collings

That sounds like that's what it did.

Mr. Wansa

It did and it proved to be right, but Peggy Newman, I have a lot of respect for her, she learned a lot about geology, she learned a lot about the water system out here. Tom Hayden opened up a lot of doors for the political parts around here. Riverside Press got involved. Even Ruth Kirkby tried to get Riverside Press involved in the early stages on that, but I know that--

Wansa

But anyhow, University friend didn't want to get involved, because he was afraid he would lose his grants from the government or other places.

Mr. Wansa

He was going to lose his grants, because the people--he was getting grants from DuPont and everything else.

Collings

And they were dumping there.

Wansa

Right, right.

Mr. Wansa

These are the same companies that are giving the university grants and everything else on here, so he said, "I'll just tell you confidential as a friend, because if I do a professional thing out here I will have a different opinion on it, because my livelihood is as a chemistry professor."

Mr. Wansa

So I respected that. I never acknowledged his name, even to this day, I won't, but he steered--he gave me some information about what to do on that and--

Wansa

Then he also made us a little aware of not trusting everything we got back, too.

Mr. Wansa

He also told us what--recommended some laboratories to go to, because everybody has an agenda and they view things from their perspective of their own agenda, what they want to do and what they want to accomplish. So you're fighting agendas, too. But it was a long process and finally the benefactors out here, we did get public water service from the Jurupa Service District and they brought it under and eventually it cost over a million dollars to bring it [unclear].

Collings

Yes, and you wouldn't have been able to sell your property otherwise.

Wansa

Oh, until that happened, right.

Collings

Yes.

Wansa

We always figured that was worth more than anything.

Collings

Everything, yes.

Mr. Wansa

I think through Penny Newman's, and Paula's my wife, and [unclear], that even the Community Service District started doing more and better testing on the water, because they were testing for E. coli and bacteria and stuff like that, they weren't really testing for--they weren't becoming knowledgeable of the impact for metal contents and all these other chemicals out here. So they started doing more specific testing for metals and carcinogenic type chemicals that were going in there and stuff like that and that had never been done.

Collings

They were just behind the curve.

Wansa

Right, but I think the whole nation was behind the curve. [laughs]

Collings

Yes, it sounds like when Ruth Kirkby was getting involved it was just sort of very early days and there wasn't the larger awareness for her to hook into.

Wansa

Right.

Mr. Wansa

I remember taking my daughter through there on the horse and there was these ponds out there, I never took the horse into the ponds or nothing like that, I never went out there when it was raining either, but on the way going through there, because I would go over the mountains and then we would ride in the vineyards it was real soft sand with my daughter on the saddle. But there was some signs that were posted out there on these pits and everything else and stuff like that, that it was hazardous, but it never explained what it was. But it was open, anybody could go there and play. I had no problem going through there.

Collings

I can just sort of see these like old pock-marked old rusted out signs, you know? [laughs]

Wansa

Right, gunshots [unclear].

Collings

Yes, exactly.

Mr. Wansa

Whenever the Riverside County officials--it was a very unpopulated area in Riverside County at that time. They thought that because there was a quarry out there, it was granite, that this was a very, very stable area, it would be a good place for stuff to evaporate and stuff like that.

Wansa

They did, like, a fifteen-minute test on the area, like, "Oh, this looks good. Okay, let's do it here."

Mr. Wansa

You brought up Tom Hayden. I also think there was a lady supervisor in Riverside County, her name was Melva Dunlap, who was also very helpful to the girls and Penny Newman and stuff like that. She was a supervisor that wouldn't--she took a lot of flack because she supported the group. Of course, it was in her district, but she took a lot of flack from local county officials and state officials and everything else, but she--I think Melva Dunlap helped Penny a lot, too, open up the doors. Don't you, Paula?

Wansa

Yes, there were a lot of people who finally got involved and weren't afraid to make waves, so that's what you need. I guess that would probably be it.

Collings

Yes. Well, thank you so much. It's been a great pleasure. [End of interview]

Date: