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News

ACME Receives Environmental Award

By Annemarie Donkin

Topanga resident and realtor William Preston Bowling and Canoga Park resident Christina Walsh received the Carl Gibbs Environmental Excellence Award on Tuesday, February 3, from the City of Calabasas for their ongoing activist work on the continued cleanup of the Santa Susana Field Laboratory.

As one of several environmental watchdog groups, Bowling and Walsh founded the Aerospace Cancer Museum of Education (ACME) on May 9, 2008 to inform and educate the public about the former nuclear and rocket test site located southwest of Simi Valley just north of the San Fernando Valley. According to Environmental Services Supervisor Alex Farassati, Ph.D., the City Of Calabasas Environmental Commission selected ACME as a symbol of commitment to the environment that founders Bowling and Walsh have shown over the past year. ACME has also received awards from the offices of Assembly member Julia Brownley, Senator Fran Pavley and Senator Sheila James Kuehl.

The Carl Gibbs Environmental Excellence Award honors a wide array of individuals, businesses, municipalities, government agencies, organizations and institutions that work to benefit the environment. It recognizes voluntary activities by companies and organizations, big or small, private or non-profit, done in the City of Calabasas and in California, that result in cleaner air or water, less waste, less traffic, conservation of energy and natural resources and reduced use of hazardous materials.

Bowling said ACME opened as a center where community members can also learn about the Santa Susana Field Laboratory and the historic clean-up initiatives recently directed by Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger that was brought forth in Senate Bill 990 by former Senator Kuehl and Assembly member Julia Brownley.

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PHOTO BY ANNEMARIE DONKIN



ACME founders Bill Bowling (right) and Christina Walsh (left) with the Carl Gibbs Environmental Excellence Award.

"Christina Walsh and I founded ACME in 2008," said Bowling, "with a generous grant from the Annenberg Foundation to educate the public of a Nuclear Research Facility in their own back yard. The Santa Susana Field Laboratory is a half-century-old facility and the site of many accidental releases of radiological and chemical contamination that will continue to impact the health of the San Fernando Valley unless more people get involved to help prompt government regulated cleanup initiatives."

During 1947, Bowling said North American Aviation had selected acreage in the Santa Susana Mountains as a permanent site adaptable for testing a broad range of liquid-fueled components, propulsion systems and atomic energy. This site would be known as the Santa Susana Field Laboratory.

"This was the beginning of the NAA, Rocketdyne and Atomics International Divisions," Bowling said. "Today we see the cost of 50 years of propulsion and nuclear research in the toxins left behind in soil and groundwater. As a community we need to take advantage of the assigned regulatory agency input process for a more in-depth characterization and cleanup. We have helped draw attention to a site that for years has been under the radar and now we are looking at the resultant cleanup actions that have been paved for 30 years by activists such as Dan Hirsch of Committee to Bridge the Gap, who first made the public aware of the meltdown."

Located in a former coffee house in Chatsworth, the museum is crammed with books, posters and previously classified documents chronicling the history of the test lab site, which was officially decommissioned in 2003. Bowling said he became interested in environmental causes after delving into the life of his grandfather.

"My grandfather, Kenneth Preston Basford, worked for North American Aviation at LAX during the 1950s," he said. "I was researching his death (at age 65 from pancreatic cancer) and cancers related to the aerospace industry; that's what got me interested. In 2005, I made a film about Rocketdyne, "H2 Oh No," a 10-minute short I did on the SSFL and it was chosen to be one of a dozen films out of hundreds to be screened at the 2005 Topanga Film Festival." (The film can be seen on [YouTube](#).)

Bowling said he met Walsh at the Topanga Film Festival when she attended as part of her work on the site. "We met as part of a huge effort to clean up a site occupied since 1947 by the United States Government; Rocketdyne, NASA, General Dynamics, North American Aviation and others.

"I had no idea how something like that could have happened," Walsh said after becoming aware of the site after attending meetings in 2001. A business consultant, she immediately started a website, www.cleanuprocketdyne.org, to inform the public about the dangers at the site.

After one of the worst nuclear meltdowns in the United States and the third worst in the world, recalls Walsh, "they were going to walk away leaving 99 percent behind. They had proposed findings of no significant impact and were going to remove one percent (Boeing and the Department of Energy). They don't include NASA that is more involved with the chemical impact."

According to a 2006 independent study, the 1959 incident released nearly 459 times more radiation into the air and nearby wells than a similar one at Pennsylvania's Three Mile Island in 1979 and has been linked to hundreds of cancers in the area.

"[Bowling and Walsh] are complete visionaries," said Merrilee Fellows, NASA Manager for Community Involvement for Environmental Remediation. "Even before the creation of ACME we had been working with Christina and Bill. I first met them toward the end of 2007, on a tour of Santa Susana Field Lab that was led by Boeing. Allen Elliott, NASA's Project Manager for Environmental Remediation of NASA's portion of the site, and I met with them for an extended meeting in January of 2008 to learn more about their views. They are very principled, consistent and learned how to work with huge bureaucracies and companies. There is a whole process, including environmental reports, and you want to do it once and do it right. Their role is so important."

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