

Kay Drey: Whistleblower for an Atomic Age in St. Louis

Commentary

Kay Drey is an activist, environmentalist, a whistleblower and an Earth Mother. Who could argue that there is anyone more passionate than Kay Drey about protecting humanity from the dangers of the atomic age?

Humanity means mothers, fathers, children – it's not just a word. She is the premier whistleblower because she has educated so many journalists to blow the whistle, to make some noise, to sound the alarm in defense of man, woman and child.



Kay Drey

She is the Paul Revere of the Nuclear Age:

- “Mobile Chernobyls are coming!” she warned us.

- “Plutonium is coming!” she warned us.
- “Polonium is coming! Have you heard of it?” she asked us.

In recognition of those midnight rides to warn about environmental dangers, the Gateway Journalism Review is giving Drey its Whistleblower award at its [First Amendment Celebration](#) later this month.

Who else but Kay Drey would have tritium³ as her email address? It is impossible to message her without wondering if this radioactive element might be contaminating the neighborhood.

Most St. Louis journalists who have covered nuclear issues in any depth have found their way to Kay Drey’s basement. Full of file cabinets packed with items like 200-page Department of Energy documents, her basement is an extensive library on nuclear issues.

Two legendary Post-Dispatch investigative reporters, Lou Rose and Roy Malone, found their way to her basement when nuclear power plants were first being proposed for Missouri.

When writers with the Society of Environmental Journalists wanted to find out about yellow cake, and why St. Louis is called “atomic city” for its role in the making of the first atomic bombs, they found their way to Kay Drey’s basement.

Whether it was a story on the careless disposal of byproducts in the manufacture of atomic bombs, or a plan for nuclear power plants at Callaway near Fulton, Missouri, Kay Drey was in that basement helping journalists find facts. And she would talk with them.

Kay Drey would say: “It’s been more than a half century since the beginning of the atomic age, and we still don’t know what to do with the first cupful of the dangerous radioactive waste that has resulted.”

Kay Drey doesn't just stay in the basement, though. With her knowledge of the dangers of the nuclear age, she might be forgiven for hunkering down in the basement. And never mind the radiation danger – how about a fallout shelter for protection from the profiteers, policy makers and public relations men of the atomic age?

No, Kay Drey has not stayed in the basement. She has come to the aid of her countrymen when they have organized and protested neglect of dangerous debris buried in lakes and streambeds. She has demonstrated with mothers opposed to train cars of radioactive waste barreling through their backyards.

There is, in fact, much more to be done in Kay Drey's basement, but she has felt compelled to take on other obligations. She has served on professional panels and at university seminars on the intricacies of nuclear technology and radioactive containment.

She was not afraid or intimidated to debate the engineers and the project managers of the Weldon Spring Remedial Action Project for burial of atomic waste in the St. Louis region.

Despite her best efforts, a tomb for some of the worst radioactive waste from the atomic age was built on a 45-acre site at Weldon Spring. The highest point in St. Charles County now is not a bucolic, vine-covered bluff overlooking the Missouri River. It's a boulder-covered mound of atomic debris. It's a pyramid completed in 2001 containing 1.5 million cubic yards of hazardous waste.

Kay Drey told the project officials that they had no business siting an atomic waste repository in a significant population area – literally just a few thousand feet from Francis Howell High School. It belonged at sites sanctioned to isolate the wastes from people and the environment.

Under Kay Drey's questioning, officials conceded that the burial site might be effective for 1,000 years or less. Not a

good fit for deadly materials with a half-life that could exceed hundreds of thousands of years.

When the Nuclear Regulatory Commission and the Department of Energy decided to ship the radioactive debris from the 1979 Three Mile Island (TMI) accident through Pittsburgh, Indianapolis, St. Louis and Kansas City, Kay Drey once again sounded the alarm. The shipments especially upset mothers in St. Louis who saw the rail casks of radioactive materials coming by their schools and backyards.

Kay Drey helped form Citizens Against Radioactive Transport (CART), which successfully got the attention of city and county officials, as well as the St. Louis congressional delegation, to demand more safety measures for the program to transport debris from TMI to Idaho.

St. Louis's most informed nuclear activist warned that the TMI program was just a dry run for a plan to ship thousands of spent nuclear plant fuel rods for decades from the East Coast, through the Midwest, to Yucca Mountain, Nevada. The U.S. Congress eventually nixed the Yucca Mountain plan.

"Spent fuel rods should not be coming through populated cities," Drey told a reporter with the Webster-Kirkwood Times. "Such shipments can be mobile Chernobyls. They must be isolated, under constant surveillance. Irradiated fuel rods are always vulnerable to acts of terrorism, fire and accidents."

When concerns over global warming and climate change began to make headlines in the 1990s, the nuclear industry began talking about the need for new, safer, greener energy generation with nuclear power plants. Kay Drey blew the whistle to remind us of accidents like TMI, Chernobyl and Fukushima.

When Ameren-UE began talking about a second nuclear plant at Callaway, or a series of small, modular reactors for electric

energy, Kay Drey blew the whistle. She insisted that nuclear power reactors are neither safe, nor economical for ratepayers and taxpayers.

“My number-one reason for disliking nuclear power is – you can’t have it without exposing workers to the radiation,” she told St. Louis Magazine. “I don’t think they level with the workers about that. My second reason is routine releases: Every nuclear power plant, even without accidental releases, sends nuclear waste into the air and water – in our case, from Callaway into the river. And I don’t think people know that.

“Then there’s the possibility of huge accidents. Terrorism – it’s a dream for a terrorist,” Drey added. In one reactor vessel the size of Callaway, there are 16 billion curies – a long-lived radioactivity equivalent to 1,000 Hiroshima bombs – and there’s even more in the spent fuel pool. And there is simply no place for the waste.”

In recent years, Kay Drey has devoted much of her energy to the cause of Just Moms St. Louis. This is a group of North St. Louis County citizens who have suffered ill effects from Mallinckrodt Chemical’s atomic waste being dumped in their Coldwater Creek, in their West Lake Landfill, in sites near their Lambert International Airport.

No one knows the importance of the presence of Kay Drey in an atomic battle more than Dawn Chapman and Karen Nickel. Kay Drey helped educate Just Moms St. Louis about the radioactive materials and their correlation to cancers, instances of leukemia, and immune-deficiency diseases in North County.

What’s more, Kay Drey helped them communicate with their county, state and national officials about the overdue cleanup of contaminated landfills that have been plagued by underground fires. Eventually, federal officials took notice and drew up a remediation plan.

“Kay Drey has been our Erin Brockovich and so much more,” said

Chapman. "She has been our Lois Gibbs. What Lois Gibbs was to the cleanup of the toxic disaster of Love Canal, that's what Kay has been for us with the West Lake disaster.

"She was there for us when we needed to learn more about what was happening to us where we live," added Chapman. "She was there for us for organizing, demonstrating, and expanding awareness of the terrible legacy in St. Louis of the atomic age."

The word exceptional has lost much of its meaning in a time of faltering "exceptional leaders" and the broken promise of our "American Exceptionalism." However, there is real meaning when just ordinary, concerned mothers like Dawn Chapman and Karen Nickel call Kay Drey a truly exceptional person – an exceptional environmentalist.

Consider a partial list of Kay Drey's environmental accomplishments:

- She led a campaign to stop Callaway from building a second reactor.
- She got the DOE to admit to the radioactive waste at Lambert Airport.
- She won a 20-year battle to get airport contaminants removed.
- She identified contaminated quarry water at Weldon Spring.
- She made sure a water treatment plant was built near Weldon Spring so "hot" radioactive waste would not be dumped into the Missouri River.
- She played a pivotal role to get the EPA to acknowledge responsibility for at least a partial cleanup of radioactive waste at WestLake Landfill.
- She has served on the Board of Great Rivers Environmental

Law Center.

- She has served as president of Beyond Nuclear, a national nonprofit on nuclear issues.
- She and her late husband, Leo A. Drey, were founders of the Missouri Coalition for the Environment in 1969 and she remains active with MCE.
- She and Leo Drey amassed more than 153,000 acres in the Missouri Ozarks and donated most of the property to the L-A-D Foundation for protection and recreation.

Let's be honest. After all, Kay Drey has been honest for nine decades of life. The days are numbered. We are not going to have Kay Drey to blow the whistle for our own safety's sake forever. And who among us could possibly take her place?

Don Corrigan is former editor of the Webster-Kirkwood Times and emeritus professor at Webster College. He has written stories and books about the environment and drew on his decades of reporting on Kay Drey to write this appreciation.