



Speaker: **Mary Dickson**

Award-winning writer/playwright Mary Dickson is a downwinder and thyroid cancer survivor from Salt Lake City, Utah who is an internationally recognized advocate for survivors of nuclear weapons testing. She has written and spoken widely about the human toll of nuclear weapons at conferences, symposia, and forums in the U.S. as well as Japan. Exposed, her play combining her experiences with powerful documentation, received critical acclaim when it has subsequently toured universities and venues nationwide as a staged reading. She was honored by the Alliance for Nuclear Accountability for her lifetime work on behalf of those harmed by nuclear testing.

My name is Mary Dickson. I am a downwinder, a survivor of nuclear weapons. Like tens of thousands of Americans I grew up under the clouds of radioactive fallout during the years of nuclear testing. We drank milk from a nearby dairy, ate fresh vegetables from the garden, mixed sugar with snow to pretend it was ice cream, and played in puddles of rain water in our tranquil Salt Lake City, Utah neighborhood.

We were only children. How were any of us to know that a silent poison was threading its way through our bodies when a government we trusted repeatedly assured us that there is no danger and distributed pamphlets telling us not to let reports of Geiger counters going crazy bother us. We watched films warning against communist invasions did Duck and Cover drills in school that were more like games and didn't think about the Cold War that was raging or nuclear bombs that were regularly detonated in nearby Nevada.

Between 1951 and 1992 the US government detonated 100 nuclear bombs in the atmosphere and 828 underground. Winds carried radioactive fallout from those detonations all far more powerful than the bombs that leveled Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Hundreds, even thousands of miles away from the Nevada Test Site exposing countless people downwind to deadly levels of radiation.

The detonation that most haunts me is the one named Sedan. I had just turned 7 when it was detonated on July 6th, 1962. Though exploded underground that one test released a plume of fallout 16,000 feet high that left a crater displacing 12 million tonnes of radiated earth which went into that plume and fell out on my Salt Lake City neighborhood and far beyond.

In my twenties I was diagnosed with thyroid cancer. I underwent a thyroidectomy and subsequent radiation treatments. Every morning a doctor came to my hospital door to point a Geiger counter at me to measure how hot I was. On my door and Hospital bracelet were the radiation symbols.

I was the radioactive material.

When I left the hospital, they burned my clothes, and told me not to be around pregnant women or try to get pregnant for a year. Another surgery meant I never could have children.

As adults, my older sister and I began compiling a list of childhood friends and neighbors who had cancer, tumors, autoimmune diseases. That list numbered 54 people in a five-block area of our



childhood neighborhood. Too many of my classmates died. One of a brain tumor when we were 8. I remember wondering why she came to school with her head shaved. Four weeks later her four-year-old brother died of testicular cancer. Another friend died of bone cancer at 16 others of brain tumors. No wonder one of my neighborhood friends said, he felt lucky to make it to 40.

I added my sister's name to the list. She was only 46 when she died, leaving three young children behind. Now my younger sister is battling cancer and my youngest sister is being treated for autoimmune disorders.

Of the Utah downwinders I worked with most closely I am the only one still living. I listened with despair, as one called me at the end of her life tearfully begging me to help her die a heartbreaking and impossible request. Another one told me before she died, You have to keep fighting for this because the rest of us are too sick. I feel an enormous responsibility to all of them to do this work.

That's why I've spent decades researching writing, and speaking about the human toll of nuclear weapons testing. Over the years countless people have reached out to tell me their own devastating stories. The woman who lost three children to leukemia, during above-ground testing, and is now seeing her three adult children battle cancer. The woman who lost her husband to cancer, then felt her heart shatter when her 5 year old son, who had been diagnosed with bone cancer, woke up from surgery asking "Mama, where's my leg?" I could go on for hours with heartbreaking stories at the harm wreaked on unsuspecting Americans by radioactive fallout.

Barbara Rose Johnston, author of 'Half-Lives and Half-Truths' wrote: "The arms race did not prevent nuclear war. It was a nuclear war."

My late friend put it perfectly. We're victims of the Cold War only we never enlisted and no one will ever fold a flag over our coffins. The Cold War had casualties, and we and too many others, like us around this planet are those casualties. We have suffered and continue to suffer. We have comforted the sick buried and mourned the dead and worried with each ache, pain and new lump that we are getting sick again. Few Americans know the extent and staggering human cost of our nuclear past. We'll never know how many people were harmed but we do know that it was far more than have ever been acknowledged. Sadly, most victims of nuclear weapons will never know they are.

While other people carry pictures of their children in their wallets I carry this map showing where fallout from atmospheric testing went. It was created by Richard Miller, author of 'Under the Cloud, the Decades of Nuclear Testing', after analyzing the government's own data. People are stunned when they see it. Fallout does not respect arbitrary borders on a map. No LED Shield stops it at county or state lines. The jet stream carried it across the country where it fell to the ground in rain or snow and worked its way into the food chain and our bodies. That's how it was measured in my hometown, in the Midwest and more than 2,000 miles away in Albany, New York.

A National Cancer Institute study estimates that virtually everyone living in the US at the time received some dose of radioactive iodine and that up to 212,000 cases of thyroid cancer alone may be linked to fallout. That's just one radioisotope and one fallout related cancer. Radiation from 928 detonations doesn't just go away. Researchers are still finding strontium-90 that mimics calcium and is absorbed by bone and teeth in baby teeth collected in the 1960s. There is a large



lag time between exposure and illness so that it takes 20, 30, or 40 years for some cancers to show up. People are still getting sick. Their cancers are returning. Health complications are showing up. The genetic damage affects new generations.

We were patriotic Americans who trusted in a government that not only betrayed and lied to us, but worse, considered us expendable. Declassified minutes of the Atomic Energy Commission during the early years of testing in Nevada read like high drama. When one commissioner lamented, that people, livestock were getting sick and dying another blasted, people have got to learn to live with the facts of life, and fallout is a fact of life. Nothing is going to get in the way of testing, nothing, and he called for judicious handling of public information. Lying.

What is the moral responsibility of a government that knowingly harms its own people.

In 1990 US Congress finally passed the extremely limited Radiation Exposure Compensation Act, RECA for short. Given the vast extent of testing the number of claimants represents just a fraction of those harmed by radioactive fallout on American soil. When it was passed President George H.W. Bush admitted it could only be considered partial restitution.

What price after all can you put on human health and human life? Nothing can bring back my sister and all the others. Our families and communities have paid and continue to pay an enormous price. Without congressional action RECA expires this July. Bipartisan bills introduced in the US Congress would extend it another fifteen years and expanded to include seven western states as well as Guam. For those of us who have suffered for decades and are burdened with ongoing medical bills time is literally running out. Too many have already died. The legislation though still not inclusive enough is a step toward long overdue justice and atonement. Hopefully Congress will do the right thing. Even if it's too little too late. And just as importantly, those of us from nations around the globe who know firsthand the tragedy of nuclear weapons must stand in solidarity to bear witness and demand that the mistakes of the past never be repeated.

Recounting our stories is incredibly painful but we cannot let them die with us. In the move to ban nuclear weapons our collective voices are absolutely essential. Nothing provides a more powerful incentive than our personal tragedies. My cancer, my sister's death and the death of so many others has given me great motivation to end the nuclear threat.

There is power in our words. The stories I listen to move me, inspire me even as they dismay and unnerve me. We must break the stranglehold of the powerful military industrial complex. We must do all we can to ensure that no government ever again sacrifices innocent human beings to the madness of nuclear weapons.

Thank you.

Disclaimer

This transcript is at the responsibility of Peace Boat and may not be completely the same as the original testimony. The original testimony was presented online at the World Nuclear Survivors Forum 2021 on December 2-3, where over 30 nuclear survivors from five continents around the world shared their voices with more than 1000 people. The Forum was hosted by Peace Boat in partnership with the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN). The stories and panel discussions are all available for viewing on demand via Youtube or on our website here: <https://nuclearsurvivors.org>