

**VANESSA PIERCE**

**Salt Lake City, Utah**

**An Interview by**

**Samantha Senda-Cook & Danielle Endres**

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**THIS IS SAMANTHA SENDA-COOK AND DANIELLE ENDRES  
INTERVIEWING VANESSA PIERCE ON FEBRUARY 15, 2008 AT 68 MAIN  
STREET, SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH.**

**SS:** ...Senda-Cook, it is February 15<sup>th</sup> at 2:00 PM and we are at 68 [South] Main street, the office of HEAL Utah<sup>1</sup> in Salt Lake City, Utah. And, could you state your full name with spelling for the record please?

**VP:** My name is Vanessa Pierce V-A-N-E-S-S-A P-I-E-R-C-E.

**SS:** And what is your current residence?

**VP:** 281 East 1700 South Salt Lake City, Utah.

**SS:** How long have you lived there?

**VP:** I have lived there about fourish [sic] years now.

**SS:** Okay, and what is your occupation?

**VP:** I am the executive director of HEAL Utah.

**SS:** Great, so can...is everything going good on that?

**DE:** Everything is good, should I stop it and restart it?

**SS:** Up to you.

**DE:** Let's just keep going.

**SS:** Okay. So background information, where were born and what is your birthday?

**VP:** I was born on June 7<sup>th</sup> 1980 and I was born in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

**SS:** And, how many siblings do you have, do you have any siblings?

**VP:** I'm an only child.

**SS:** All right. What brought you to live in Salt Lake City?

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<sup>1</sup> HEAL Utah is a non-profit organization in Utah that works to protect the environment and health of Utah citizens. For more information on HEAL Utah, see their website: <http://www.healutah.org/>.

**VP:** I originally came out to Salt Lake to work on a contract. I was doing a fellowship with a group called Green Corps<sup>2</sup>, which is field school for environmental advocacy. And so Green Corps recruits recent college graduates, trains them in the skills they need to be effective environmental advocates, and then they run campaigns for the nation's leading environmental groups. And so I was running a campaign at that time that was doing fundraising for a number of different environmental and human rights groups and that brought me to Salt Lake, and then after that fellowship was over I had fallen in love with the mountains and it was similar enough to Colorado that I felt like home but different enough that it was interesting so I decided I wanted to stay.

**SS:** And in between there you were in Connecticut?

**VP:** Uh hum.

**SS:** Okay, and is that where you did your undergraduate work?

**VP:** Nope, but I did my college years in Iowa and then after I graduated from Grinnell College I did Green Corps which brought me to live in both Hartford, Connecticut and then later in Salt Lake City.

**SS:** Okay, so you probably have a good conceptualization of these kinds of issues in multiple places in the United States.

**VP:** Uh hum.

**SS:** Great. Is there anything you'd like to tell us about yourself before we get started?

**VP:** No.

**SS:** Okay, so, what was your family life growing up like?

**VP:** Well, I come from a family of divorced parents so my folks got divorced when I was in sixth grade. But I'm extremely close to both sides of my family. My parents met

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<sup>2</sup> For more information, see their website: <http://www.greencorps.org/>.

teaching transcendental meditation so I was raised kind of living on the outside of your traditional type of—I guess family values maybe is way to say that? I mean our values are very traditional but just in terms of, you know, not identifying as a Christian in Colorado Springs [Colorado], which is kind of home base for a lot of the fundamentalist Christian movement, was a little bit alienating at times. So, I like to say that I feel comfortably oppressed here in Utah [laughs]. I probably should not have said that on the record but... So I grew up with two parents who love me very much and who had very different parenting styles and both had very high expectations for me. And I think both my dad and step-mom would...they would talk to me about my activism in college, which I really got involved with working on global warming issues in college and corporate responsibility types of things. And I got to go to the Kyoto Protocol<sup>3</sup> in the Hague [Netherlands] when they were doing negotiations back in 2000 and I remember my step-mom expressing her disappointment with me when we got back because the U.S. didn't do anything good to move the negotiations forward, and she heard about what we had done to kind of advocate for the U.S. to be good instead of towing the Bush administration line, and she...what did she say? She just basically like expects me to save the world, and was disappointed that I wasn't able to do that effectively enough when I was a junior in college.

**SS:** And so do you feel like that's had an impact on how you try to do things currently?

**VP:** You know, I think just growing up believing that every person can make a difference and every person is important and every person intrinsically is valuable, that has been more a part of my advocacy and that's definitely a core part of my values and a core

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<sup>3</sup> The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change developed the Kyoto protocol to reduce greenhouse gases that cause global warming. The Kyoto protocol was negotiated in Kyoto, Japan in 1997. At the time of writing, 170 countries have ratified the Kyoto protocol. The U.S. has not ratified it.

value of our organization [HEAL Utah] as a whole. So not only do we work on nuclear and toxic waste issues, but equally important to us is the democratic process and giving people a voice so that we can shape the world to be the world that we want to live in, not just the world that special interests or corporations want to have.

**SS:** Great. So can you think of major influential events growing up that have shaped your perceptions today?

**VP:** Well, I remember when I was about six years old seeing something on the news about these students who were protesting McDonald's for using Styrofoam, and they were getting McDonald's to start using more environmentally friendly alternatives. And as a kid not understanding that students probably meant college students I thought like other kindergarteners or first graders were out there making McDonald's be a better company. So I just remember thinking that seemed amazing and I remember thinking 'God, what would it take to get a job to like do that professionally, you probably have to be rich or a movie star in order to work for Greenpeace<sup>4</sup>.'

**SS:** Interesting. What were some of the major ethical influences you had growing up?

**VP:** Probably I would say—in a lot of ways probably just my mom. I mean, she's a very empathetic person. She's far more than just compassionate and I think that I kind of inherited a lot of that from her. And so I think if you tend to feel things more strongly than other people, you tend to just be more sensitive to maybe the more weak and vulnerable. And so more than any religious leader or political figure, I think it's just kind of that level of sensitivity that has probably shaped me.

**SS:** Great. What were some role models you had, or who were role models?

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<sup>4</sup> Greenpeace is an international non-profit organization started in 1971 to address environmental issues such as global warming, saving whales, nuclear energy, and toxics. For more information on Greenpeace, see their website: <http://www.greenpeace.org/usa/>.

**VP:** I think my biggest role models in terms of advocacy work were people that I went to college with. And so...like the leader of our campus environmental group who is a good friend of mine, he's a couple of years older than me. So he was definitely a role model, Bill Holland, and taught me a lot about organizing and how to be an effective social change agent. And just a couple other people who were just a handful of years older who were doing the same kind of work and really believed in the power and importance of youth and young people and making a difference. So even though it doesn't stick with me a lot, just the vision of John Passacantando who is the now executive director of Greenpeace, he was the one who had this vision of bringing all these college students to the Hague [Netherlands] for the Kyoto Protocol negotiations because he always saw young people as the cutting edge of morality and kind of the moral compass of our nation whether you look at the civil rights movement when Martin Luther King and the churches were afraid to continue sending people on freedom rides, it was the young people who would say 'I'm still going to put my body in harm's way and I'm going to walk past the dogs that might sic me and I'm going to walk past the fire hydrants that are spraying on full blast and I'm going to do this because this is right.' And it was the young people, not the big famous leaders that really first put themselves on the line.

**SS:** Great. Thank you. So, we're going to move into your relationship with nuclear waste issues more specifically. How did you first get involved with nuclear waste issues?

**VP:** It was when I was hired to work here at HEAL. So when I was working in Connecticut, I was working on a lot of toxic waste issues for an organization called

Toxics Action Center<sup>5</sup>, and they were kind of like the Ghostbusters of toxics. When people were concerned about leaky landfills or polluting power plants in their backyards they'd call us and ask us to help them organize campaigns to address those issues. So the issue of human health and the environment and the relationship between the two came on my radar screen through that work. And when I came out to Utah and saw that there were radioactive waste landfills rather than just municipal waste landfills, which themselves are scary, I kind of felt like I was walking into a toxic hyperbole. I think it was in December of 2003—so I had just been here for four or five months—that the federal government first announced plans to develop the robust nuclear earth penetrator otherwise known as the 'bunker buster.' And there were a bunch of hearings about that at the same time that there were hearings about expanding compensation for downwind victims of radioactive poisoning from nuclear testing. So it was kind of in that context that I really started getting involved in these issues and kind of delving into our nuclear past and what the weapons complex had done to the civilians of our country.

**SS:** And so you got involved in Green Corps and that's how you got out here. Did you have to apply for that or were you recruited?

**VP:** Both. Green Corps is a competitive fellowship, they typically have about a thousand applicants and they accept around twenty-five people into the program. So I had heard about it because some of my mentors in college either were Green Corps alumni or had done Green Corps and so I had to apply to the program, but I was also recruited to apply.

**SS:** Great, thank you. And then so you've stayed with it, why?

**VP:** With nuclear issues?

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<sup>5</sup> Toxics Action Center is a non-profit organization, formed in 1987, that works on a variety of forms of toxic pollution that pose a threat to the health and safety of neighborhoods, residents and the environment. For more information, see their website: <http://www.toxicsaction.org/index.htm>.

SS: Yeah

VP: I mean, it's just a really fascinating arena because it's this intersection of issues that pertain to corporate responsibility, the intersection of kind of science and what do we want to open in terms of a Pandora's box and what don't we. And then I think that especially in the state of Utah the issue of democratic participation is really central. So I think the... For me, part of the importance of the work that we do is, like I said, getting people involved in the political process and giving them a say. And that's critical because back in the 1950's when the testing era started, Utahans were taught to trust authority, 'don't question what [the] government wants to do, they have your best interests at heart.' And a lot of people paid with their lives for that blind belief that the government knew what was best and that the defense industry knew what was best. And it's because they didn't question that so many people today even are getting sick. And it's not okay with me that people's health is sacrificed for one company's bottom line or for some people back in Washington who think that the defense strategy happens to be better and that losing thousands of American lives is an okay payoff for that.

SS: And you've been involved you said since 2003?

VP: Uh hum.

SS: Okay. So how would you describe your role in the current debate over nuclear waste?

VP: My role? Well, I mean as the director of this organization [HEAL] that's pretty much the only full time watchdog on these issues I certainly help prioritize where we spend our time, although I think generally we work to be responsive to our membership and so we're not doing anything that the people who are part of our organization wouldn't want us to be doing anyway. So I think I guess the importance of my role is that, you know,

we, myself and my staff really help to channel people's actions so that they are impactful and make a difference. And I think, kind of, that strategic guidance is probably critical.

And then another piece of what we do, and it's kind of hard to separate what Vanessa does from what the rest of the HEAL Utah staff does, but what we do that is also important is just a lot of work to raise public awareness about these issues so getting this stuff in the media, ensuring that people know not just what's going on but what they can do to take action and who has the power to really make the decisions that we want made.

SS: So that kind of sparks two lines of questioning in my mind. The first is: how do you feel about being a spokesperson frequently for nuclear issues or I guess raising this awareness for nuclear issues? And then I'll get to the second one in a minute.

VP: I feel good about it.

SS: Yeah?

VP: Yep.

SS: Yeah, a lot of times you're like the go to person for news stories.

VP: Yeah, I think one thing that we do better than a lot of groups is working with the media and knowing how to do that well, and it's really challenging. So it's not like I just call up the paper and say something really brilliant [laughs]. There are often like hours of agonizing in order to develop the perfect sound byte and sometimes that sound byte doesn't quite work well so it can be challenging to put yourself out there, it can be...you know, you're a little a bit vulnerable because people know who you are and Energy Solutions<sup>6</sup> does Google searches on me and has told me about things I have said in other

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<sup>6</sup> Energy Solutions (formerly known as EnviroCare) is a corporation that works on nuclear waste storage and cleanup at several locations across the US (i.e., Rocky Flats, Savannah River, Fernald, etc.). Energy Solutions runs a low level (class A) nuclear waste dump at a facility in Clive Utah, which is about 70 miles from Salt Lake City. HEAL Utah has led campaigns to prevent Energy Solutions from expanding their

places and other states, which is always interesting. But I think that it's important to have people who are good at messaging to be talking about these issues so that, you know, so that we're not alienating the very people that we need to organize. I think the risk can be that sure my politics to some—if I'm talking amongst friends might sound a little bit more lefty—but truly these issues are non-partisan and they impact us all and it's important to talk about these things in a way that can get people no matter what party they're affiliated with to really understand that they're important issues for them personally and so that's what we strive to do.

**SS:** What do you mean when you said Energy Solutions has Googled you and told you what you said in other states?

**VP:** So they've done Google searches on me, or at least one of their employees did, and he kind of told me a quote...so I had been quoted in a newspaper in Connecticut and he had read the quote and he parroted it back to me.

**SS:** To what end?

**VP:** Oh, I'm sure just to kind of intimidate me and let me know, 'oh, we're watching you.' And you know, to be fair, we talk a lot about Steve Creamer the CEO of Energy Solutions and his not too illustrious background in engineering. He's had a lot of failed engineering projects and we've made sure to put that out publically because we think that somebody who's in charge of the largest commercial nuclear waste site in America, you know, we should be conscious about who's running that. So I think that they have

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storage capacity, starting to receive "hotter" class B and C waste, and importing low level waste from Italy. For more information on Energy Solutions, see their website: <http://www.energysolutions.com/>. For more information on HEAL Utah's campaigns related to Energy Solutions, see: <http://www.healutah.org/nuclearutah/waste/energysolutions>.

worked to try and, you know, do the same thing. My background isn't as colorful or interesting as Steve Creamer's though so...[laughs].

**SS:** So would you say that your role has changed from, or in moving from the Program Director to the Executive Director of HEAL Utah?

**VP:** In a lot of ways it has. I was the primary spokesperson for HEAL Utah on anything to do with nuclear weapons before and now I guess I'm kind of generally the *de facto* spokesperson. But my responsibilities have changed more in more boring ways: I do our taxes, I do our bookkeeping, I decide how much money our employees are going to make, I do the fundraising, I do a lot of regulatory stuff, so it's not that exciting.

**SS:** So things that maybe get you more in the public eye and more behind the scenes responsibilities as well?

**VP:** Uh hum, yeah.

**SS:** So that was the first line [of questioning], and then the second line would be to do with the members of your organization. So how do your organization's members conceive of this problem of nuclear waste?

**VP:** I think the way that they probably conceive of it as just that Utah is the nation's nuclear dumping ground and they don't like, we don't like to be seen as a disposable state. I think ultimately a lot of us believe that we can move forward to help promote alternative cleaner technologies that don't carry with them the liability of poisonous waste streams like nuclear waste. And so I think that's another part of our culture as an organization.

**SS:** Great. So you worked with the Skull Valley Goshute tribe in stopping that temporary storage of nuclear waste there, and I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about the

strategies you used for coalition-building. You said earlier that your mom had an influence on you in terms of feeling this empathy and I'm wondering if that played into those decisions at all?

**VP:** Sure. And one other thing to the prior question about our membership, I would also say that people feel like they're representatives in government don't represent them. They really feel... a common critique is that they're so bought off by Energy Solutions, and so I think that that's a huge piece of why people get involved with us as well, is to try and remedy that lack of balance of power.

**SS:** I see.

**VP:** As far as the Skull Valley Goshute issue<sup>7</sup>, that was a campaign that was first started by my predecessor Jason [Groenewold]<sup>8</sup> and honestly the bulk of that work was done before 2003 when I came on board. And so that was really reaching out to the section of the Goshutes that was not okay with turning their reservation into a storage site for spent fuel rods. And it was pretty easy I think to get a lot of people on board with that because they... you talk about high level nuclear waste and nobody wants that anywhere. So I do know that the governor, [Michael] Levitt<sup>9</sup> at the time, convened a group called the No Coalition that included kind of other big wigs from the state who were involved in

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<sup>7</sup> The Skull Valley Band of Goshutes tribal government signed a lease in 1997 with Private Fuel Storage (PFS), a limited liability corporation made up of eight power companies with nuclear reactors, to temporarily store 40,000 metric tons of high-level nuclear waste the reservation. The Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) approved a license for the site in 2005. The Skull Valley Band of Goshutes tribal chair, Leon Bear, and the rest of the tribal council were in favor of the project. A group of tribal members, led by Margene Bullcreek, opposed the decision of their tribal council and fought the PFS temporary waste site. Tribal opponents of the nuclear waste site worked with HEAL Utah, the state of Utah, and other organizations to stop the site. Decisions by the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Bureau of Land Management in 2008 invalidated the NRC license and stopped the site. For more information on this controversy, see: Ishiyama, Noriko. "Environmental Justice and American Indian Tribal Sovereignty: Case Study of a Land-Use Conflict in Skull Valley, Utah" *Antipode* 35 (2003) 119-139; PFS' website: <http://www.privatefuelstorage.com/>; and the Utah Division of Indian Affairs profile of the Goshutes: [http://indian.utah.gov/utah\\_tribes\\_today/goshute.html#skull](http://indian.utah.gov/utah_tribes_today/goshute.html#skull).

<sup>8</sup> Immediate past Executive Director of HEAL Utah.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Okerlund Levitt served as governor of Utah from January 4, 1993 to November 5, 2003.

industry and just kind of politics in general and that No Coalition worked to strategize on how to stop the waste. The main strategy that was really used is initially we raised concerns to get the delegation, the congressional delegation on board and to get the governor to oppose it [the waste site]. And once they took a hold of the issues, you know, they did a great job of working through legal channels and backdoor deals in Washington to get the proposal to stop. We did a lot of the public education work and certainly the Skull Valley Goshutes did a lot of work as well, I mean you've got to hand it to Sammy Blackbear and Margene Bullcreek who really put their own relationships with people in the tribe on the line, not to mention their incomes and things like that because there were certain ways that it sounds like the tribal leader Leon Bear<sup>10</sup> worked to retaliate against those opposing the waste in fairly subtle but still powerful ways.

**SS:** Do you know...have you heard anything about a current situation or renewed efforts by PFS [Private Fuel Storage] to try to deposit the nuclear waste there?

**VP:** After the Department of the Interior ruled against allowing the waste to go there<sup>11</sup>, there is a five year statute of limitations, so Private Fuel Storage has the right not to appeal the ruling but to actually sue the federal government for the ruling. And my understanding is that they were exploring that option and keeping it open. I don't know that they are definitely going to do and the little legal insight that we've heard is that typically in those cases the courts tend to rule on the side of the federal government. So their chances of winning were relatively low. But I would say that there is a slight chance

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<sup>10</sup> Leon Bear was the tribal chair when the Skull Valley tribe signed a lease with PFS for temporary high-level nuclear waste storage on the reservation. In 2006, Leon's uncle Lawrence Bear was elected to be the tribal chair.

<sup>11</sup> In September 2006, the Department of Interior ruled that the lease agreement between the Skull Valley Band of Goshutes and PFS was not valid, thus negating the license. The DOI ruling cited their trust responsibility to American Indian nations, the fact that there is still not a permanent storage facility, and environmental impacts.

that they might try and come back and sue and then that would be the final recourse that they could take.<sup>12</sup>

**SS:** Thank you. How would you characterize the problem and then potential solutions to nuclear waste issues in Utah?

**VP:** Well the majority of the nuclear waste that's dumped in Utah right now comes from two places: the nuclear power industry and the nuclear weapons complex. Most of the sites that were the most contaminated from the nuclear weapons complex with nuclear waste have been quote-unquote remediated or cleaned up, and I say that with that quote-unquote because a lot of those places, the community groups in the areas have not been fully satisfied with the level to which those places have been remediated. But nevertheless, most of the existing sites have been—a lot of the existing sites have been cleaned. So there are still active sites that have waste that are manufacturing nuclear materials to support the complex. Some of that waste will continue to go to Energy Solutions, but not until a time when—if the U.S. ever abolished our nuclear weapons complex, not until then would we see another influx of waste. So, then that brings us to the nuclear power industry, and that is a big source of contamination and one of the reasons that we recently have started working on renewable energy issues is because that is the positive alternative and the way that we need to go that is not going to create these types of wastes. So the more that, we can move our economy away from nuclear power and towards wind, solar, geo-thermal, that kind of thing. We'll hopefully be able to turn off the faucet when it comes to that type of waste.

**SS:** So, turning off the faucet would be probably the start to a solution, right?

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<sup>12</sup> Our research during transcription reveals that on July 17, 2007, PFS and the Skull Valley Tribe filed a complaint in the U.S. District Court (Salt Lake City) against The Department of Interior for their ruling to disapprove the PFS-Goshute lease.

VP: Uh hum.

SS: What are the next steps?

VP: For high level waste or the waste going to Energy Solutions? Or?

SS: Either one, or both, are they different solutions?

VP: Well I mean, I don't...there is no solution for the high level waste issue so that's just kind of a nasty one to grapple with, nobody really knows long term what to do with that waste. Immediate steps...what we've determined with Energy Solutions and knowing that they're out there, they're taking waste, we pretty much draw the line at nothing hotter than what they're currently allowed to take, nothing more.<sup>13</sup> So they've in the past tried to expand onto new land and then just expand vertically, so we don't want to see any increase in their capacity. And as long as we kind of keep that box around them, our hope is that we can turn more of our attention to promoting these positive solutions rather than just trying to fight them and prevent them from taking more [waste]. And the analogy I like to use about them is they're...it's like we're in this co-dependant unhealthy relationship in Utah where we enable the creation of this dirty poisonous waste that basically pollutes land for time immemorial, like no one can ever go to the Energy Solutions facility and live there not even a thousand years into the future. So by developing this place that's cheap and easy to dump nuclear waste, we just help create more and we enable that. And our goal is to ultimately get to a place where no state is seen as an OK sacrifice zone so that ultimately we will force our ingenuity and our capability for innovative thinking to come up with better, safer, cleaner, healthier solutions.

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<sup>13</sup> Energy Solutions currently takes Class A low-level waste. "Hotter" waste would be Class B-C low-level, transuranic, or high-level waste.

**SS:** Great. With high level nuclear waste you said that there really isn't a solution but have you heard better or worse proposals?

**VP:** Yeah. What we would recommend right now is storing the waste at the sites that create them in what's known as HOS storage, and that's hardened onsite storage. Most of the time the best way to do it is even to put it underground so that the stuff isn't sticking up as a potential terrorist target. You need to have good security measures. That would buy us maybe a hundred years to try and figure out what is the next best thing to do with it. In terms of even longer term, it's hard to say because the discussion about how to manage our high level waste has always been a very political discussion, more so than a technical discussion. So one of my colleagues, a man by the name of Dr. Arjun Makhijani, and he's the director of a group called the Institute for Energy and Environmental Research [IEER]<sup>14</sup>, they do a lot of work on nuclear issues and he's basically a nuclear physicist. And his interesting anecdote is that there actually is a site in terms of deep geological disposal which is probably—what is the best thing is that it's not far from D.C. That would be a good place. Will that site ever be considered? No, there's just no way politically it would ever be considered, but technically it's certainly more promising than Yucca Mountain, which is the place that's currently considered.

**SS:** So what makes the one near D.C. more promising than Yucca Mountain?

**VP:** Part of it is just the I...and again I'm not well versed on the technicalities of this, but I think you want to find like granite shielding that can help protect the...that can bear the heat load and that can protect the materials from infiltration by water so that...you don't want it leaking into an aquifer or moving or migrating, so you need a really stable place

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<sup>14</sup> The Institute for Energy and Environmental Research (IEER) is “dedicated to increasing public involvement in and control over environmental problems through the democratization of science. For more information, see their website: <http://www.ieer.org/>.

for it. So that's my non-technical description of the type of place that you want to store the stuff.

SS: Great, thank you.

VP: Although, many people when we do tabling and public education events suggest that we shoot it into the sun.

SS: You know, my grandma suggested that that too, to the moon [laughs].

VP: Well, the sun is a big nuclear reaction so it seems a little more fitting there, but given the risks and the Challenger accident<sup>15</sup> I don't think that's a wise idea.

SS: Okay. So who has been or will be affected by nuclear waste disposal?

VP: Well, people who have been particularly affected I think tend to be Native American populations, especially if you look at the Western Shoshone who are at the...their native land is basically what is now the Nevada Test Site<sup>16</sup>, the Goshutes being another example. The nuclear industry had looked to Mescalero Indians as another place in Arizona to temporarily store waste.<sup>17</sup> And also a lot of native populations have been...those are the people who have actually been mining and milling nuclear waste, a lot of...I'm sorry not nuclear waste, they were mining and milling uranium, a lot of Navajo live in areas that are pretty rich in uranium, and they've been effected by the waste as well. So I think that's one group of people. Even when you talk about nuclear

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<sup>15</sup> In 1986, the U.S. space shuttle Challenger had an accident in launch, which killed all seven crew members.

<sup>16</sup> The Western Shoshone lay claim to the Nevada Test Site and Yucca Mountain land under the 1863 Ruby Valley Treaty of Peace and Friendship.

<sup>17</sup> The Mescalero Apache Reservation (New Mexico) was considered for high-level nuclear waste storage under the Monitored Retrievable Storage (MRS) Program. MRS is a method of temporary high-level nuclear waste storage. A 1987 amendment to the Nuclear Waste Policy Act created the Office of the Nuclear Waste Negotiator, which was tasked with finding a site for MRS. The office considered sites on the lands of the Skull Valley Band of Goshutes, the Mescalero Apache, and the Fort Hall Indian Reservation. Congress dissolved and stopped funding the program in 1994 because of its lack of success in finding an MRS site.

fallout, you've got some interesting groups because we did a lot of testing in the south pacific and so you get the Marshallese and south pacific islanders who were moved from island to island, just entire populations moved. One island was actually completely obliterated by testing and so they, you know, it's been demolished and those people can never go back. So, certainly people without a lot of political representation and political clout have been severely impacted. And if you look at the logic behind selecting Yucca Mountain as the disposal site for high level waste, that decision was very political. There were a handful of states that were being considered, those states got together and said 'look Nevada only has three representatives in Washington, two senators and one member of congress, they do not have the political capital to stop this so lets just pass a resolution saying we'll only study the Nevada site.' And that's what happened. The bill was actually known by its supporters and its opponents by the 'screw Nevada bill,' and it passed. So I think it tends to be small marginalized populations that are most impacted. And again, if you look at Utahans, we are in the minority in terms of being a state that is predominantly Mormon and LDS and I think that is absolutely part of the calculation that the Atomic Energy Commission [AEC] made when they were detonating bombs and deciding only to test those weapons when the winds were blowing eastward towards Utah. They thought, 'well, there's just a couple of cowboys a couple of Indians and a couple of Mormons, who's going to mind when those people die?'

**SS:** So you would say that there is sort of this calculation involved in not considering certain populations.

**VP:** Well, I think they were considered...

**SS:** Oh, okay.

**VP:** ...and that's why they were chosen.

**SS:** I see. All right. What ethical concerns does this call forth in your mind?

**VP:** I think the biggest ethical concern is just what types of technologies we're promoting. Whether you're thinking about technologies for defense or for power generation, and I think it's kind of our human responsibility to look at the long term impacts of what we're doing and what impact it's going to have on future generations. So, I mean that's kind of the first thing that comes to mind.

**SS:** Do you think that your...the members of this organization, see these effects in the same way in terms of who is affected or do you think that they perceive themselves as being affected?

**VP:** I think they probably see themselves as being slightly affected, I mean not...we don't have a strong base per se in Tooele county where Energy Solutions is located—just by virtue of us being based in Salt Lake I think that most of our supporters are in Salt Lake. But I think they see this as this is their state, this is their home, and this is a place that has been dumped on and deemed a dump site by people with more power than they. So I think it does, it impacts them indirectly and it impacts the way that they view their home state.

**SS:** So do you see...I know that nuclear waste affects a number of states, do you see this separation in terms of states and how people organize themselves, maybe like citizen groups, to resist this nuclear testing and nuclear waste disposal?

**VP:** Can you repeat the question?

**SS:** Yeah, do people organize themselves by states or do you see sort of separate organizations for each state?

**VP:** Yes and no. When you're talking about low-level waste it's definitely more state-based efforts. So there's another low-level waste site in South Carolina, and the people there have been doing organizing. And again, I think if you talk about waste and nuclear weapons issues...again the south, largely African American and largely low-income and impoverished, so certain types of people are being impacted by these industries. And their organizing efforts...I mean I think most organizing, you kind of have to use the same tried and true tactics in terms of working with the media, calling on political—people with political power to step up and protect the public and that kind of thing. With high level waste there's a little bit more of national concern because it is so scary to people. I mean exposure to a spent nuclear fuel rod unshielded will kill you in seconds so that's a pretty scary thing and the risk of an accident I think is just a lot more frightening to people when they think of high level waste. I think also people are thrown off by the term low level waste. Low level doesn't mean low hazard, low level can still kill you depending on what you're exposed to. So there's been some good branding and PR work inside of the industry to come up with those terms [laughs]. But people are concerned about transportation efforts though that certainly makes it more of a national issue, and there has been some good work to educate a little bit about the Western Shoshone whose land that's on. Although I think the way that that education has been done hasn't quite penetrated to mainstream America so most people have no idea about that.

**SS:** Does HEAL Utah make efforts to, I guess build coalitions across states, or with other maybe local organizations?

**VP:** It depends on the issues and if it's strategic. So with Energy Solutions, it doesn't really make sense for us to reach out to Idaho or Wyoming to work on that just because

those people aren't impacted that much, they have no decision making authority. So for us we choose our coalition partners based on...first we look at who has the power to give us what we want. Is it the governor? Is it a member of Congress? Is it, you know, who is our target? And depending on who that target is we'll look at who is influential to that target and we'll do coalition work based around that.

**SS:** What are some current projects that HEAL Utah's working on?

**VP:** Well, there are a couple different things. On renewable energy stuff we've got different coalition partners than on nuclear waste. So on the renewables we've been working with groups like the Sierra Club<sup>18</sup>, Utah Moms for Clean Air<sup>19</sup>, Utah Physicians for a Healthy Environment<sup>20</sup>, The Utah Clean Air Alliance<sup>21</sup>, so it's a lot about air and clean air. And those groups are all relatively new—with the exception of the Sierra Club. So they're new to the game and some of them have actually started speaking out on nuclear waste issues as well. On this...currently there's a proposal to import 20,000 tons of nuclear waste from Italy and to dump it at Energy Solutions and we're actually working with a couple of owners of Italian restaurants who are offended by this proposal and we're going to be doing a press conference next week to talk about things we like from Italy and things we don't like from Italy and encouraging people to speak out.

**SS:** Interesting. So what are the consequences associated with nuclear waste disposal?

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<sup>18</sup> Sierra club is a long-standing national environmental organization devoted to protecting the earth and it's resources. For more information, see their website: <http://www.sierraclub.org/>.

<sup>19</sup> Utah Moms for clean air is a non-profit organization dedicated to "using the power of moms to clean up Utah's dirty air." For more information, see their website: <http://www.utahmomsforcleanair.org/>.

<sup>20</sup> Utah Physicians for a Healthy Environment is a group of health professionals that promote science education and interventions to protect the environment. For more information, see their website: <http://uphe.org/>.

<sup>21</sup> The Utah Clean Air Alliance was formed in November 2007 as a coalition of groups in Utah focused on air quality.

**VP:** Well. One other thing about other groups we've worked with. The Catholic church has been great in the state of Utah. Dee Roland who works with the church and the former bishop there George Niederauer were all involved with our work and so they've been an excellent partner on these issues and on nuclear weapons issues so I've got to give the Catholic church their props [laughs]. So you were saying 'what are the problems with nuclear waste disposal?'

**SS:** Wait, I'm going to ask a follow-up question and maybe we can go back to that one.

**VP:** Are you going to ask me about the Mormon church?

**SS:** No, I actually wasn't but if you're willing to talk about that you can. But I was going to say, what is involved in these coalitions? You mentioned a press conference with some of the Italian restaurants, but what other things do you do when you team up with other organizations like the Catholic church or like some of the other clean air...Moms for Clean Air, things like that?

**VP:** It really depends on the issue and how closely...So there are different types of coalitions, there's like really actively involved coalitions where you all sit down together and kind of plot and strategize and that's what we were doing on the renewable energy stuff with a couple of our coalition partners. We'd meet, you know, once a week to talk about where our bill was, what our media strategy was going to be, what our messaging was going to be, which legislative targets, which groups we're going to get, that kind of thing, what kind of grassroots pressure we were going to leverage on whom. So that's like very close work with coalitions, and we did all of that plus your typical having them at the media events with us and having us be a united front. Then there's something that's more traditionally called like a paper tiger coalition, that's when you get all the names of

groups that might be influential on a piece of paper or you might get the talking heads to, you know, do something when you call them and say 'hey can you speak at this press conference' or 'I penned an op ed. would you mind signing it?' And those...in that example those people are less actively involved but are happy to step up to the plate when you need them. So we do a mix of that kind of work and it just depends on how interested the partners are in terms of being engaged and also another factor is just how well we work together. So sometimes, you know, we'll be willing to play the bad cop and another group will be willing to play the good cop and we'll have to look separately, look like we're doing things separately at that public level.

**SS:** Interesting. So a lot of different strategies you have in your toolbox I guess.

**VP:** Yeah.

**SS:** Did you want to talk about the Mormon church?

**VP:** Oh no I was...it's just our joke because every time a new volunteer or board member comes on they always say 'have you thought about getting the church on board with what you're doing?' and it's like of course we've thought about it. If it were that easy, you know, it would have been done five years ago.

**SS:** I see. So then, this other question was: what are the consequences associated with nuclear waste disposal?

**VP:** I mean the immediate things that just come to mind are if you dispose of waste you've got to have monitoring systems for long periods of time to make sure that the water isn't getting contaminated, make sure that the covers and the barriers aren't breaking down so that you're not having radioactive dust blowing around. You've got to make sure that you have ways of preventing people from getting into that site and being

exposed to waste in the future, which raises interesting questions since Utah has only been a state for somewhere around two hundred years and some of the stuff is going to be radioactive for hundreds some thousands some millions of years. And so there are just questions of, you know, how much can you do to ensure that future generations won't go out there and, you know, there are a lot of debates. Energy Solutions often says or even regulators will say, you know, 'I don't think that anyone is ever going to want to build a housing community out there so why are you worried about this?' And our concern is you don't know how we're going to be growing in the next two hundred years and who, I mean who knows it's just hard to say what this planet will look like even a thousand years from now. We could be under water again; we could be under a sheet of ice; there's a lot of different things but...so it's just hard to really control what's going to happen with that land. And because there are so many unknowns it just seems like a fairly sizable risk to be taking.

**SS:** So, you seem to hint a little bit at the environmental impact. Could you talk a little bit more about that?

**VP:** Like are there specific things?

**SS:** So, you said radioactive dust is a possibility for environmental impact.

**VP:** Well, a lot of the material that they dispose of out there is like contaminated soil and it's soil that's contaminated with radioactive materials. So if the rock and the clay that cover that is on—that is over the material erodes, then you've got wind and you've got stuff blowing around potentially and you have potential exposure pathways.

**SS:** I see. So what are some of the economic impacts of nuclear waste?

**VP:** I mean nobody's done a big study that says businesses come here or not come here because we have the largest commercial nuclear waste site in America. Certainly they add to the tax base. For a long time they didn't; radioactive waste used to not be taxed at all. And then for a while it was cheaper to dispose of nuclear waste in Utah than it was to dispose of municipal waste. For a while we were making more money off of cable TV taxes than nuclear waste disposal. A couple of years ago there was a bill that kind of changed the tax structure and the way that the waste was taxed and I honestly don't know if we're still making more money off of cable TV taxes than nuclear waste, it's an interesting question. Tooele County, which is home to Energy Solutions, gets a certain percentage of the company's profits [that] go directly to the county and so it's certainly a company county. In fact the...one of the PR liaisons for Energy Solutions, her son is now on the county council and he—along with some of his council members who are newly elected...there was the big kind of nasty election in Tooele County in the last county elections and there was this kind of overthrow of the traditional powers that were—and the new county commission voted to stop auditing Energy Solutions' books to see that Energy Solutions was paying enough to the county. They just said 'you know what it's not...let's just now worry about doing that anymore, we trust them.'

**SS:** Interesting. So when you say that we tax nuclear waste, who pays those taxes?

**VP:** You know I think that...I don't know if Energy Solutions has to pay it directly or if they pass...it might be a pass through tax, like they have to pay 'X' number of cents per cubic foot of waste and they probably just increase the prices to their customers by that amount. I'm not positive about that, I'd have to double check if you really wanted to know.

**SS:** How important is the impact of nuclear waste on maybe your life and the lives of the members of HEAL Utah?

**VP:** That's just...it's so abstract. It's not like there's shipments of nuclear waste that like go through my back yard and I don't live right next to them. I'm not employed by them so it's more an abstract issue. But to me it's very important because it's kind of what we're working...our vision is that we can have a Utah that is waste free when it comes to nasty nuclear stuff and toxic stuff and that can have a prosperous economy based on clean technologies and that's what we're working for. So it's important to me in that I think it's a part of Utah's present and past and if we get things our way it won't be part of our future.

**SS:** So you do see this acceptance of nuclear waste as having an effect on people's perceptions about maybe Utah or nuclear waste in general?

**VP:** I think it depends on who you ask. I think some people feel like it really is kind of a, like a blemish on our state's image. So some people involved with the tourist industry and things I think can be off put by it. I think the other thing though is that because Energy Solutions is based here they really worked hard to convince the public that they're this great company that's in the business of stopping global warming and building golf courses, which all of those are images in their commercials that they're running so it's definitely in their interest to make people think that they're providing this tremendous public service. They also really imply in their commercials that they take waste predominately from the medical industry and from academia, and if you go in and do the research, less than .01 percent of what they take comes from those sources.

**SS:** Interesting. How do you think perceptions of land influence whether or not we're taking nuclear waste or where we decide to put nuclear waste?

**VP:** I think that's definitely a key component. So a lot of Utah's rural legislators see land as a resource to be used not a resource to be preserved and treasured as it is, intact. So, I think because the west desert is big and because it doesn't look like bucolic forests or, you know, prairie land or whatever they think , it's ok to just dump things out there even though it's home to a bunch of different plant life and animal life and it's a very unique type of ecosystem. And I think at the national level as well, a lot of people back east just see the west as this huge open space and they think 'well, there are too many people where we are to dispose of this stuff so we should just send it out here. Nobody lives in Utah.' And quite honestly I do think there is a little bit of prejudice because Utah is a predominantly LDS state and I think a lot of people think it's a backwards state with a bunch of polygamists and 'who cares of there's nuclear waste there.' So, certainly that's not all east coasters but when I've been back there the perception definitely is, you know, people don't live there like they live here and it's better to put our waste over there. And I mean we certainly don't want to keep this waste in really populated areas so there's some merit to that conversation but I think there's even more merit to looking at, is this a just arrangement? Is this an equitable arrangement? Is this an arrangement that benefits Utahans? Who is benefiting from it? And it's predominately the industry that creates the waste and the industry that disposes of the waste because certainly we can make things whether it's a national defense strategy or an energy policy we can make our world into a different world so that we don't have to rely on these poisonous processes that create nuclear waste.

**SS:** When you're asking is this a just or equitable situation, what are the characteristics that you would see as defining a just or equitable situation?

**VP:** Maybe I can tell you what happened that wasn't just or equitable, which is sad. The land that Energy Solutions, it used to be known as Envirocare, acquired to put their nuclear waste facility [on]... first of all, there was kind of this weird dealing where they bought the land from SITLA [State Institutional Trust Lands Administration] state trust lands and they bought it for pennies on the dollar, so tax payers and education kind of got screwed in that transaction. They had to get an exception to federal law for private ownership of the nuclear waste dump because technically no private individual shall be responsible for that. So there was that loophole that they were able to get. And then the owner Khosrow Semnani was engaged in a bribery extortion scandal with a regulator who granted him his permit. The regulator, Larry Anderson, received \$600,000 in gold coins, Swiss bank account transfers, and property/real estate in the Park City area for this consulting gig that he had with Khosrow Semnani. Well, anybody with a shred of integrity knows that the chief regulator who's going to give the license should not be consulting for the company asking for the license—that's a huge conflict of interest. So ultimately Larry Anderson went to jail. Khosrow Semnani had to probably pay some fines and had his own issues, he couldn't be the head of the company for a number of years, but the result is that he got his way and he got his nuclear waste site and all of that was because of underhanded dealings, exemptions to the rules. And the public I don't think even had much of an idea of what they were in for at the time. They weren't informed about the issue and they had no say in the matter.

SS: Thank you. Who is responsible for the nuclear waste situation in your conceptualization?

VP: Again that's a very broad general question. I mean if you look at it just in terms of a very bureaucratic analysis it's like the power industry generated [it], the Nuclear Regulatory Commission [NRC]<sup>22</sup> regulates it at the federal level, the [Utah] Division of Radiation Control [DRC]<sup>23</sup> regulates it at the state level, and they have oversight over most of the major decisions that happen there. There's a little bit of political oversight at times but the challenge is that the regulatory system is set up in a way so that if an industry says 'I want permission to do this thing with nuclear waste,' and if a certain set of boxes are sort of checked off, if they meet that checklist, the regulators have no power to say no. So if the criterion is met they must say yes, they have no other choice. And so I think part of the problem is that unelected bureaucrats end up making huge decisions that we're going to live with for the rest of our lives as residents. I think if you take a different kind of more political analysis it's just, you know, the people with money...and the industry does definitely have a financial stake in propagating this industry, right? That's the business that they're in and they want to see it continue, and so they're going to do everything that they can in terms of lobbying elected officials, in terms of lobbying regulators, and in terms of hiring people who work for those agencies to work for them so that they can grease the skids so that they can keep their industry up so that they can keep making money. And Energy Solutions is really good at that, in fact they do it now and they did it before when they were Envirocare but the former head of the [Utah]

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<sup>22</sup> The Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) is a government agency formed in 1974 and charged with regulating radioactive nuclear materials. For more information, see their website: <http://www.nrc.gov/>.

<sup>23</sup> The Utah Division of Radiation Control is a government appointed board that establishes rules and policies to protect "Utah citizens and the environment from sources of radiation that constitute a significant health hazard." For more information, see their website: <http://www.radiationcontrol.utah.gov/>.

Department of Environmental Quality [DEQ]<sup>24</sup>, when he retired from DEQ went to work as Vice-President for Envirocare. So no longer a revolving door between industry and regulators, there's just a golden archway.

**SS:** What ethical concerns do you think maybe people in this industry have, or do you think they have ethical concerns?

**VP:** In talking with people from the industry I think that if they do have...I don't know if they have concerns or not, I think a lot of them really trust the science. I think they think they are providing as service. I think that some of them are really genuine in believing that they're doing the best that they can and just the fact that this industry exists is just a fact of life and so we—we're not going to do things a different way so we need to find a place to put this waste. And I think that a lot of them believe that they're a state of the art facility that is doing a great job. There are other people who work there that I think have drunk a little bit too much of the kool-aid. So their [Energy Solutions] PR person likes to take the public on tours of their facility. And she literally told a tour group that included our staff, and she knew that they were our staff, that the dirt out there is so nice that she wishes that she could grow her tomatoes in it, and that you could eat a tablespoon of the stuff that they dispose there every day for thirty years and you would never get cancer.

**SS:** And you think that's just wrong?

**VP:** I think that any health official and any regulator would say keep this stuff away from people because it is dangerous and they should not be eating it, they should not be sleeping on it, which she also said that you could do, you should not be growing your tomatoes in it, although if she did I wouldn't stop her.

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<sup>24</sup> The Utah Department of Environmental Quality is a state government agency that addresses environmental quality in the state. For more information, see their website: <http://www.deq.utah.gov/>.

SS: Let's see, okay. Where are we at with time? Okay, so how about let's close, and do you want to add anything you feel like we didn't cover enough of?

VP: No, I feel like I talked a lot [laughs].

SS: And can you recommend any other people to speak with?

SS: I assume Mary Dickson is on your list. Michelle Thomas is in St. George, but she...have you guys thought about talking to her? She's a downwinder so, she also grew up on St. George with Steve Creamer and so she's got an interesting perspective on him and also Betty Arial the PR person who wants to grow her tomatoes out there is also from St. George. So I'm sure there are like two kinds of opposite sides of the spectrum, but you know, two other people to talk to would be Betty Arial and would be Steve Creamer.

SS: Great, thank you so much.

VP: Yeah.



