

The History of The Groundwater Foundation

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It is often said that the greatest gift is good health. I did not fully appreciate the extent of this truth until my infant son, Logan, became ill. Happily, he recovered fully after four long years of serious digestive difficulties. During his frequent hospitalizations, I came to understand that the health of our families is the basis on which we build our lives. Therefore, at the time of Logan's



Susan and infant son, Logan in 1981.

recovery I congratulated myself on the fact that I was providing a healthy environment for my children by raising them in Nebraska where abundant fresh air and water were a fact of life!

Imagine my surprise when I read a 1984 newspaper article describing potential environmental health hazards right in my own backyard--the Platte Valley of Nebraska. This article featured information about Dr. Robert Rosenlof, a Kearney, Nebraska physician, who had convinced the University of Nebraska Medical Center to hire an epidemiologist to investigate potential links between pesticide and fertilizer use, groundwater contamination, and the elevated levels of

leukemia and Non-Hodgkins lymphoma in the Central Platte River Basin.

I wrote to the epidemiologist cited in the news story, Dr. Dennis Weisenberger. I asked him to describe his research and any possible theories he might be developing about the cause of these illnesses and how I might protect my children.

Dr. Weisenberger responded right away. His letter challenged me as a concerned mother to learn all I could. He wrote that groundwater contamination might be a potential culprit for the area's elevated levels of leukemia and Non-Hodgkins lymphoma, but that much more needed to be learned. Dr. Weisenberger also believes that until citizens such as myself became engaged and involved, no real progress is possible.

Never one to shy away from a challenge, I decided to spend the remainder of 1984 educating myself about groundwater and potential threats to its quality and supply. Like many concerned mothers before me, I made appointments with public officials and read everything I could.

During this intense process, my own mother wondered what had happened to "Good Housekeeping" and she wasn't referring to the popular periodical! My long suffering spouse, Gary, learned that my willingness to put projects on the "back burner" had assumed a new and ominous meaning. He even made me wear a sign at cocktail parties that read, "Do NOT ask this woman about groundwater." Needless-to-say, I had found my calling!

During this self-education process, my interest in groundwater expanded from protecting the health of my immediate family, to a reverence for the resource itself and the abundance it gives

to all people. I learned that groundwater provides half of our nation's drinking water and that groundwater is also a huge part of the irrigation water that grows our food.

As time progressed, I continued to be concerned about the impact of contamination, but my fervor also included a desire to help others become educated and involved as well. Through the stellar example of Dr. Rosenlof, I had learned to appreciate the value of taking action and getting involved. Thanks to his watchful and perceptive eye, physicians all across Nebraska were participating in Dr. Weisenberger's study which was adding understanding and data about how to more effectively protect human health. Dr. Rosenlof's interest and willingness to make a difference made all the difference, as it made me think that perhaps I could follow his example.

As a long-time educator, I believe in the power of learning. As a Director of the National Arbor Day Foundation, I also knew organizations achieve great things. I put these two factors together, and in 1985 created The Groundwater Foundation and, in the words of a dear friend and writer, "found a natural outlet for my ebullience."

The Groundwater Foundation was started so that citizens like myself could learn in ways that were scientifically accurate, but also user-friendly. From the beginning, The Groundwater Foundation worked hard so that groundwater science would be accessible and understandable to citizens everywhere. These educated and involved citizens would in turn, protect the environmental and economic vitality of their communities.

The Foundation has always valued its role as an incubator for local groundwater champions. As a result, we began a national program in 1994 entitled Groundwater Guardian, which supports, recognizes, and connects communities taking proactive, voluntary steps to protect groundwater. Today, the Foundation is proud to work with hundreds of communities in over 40 states that concentrate efforts on comprehensive protection of local groundwater supplies.

It's hard for me to believe that almost twenty years have passed since the file folders were piled up on my kitchen stove and my small children were the Foundation's "assistants." Many people have contributed to our growth and success throughout these years, allowing us to stay focused on the fact that becoming educated about and involved in groundwater protection helps us care and do more for our precious groundwater.

I'm still working hard on the issues that interest me, and I still believe that good health is the most precious gift of all. Thanks to the opportunities I've had through The Groundwater Foundation and its partners, I have the satisfaction of knowing that people are healthier and able to live more fully because of the work we do.



Susan toasts to groundwater in 2007, shortly before retiring from The Groundwater Foundation.