

## ABSESTOS & WOMEN'S HEALTH: REFLECTIONS ON INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

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Prepared for: Asbestos and Women's Health Workshop: An Ongoing Health and Safety Disaster

[In the event the workshop, scheduled for March 9, 2013 in Birmingham, did not go ahead; however, the organizers hoped to hold the workshop at a later date]

Alice Jefferson was one of us. She was a mother, a wife, a worker and a British citizen. It is fitting that she should be remembered on International Women's Day as it was her film that revolutionized the British debate on asbestos. Thirty years after Alice had worked at the Cape asbestos factory in Hebden Bridge, Yorkshire and some while after she had been diagnosed with the fatal asbestos cancer, mesothelioma, she became the heart and soul of a "momentous film:" *Alice – A Fight for Life*. With Alice's help, this documentary accomplished a rare feat – it provided a human face and a primetime television audience for an investigation into an occupational health scandal: the human cost of asbestos industry profits.

Having watched *Alice – A Fight for Life*,<sup>1</sup> none of us can be in any doubt that it was Alice herself which gave this 30-year old award-winning program the impact it had. Within ten days of the film's broadcast, the British Government had reduced the allowable limit of asbestos dust in workplaces. Alice cost the asbestos industry more than just its reputation; millions of pounds on asbestos shares were lost. Accusations about dangerous working practices previously dismissed by vested interests were finally given serious consideration as public awareness of the asbestos scandal exploded.

It was Alice which kept viewers watching until midnight on the day IRA bombs exploded in London parks. John Willis, who directed and produced the film for Yorkshire Television, recalled Alice's "incredible inner grace," and said that she had "more decency, honesty and courage than anyone I have known." Historian Geoffrey Tweedale echoed these sentiments; on the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Alice – A Fight for Life*, he recalled:

"The film soon introduced Alice, who was to emerge as the 'star' of the programme. Over the course of the next hour or so, viewers followed Alice's fate – through the misery of what was left of her daily life, on her tortuous short walks, lying sick in bed, sitting morosely in an ambulance, attending court, through to the final scenes in a hospice. The documentary was interspersed with digressions on other aspects of the asbestos industry – Canadian asbestos mining, production in the developing world, working conditions at companies such as Eternit and Turner & Newall – but always the camera returned to Alice...

Much of the documentary's impact was due to its unremitting focus on Alice, who demonstrated enormous fortitude in the face of a pitiless disease. Her physician described

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<sup>1</sup> *Alice – A Fight for Life* was broadcast on July 20 & 21, 1982. With more than 5.8 million viewers, the program became one of that week's top twenty.

Willis J. *Alice – A Fight for Life: 25 Years On*.

Tweedale G. *Alice: A Fight for Life – the Legacy*.

British Asbestos Newsletter. Issue 67, Summer 2007. <http://www.britishasbestosnewsletter.org/ban67.htm>

her as a ‘typical West Yorkshire lass. She's tough and realistic and you can't kid this lady. This lady knows exactly what the score is.’ Alice's reaction was to fight, especially for her husband and young son and daughter. As she explained: ‘You just can't give in, can you? You owe it to yourself and your family to keep fighting, don't you. And when you get knocked down, get up and stand there again ...’”

In 1982, when *Alice– A Fight for Life* was shown, 500 people died of mesothelioma. Forty-seven year old Alice Jefferson became one of the statistics. Twenty-eight years later, the annual mesothelioma death toll has more quadrupled with 1,946 male and 401 female deaths registered.<sup>2</sup> There is no end in sight to this devastating public health catastrophe. Unfortunately, Alice was one of a long line of women whose lives were cut short by their exposure to asbestos. Most of them are unknown, but history has noted the names of a handful of them. As we pay tribute to the memories of the few, we remember the loss of all.

### **Nellie Kershaw – The First Named Victims of Asbestos Related Disease, died in 1924**

Nellie Kershaw was a factory worker in asbestos textile mills in Rochdale from 1903, when she left school aged 12, until 1922 when she became too sick to work. Despite repeated requests from Nellie and her husband, her employer – Turner Brothers Asbestos Company (TBA) – refused to provide any support when Nellie got ill. Nellie died in poverty on March 24, 1924 leaving behind a grieving widower and young son. This case was a rarity in that Nellie had been medically diagnosed during life to be suffering from an asbestos-related disease, a fact confirmed by a post-mortem examination. Nellie's death was the first to be officially recognized as being due to “pulmonary asbestosis,” indeed the nomenclature “asbestosis” was used by Dr. W. E. Cooke in his 1924 report of her case to the British Medical Journal.

### **Nora Dockerty –The First Successful British Asbestos Claimant, died in 1950**

Like Nellie Kershaw, Nora Dockerty worked for TBA, starting at the Rochdale asbestos factory after leaving school aged 15 in 1933. When her contract of employment was terminated due to illness in November 1948, she had given thirteen and a half years of service. At her death in 1950, Nora was only 31 years old, two years younger than Nellie Kershaw had been when she died. Whereas Mr Kershaw survived Nellie and was able to look after their daughter, Nora's husband had pre-deceased her leaving her father to pursue TBA for compensation on his granddaughter's behalf. After protracted negotiations and extensive legal jostling, the case was finally settled in January 1952 when Turner & Newall, TBA's parent company, paid the sum of £375 with costs. Commenting on the significance of the case brought for the death of Nora Dockerty, Professor Nick Wikeley wrote: “The story of *Kelly v. Turner & Newall Ltd* represents a microcosm of the balance struck in the asbestos industry between workers' health and company profitability: between 1931 and 1948, £87,938 was paid out to 140 asbestosis victims under the Asbestosis Scheme; in the same period, nearly £7 million was distributed to shareholders.”<sup>3</sup>

### **June Hancock – The First Successful Environmental Claimant, died in 1997**

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<sup>2</sup> Kazan-Allen L. *Britain's Mesothelioma Epidemic*. British Asbestos Newsletter. Issue 88, Autumn 2012. <http://www.britishasbestosnewsletter.org/ban88.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Wikeley N. *The First Common Law Claim for Asbestosis: Kelly v. Turner & Newall Ltd (1950)*. [1991] J.P.I.L. Issue 3/98; 197-210.

June Hancock (born 1936) grew up in the shadow of an asbestos factory in the town of Armley, West Yorkshire. After losing her mother Maie Gelder to mesothelioma in 1982, June herself was diagnosed with mesothelioma (1993). Neither she nor her mother had worked with asbestos. Determined to seek justice, June fought and sued J. W. Roberts Ltd. (JWR), the owner of the Armley site; by suing JWR, June was in reality suing its parent company, T&N, a British asbestos multinational. It was a test case; never before had anyone succeeded in getting compensation for environmental asbestos exposure from an English company. In 1995, June won her case.

### **Gina Lees – A Symbol of Britain’s Third Wave of Asbestos Deaths, died in 2000**

In 2000, at age 51, Gina Lees died of asbestos cancer, a mere three months after her condition had been diagnosed. Gina had never worked with asbestos, nor lived near an asbestos factory; none of her relatives had worked in an industrial setting. When she was diagnosed with mesothelioma, neither she nor her husband Michael could comprehend how a primary schoolteacher could contract an industrial disease. After extensive research, Michael ascertained that most of the schools in which Gina had worked contained asbestos products. Gina Lees was not the first schoolteacher to die of hazardous workplace asbestos exposure and she won’t be the last but her case was the catalyst for the mobilization on asbestos in schools which has taken place in recent years.

### **The Female Face of The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Asbestos Pandemic**

Unfortunately the incidence and geographical spread of asbestos-related death amongst the female population has not abated in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Mothers, wives, daughters, sisters, grandmothers, aunts and nieces the world over continue to pay the price for the profits made by asbestos companies.

### **Ruth Maria Nascimento, Brazilian factory worker, activist, asbestosis victim, died 2008.**

For twelve years, Ruth Maria Nascimento worked for the former Johns-Manville asbestos textile company: Asberit in Rio de Janeiro. As the operator of a spinning machine, Ruth was exposed to high levels of asbestos fiber on a daily basis. With her friends Rosa Amélia Alves de Araújo and Dulcelina da Costa Alegrete, who also worked in Asberit’s spinning department, she founded the Rio de Janeiro branch of the Brazilian Association for the Asbestos-Exposed (ABREA) in 2001. Rosa Amélia served as the first President of ABREA-Rio. When she died of asbestosis in 2006, Ruth took over. Unfortunately Ruth died of asbestosis in 2008; Dulcelina died of pleural mesothelioma.

### **Rachel Lee, Korean environmental asbestos victim, activist, died 2011.**

Jeong-rim Lee, or Rachel as her English friends called her, was diagnosed with mesothelioma in 2006. She had never worked with asbestos; as a child, however, she had lived near one of Korea’s biggest asbestos-cement factories. She was the mother of two children and an active member of the Ban Asbestos Network of Korea. In 2010, Rachel was one of a seven Asian campaigners who travelled to Canada in the depths of winter to appeal to the Governments of Quebec and Canada to end the production of asbestos. Just a few months earlier she had visited the Indonesian city of Bandung to participate in a meeting at which the Indonesian Ban Asbestos Network was formed. In 2011 Rachel went to India to plead for the end of asbestos use: “No more asbestos, no more asbestos victims,” was her

motto. She told journalists in Jaipur that even though she was in pain, she felt she had to make the trip to Rajasthan to convey her personal message to the people of India. Rachel died on December 21, 2011.<sup>4</sup>

**Mie Kawamura, Japanese nurse, mesothelioma sufferer, campaigner.**

Mie Kawamura is a 52-year old nurse who was diagnosed with mesothelioma in 2010. Her occupational exposure to asbestos contaminants in talc used on latex gloves has been recognized by the Japanese Government as the source of her illness. She is an active campaigner for asbestos victims' rights in Japan. As a result of her efforts to raise awareness of the asbestos danger amongst her peers, the Japanese Nursing Association began a program to alert members of the asbestos hazard. On last year's International Workers' Memorial Day (April 28, 2012), Mie took part in a demonstration organized by Ban Asbestos Japan in downtown Tokyo.

**Concluding Thoughts**

Tomorrow (March 10) is Mother's Day. As we pay tribute to the women whose lives have been sacrificed to asbestos, let us not forget their children: Nellie Kershaw's son, Nora Dockerty's daughter, the children of Alice Jefferson, June Hancock, Gina Lees, Rosa Amélia Alves de Araújo and Rachel Lee: all of whom were deprived too soon of their Mother's love. Gathered together today to commemorate the asbestos dead we honor the memory of all these women. Today we reaffirm our commitment to kill asbestos before it kills any more human beings or orphans any more children. An asbestos-free future is possible.

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<sup>4</sup> Kazan-Allen L. *In Appreciation of Rachel Lee*. December 22, 2011.  
<http://ibasecretariat.org/lka-appreciation-of-rachel-lee.php>