

Remembering Erik Jansson

Environmentalist, conservationist, and founding board member of Beyond Pesticides

With deep sadness, we learned that Erik Jansson (1940-2008) died of injuries from a fall on his farm in Southern Maryland in July. Erik helped give life to the Beyond Pesticides family and community, as he, back in the late 1970s, saw the need for a strong voice and advocate for those poisoned and the environment contaminated by pesticides. At that time, Erik was the pesticides and toxics lobbyist for Friends of the Earth (FOE) in Washington, DC, going on to create the National Network to Prevent Birth Defects and then the Department of Planet Earth. Erik came together with other DC-based organizations, including farmworker, legal action, public health and environmental groups, to form an umbrella organization under which we could voice common concerns and positions—a true collaboration. The umbrella was named the National Coalition Against the Misuse of Pesticides (NCAMP).

Prior to that time Erik had been organizing with people across the country on the problem of pesticide spray drift. He brought activists together from across the country to organize and demand change. Erik knew the facts alone would not effect change. But, he knew that he had to bolster his advocacy with extensive research documents and citations. He turned both advocates and facts on government, urging all of us to ensure that government worked for the people, not the polluters. To that end, in 1979, Erik, on behalf of FOE, petitioned both EPA and the Federal Aviation Administration to curtail spray drift.

Ahead of the Curve

It is fair to say, Erik moved ahead of the curve and put the issues in front of decision makers. In his petitions, he stated unequivocally “people have a right not to be sprayed with any poison without their permission.” Erik got their attention. I don’t think you would ever see a communication between Erik and government regulators without him asking whether they were fulfilling their responsibility to taxpayers in carrying out their responsibilities.

I was new to the movement in 1977. Watching Erik, his energy, optimism, enthusiasm and belief that change was possible was an inspiration and a guiding light for me. No research effort, no amount of time, late nights, or weekends was too much for this incredibly committed person. No better example, perhaps, is Erik’s commitment to the banning of 2,4,5-T, the phenoxy herbicide used as half of the mixture of Agent Orange for defoliation in the Vietnam War, and throughout the northwest in forestry. As Carol van Strum documented in her book, *A Bitter Fog*, Erik went through EPA files, gleaned the stories of 450 poisoning victims and zeroed in on a letter from a woman in Alsea, OR who reported on an association between spontaneous abortion rates and herbicide use. So, Erik copied the letter and distributed it widely to decision makers in Washington DC and the media. Carol said upon

learning of Erik’s death: “The result of his persistence was the EPA’s Alsea Study, which linked phenoxy herbicide spraying to ‘spontaneous’ abortions in a 1600-square mile area surrounding Alsea, OR. Preliminary data from the study prompted EPA to issue an unprecedented emergency suspension of registrations of two phenoxy herbicides in early 1979.” She continues, “That was my introduction to Erik Jansson. He was the faceless hero in Washington, D.C. who forced EPA to act on the dangers of domestic herbicide use.”



Belief in Individuals’ Power to Effect Change

Erik believed in the power of individuals with passion to effect change with his whole being. That is who he was, summoning all the energy he had to move change. It was no surprise then that he was attracted to environmentalist David Brower’s style of organization in which he gave people a desk, phone, and typewriter, and later fax machine and computer, and asked them to pour their heart and soul into solving the problems contributing to environmental degradation and environmental illnesses. So, when I was looking for a space to work out of, to nurture NCAMP into a national grassroots organization, it was Erik who invited me to find a space at the FOE office. Moreover, he devoted his own resources to launching NCAMP, now Beyond Pesticides. That began 27 years of Erik and I sharing the same office.

Erik’s latest project on global climate change had him advocating that organic farming qualify for carbon credits. Erik’s solution: Lobby the Chicago Climate Exchange and others. Erik wrote: “The U.S. House of Representatives recently purchased a fraudulent carbon credit from the Chicago Climate Exchange: i.e. no-till farming from North Dakota. Conventional no-till does not reduce greenhouse gas because it uses high rates of commercial nitrogen fertilizer. Also, the carbon is at the surface of the soil where it can be oxidized.”

Erik was in many ways the organic farmer he advocated for; he planted seeds and nurtured their environment to create a healthy and sustainable future. I realize now that I am just one of those seeds that he nurtured, supported, and encouraged. Those who knew Erik know that he did this for his community, the country and the world without seeking acknowledgement, credit, or accolades. Erik did what he thought was right. We are all better off because of him. *The board of Beyond Pesticides will be developing a strategy for continuing Erik’s legacy so that others may benefit from his spirit and commitment to a healthier world.* - Jay Feldman