



Rena Steinzor:

My name is Rena Steinzor. My date of birth is August 9th, 1949. Just a brief graphical timeline. I went to school in New York City at Columbia Law School and it was right around the time when the '60s was beginning to taper off and I had gone to college at the University of Wisconsin, which was our experiences were very influenced by protest against the Vietnam War. So Columbia was a bit of a culture shock for me. It was sort of corporate oriented. And I decided that what I wanted to do was to work for the government, in part because I had been denied a security clearance on the basis of my activities at the University of Wisconsin. Even though I was a student journalist, I was an editor of the school newspaper, but the FBI had, for a variety of reasons, it probably is off the track, compiled dossiers on those of us who were active in the newspaper.

So, I came to Washington in 1976 to work at the Federal Trade Commission. I was working on consumer protection. And Ronald Reagan was elected and I decided that it was time to get out of the FTC, because they were really trying to shut down a lot of the things I cared about. So I went up to Capitol Hill and I was working for Jim Florio, who later became the governor of New Jersey. And he was working on Super Fund, which is toxic waste cleanup. So long story short, five years on the Hill, then seven years working to defend publicly owned electric systems, make sure they understood what they had to do to comply with environmental law, because they were public officials. They were very sensitive to those needs.

But at that time I had two toddlers and I went off to Guam to do an environmental assessment. And about an hour and a half after we landed, there was a big earthquake. And my husband said, "Here are two toddlers and you're off in Guam and there are earthquakes. How about you come to the University of Maryland," where he had graduated, "And there's a job open that's right up your alley. It's to Head the Environmental Clinic."

And I got the job 12 years running the clinic and then 14 more years doing other kinds of teaching. So the clinic is really, was the heart of it for me. The clinic and the law school allows students to practice law under the supervision of an attorney who's barred, and has a bar, is admitted to the bar. And my students were wonderful and energetic. And probably the central thing that we accomplished was to relocate about 270 people who were living right in the middle of the industrial park, Wagners Point. And they were trapped among these huge fuel tanks and massive factories that were making pesticides.

And every time there was an accident, one of the factories, the emergency response equipment blocked the only road that went in and out of the community. And they were told to shelter in place. That's basically tape up the cracks in the door and hope for the best. So we did get them relocated. In one of the few examples from across the country where a community was moved



out from with federal, state and local funding. And also funding from industry, which didn't want to accept the liability of having them there anymore..

Eve Austin: Could you tell me some more about what that was like? What was really involved in getting to that end goal of getting them moved? What was that experience like? What was the day-to-day work like? What was it like for the people there?

Rena Steinzor: It took four years and four generations of law students. I worked with a woman, who is still one of my closest friends, Brenda Bluhm. She's retired. But she ran the Community Development Clinic and she was asked to consult with a community leader about a lease. They didn't ... it was given by the FMC Corporation to the community, because otherwise it didn't have a place to meet. At the time there was no supermarket, no school, no post office. The only public meeting place was a bar. And so these people needed somewhere to sit and talk about community issues. It was basically a four block area of row houses that looked as if God had taken a handful of houses and sort of thrown them in the middle of this industrial park. And it had been zoned commercial, so you couldn't even build there and the houses were worth nothing. I mean they had everybody savings, but these were working class people.

Eve Austin: How did they end up there? Who were these people?

Rena Steinzor: Well, originally it was a company town. There was a cannery there long time ago and the families were, many of them were extended relations. They had originally come from West Virginia to work in the cannery. And then the industrial park grew up around it and the city ignored it. And it was, I said to my friend, she was advising on the lease and we used to meet in the fire station. Starting was seven or eight people. We kept it up for two, three years. And then there started to be repeated explosions, accidents. And altogether, there were five of them and we milked it for all it was worth. I said to my friend, "You do the organizing and conceiving of how to do a solution, because you're community development, and I will be your environmental enforcer. And we will examine what everybody's doing to comply with environmental laws."

And lo and behold, they weren't doing anything. And this, in combination, there was a very gifted and diligent reporter for the Sun who kept writing stories about it. And over time the governments just had to respond. I mean we had, the final incident was an explosion that sent a plume of smoke drifting over the community and by then this community was so notorious, there were helicopters up, these problems were so notorious, I should say, not the community. Helicopters up and they were trying to interview one of the community leaders and the fire guy, the Assistant Chief, had just been down and said, "It's all contained on the site." And she said, "I'm looking at my



television set. I can see television footage that shows it's drifting over our community."

Eve Austin: Around what year was that, do you know?

Rena Steinzor: This was 1998-99, 2000, 2001. And at one point Peter Angelos got involved, because people were interested in challenging what the companies ... in a potential tort action, which was never filed. But the minute he said he was representing them, the companies came to the table and started offering to make a contribution. And they got enough money to move to safer neighborhoods with roughly comparable housing. And that's what we wanted. That was all we wanted.

Eve Austin: So, did you say that was like five years worth of work to make that happen?

Rena Steinzor: Yes. Yeah. Four and a half.

Eve Austin: Okay. Yeah.

Rena Steinzor: And the students after the last explosion, they went down, interviewed everybody and did an accident report about how this happened and what people's experience were. They audited the company's compliance with something called the Community Right To Know Act, which also included planning for when there was an accident, and we found out that the fire people who were not aware of this, were not paying any attention to it, they kept sealed envelopes in a file drawer. They hadn't even opened them. And that was the city's community planning. And it's very important if you have people living near factories.

Eve Austin: How is that similar or dissimilar to the incinerator? It has a name, the Baltimore Incinerator?

Rena Steinzor: We were in touch with those folks. And the Nursing School on the campus was working with them. I think that people on this campus take very seriously the commitment we all need to make to community service, because we're a public school, we need to be a resource. So that happened and we also were doing other work. One of the things we did was we represented the man who is now the Attorney General of Maryland, Brian Frosh. He was then in the legislature and he was the Chair of the Environment Committee in the Senate. And we advised him when he dealt with Pfiesteria, you remember the algae bloom was stripping the flesh off fish. And some of the fishermen who were exposed to it were also having problems. So there was a big joint commission formed about the Bay and pollution and we staffed him on that.



There was a Brownfields Development Bill where people wanted to reclaim land that had been used for industrial purposes and make it productive again. We staffed him on that. We did work for a community group near Aberdeen Proving Ground, because they were very concerned about what was going on. It's a huge facility and it's basically one big weapons testing facility. And it had two Superfund sites and all sorts of problems. So, we worked with them on that. We brought a couple of appellate court cases in front of first the DC Circuit and then the Fourth Circuit on behalf of community groups. It was really wonderful for the students and terrific for me, because I got to work with a relatively small group of them and they were just fabulous.

Eve Austin: What were some of the challenges you faced, I guess as a woman, as a person coming out of the '60s, any of it? Any challenges or stories you might have?

Rena Steinzor: I'm more aware of it now, because I think about how things haven't changed as much as we might've thought. And that's probably because the President is so demoralizing. But, my law school class was the first class that had one-third women. Today, we're 50-50 and sometimes there are more women in our classes. But at Columbia it was the first time that they had ever had that many. And so, I've really watched through my career as it's become more and more accessible, and yet women still are having some of the same old problems. And I guess the biggest example of that would be Brenda and I had a negotiation with the city where we were trying to coax them into helping us with this settlement. And they were resistant for some very interesting reasons. Most of the people on Wagners Point were white and they were sort of demanding to be relocated.

And of course, African Americans in the city were having a very hard time. So Kurt Schmoke was the Mayor and he was sort of saying, "Well, if I relocate you, I should be relocating people who live in neighborhoods where their kids are exposed to bullets that fly through the window or where there are three crack houses on the same block." And so it was very delicate and we got ourselves all together and went for a negotiation with the City Attorney. And he said, "We will never settle with you. Forget it. We're not going to do anything." And through a back channel with a wonderful woman, who worked for the Baltimore Redevelopment Corporation, she decided that the way that land could be used is for a sewage treatment plant. The city extended the existing plant onto the property. They would have to buy the property. And so that was the city's contribution.

And then Barbara Vancosky got some money from the federal government and eventually Paris Glendening ponied some up from the state. But, women played a very vital role in all of this. And I think in environmental issues it gives an opportunity for women to be very active.



- Eve Austin: Okay. Why? I mean, why environmental issues and women?
- Rena Steinzor: I think for community activists, if you look at the reporting, it's often women who are the face of the community. And I think that's because the men are struggling to work. The women are concerned about the kids. I'm not saying the men aren't too, but when you are very pressed and you are working class, it is very hard to have the energy for much else, but work in your job. And the three women who really led the fight, the one I was talking about with the lease, whose name was Janette Skyrzek, and the two women, the Hindla, they were related. They were the leaders of this whole campaign and stuck with it for years.
- Eve Austin: They were residents, you mean?
- Rena Steinzor: Yes.
- Eve Austin: Okay.
- Rena Steinzor: They all lived there.
- Eve Austin: But, back to you about when you mentioned when you first said that you had a couple of toddlers and you landed, I was picturing you with your toddlers in tow. You went off by yourself, you're saying, and left your toddlers and husband back here when you went to Guam?
- Rena Steinzor: Oh, yes.
- Eve Austin: You left the toddlers here.
- Rena Steinzor: Yes, the toddlers were here, but I used to be on the road a lot because I was in practice and went all over the country.
- Eve Austin: But, that must've been fairly unusual.
- Rena Steinzor: Yeah.
- Eve Austin: For somebody to be doing that, for a woman to have their own career and leave the kids.
- Rena Steinzor: Well, it was tricky because he is a lawyer too, so it was hard. He didn't want to be sort of left minding the store while I was running around for my private practice that I wasn't thrilled with anyway. We had to go back to Guam, by the way, because this earthquake, a 5,000 gallon tank of fuel oil was breached, and the lights were out for days and days. So it wasn't like we were going to be going



over to Guam Electric Power with our clipboards and doing an environmental assessment in the middle of all the chaos. So we had to go back and it was ... it's arduous, you have to cross the date line.

Eve Austin: Okay. So since that time of achieving that accomplishment, with getting the community relocated, what have you been up to since then?

Rena Steinzor: In 2001, I approached some colleagues who are also law professors. I was on sabbatical and I was working for just the year at the Natural Resources Defense Council, NRDC. And they were having meetings about forming some kind of think tank in the health and safety and environment regulatory space. Public Citizen was sort of leading the discussions. And I approached some colleagues and said, "We have computers, we have telephones, let's just do it." And it has been built into an organization that is still going strong.

It's called the Center For Progressive Reform. So CPR, which is what we thought we needed for the regulatory system. And it involves about 60-65 law professors from all over the country. We have a small paid staff. And that's where we cross paths in a very significant way with Town Creek. And mostly we've been working on the Chesapeake Bay and started at traditional water pollution, but now have branched out to climate change in the Bay. And I was the so-called Member Scholar who was working with the staff on those issues. And we're still at it. What we provide is a certain amount of expertise in what the legal requirements are.

Eve Austin: So, who needs that? How is that utilized? What kind of people come to you to find out about the legal requirements?

Rena Steinzor: Well, we work with groups like the Waterkeepers, the Riverkeepers, and we also work with the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, the League of Conservation Voters, the Chesapeake Bay Alliance, which is a group of volunteer practitioners who are mostly retired. And we do studies and reports on lack of enforcement, on what the state's plans have been, which have been very discouraging, because Pennsylvania is basically not doing anything. So we do that kind of research. I should say what we don't do, we don't litigate, because scholars have their day jobs. We're all volunteers. We don't get compensated, we just raise money for the staff. And so we set limits, we don't litigate and we don't lobby. Now, we provide information to the legislature to be sure, but we don't do those two things, which a lot of other groups do really well. So, that's how we fit in.

Eve Austin: Obviously, it's 2020, we've got a climate crisis, we get Donald Trump as President. You've mentioned a few different times, different ways in different times, demoralized, discouraged, no change. I'm curious about how do you keep on going and how do you encourage young people to stick with it?



Rena Steinzor: When he was elected, I called a friend of mine, who actually works for Ralph Nader. And I said, "I just can't get up in the morning." And he said, "Come on, you have to pull yourself together. Young people can't afford to crawl under their beds. We didn't expect this to be a piece of cake." We didn't expect to win when we chose which side we'd be on. Certainly, all the time, maybe ever. But, at least you know we're fighting and things would be different if we weren't. I'm personally writing a book called *The War On Regulation*, which is about all the forces that have combined to undermine protections for people, not just environment, but public health and also financial. So, I did a chapter on the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, which was Elizabeth Warren's baby, and it's going to be published.

It'll come out after the election. But, what's different about it is that I structured it as sort of biographies of the interest groups that are most active. And some of them you wouldn't think about. So there is a chapter on corporations and there's a chapter on lenders, especially bottom feeding lenders.

Eve Austin: What do you mean by bottom feeding lenders?

Rena Steinzor: The people that give the military loans for profit colleges that then go out of business leaving the military, they use up their GI benefits and then they're stranded. Same thing with people who qualify for Pell Grants, who are generally low income, payday lenders who charge hundreds of percent interest. But, there are also chapters on evangelicals who the conservative wing have been a steady destructive force. They believe climate change is the rapture and this is what is inevitable. This is God's will. He has this, he knows what he's doing. In the rapture, they would rise, and the rest of us would be, and they really believe this. It's quite startling.

And sovereign citizens, who among other things are that group of people that took over the wildlife refuge. And through social media got armed militia to come help them and we're training their guns on the police in broad daylight. And now threaten the Bureau of Land Management when it tries to preserve federal land in the West. And the Tea Party, which is not gone, it's just been absorbed into the Republican Party. And they don't believe there's a role for government in virtually any area. They want to eliminate regulation across the board.

So, I think by the courts, I'm going to do a chapter on the courts, because conservative jurists are a terrible problem with these things. I mean they have all sorts of ways that they help to change the law, to undermine regulation.

Eve Austin: Can you be an environmentalist or someone who believes in climate change and be conservative and be Republican?



Rena Steinzor: I don't think you can be Republican. Certainly, not at this stage. There are evangelicals who, young evangelicals who are very helpful, and they see climate change as an abuse of the gift God gave to humans. So it's, we need to be good stewards of his creation. That's the concept, rather than it's all sign of the rapture and he really intends it to be this way. And who are we to question? So, you see that beginning to grow up as you see in so many other areas, young people who I cross paths with every day. I have the best job in the world beginning to pull away from these very negative, the establishment. My son says to me, the reason I backed Bernie is because things have got to change in a very profound way. And it's not time to stop fooling around.

Eve Austin: How old's your son?

Rena Steinzor: He's 29.

Eve Austin: Okay. Well, it's kind of a good segue into what are your thoughts about what young people are facing? Young environmental advocates, what they're facing in terms of challenges and what's your advice?

Rena Steinzor: I have done a lot of research and I'm really discouraged by the way that climate change legislation was handled in 2010 around that time when they were trying to get it across the Senate floor and across the House floor. When I worked for Congress, I watched Henry Waxman and he is really one of my heroes. He's from California and he was the leader that got it through the House. What he had to do to make that happen was to basically create this pool of pollution licenses and sort of dole them out to different groups to get votes. And I don't challenge him in any way, but what was going on at the same time among national environmentalists, including my friends at NRDC, was they were trying to cut corners and negotiate with large corporations who would then support the legislation.

And they got a little group, people like Duke Energy, who were supposedly advanced on climate change, and they went into a room and negotiated with them for months and months, and neglected building a grassroots movement that would have been able to withstand the fact that the group they were negotiating with might've been responsive. But, there were thousands of other industry groups and lobbyists who were not bound by any negotiation and mounted an assault that was absolutely overwhelming and the bill failed in the Senate. I think that effort to sort of play an inside Washington game rather than going back to basics and organizing grassroots was a fatal mistake my generation made. And I hope young people go back to basics, because you can't do inside the beltway anymore because for one thing, EPA is a shadow of its former self. So you have to convince people.



And I think there are ways to do that. If you look at Pew polling in the high 60s, believe that climate change is affecting their own communities. They begin to see the hurricanes, the wildfires, the drought. So there's an opportunity there. And that would be my advice. I mean my generation, 40 years ago we said, "We need to be like the other people who seem to be privileged in Washington. We need to be scientific and technical and legal experts." And now we have to go back and explain it to our neighbors in a different way.

Eve Austin: Like hitting people on an emotional level. Well, kind of, I mean-

Rena Steinzor: ... well, also reasoned. One of the things that came up, if you do a cap and trade program, which is what this was, you create a universe of pollution licenses or credits. And then you hand it out. We may need to take a completely different approach. So we may need to tax carbon, we may need to subsidize renewables, we may need to really regulate in a way that makes fossil fuels, internalize the costs they impose on the rest of us. And we need to explain that to people. It needs to be done ... we got so good at fine tuning and drafting laws that we didn't remember, I mean, when I worked on Super Fund up there, we had people from all over the country who had toxic waste sites in their neighborhoods.

And they used to lobby the heck at home out of Republicans and Democrats who resisted it, who were responsive to the oil and gas industry, and the coal industry. I'm not trying to make it sound pollyannaish that it will be easy, but among other things, corporations now spend as much lobbying Congress as you and I spend supporting Congress. It's about \$1.6 billion. So there needs to be campaign finance reform. This is why my son says time for ... stop with the half measures.

Eve Austin: Okay. So he thinks bringing in Bernie will just be so radical.

Rena Steinzor: And I say, "But Daniel, you really think he's going to get anything done?"

Eve Austin: Well, and then you have another adult child [crosstalk 00:00:30:04].

Rena Steinzor: I have a daughter.

Eve Austin: Where is she? I mean, you don't have to-

Rena Steinzor: ... she is a little more practical. So he voted for Bernie in the 2016 primary and she voted for Hillary. But, there were lots of reasons to do that from her perspective because she's aware as a young woman. But, I just have given up arguing with him because I understand where they're coming from. I really do.



But, I don't think the Warren regulation is going to be over no matter who wins. I really don't. The forces are very powerful.

Eve Austin: As you were talking about, if I'm understanding properly, because I'm not an attorney, you focus so much, you all focus so much on regulation and getting inside of DC, and now you need to figure out how to get down to the community level and really be able to talk to people and help get people riled up and informed and invested. I'm thinking of a couple of attorneys who I interviewed earlier this year who also talked about, I wish they were in the room, we could have this conversation. They began their observation of kind of the environmental movement was they felt like there's a lot of focus and money at the time given to conservation and kind of feel good, get out there and protect the trees. But, what was really needed, why they chose to go into law, was law policy, regulation and that's how they felt that that was most important. I think it's the other side of what you're saying.

Rena Steinzor: It is, I mean, to the extent that they're talking about litigating, that's a different thing. I mean, and you still need people that have a presence on Capitol Hill. I'm not saying it's an either or thing. What I'm saying is that if you don't have incentive when industry sits down, they're not serious. They just do it, because they have so many people, they just do it to distract you. And I don't think many industry groups, I was around in the '90s when the environmental community was pretty powerful and you can negotiate a deal. I think anything now is just not ... it's not possible, because they win, they vanquish, and this business about plenty of money for the trees. Yes, I understand that, but I'm not exactly actually talking about that. For example, you can fight for legislation at the state level and it's very important to do that.

I mean, California, the sixth largest economy in the world is very passionate about climate change. Because they have to be. That is an example of really powerful grass roots all over that state. And it's not that there is no place for people who can write regulations. It's that trying to avoid a full sort of vertically integrated, the building of a vertically integrated movement by standing at the top and negotiating with a few people who have no incentive to be sincere with you, is not the way to go about it. And I am quite critical and I'll be critical in the book, so I'm too old now to be, that's the problem.

Eve Austin: No. We need critical voices, right?

Rena Steinzor: Yeah.

Eve Austin: And it sounds like, I don't know if it was just your friend telling you to come on and get up, that keeps you going, but something keeps you going rather than just saying, "Well, I'm going to retire and go."



- Rena Steinzor: But, the problem of course is that people are beginning to see the handwriting on the wall with climate change. It's getting to be a little too late. I mean, we have a very narrow, in the total scheme of things, a narrow period of time to avoid the most catastrophic effects. I'll give you one example. We have a Food Law Society here, because young people are very interested in food and how it's produced because it feels like something they can control. And I teach a food regulation course. And the other day we had someone over from Hopkins who was talking about the effect of agriculture on climate and how the diet will change as those effects become manifest. Very personal. Will we be eating meat? Will we be eating a plant based diet? I mean, pretty soon the pricing will get to the point where we can't eat beef and the companies obviously realize it with the Impossible Burger.
- Eve Austin: That's where your son's attitude comes in. We need complete radical change.
- Rena Steinzor: Yes, we do. We will have to. The question is whether we also take care of the people that will be starving in this country.
- Eve Austin: Wow.
- Rena Steinzor: I apologize to them all the time, because I feel like my generation failed so badly.
- Eve Austin: You mean literally in your classrooms you apologize?
- Rena Steinzor: No, I apologize to my kids.
- Eve Austin: To your own kids.
- Rena Steinzor: Yeah. I sometimes say to my class, I apologize to my kids, but a lot of my students are not as tuned into it. There are these specialized groups, the Environmental Law Society and the Food Law Society, they come to Maryland because we're high ranked in environmental and health law.
- Eve Austin: Well, before we finish up today, is there anything else that you would like to add?
- Rena Steinzor: It's been a great interview. I appreciate it.
- Eve Austin: I appreciate meeting you and I really do thank you for all the work you've been doing all these years and I hope you will just keep on going.
- Rena Steinzor: I hope so too. Although, at some point it's time to let the younger generation take care of things.



Eve Austin: Yeah. For sure. I just wonder, how do you not get discouraged in the face of all that you're facing, and everybody to greater or lesser degrees, just find their way to just keep on ... Keep going and keep doing the important work. So, that makes me feel better.

Rena Steinzor: Well, that's good.

Eve Austin: You got to have something right now.

Rena Steinzor: Yeah.

Eve Austin: All right, let me sign us out. So this is Eve Austin and it's February 26th, 2020. And we've just been doing an oral history interview with Rena Steinzor here at the University of Maryland Law School. And we're going to sign out.