

Sandra Steingraber to Receive Prestigious Heinz Award

Scholar to dedicate award to fight against fracking

by Sue Smith-Heavenrich

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Sandra Steingraber – ecologist, author, and cancer survivor – can now add one more thing to her resume: recipient of the prestigious Heinz Award. According to the Heinz website, the award, “Established by Teresa Heinz in 1993 to honor the memory of her late husband, U.S. Senator John Heinz... celebrate[s] the accomplishments and spirit of the Senator by recognizing the extraordinary achievements of individuals in the areas of greatest importance to him.”

Steingraber is receiving the award because of her contributions made through writing, research and public speaking that further our understanding of the connections between the environment and health. In addition to the award, Steingraber will receive an unrestricted cash prize of \$100,000.

Though the official award ceremony isn't for another month, Steingraber already has plans for the money. Instead of investing in a retirement account or putting the cash towards living expenses while she works on another book, she's dedicating her award to fight hydro-fracking here in upstate New York. And she's hoping her simple gesture will inspire others to do big things.

Steingraber was a 20-year-old college student when she learned she had bladder cancer. That experience has helped shape her career. Now the scholar-in-residence at Ithaca has joined 250 other health professional calling for a comprehensive study of drilling impacts on human health.

Last week the group sent a letter to Governor Andrew Cuomo warning that the state has failed to analyze public health impacts of hydraulic fracturing in its rush to approve permits for drilling. They request that the draft Supplemental Generic Environmental Impact Statement (SGEIS) be supplemented with a full assessment of the public health impacts of gas exploration and production.

What the SGEIS lacks, say Steingraber and others, is documentation of the baseline health status of the New York State population; identification and analysis of direct and indirect health impacts of drilling; a cumulative health impacts assessment; and a description of potential measures to eliminate these impacts.

How can the state release a thousand-page environmental impact statement and not address health impacts, asks Steingraber? “We know that fracking will increase smog and exposure to diesel exhaust and particulates,” she says. Exposure to those chemicals is associated with pre-term birth, asthma, and lowered IQ in children. It affects adults by increasing their risk of stroke, heart attack, breast cancer, and diabetes.

The problem, Steingraber explains, is that our country is addicted to fossil fuels. “We burn them for energy, filling the atmosphere with heat-trapping gases that destabilize the climate and acidify the oceans,” she says. “We use fossil fuels as feedstocks to make pesticides and solvents, creating toxic substances that trespass into our children's bodies.”

Drilling into unconventional fossil fuels – shale gas and shale oil – will do little to reduce this insecurity, Steingraber notes. If we put our minds to it, our nation could be running on renewable energy sources within two decades, she says. “Instead, evermore extreme and toxic methods are being deployed to blast fossilized carbon from the earth. We are blowing up mountains to get at coal, felling boreal forests to get at tar, and siphoning oil from the ocean deep.”

The most ominous technology, she feels, is fracking. It fractures the bedrock, fragments the landscape and divides communities, all in the name of energy security. But real security,

Steingraber says, is being able to buy tomatoes, cheese, and peaches at her local farm stand. Real security is being able to drink the water that bubbles up from the aquifer beneath her feet. And that, she says, is worth fighting for.

Steingraber invites others to join her in defending the economy and environment of upstate against industrialized drilling. Everyone has something to offer, she says. Real estate agents and lawyers can examine how – and whether – drilling affects mortgages and housing; teachers need to be talking to state regulators about how smog will increase the rate of asthma and, subsequently, school absenteeism. One person is writing a letter each day to Governor Cuomo.... Imagine if we all did that, she muses.

“We can’t be neutral on this issue,” Steingraber insists. “People have had three years to learn about hydro-fracking. To be silent at this point is to offer your consent to the impacts.”

Steingraber’s recent book, *Raising Elijah: Protecting Our Children in an Age of Environmental Crisis* is a blend of science and memoir. From pizza to playgrounds she shows how compounds developed for chemical warfare ended up in our kitchens, our gardens and our schoolyards.