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May 31, 2003, Public Hearing by Public Citizen and NC WARN
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Good morning. My name is Barbara Zelter; for 30 years I have lived close enough to Shearon Harris and the waste transport routes to make the topic of this meeting close to my heart.

I rise this morning despite a deep skepticism that people back at the NRC will ever hear or read my words. I have similar doubts about Progress Energy (will PE representatives in this room raise your hands, please?), although the recent decision to stop the transport trains is a most welcome and encouraging sign. In a country where campaign contributions and lobbying gifts to influence government decisions are considered the "free speech" of corporate persons, my voice feels airy and thin. Still, as the Ethiopian proverb says, "When spider webs unite, they can tie up a lion."

I am standing here for one main reason: I want to prove to my three grown children that Davids CAN make a difference when facing Goliaths in our country. I want to help them know that when leaders hide the truth, as with the NRC undermining of the Princeton Study, we citizens can draw back the curtain and expose the subterfuge and bring the truth out into the open.

I want them to see that even though Progress Energy keeps claiming Shearon Harris is safe from attack, and that we don't need to worry about those waste storage pools with spent fuel rods, citizens have the power to inspire them to admit risk and change to safer systems.

I work with the NC Council of Churches and have spent the past several years with mothers who face welfare reform. The mantra they heard was personal responsibility. Get a job! Make it on your own! No more entitlement to a welfare check! The taxpayers don't want to help you; you cost too much!

But it seems that corporations have defined themselves as persons—at least until we citizens are smart enough to pull the plug on that charade—and thereby evade the kind of responsibility that the rest of us must take. The Price Anderson Act in 1956 was reprehensible collusion between the nuclear industry and NRC. It did two bad things: transferred to taxpayers the cost of potential nuclear disasters, and evaded the giant problem of polluting Mother Earth with deadly, nuclear waste.

The jig is up. We know that a plane could crash into a nuclear plant, with unspeakable consequences. We know that we have no perfect ways to deal with nuclear waste, Yucca Mountain included. But NRC and Congress and the power industry made that bed of dependence on nuclear power, and now we are all lying in it.

What to do?

I would like to report to my kids that yes, truth and wisdom prevailed!

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Yes, the NRC and the power companies admitted that the nuclear experiment did not turn out as hoped. They listened to the best scientists and concerned citizens and not to the lobbyists and campaign donors.

Yes, the nuclear industry decided to take responsibility just as average people must. They gave up their corporate welfare, repealed Price Anderson, and decided to pay liability premiums for their own potential mistakes and accidents.

Yes, Progress Energy switched to dry-cask storage after they stopped the transport of nuclear waste.

All it takes to get to this starry scenario is for the NRC and the power industry to act like the ethical adults that I am urging my children to be. All it takes is for them to stop hiding from those of us who challenge them to higher standards. And if corporations are persons entitled to all the free speech that money can buy, let them be upright and honorable persons—making decisions based on the best science and environmental health as well as the bottom line.

I deeply understand that this means veering off the course of what the Pope calls “savage capitalism,” and off the current political power train where corporate money drives elections, causing our representation and government operations to be farther and farther removed from accountability to those of us who pay the light bills.

So I sit back down knowing that I am asking for a pipe dream. But if we do not operate by the ideal of truth, by adherence to the best science and common sense rather than the well-worn track of corporate disdain for common people’s concerns, where are we? Who are we?

I am committed to showing my kids a way of integrity, to helping them have hope in a country they believe is corrupt in high places. I ask the NRC and Progress Energy help me in that endeavor by acting in an exemplary way—accepting the wisdom of the Princeton Study and following the recommendations of NC WARN.