



Transcript of Video Interview with Christa Backson, recorded May 2010.

This interview is part of Earth Alert's Heroes of the Coast video archive, featuring interviews with leading California coastal activists, past and present California Coastal Commissioners and Coastal Commission staff. For more information, visit www.earthalert.org.

[This interview was conducted as part of the *Stories of the Spill* documentary.]

Janet Bridgers (JB): OK, Christa – Tell us your name, and your occupation and your affiliation for the front of the tape.

CB: OK, my name is Christa Backson and I work at the Community Environmental Council. I've been with them for about 10 years now, maybe going on 11. Great organization to be with, promoting clean environment.

JB: How old were you in 1969?

CB: I was just turning 14 right in January, right before the oil spill. In 1969, I was 14.

JB: What do you remember about how you first heard about the oil spill?

CB: Well, we lived right across the street from the beach, there where the spill was washing up at Leadbetter and there's a bluff there where we all hung out and played as kids. We heard about the spill. We all ran down there as it started washing up when it was on the evening news. We were all hanging out down there on the cliffs. There were a bunch of children of all different ages in that neighborhood all lined up on the bluff looking down. And over the next days...and the first day, you could see all these oil globs and thick mats of oil washing up on the beach. This is a beach that we played on from childhood. It was our playground. So it was very devastating and surreal to see all this black goo just lined up all along the shoreline.

JB: Although you might not have understood what was happening, how did you feel about it?

CB: It was kind of scary in seeing the seriousness of the adults around us and the type of equipment that they had. There were bull dozers on the beach and people dressed in suits and outfits that were completely covering their bodies to protect them from the oil penetration. It was kind of scary just wondering where it was going to lead and it seemed like it was just this continuous flow coming in. It didn't seem like a simple fix.

JB: Did you have a sense of confidence that it was being handled correctly?

CB: It was interesting because they were taking bales of hay and spreading the hay all out. I had no concept! I'd never seen anything like that before. The process of clean up was like watching a show; standing up on the cliff and watching all of this activity take place. Like I said, I had to have confidence that they knew what they were doing. It was something that had never happened before so we were all depending on the public and the community and the people who were

supposedly in charge to clean it up. There were dead birds, there were pelicans and sea gulls lying on the beach saturated in oil. So that was really upsetting!

JB: We're going to cut right to the end questions: as concisely as you can state it, how did the 1969 oil spill affect your life?

CB: It just gave me a much greater appreciation for our natural surroundings and our natural beauty and how vulnerable they are and how our actions can affect their safety and their preservation. So it led me into kind of a field of environmental work and more conscientious living in general to get away from fossil fuels. We have solar panels on our house now. We try to ride our bikes to work, my children ride their bikes...just try to be conscientious in general of how we treat our natural surroundings and what our actions do to either preserve them or damage them.

JB: If you were speaking for a class of high school students, what would your recommendations be to them as to how to protect the coast?

CB: As far as oil spills go, get away from fossil fuels. Try to look into alternative energy with solar panels, wind. Promote any kind of organization and activities that you can that educate people to alternatives to fossil fuels, and then taking steps yourself and your family and your community.

JB: And if the President appointed you to a Blue Ribbon Panel on how to protect the coast, what would your top one or two recommendations be?

CB: No offshore drilling would definitely be number one. Probably dumping and plastics would be another one. Well, if I were appointed to a Blue Ribbon Panel, I would probably recommend that we end any kind of off-shore drilling as well as limiting plastics. Plastic bags, plastic drinking bottles, any type of plastic packaging that's going to end up in the ocean and hurt animals and cause pollution in the ocean.

Toby: Christa, what is your name, occupation and what environmental associations are you associated with:

CB: My name is Christa Backson, I work at the Community Environmental Council and that is the main environmental organization that I'm involved with. I am a member of Surf Rider Foundation, Environmental Defense Center as well.

Toby: Thinking back to 1969, how old were you and what was your occupation then?

CB: I was a middle school student and I was 14 years old.

Toby: And how did you find out that the oil blowout had occurred? And once you found out, how did you react to it?

CB: I don't remember exactly how I first heard. My feeling is that it probably would have been on the news.

Toby: Let me change the question. There was a point when there was oil in the water, but not on the shores. Tell me about the first time that you saw oil on the beaches and how that made you feel?

CB: The first time I saw the oil on the beaches, I was just shocked! I was stunned at the devastation that seemed to be covering the whole sandy area that I played on as a child and just the seriousness of all of the crews that were down on the beach, frantically working to contain it, just kind of exuded this very serious dismal type of vibe that was obviously there to be taken seriously and that it was going to have a huge impact on our community.

Toby: You know, when you're that young, an event like that...I guess it could be described as monstrous. It tends to affect your thinking for the rest of your life. How did that 1969 Santa Barbara oil blowout affect the rest of your life?

CB: It made me much more conscious of preserving our natural surroundings and just using actions in your personal life that created awareness with others and within your family and yourself to always think about what you're doing that could either create a safe, clean environment or do an action that's damaging.

Toby: How do you feel personally about the California coastline?

CB: I love it! I grew up on the beach. I spent a lot of time on the beach. I surfed, I kayaked, I can't imagine living far from it. It's one of my favorite places.

Toby: So if you could describe what you believe is the most ominous, the ugliest threat to the California coastline, what would you say that was?

CB: Another oil spill definitely would be the number one.

Toby: And if you were standing in front of a bunch of high school students in a gymnasium, and you could ask them a favor; and that favor would be very much oriented towards protecting the California coast, what favor would you ask them?

CB: I would ask them to consider alternative fuels in their life so that we can sort of start weaning ourselves away from fossil fuels, and particularly living on a coast, any kind of off-shore drilling could be just put at rest and wouldn't ever be a threat again would be the main message for protecting the coast.

Toby: And if President Obama had a few spare minutes of his time and he were to call you; and he would say, "Christa, when it comes to the California coast, I'm going to (the President of the United States: the most powerful man in the world), I'm going to grant you one wish, one favor. I'll grant that favor." What favor would you ask President Obama?

CB: I would ask President Obama to eliminate off-shore drilling.

Toby & JB: Thank you. OK! Very nicely done! Very quickly done.