



Transcript of Video Interview with Abe Powell, recorded May 2011.

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.

Abe Powell Interview

JB: For the record, would you give us your name as you are usually known, your occupation and your association with the organization.

AP: My name is Abe Powell. I'm the president of Get Oil Out. I'm a business owner, a solar electrical systems company. Was there another question?

JB: No. That's good. And when were you born?

AP: 1969

JB: Oh, answer the question so it has the question in it.

AP: Oh, I was born in 1969.

JB: So you don't remember the Gulf [sic] spill. What is your relationship to the 1969 oilspill?

AP: Well, the spill occurred before I was born and was active while my uncle said I was in plastic pants. But I wasn't in plastic pants. I asked my mom. She said she used cloth diapers. But my relationship to the spill is I was born immediately into the generation following the shot across the bow of Western society's appropriation of nature. And so I think the modern environmental movement looks at that spill as the catalyst for the modern environmental movement. I mean that was where it started as a conscious effort and a movement and it was a movement to address something and that something was a problem and the problem was represented by the spill. And I think in the way that the earth is a body, and it is like a human body, or an animal body, and an animal body is kind of like the earth in that it's a system, and it's a living system, and when there's something wrong with the system, it will show symptoms of a problem. And the more serious the problem, the more serious the symptoms become. And I think the spill was kind of the first major symptom that registered on everybody's radar, where they went, "wow! This is a real problem. And we're going to have to deal with this.

And over time, it's become apparent that it was indicative of a much larger problem, in fact one of the biggest problems of kind of Western economic society, which is our addiction to oil, and the need for oil to allow for global capitalism to operate in the way it operates now.

JB: But when do you first remember hearing about the spill? In your personal memory, when did it first come in, and how?

AP: My grandfather was on the first board of GOO—Vernon Johnson. And sometime around when I was in my early teens, actually, is the first time I actually heard anyone talk about it and it

was Vernon and people talking about “Get Oil Out.” And it didn’t really register, his involvement in that, or what it meant, but I understood that there was a big spill and he got involved in the fight to deal with it, or to stop it. And I believe it was around the time of the Diablo Canyon Nuclear Power Plant, and the protests that were taking place. He was one of the protesters and got arrested protesting Diablo. And he tried to take me, and I think I was 12 or 13 at the time. I might have even been younger. But he wanted to take me to get arrested and I was a minor. And my parents said, “absolutely not!”

But he went ahead and did it, and at that point, the story of my grandfather was passed on to me about kind of his involvement in things and his commitment to the environment and social and economic justice.

JB: I gather that your grandfather is no longer with us?

AP: He passed on in 1987.

JB: But before he did, what did he tell you? Concisely. He probably talked every night at dinner. How would you phrase the essence of what he taught you?

AP: About the spill?

JB: The spill and about issues in general. “My grandfather...”

AP: My grandfather taught me that if you wanted to change something, you had to get involved and change it yourself, and that it was foolish and fruitless to wait for other people to fix a problem that you could see was a problem. And so he was always involved with things. He saw things in the world that he thought needed to be changed. He saw injustices or he saw inequalities or just things that were just outright wrong, and he wanted to fix them. He had his own style of doing that, but he was very persistent and aggressive. He did not sit back. He went after problems and did his best to solve them in his own way.

JB: Would you say that he is your primary influence as an environmentalist and what are the others?

AP: The primary influence on the movement I guess would be...I’m not even sure what the primary influence would be. I look at environmental justice and social justice as being completely interwoven. And so one of my early kind of teachers was a man by the name of Luke Coal. And he started the Center for Race, Poverty and the Environment. He was an attorney...Stanford and Harvard-trained. He saw them as irretrievably interwoven and he turned down a career for a great deal of money in a lot of ways and chose to do something that gave very little financial return in return for what he felt was important in changing things. And he fought against polluters, basically, that had an impact on poor people primarily. And he showed me kind of...he demonstrated a certain level of commitment and intent with relationship to the environment in addressing the problems that we have with the way we interact with the environment that kind of changed me. And so he was probably...and I really know him very well. He was my close friend’s brother.

But he...when he graduated from Harvard, and did this thing, nobody had even heard about this. This was back in the 80s. And he was doing something I'd never even heard of—social environmental justice was a term that just wasn't part of the vernacular at the time. And he was a pioneer. And as a young person, I was starting to think about that I wanted to do and that was the first thing that really sounded like, "yeah, I could do that."

JB: And so how did that evolve for you?

AP: I wanted to be an environmental lawyer. I decided at some point that that was the way to deal with the problem and I'd seen that a lot of my heroes were people who stood up to big companies that were hurting people around them environmentally and health wise, or economically, or all of the above. And with very little money and very little resources, they went up against the biggest companies in the world and won. And I said, "wow! That's a way to have real power to help bring about some kind of justice without having a whole lot of money or a whole lot of resources, which I didn't have."

And I said, "that's a path to success." And so I thought that's what I wanted to do. And when I got to the point where I was studying for the LSAT and getting ready to apply to schools, something just didn't feel right. I don't know what it was. This was back in the early 90s. And I just couldn't quite figure what it was. It was an itchy thing. I just didn't know why I didn't want to do it, but it felt like what was needed was something different and I couldn't articulate it, but it felt like what was needed was not so much my role wasn't going to be saying "no" to things, which is kind of what my heroes had done, stand up to injustice, say "no" and fight. But to find a way for people to say "yes" to something else.

And I couldn't quite figure out what that was and I'd become involved with solar as a consumer at that point. I was a consumer of solar electricity and I was a big fan of it at that point. It seemed really powerful. And as my thinking about this progressed, I realized what I wanted to do was be involved in a business that helped people change the way they lived. And that was what kind of lead me down the path that I'm on now, which is solar electricity as a business, as a for-profit.

The environmental movement needs both sides. It needs people who are stopping pollution and protecting the environment, but it needs people who can come in and replace the systems that are being stopped with some other way to go about our business that keeps the wheels turning. And so what felt right to me was to be on that side of the movement, which was "how do we keep the wheels turning in a way doesn't hurt the environment?" And that's what I've kind of devoted my life to.

JB: You have the advantage in terms of communicating with younger people of being closer to their age than many of these people who were involved in the 1969 oil spill. What would you say to young people who are in high school and college today about what they can do to protect specifically the California coast and more generally the environment?

AP: The thing I say to young people about the best ways to protect the environment, and this goes for me and everybody else, is start with yourself first. You can change yourself. It's really

hard to change the things around you. If you're going to change something, change yourself first, and make yourself the kind of person that you want to see the world to be like around you. And if you can do that, if you can change yourself, then try helping others to change.

And any other kind of formula results in something that is often called the kind of hypocrisy of the environmental movement, or any movement. But the important thing is to start with yourself. If you think people should go solar, find a way to go solar. If you think people should use alternative fuel, find a way to use alternative fuel. If you think people need to recycle, start recycling. Do the thing that you think the world needs, and if you can do it successfully, then help others to do it. That's the best way to be involved in the movement, and that's my model, and to whatever extent it's been successful after 15 years of working that model, I still think it's the best one.

JB: If Jerry Brown or President Obama called you tomorrow and said, "I want you on a blue ribbon panel to provide recommendations how to protect the California coast, what would you say to them that would be the top recommendation?"

AP: I would recommend that we get a public transportation system in place that includes high speed rail and local trains as soon as possible is the highest priority. I think we need to transition away from personal vehicles as soon as possible and any policy that leads toward that is going to help us a lot and anything that leads away from that is going to be real trouble in the long run, I think.

JB: Really good. We're going to swap interviewers here.

TY: Please don't mind that the questions are redundant. We do this so that we can get the best of the best.

Abe, what is your name, your occupation and how are you connected to the protection of the California coast.

AP: My name is Abe Powell. I'm the president of Get Oil Out. I am a business owner of a solar electric company and I am an environmentalist.

TY: 1969 was a special year in California because of the blowout in Santa Barbara. You weren't there. You said that you were one at the time. But through a series of fortuitous events, it had an impact on your life. How did the 1969 oil spill, even though you were just born right after, how has it impacted your life?

AP: I think the 1969 oil spill was a catalyst for the modern environmental movement. That modern environmental movement is kind of the water I swim in. And so, as an environmentalist, as a green business owner, I am a product of that movement, as much as I am a part of that movement. And the effect that the spill had on everybody's consciousness about the way we're living in Western capitalist society changed the game, changed the way people look at the way we do things. And 42 years later, there is a robust green movement in this country and I'm a part of it. And I don't think, had it not been that spill, it might have been something else, and I'm sure

it would have been. But that was the event, the line of demarcation, before and after the spill, that changed the world.

TY: As a student of environmental history, tell me about the first time that you heard that a spill occurred off the Santa Barbara coast in 1969, how you heard it and what you thought at the time.

AP: The first time I remember hearing about the spill was when my family was preparing to go and protest against the Diablo Canyon Nuclear Power Plant. My grandfather was a really serious activist and was vehemently opposed to nuclear power. And it turns out that he had been on the board, the original board, of Get Oil Out. And I was a young person at this time, pre-teen, and they wanted to take me with them to protest the plant. And I wanted to go, but my parents didn't let me. And in the context of this invitation, and learning more about what was going on, I heard some stories about my grandfather and knew that he had been a part of different movements to protect the environment, and he was involved in this thing called GOO which was a response to this mythical big spill that happened in the year that I was born.

TY: You seem to have a more evolved perspective of activism. How would you describe the differences between your grandfather's definition of activism, especially activism related to the California coast, and your definition of activism, the difference between his generation's definition of activism and your generation's definition of activism?

AP: The difference between my generation and the previous generation is I feel like when you look at a stained glass window in an old cathedral in Europe. The show the saints, and the saints are stacked up on top of each other, and they're sitting on each other's shoulders. And it looks kind of funny, but you see these stacks of saints. And the environmental movement is kind of oriented the same way. We are riding on the shoulders of the previous generation, me, of my grandfather and his generation and the generation after that. They were primarily involved in recognizing that there was a problem and starting a way to stop it. And so they said, "Whoa, we're heading for a cliff." They recognized that there was a problem and they said, "Let's hit the brakes!" And that was kind of their contribution, recognize the problem and make a statement that we're going to do something about it. And they got that far. And the next generation picked up and developed legal, and activist and political and social tools to stop the things, the problems that they identified, to start to address those things. The second generation was kind of the development of those mechanisms, those vehicles. The third generation is focused on how do we live if we stop the things that are bad? How are we going to move forward if we back away from this cliff? Which direction are we going to go and how are we going to get there? What vehicles are going to take us to where we actually want to be?

So there's the green activist movement and then there's what I call the green business movement, but that's the commerce and the way of living that involves food getting to the table, and lights going on and water getting hot and all the things that we take for granted. How are we going to make those happen in a way that's not destructive to the environment, to our host?

TY: What is GOO? What does GOO stand for and what is its mission? And what do you think your responsibility as president is?

AP: GOO is Get Oil Out. And originally the founders...there's a couple of ways to look at what that phrase means, but the first way, I think, was "let's get oil off the beach." Because in '69, when they started, I think they said it was Bud Bottoms. You know, they saw the oil coming in in the tankers, and the oil washing up on the beach, and there was a huge crowd of angry people and a bad smell in the air from all the oil washing up. And somebody shouted, "hey we need to Get Oil Out." And what they meant was get the oil companies out, get the oil off the beaches and clean up the coast. And over time, it's meant "let's try to get oil out of the channel, let's try to get the oil development out of our area...not in my backyard." And then as time developed further, it was how do we get oil out of our lives? And that went from an outward view, how we stop them to how do we stop ourself, because we're the problem now?

The fact that we still exist 40 years after this thing started is a testament to our inability to achieve the goal. And it turns out that we were focused outward when we should have been inward. We go to hearings and half the people who go to these hearings to stop the oil development drove there in a car that burned the thing that they're trying to stop. And oil companies have gotten pretty good at pointing that out to people at hearings. So Get Oil Out now to me means how do I get oil out of my life, or how do I cure my petroleum addiction.

For me, we started a program called PART, Petroleum Addiction Rehabilitation Therapy. And I'm the first victim of a 12-step program to try to kick the oil habit. And I've been trying now officially for 11 years and I haven't kicked. I mean I've made some great strides, taken huge chunks out of my addiction. But I think there's lycra in the waistband of my underpants and I'm surrounded by plastic even now as I speak. And the harder I struggle to get out of the tar baby, the more I realize how interwoven with it I am. And so that's the next challenge. We've done 42 years of being a kind of outward driven organization, fight the oil companies. The next step is inward driven, how do we fix ourselves? And that's kind of my approach to the environment in general and I'm trying to bring that to GOO.

TY: In your opinion, what is the most ominous threat to the California coastline at this time?

AP: People.

TY: Tell me what you mean.

AP: People, as individuals, are wonderful things. But as a group, organized the way we're organized, we're filthy animals. And the more of us that you put in an environment, any environment on this planet, the filthier it gets. And so the biggest threat is us. There's nothing that's as big of a threat as us. Now within the threat that is us, to the coast, I'd say a nuclear or another major oil disaster would be the kind of near-term problem that would be kind of biggest disaster, but I think a nuclear, a major nuclear meltdown at one of the plants on the coast would probably be the biggest threat to the coast. I think it would take a long time to recover from something like that, a lot longer than from an oilspill.

TY: If you were standing in front of an audience of high school students, say 500 or so, and you were hoping that by being inspired by you, they would all become activists to help protect the

California coast, what would you say to them, what story would you tell them to inspire them to become activists?

AP: I'd probably tell them the story of Luke Coal who graduated from Stanford and then Harvard with a law degree, and then turned down some very high paying offers from very fancy law firms all over the world and all over the country to start his own firm to protect the environment and to protect people, poor people particularly, from the effects of pollution from big companies. And he was incredibly successful at it. And he would go into the most disenfranchised people and he would go in there and they'd say, "we have no hope. Our water is polluted." Whether it was up in Alaska, or in the Central Valley of California, he'd show up. They'd say, "we have no hope. Our kids are sick. Our water is polluted. We don't know what to do. There's a mine or there's a big company something next to us and we don't know what to do and they say there's nothing to be done." And he'd look over and say, "well, I'll tell you what we're going to do. We're going to kick their ass." And then he would. And he showed that with the right amount of determination and persistence, just about anything can be done and any big problem can be brought down with very few people and very little money, with the right effort and the right persistence. And in my life, I've approached things differently.

My inspirational story would be maybe trying to find a way to not drive a car on gasoline in 1999. And there was nowhere that I could go that I was aware of in the State of California that I could drive up to a station and get something that wasn't petroleum to put in my vehicle. And I needed a vehicle to do the business I did. And I said, "well, I'd like there to be alternative fuel, but there's not. I can't go to the station to get it. There's no supply, and because there's no supply, there's no demand. How are we going to solve this?" So we said, "well, hey, what if we find a way to bring in a fuel that's not petroleum and use it ourselves. We'll bring it in. We'll create a supply. I'm the demand, me and my four friends. And we said, "we're going to create a supply of biodiesel fuel that was made from recycled waste grease from Las Vegas, Nevada. That's where we got it at first. We said, "we can get this fuel. And we're going to create a supply and a demand. We'll be the demand. And we started a co-op to get alternative fuel into our town. And we all started running on biodiesel and all of our tailpipes started putting out a smell that smelled a lot different from what everybody else was doing and people started asking us and pretty soon more people wanted to join us. There was four of us, then there were eight of us, and then 16, then 50. And pretty soon there were a lot of people in town driving around and there was a big tanker truck that was coming and filling up all our little tanks at home of this vegetable, recycled vegetable oil fuel. And so now we had kind of artificial supply...not a gas station per se, but we'd kind of created our own supply and demand started responding to the supply, instead of the other way around and the suppliers took notice of us. And within two years, a supplier, two different suppliers, picked up biodiesel in Santa Barbara and started selling alternative fuel here in Santa Barbara. And that was really inspiring.

Because we went from a situation where there we had no choice and we said, "there will be a choice. We will find a way to make a choice." And four people started a co-op that turned into the availability of fuel that turned into the city using biodiesel in its vehicles to decrease air pollution and to decrease its dependence on oil as a sign that it's erious about kicking its oil habit somehow. And things changed. Now there's gas stations in town where you can get alternative fuel where there wasn't before. And it was four people with not a lot of money, and a little

determination made a change and that again, the persistence and the intention, you can change things, and it's worth it.

TY: If you could ask every citizen in the State of California to do you one favor that would improve and protect the coast even further, what favor would you ask them?

AP: Use less.

TY: Explain.

AP: Can you do what you're doing with less material consumption to support it. And if you're going to do one thing, can you do what you're doing now with less and still do the same thing and almost every case you can. There's so much waste built into our society and the way we do things that with a little bit of thinking and a little bit of kind of bringing a little consciousness to the way you do what you do, you can do a lot. You can do as much or more than you're doing now with much less material input into the equation if you try. So why not try?

TY: Let's reverse the process. Let's say you're sitting in your office and President Obama calls and says, "I will grant you one favor that will help protect the California coastline, what favor would you ask of President Obama?"

AP: I would ask him to provide the funding to immediately establish a robust network of high speed rail lines up and down the coast of California to eliminate the dependence on vehicles and cars for people to get around and I think that would be the single fastest way to reduce pollution and petroleum consumption in California.

TY: And how's that going to change the quality of the coastline?

AP: Well, if you look at places like Los Angeles and Santa Barbara, where there's an incredible car commuter workforce situation, the average speeds on the freeways during rush hours is very low. In fact you have cars going 15- to 30 mph, or being stopped a lot of the time, and idling is an incredible burden on our fuel supply and on our air quality. There's an incredible kind of pollution content to that lifestyle. If people thought that they were driving into Santa Barbara from Ventura, for example, which a lot of people do. They drive into Santa Barbara to work from north or south, and if they could get on a train that would get them there quickly and save 30 minutes in the process, that would save all that pollution and all that fuel, and all that time for people, and I think that would be a big game-changer.

JB: Could you say that more concisely?

AB: I would suggest to the governor or the President that we need to establish immediately a robust network up and down the coasts of California so that people could get to work without the use of their car. And until we do that, we're going to be car dependent, we're going to need fuel to support the commutes that everybody is doing and we're going to be stuck in our cars.

TY: For the sake of our audience, what is the next great, in your opinion, what is the next great environmental battle that you or your offspring will have to fight?

AB: I think the next major environmental battle we're going to fight is the results of climate change. I think that my children, their generation, are going to be the ones where we really start to pay the piper for our carbon based lifestyle. And I think that most people, except maybe the Department of Defense, have grossly underestimated the effects that this is going to have on food supply, food distribution, water supply worldwide and the effect that's going to have on populations, and where they are and how they're fed and what not. And I think what's going to happen is we're going to face a pretty serious problem of trying to feed and house everybody in the next 50 years and I think that is going to put a serious strain on governments. I think it's going to put a strain on people and the environment, and when things get strained in way, humans don't tend to react in a very rational and calculated fashion. When we get into crisis, we tend to knee-jerk react to things and our initial knee-jerk reaction doesn't tend to be the smartest one in the array of possible reactions. And I think we're going to face a crisis more or less unprepared, despite all the warnings, but as a plenty, we're still going to go into this relatively unprepared and we're going to struggle with our own ability to deal with crisis in the midst of the crisis and it's going to be a pretty potent challenge for my children's generation.

TY: Well done!

[end of interview]