



# BLUE RIDGE ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENSE LEAGUE

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## The LEAGUE LINE

SUMMER 2021

SPECIAL EDITION: CELEBRATING LOU ZELLER ON HIS RETIREMENT

### Inside Line:

List of articles inside.

We are celebrating Lou Zeller's retirement throughout this special edition

- ◆ Lou talks about the use of chapters
- ◆ Lou reflects on "Whatever it takes"
- ◆ Lou discusses some of his favorite characters: Captain Slow, Compost Chef, Dr. Smello
- ◆ Lou gives us the details on that 1990 photo of him being dragged out of a meeting
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### Congratulations Lou—Happy Retirement!

Thank you for decades of leadership and community organizing

In light of Lou Zeller's August 18 retirement from the position of Executive Director of BREDL, which he has held since 2012, BREDL staff interviewed him to give him an opportunity to reminisce about the history of BREDL, the history of his role in its founding, development, and operations, and his wishes for the future of BREDL. All BREDL staff are going to miss working with Lou, and we offer our warmest wishes for what we know will be a fun-packed retirement!

**Please check out the full interview with Lou online at [www.theleagueline.org](http://www.theleagueline.org)**

**Interviewer:** *Can you talk about Bernard Goss and Janet Marsh's decision at the founding of BREDL to use chapters as an integral element in the structure of the BREDL organization?*

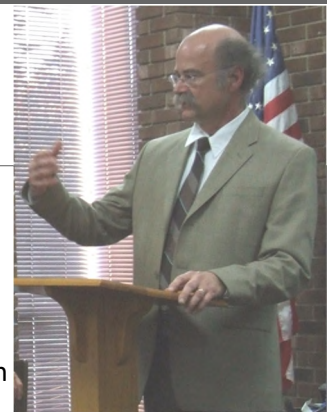
**Lou:** People like Bernard Goss saw that places that were sited for one waste dump would be sited for another environmental threat later on. Decisions on where to build polluting facilities are based on political power, not scientific merit. It's a plain English description of something which academics have demonstrated over the years. Dr. Robert Bullard, author of *Dumping in Dixie*, was an excellent researcher. He said you can predict proximity of pollution by Zip Code. Designated areas, sacrifice zones, according to Zip Code. Bernard Goss saw the same thing.

A BREDL chapter is an association designed to win the immediate campaign by mobilizing resources and getting a

reputation for winning. After the win, that chapter group, by being affiliated with a larger organization and perhaps

moving onto another issue of an entirely different nature, would be there when the next threat came. It might be totally different – solid waste, asphalt, incinerator – that chapter's core group would still be there, under the umbrella of the League. Some chapters have had two or three campaigns. During the period between fights, projects can be undertaken to build unity, strengths, and associations. A BREDL chapter in Tennessee has an annual Christmas party that's a lot of fun and worth going to, food, drink and treats, a real Christmas party. It's done every year, and keeps the group intact. They've won two victories so far.

In Burke County, North Carolina, the first campaign was a hazardous waste tank farm, then a landfill. Then the chapter pursued enactment of a land use management ordinance as a tripwire to future environmental threats. They stayed around to enact this ordinance based on their reputation for stopping the tank farm. They had credibility and moxie to be a political presence on the policy of land use management in Burke County. Then a new waste dump was proposed. The chapter was



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### **BREDL: Who and what we are**

In March 1984, fifty citizens of Ashe and Watauga Counties met in the Mission House of Holy Trinity Church in Glendale Springs, North Carolina. Teachers and farmers, home-makers and merchants listened to the report of the Episcopal Church Women on the US Department of Energy's siting search for a high-level nuclear waste dump in the rain-rich east.

Recognizing that the North Carolina mountains were a region at risk, the assembled group organized the Blue Ridge Environmental Defense League (BREDL) to protect their own backyard and those of other threatened communities.

Grassroots organizing was a cornerstone of our early all-volunteer organization. One of our first multi-county boards of directors adopted our credo, which embodies our mission statement:

### **BREDL Credo**

We believe in the practice of earth stewardship, not only by our league members, but by our government and the public as well. To foster stewardship, BREDL encourages government and citizen responsibility in conserving and protecting our natural resources. BREDL advocates grassroots involvement in order to empower whole communities in environmental issues. BREDL functions as a "watchdog" of the environment, monitoring issues and holding government officials accountable for their actions. BREDL networks with citizen groups and agencies, collecting and disseminating accurate, timely information.

BREDL sets standards for environmental quality, and awards individuals and agencies who uphold these standards in practice.

### **Moving into the future**

Since then, the Blue Ridge Environmental Defense League has grown to be a regional community-based, nonprofit environmental organization. Our founding principles - earth stewardship, environmental democracy, social justice and community empowerment - still guide our work for social change. Our staff and volunteers put into practice the ideals of love of community and love of neighbor, which help us to serve the movement for environmental protection and progressive social change in Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama and Tennessee.

### **Grassroots Campaigns**

Nothing creates hopefulness out of helplessness like a successful grassroots campaign -and our chapters have a history of winning. For over three decades Blue Ridge Environmental Defense League chapters have protected their communities by stopping dangerous facilities and promoting safe alternatives.

In the 1980's and 1990's, BREDL prevented a multi-state ThermalKEM hazardous waste incinerator, a southeastern nuclear waste dump and a national nuclear waste dump. In the 2000's, our coordinated grassroots citizens' campaigns have had further victories. We won a legislative victory with the passage of the NC Solid Waste Act, effectively blocking at least four multi-state mega-dumps. Our Person County chapter convinced their Board of Commissioners to reject expansion of the Republic Services landfill. Our Cascade, Virginia, chapter shut down a huge hazardous waste incinerator. We eliminated mercury waste from the Stericycle incinerator, shut down a tire incinerator in Martinsville, won the landmark environmental justice court decision in Greene County, North Carolina. Further, with our chapters we have protected air quality by blocking scores of asphalt plants, four medical waste incinerators, a PVC plant and a lead smelter, and passage by local governments of eight polluting industries ordinances. Our work on nuclear power and coal plants laid the groundwork for our new Safe Energy Campaign. Victories over twenty-four mega-dumps have resulted in our affirmative Zero Waste Campaign. Guided by the principles of earth stewardship and environmental justice, we have learned that empowering whole communities with effective grassroots campaigns is the most effective strategy for lasting change.

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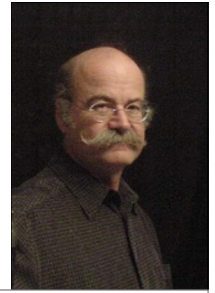
Renee Cail

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# LEAGUE LINE DIRECTOR'S REPORT

Louis A. Zeller, Executive Director

July 14, 2021



## Envision the Future

*If I were to wish for anything, I should not wish for wealth and power but for the passionate sense of the potential, for the eye, which, ever young and ardent, sees the possible. Pleasure disappoints, possibility never. And what is so sparkling, what is so fragrant, what is so intoxicating as possibility? —Søren Kierkegaard*

**T**his existentialist message, now coffee-stained and faded, has been posted on the wall beside my desk for years, witness to many early morning, midday, and late-night hours of talking, composing, and directing. Possibility is our job. Possible strategies, possible funding, possible help, possible ideas, possible victories.

For thirty-five years I have had the honor and pleasure of working for and leading the finest of grassroots organizations; the Blue Ridge Environmental Defense League. This work has taken a New York boy who transplanted himself to raise a family in rural western North Carolina only to find that his new home was to be threatened with an industrial waste project with a toxic legacy measured in millions of years.

After traveling a million miles of highways, byways, and dirt roads to cities—Asheville, Raleigh, Atlanta, Washington—and hamlets—Beaverdam, Shell

Bluff, Snow Hill, Cascade—I seem to have a virtual map in my head populated with thousands of acquaintances, associates, co-workers and friends. Internationally, BREDL has taken me to the United Nations in New York City, to Moscow, Ekaterinburg and Krasnoyarsk in Russia, and to a meeting of the Group of 8 in Okinawa, Japan. Everywhere I went I met people working for the same thing people everywhere want: an end to pollution and contamination, a halt to deadly forms of energy. Everywhere, free people were engaged in making their



communities better places to live and settling for nothing less.

Together, we have done well by doing good. The members, the Board, the staff, the chapters, we listened to and learned from each other. But time has come to turn the page. I feel confident in leaving the best of organizations in your capable hands.

Envision the future you want. Secure homes. Fresh air. Clean water. Safe streets. Healthy children. Prosperous communities. We will have no less than total dedication to justice, health and well-being for all.

Possibility.



Photo: Image by mmi9 from Pixabay



# Augusta Georgia Goes Green

## Zero Emissions Electric Bus

*By Charles Utley, BREDL Associate Director*



Three years ago, the Augusta Richmond County Board of Commissions adopted a Zero Waste proposal for 100% clean energy by 2050 with an intermediate goal of 80% by 2030. The proposal was introduced by The Concern Citizens of Shell Bluff, (a chapter member of BREDL), the Richmond County Neighborhood Alliance Association and myself. We asked the commissioners for their support to implement this new concept to protect our environment.

Augusta Mayor Hardie Davis, Jr. endorsed the goals that were presented in the Resolution on August 28, 2018, supporting a Goal of 100% Clean Energy. It passed unanimously. The Resolution stated:

“Now, therefore, be it resolved by the Richmond County Commissioners that it endorses the following: that the county establish a transition from a fossil fuel-based economy to a 100% clean renewable energy for all energy sectors, including transportation by December 31, 2050 to avoid climate

catastrophe, to promote job creation and economic growth, and to protect the Earth for current and future generations from climate catastrophe,



Standing by the electric bus are Charles Utley, BREDL; Jordan Johnson, Commissioner; Eugene Lowry, President Richmond County Neighborhood Alliance Association; Dennis Williams, Commissioner; Terence Dicks, Transit Citizen Advisory Committee Chair; and Ben Morgan, TWU Transit President. June 28, 2021

Further, the county shall achieve 80% clean renewable energy for all energy sectors by December 31, 2030.”

To implement the Resolution’s goals, we continued to work with the Richmond County Commission and

the Engineering Services Committee.

So, on June 28, 2021, Mayor Davis hosted a demonstration of an electric, zero emissions bus (seen in the

photos). The Demo Bus will serve several community routes to gather data for future changes and consideration for several days. Citizens will have an opportunity to ride on the Demo Bus as data is being collected.

We thank Dr. Kenneth Bradshaw, Superintendent of Schools in Richmond County, for his continuous support by providing energy

efficiency elements and solar panels in the new construction of Richmond County School System designs.

It is our hope that this is only the beginning and will continue to spread into other areas such as solar for new

construction and fleet purchases of department electric vehicles. I will continue to focus on the future for our environment to be a safe haven for all of us to live in and for the next generation.



Taking a ride on the Electric Bus with Mayor Hardy Davis and members of Richmond County Commission.



## Duke University Nicholas School of the Environment Stanback Fellowship Program students



**Jacqueline Fahrenholz** is a rising second year master's student at Duke University's Nicholas School of the Environment. She is pursuing a dual master's degree in Environmental Management focusing in Ecosystem Science and Conservation along with a master's degree in Forestry. At the Nicholas School, Jackie is involved in The Society of American Foresters Duke student chapter as well as the International Society of Tropical Foresters which is only one of three student chapters to exist in the entire world. In her free time, she enjoys cooking and spending time outdoors, more specifically at the beach during these warm summer months. Jackie is currently working with BREDL as a GIS Specialist, helping the organization get familiarized with the program as well as identifying tools necessary for completing tasks that have already been identified. Some of the projects the team has focused on include but is not limited to AERMOD modeling and the Mountain Valley Pipeline Southgate extension.



**Alice Elworthy** is a rising junior at Duke University majoring in environmental science and policy. This summer she is working with Jenn Galler in the marketing and management of her podcast with BREDL as we work on our new season, "Road to Renewables" investigating clean energy locally and globally. Originally from New Zealand, she has come to Duke on a rowing scholarship. Alice has been in the United States for two years and "absolutely loves it". "I have learned so much both in and out of the classroom. I would strongly encourage anyone to work or study abroad if given the opportunity, for both amazing experiences and exposure to new ideas and new ideas", she said. Since declaring her major, she has been able to take a broad course load, learning about sustainability and climate change. She is also taking some more business oriented classes. Alice stated, "I am really enjoying working remotely with Jenn as she has taught me so much and is very passionate in her work. The podcast is great because we get to connect with experts and have transparent conversations with them. I am really enjoying my field experience."

## BREDL Union Hill report cited by National Geographic



Gas pipelines like this one in Massachusetts crisscross the United States. A new study finds that the highest concentrations of them are located in communities considered vulnerable.  
PHOTOGRAPH BY JESSICA RINALDI, THE BOSTON GLOBE/GETTY IMAGES

ENVIRONMENT | NEWS

### Where are the U.S.'s natural gas pipelines? Often in vulnerable communities.

A new nation-wide analysis shows that counties with higher social vulnerability are home to a denser web of natural gas pipelines.

BREDL's Union Hill Report was recently cited in a National Geographic article. The report "Union Hill: Real Property, Racism and Environmental Justice" was released in October 2019. The June 4 National Geographic article "Where are the U.S.'s natural gas pipelines? Often in vulnerable communities" by Alejandra Borunda featured interviews with regional geography experts Ryan Emanuel from NC State University and Mary Finley-Brook from the University of Richmond. The report was cited in a section on low property values

resulting in policies that undervalued Black-owned land. The Union Hill report was authored by BREDL's Sharon Ponton and community members Kathie Mosley, John W. Laury and Richard Walker. The National Geographic article may be found at: <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/article/where-are-the-us-natural-gas-pipelines-often-in-vulnerable-communities> and the BREDL Report at: [https://www.bredl.org/pdf6/191029\\_Union\\_Hill.pdf](https://www.bredl.org/pdf6/191029_Union_Hill.pdf).



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there and ready to go.

Bernard's concept in using chapters as the foundation of BREDL was that they would be soundly rooted for the long term in the community of people directly affected by an issue, not going anywhere, forming associations that would last for decades. Not every BREDL chapter is committed to doing that, however. Sometimes a chapter will win and then they go back to soccer games and church and other activities that make life worth living. Even in that case, they've got our name and number and we've got theirs, so when something happens, we each know who to call. The chapter in Hamlet, North Carolina fought a low-level radioactive waste dump during the 80s and 90s. It took years, but they were successful. About six months ago, after a biochar facility was proposed in the same community, a local resident called BREDL, saying, "My daddy said I should call you."

Some chapters last decades. The chapter in Sanford is an interesting example. The Cumnock Preservation Association on the banks of the Deep River, found itself in the crosshairs of proposed fracking in the Triassic

basin (the threat remains), and decided to become a BREDL chapter. In 2014, the Dan River coal ash spill happened-inflaming controversy over coal ash disposal. The state of North Carolina began looking for places to dump coal ash. They chose Chatham and Lee Counties. The Cumnock group then morphed into EnvironmentalLEE (ELEE). The chapter was, by that time, geared up and ready to go, with some of the same people from the original preservation association. ELEE is in the process of reformulating the chapter in the wake of BREDL's coal ash victory.

**Interviewer:** *In your April, 2019 Executive Director's report in the League Line, you write about how a reporter, interviewing Janet in 1995, asked her, "Can you win?" You say that Janet replied to this question without hesitation, saying,*

*"Yes, without a doubt. Whenever a group of people put together a citizens' action campaign and develop and implement strategies and ask themselves how far they'll go and what they're willing to do; as long as the answer is 'Whatever it takes,' they can't possibly lose."*

*Could you reflect on the meaning of Janet's use of "Whatever it takes"?*

**Lou:** The reason I wrote about that, and the reason Janet said it, is because it's true. It sounds simple, whatever it takes, but it is the key to success. This seems to be the difference between us and other environmental organizations. We pick up the fight, the campaign, even when the odds are against you, overwhelming odds against you. You've seen this happen, victories we've had when it was deemed impossible or not winnable, or not worth the

sacrifice it would take to win. But when people's homes, neighborhoods, communities, families and neighbors are at risk, of course they are willing to do whatever it takes. But somebody's got to say it.

In the heat of a campaign, we'll get a news story, phone call, or text message with a cry for help, saying, "Can you help us? We heard about you." Until organized, these people have the strength and the power but don't see it and don't utilize it. So it seems fruitless to do anything about the issue because they are up against a powerful company with money and lawyers, or a state agency that issues permits, or a federal agency that's got all the money in the world and experts galore to wreak environmental havoc. That's where we started out. In 1985, I started hearing about federal plans for a high-level nuclear waste dump that would hold fuel rods from nuclear power stations after they had been irradiated for several years.

When Janet held her first public forum in Glendale Springs, she invited the whole community, including some elected officials. She didn't put the public officials on the dais so that they could spout information in our direction. She had the elected officials sitting in the front of the room as part of the audience, not to speak, but to listen. Janet had reversed the roles.

How many times have you heard community activists say, "We've gotta get Rep. So-and-So to speak at our meeting." Or a company representative, which will get people lined up at the door to attend. But you are playing with a weak hand in those cases. Whether an elected official or company representative, they've already got answers to the



Lou Zeller, Charlottesville, VA Anti-Nuclear Day Of Action March 25, 2004

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smartest question you can ask. What Janet did in Glendale Springs in 1985 was to have the public officials listen to what we had to say. We had knowledgeable speakers lined up that day, and the elected officials got a lesson in how much we had been able to learn about nuclear waste. They also got the lesson that the people were not happy and were taking steps to organize themselves. The people were garnering political power, not through party politics, but much more fundamentally, what the United States is built on.

When BREDL gets called into a community, one of our first underlying missions, whether it's a county, state, or federal issue, is to alter the balance of power. That's what "whatever it takes" means. Whatever it is that you can do to establish your own credibility in having accurate information. Being able to put that information out in a way which is understandable to the lay person. Our mission is fighting the battle for public opinion, which is the highest court in the land, not with lawyers, but in the public. If you want to get the word out, how do you do it? BREDL offers workshops on how to get publicity, do a press release, write a fact sheet. Getting your message out costs a bit of money. Yard signs can run into hundreds of dollars. T-shirts are popular items for building solidarity. Billboards on major highways give people the message day after day. Showing up at a public hearing or at a county meeting in numbers is a good thing. It gives a visible sign of unrest in the community, altering the balance of power.

Sometimes you don't have the numbers, so you've got to be creative to amplify your voice. The group in Anson County, North Carolina fighting a commercial waste

dump had their members contribute photos of family members, which were then printed on 8.5 x 11 sheets of paper. They spread these photos all over the floor of the entryway of the county courthouse, forcing elected officials to walk over the photos of the people who were against the project. That tactic inspired unity, was non-violent, and boxed the officials in.

One group took the signed petitions they had collected and, instead of putting them in a stack, taped them together and rolled them onto a stick. This "trail" of petitions was unrolled at the public hearing, some 50-60 feet long.

"Whatever it takes" means not taking the easy way out. "Whatever it takes" means taking a clear stand. "Whatever it takes" means you say "we're going to stop it".

Going for the legal tactic, although often part of "whatever it takes", is just one tool, along with public education, direct action, fund raising. Each step must be doable, each subsequent step becomes more doable based on the previous step, all lead to the goal. That's "whatever it takes". Do first things first, leave things that look impossible for later in the campaign. Aim for systematic ramping up of pressure by the people, changing balance of power, putting power into the hands of people instead of those of captured public officials.

Captured public officials are those who have bought the company line. This company has waltzed into town. They are well dressed, well spoken, they know how to do public relations, and they offer a smattering of technical information. They are primarily publicists and can present a convincing argument, typically focusing on job creation. County and



Lou Zeller and Claude Ward demonstrate the operation of the bucket device which grabs air samples during Bucket Brigade Training in Winston-Salem Aug. 18, 2001

state officials' eyes light up when they hear "jobs". They don't question it. It's up to the people who are directly affected to say, "Wait a minute. Where does this lead? Who gets the pollution? Who gets the groundwater contamination? Who gets the asthma from an asphalt plant built in a residential area?" Captured officials are officials who haven't examined the issue well enough to understand that it's bad news for their community.

But they can become uncaptured. In Surry County, North Carolina there was a BREDL fight to stop a poultry manure incinerator electricity generating power plant. This plant had been sanctioned by the North Carolina General Assembly in 2007 as part of the Renewable Energy Portfolio Standard, of all things. They had prominent environmental groups lined up behind it, requiring renewable energy, a certain percentage by a certain date. County commissioners were convinced of the value of the poultry manure incinerator and had approved infrastructure to support the project, including a water line to the incinerator site. A BREDL campaign, using all the tactics we have discussed in this interview and more, ramped up. We were able to reverse the county commission's decision,



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and they rescinded the project. All five of the commissioners voted against the project. Surry County is not like Durham or Asheville or some other liberal bastion. This is Surry County, a very conservative culture.

Tenacity, endurance, and persistence are oftentimes the key, part of “whatever it takes”. This is determination to see a project through to the end and not give up. That’s the purpose of community organizing, and expecting one, two, or six people to do all the work is a lot to ask. Therefore, you organize a working group, a committee, a local organization, people who are directly affected. When one person steps down or has a job change or life change, or is simply exhausted from late night calls and all the stuff involved in a fight, there is somebody else who says, “Let’s continue the campaign.” New people step up to fill the shoes. Leadership could change, can become a shared responsibility.

**Interviewer:** *Can you reflect on your skit as Captain Slow?*

**Lou:** *Captain Slow* was a character I did in the public school for grade school students. The kids liked it and the teachers liked it as well. It was a really fun way to bring environmental issues to children of the people in the community. BREDL is an educational organization. I did the children's programs for that



Lou performing as *Captain Slow*, a part of “The Big Throwaway” presentation from BREDL’s Earth Stage Productions 1993



Lou performing as *Captain Slow* reason alone. It didn't hurt to have the ancillary benefit of presenting something like *Big Throwaway: A Comedy of Global Impact*, and *Compost Chef*, a blend of science and magic. *Big Throwaway* is silent comedy, based on a Charlie Chaplin routine which I borrowed from and turned into an allegory about our throw-away society. It had the benefit of not only educating children, but also allowing us the opportunity to give each child in attendance a flyer to take home and show to Mom and Dad. So it allowed us to do some community organizing, as well.

**Interviewer:** *What can you share about your role as Compost Chef?*

**Lou:** *Compost Chef* was a magic show for young children, designed to spark imagination and showcase what might otherwise be the tedious subject of making compost, which is about as exciting as watching cement dry. It was a magic show in which I offered a series of tricks and small stage magic routines. I made flowers grow out of compost, for example. I showed how you can put your kitchen waste into a container and do certain things with it, and after a period of time you get fertilizer, flowers, and food.

**Interviewer:** *Please describe your role in Radioactive Money Machine.*

**Lou:** *Radioactive Money Machine*

was edgier. It evolved over the years, focused on the nuclear dump issue. The first time I did the routine was in 1987. I had been doing this kind of work before I came to BREDL. New Vaudeville, it is called. Some routines I had done were slapstick and juggling. I went to classes, workshops, and retreats to get training, worked with various artists of national and international renown. One of these was Yuri Belov, a Russian comedian who held a workshop in Philadelphia where I learned about comedic timing and the requirements of comedy. I also studied with Peter Hoff, an American clown, from whom I learned about putting a program together through



COOKING WITH THE COMPOST CHEF - Lou Zeller of the Blue Ridge Environmental Defense League was “The Compost Chef” in presentations at four Pender County elementary schools last week, explaining to the students how they could reduce waste of natural resources. Checking out his ‘recipes’ here are (left to right) Burgaw Elementary fifth graders Tola Meyer, Rashanda Johnson, and Jamie Tomassetti.

Lou as *Compost Chef* with students from Pender County Schools  
(source: The Pender Post, January 29, 1992)

a series of steps. Leo Bassi gave a workshop which I attended on being creative, being convincing in your role as actor.

Then I started providing workshops, one of which was CROP Walk in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, in behalf of a nonprofit called CROP. Their mission was feeding the hungry, and they would do a walk every year. I



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provided training workshops for them on how to make up characters, characters in costume.

I worked in the world of New Vaudeville during the 1970s and 80s. At that time, I was doing musical work, playing in an acoustic jug band. I met a team of performers who combined juggling and comedy. We swapped ideas. I learned how to juggle, and we formed an outfit together. We would do shows for bars and clubs in Georgia and North Carolina. They were slapstick, juggling, vaudeville routines, not musical shows.

Earth Stage grew out of that history. *Radioactive Money Machine* was one of the most edgy of these routines. Before getting involved with BREDL, around 1982, I did a skit called *Major General Destruction*. It was about the



Radioactive Money Machine operated by "Dr. Smello"

arms race, a routine I developed where I played a military man in a general's uniform. I went to the local Salvation Army and bought a military officer's jacket, to which I attached badges and medals. I carried a suitcase onto the stage. It was a juggling routine, juggling two nuclear

missiles and a ball, which was Planet Earth. I was a madcap general playing with Earth's future.

Charles Chaplin did a silent movie in which he played a comic rendition of Hitler. He has a very large beach ball which is Planet Earth, which he bounces during the skit. This gave me the germ of the idea for *Big Throwaway*, which I performed for children and adults. In the skit, you can see a prop that's a trash can filled with objects. I would do slapstick, chasing the objects around on stage, juggling plastic jugs and aluminum cans. All ended up in the trash can. The finale was a large inflated beach ball globe, the Earth, three to four feet in diameter. I would do a dance, bouncing the ball on the floor while dancing, playing with the Earth as with a toy. At the end of the program, I would put the Earth on top of the filled up trash can. Voices appeared out of nowhere, scolding me for throwing the Earth away. The protagonist was learning about not throwing the Earth away. He rescues the Earth and says he's sorry while standing on top of the trash heap. Kids and adults would get into it.

I did this type of skit in concert with BREDL chapters and other local groups trying to stop waste dumps. The routine took 20 to 25 minutes. The local leader would come out at the end of each skit and talk about the issue at hand. Flyers would be distributed.

**Interviewer:** *How many of those skits do you think you did, in total, and where did you do them?*

**Lou:** Scores, close to 100 shows,



Lou Zeller being carried out of state meeting on the Low-Level Radioactive Waste dump being broadcast on the North Carolina Public Television Network by WUNC—Feb. 21, 1990. Photo by Laura Drey

pretty much all over the BREDL service area, a lot in North Carolina and Georgia, and other states as well.

**Interviewer:** *Can you tell us the story behind the photo, dated February 21, 1990, of you being hauled out of a public meeting?*

**Lou:** We were in the thick of the low-level radioactive waste dump campaign. A meeting had been scheduled at the PBS television station, WUNC in Raleigh, North Carolina. We had been working against the state of North Carolina's search for a place to dump 30 million cubic feet of low-level radioactive waste. This type of waste includes pretty much everything that goes into the trash at a nuclear power plant, including gloves and booties that you wear in a radioactive area, white plastic suits, and scintillation vials. Low-level nuclear waste actually includes the power plant itself, once the fuel rods, which are the high-level waste, have been removed. The nuclear industry emphasized the gloves and booties and other medical waste as the principal type of waste in this category. We did years of research starting in 1986 to uncover facts

## CELEBRATING LOU ZELLER ON HIS RETIREMENT

about this so-called low-level radioactive waste. For example, I did a study, went to the radiation protection section of the state of North Carolina and obtained copies of every permit, every bill of lading for hospital and medical radioactive waste in the state of North Carolina. I tallied it all up. My study found that the amount of medical radioactive waste was a fraction of a fraction of a decimal point of the total they were talking about. The industry was misrepresenting it.

The state of North Carolina had narrowed the prospective sites for the low-level nuclear waste site to four locations, two in the western part of the state and two in the east. BREDL took on the western sites. We organized in those communities in the west until they were removed from consideration. We did a lot of publicity, including the *Radioactive Money Machine*. The site search was narrowed from four to two. Janet and Lisa Finaldi from North Carolina Clean Water Fund put their heads together and divided the two sites up again, with North Carolina Clean Water Fund working at the site in Apex and BREDL in Hamlet.

The North Carolina Low-level Radioactive Waste Management Authority was a 17-member committee of scientists and industry people charged by the state with selecting the waste dump site. We had been to many of their public hearings, and decided to attend the one scheduled in 1990 to occur at a PBS television station in Raleigh. The meeting, at which they were going to discuss their decision on where to place the dump, would be broadcast as part of *Stateline*, a public interest interview program which was also broadcast into public schools as part of the curricula. The industry and the authority were going to use public

airwaves to broadcast this meeting at the level of junior and senior high school students.

On the date of the Authority's meeting, we arrived early at the TV station, me dressed in jacket and tie and Janet in a nice outfit. Our plan was for someone to stand up and disrupt the proceeding by speaking from the audience, and do it in a way which was not ugly or violent or rude in any way. We had recruited 15-20 volunteers from the Radioactive Waste Roundtable to work with us, keeping our plans a close secret. We entered the TV station when they opened the doors and spread ourselves out throughout the studio, not together. We were ready.

The program started. The Roundtable had selected one person to be the first to speak out of turn. I was that person. The Authority gaveled the meeting into order. I was supposed to pull the trigger when the time seemed right. I knew it had to be early. Dr. Murray, chair of the Authority, banged the gavel. The meeting was called to order and they had the reading of the minutes. The secretary explained the cut-and-dried meeting agenda. Then Dr. Murray asked if there were any additions or changes. I saw my moment and stood up from where I had been seated in the third or fourth row in the studio. I said, "Dr. Murray, I do have a statement I would like to make at this time, if you please." Dr. Murray was shocked for anybody to do this. I said, "Dr. Murray, I think this is an important issue." He gaveled me down, saying, "You're out of order." I said, "But Dr. Murray, this is a much larger issue, people have come to tell you that choosing a nuclear waste site is an act of great injustice, and we need to bring it to your attention." I didn't stop talking. By now the fact that it

was in a TV studio meant it wasn't just PBS, it was also the network news media, CBS, ABC, NBC, in addition to PBS. All cameras were on Lou Zeller now speaking out of turn. I stood there and kept the spiel going at a steady pace.

I watched the Authority members trying to figure out what to do with me. The two leaders of the group were there representing their firms, Carolina Power & Light and Duke Energy. I heard someone say, "Mr. Zeller, we're going to have you escorted out of the room if you don't sit down." I continued in the same determined manner. Dr. Murray called in two State Bureau of Investigation security people to escort me out of the room. Improvising, I decided to go limp. The SBI said, "Oh no." They picked me up. It took them several minutes as I stayed limp. I didn't stand up, just sat like a doll. Two guys picked me up. They had to clear the way and carried me out of the studio, down the hallway, and out the back door, then dropped me in some mud.

The plan was to have others speak in turn after me. Right after me was one of the members of the Roundtable, Kaye Cameron, in a blue dress. She got up to speak as soon as I was removed from the studio. Kaye did not go limp when Dr. Murray sent the two security personnel to escort her out of the studio. The Authority waited a few minutes to get back to order. Then another person stood up and got escorted out. Then another spoke and was escorted out, for a total of eight or nine escorts. We stole the meeting, stopped this attempt by the Authority to up the ante and further their cause through use of the public TV station.

All the school children in North Carolina that day watching the

Stateline program, which is still a program on PBS, everybody in the whole state saw it that day on PBS and other news channels. "Activists filibuster Authority meeting" was the headline in the news. Janet said that was a gift and a turning point in the campaign. The Authority never recovered from that blow. Their credibility was diminished. Legislators saw this, word spread that the Authority was trumped by citizens at that meeting, locally-affected citizens such as Kaye Cameron, and Pam Dodson from the Hamlet site, standing up, making statements against the waste dump, and getting escorted out of the room.

Turning adversity to advantage, whatever it takes.

**Interviewer:** *What is the significance of the term "sand in the gears" in the context of a fight undertaken by a BREDL chapter?*

**Lou:** One of BREDL's flagship fights was opposition to a low-level nuclear waste dump proposed by the Southeast Compact, which was an eight-state consortium, a legal and administrative agreement among eight states to select one of them for the first of eight dump sites for low-level radioactive waste. Each of the eight states was supposed to take their turn hosting a waste dump site for 20 years. They started doing geological analyses, taking into consideration whether prospective sites were on the coast, in sandy areas, in the western mountainous part of the state, or inside special geological formation. The North Carolina Radioactive Waste Management Authority was set up to do the site selection process for eight states' worth of radioactive waste. They went through a decision making process in which they selected a

## Environmental hit parade

Lou has used his many talents to highlight environmental causes throughout BREDL's history. His gifts in art, music and drama add creativity to all aspects of the League's programs. He often showcases original music at environmental events, known as the environmental hit parade. These songs include "Don't Hog Our Air," "Talkin' Trash Dump Blues," "Ballad of the Watts Farm," and "Talkin' Tarheel Asphalt Blues." Lou also performed two songs in the hit parade that were written and contributed by BREDL members- "Don't Wanna Get Nuclear Wasted" by Wells Edelman from Durham, North Carolina and "No Place For Nuclear Waste" by Mike Jenkins in Union County, North Carolina.



Lou Zeller performs a landfill protest song at the NEST Pig Pickin' Celebration held on Oct. 23, 2004 in Oak Ridge, NC.

group of prospective target areas first, then selected potential dump sites, two in the west, and two in the eastern part of the state. They were attempting to divide and conquer, pitting one part of the state against another.

The same process was used for an incinerator. A series of sites was selected for study in different counties, mostly in rural areas. They played one part of the state against the other. The turning point was when the Granville County and Iredell County groups began working together. They countered this selection process with a unifying theme – "Not here, not there, not anywhere." They started doing joint fund raising. BREDL went to 22 different counties with our campaign. Granville and Iredell Counties coming together was a turning point. Then they joined BREDL, as did a number of the 22 communities where we conducted campaigns all across North Carolina. We still have a chapter in Statesville,

North Carolina, formed during this remarkable campaign.

BREDL's Environmental Justice Coordinator, Charles Utley, uses sand in the gears. Concerned Citizens of Shell Bluff has been fighting Plant Vogtle since 2006. Their challenge of a license for the Savannah River Site's plutonium fuel factory in South Carolina took 20 years. By placing sand in the gears, creating opposition in the community and in the courts, they slowed the process down. Savannah River Site was granted a license for construction of the plutonium fuel factory, which BREDL had challenged before the Atomic Safety Licensing Board. That bought us time. Then we challenged the operating permit in 2007. Both permits were issued, but behind schedule, bills piling up. Meanwhile, earth was turning. Rapprochement in the form of a joint agreement between the U.S. and Russia, Clinton and Yeltsin, evaporated. This agreement, which would have turned





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BREDL staff in 1990: Ginny Lindsay, Denise Lee, Janet Marsh, Lou Zeller



Street Theater, Raleigh, Lou Zeller & Ginny Lindsay, 1988



Lou Roadshow Asheville, NC June 5, 2002



"Monopoly Man" brought attention to rate increases with the Progress/Duke Energy merger in front of the Utilities Commission hearing, Raleigh. 2013



Lou and Janet - Staff Retreat



Lou and Charles Utley, Sow the Wind Press Conference, March 20, 2007, Augusta, GA



Blue Lou—Lou not only writes music and lyrics, sings and plays guitar, but he also plays a wicked harmonica! Here's "Blue Lou" performing with Woody and the Stragglers at a CHE fundraiser in Charlotte.



In 2006, in recognition of Lou's twenty years of service to the organization, the executive committee presented him with a sword and shield, symbolic of his campaigns as an environmental warrior. Oct 6, 2006



Framed artwork presented to Lou at our 30th Anniversary celebration in 2014. Includes original screen print by a Greensboro artist including fish and turtles reflective of the coal ash spill in the Dan River. Artwork says Duke Energy destroying nature in its quest for Power.



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In the control center in the base of the tower, Lou Zeller inspects the computer display which controls power output  
Wind farm visit Oct 24, 2000



Lou Zeller with Patty Lovera CHEJ – NC People's Hearing on Dioxin, April 29, 2000



BREDL Press Conference with French MOX experts held on Oct. 15, 1999 in Charlotte, NC



Lou performing at Busboys & Poets, Sept 20, 2012, Washington DC



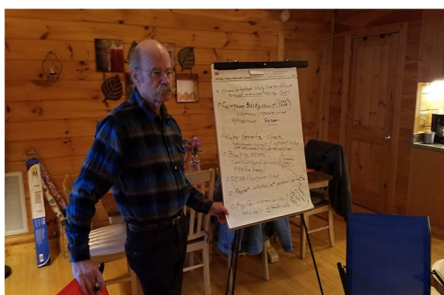
Lou Zeller interviewed by WFMY Ch. 2 Greensboro regarding Yankee Rowe dismantled nuclear reactor waste being shipped by train to Barnwell, SC in May 1997.



"Don't Dump On Us Keep North Carolina Healthy" Summer Tour 2007



Lou Zeller, Vladimir Mikheev, and Tatsuaki Oshiro (not shown) deliver joint appeal on plutonium at the NGO press conference in Okinawa, Japan, July 23, 2000



Lou Zeller discussing strategy with citizens in Snow Camp, NC Jan. 2, 2019



BREDL, Anson County CACTUS, SCOTCH and Greenpeace "fired" several employees of the Division of Solid and Hazardous Waste Management. Participating in the skit are Therese Vick and Lou Zeller. August 1993, press event in Raleigh, NC



Lou Zeller with NC DAQ's George Murray on visit to NC Division of Air Quality monitoring—1990s

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warheads into nuclear power fuel, foundered politically in the U.S. and Russia. Sand in the gears slowed the process down.

“Sand in the gears” is a concept I have developed over the years, which is implemented by opposing your opponent everywhere, leaving no weak spots, not picking winners and losers, leaving no sacrifice zones, no weak links in the chain. If there are weak links, that's where you put your strength. “Sand in the gears” is an appropriate metaphor because your opponent with power has nowhere to turn. They have no victim because people are sticking together.

**Interviewer:** *What are your thoughts about BREDL staff – past, present, and future?*

**Lou:** The year following the loss of Janet was a rough patch for me and for the organization. The staff behaved and performed so admirably during that period. Everybody had been given a shock, cold splash of water. Everybody muscled up and did what they needed to do. That's been a watch word in the larger issue for all of the work that we do. Most of the work that gets done by the staff – chasing down documents, writing letters, finding, studying, and using test equipment, planning and implementing meetings, podcasts, newsletters, research, mapping – that is a style of work that BREDL established intrinsically.

In 1986, BREDL got its first grant, which was given by the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation. They had enough for one salary, so they hired four quarter-time people, including me. Those of us who had been hired were happy to have a little bit of income from something that we were already doing as

activists working to save our home from the risk of a nuclear dump. Every one of those first BREDL staff, including Sandy Adair, Bob Gessner, Virginia Hunt, and me, did what we could do best, under Janet's guidance.

Before I came to BREDL, I was involved in a performing show band, playing music on stage in venues, clubs, auditoriums, theaters, convention halls. I got confident enough doing satires that I attended a public hearing of the North Carolina Low-level Radioactive Waste Management Authority, at University of North Carolina in Asheville -- in character. This agency had been set up to find a dump site for low-level radioactive waste. 300 people were in attendance at this meeting which was being held to gather public comments. People wishing to speak at this meeting were asked to sign the sign-up sheet at the entrance to the meeting room. I surreptitiously signed as a made-up character, Dr. Ludwig Smello. This name was a play on one of the nuclear scientists who had invented nuclear weapons, Dr. Victor Tello. I wore a white lab coat, a large red nose, and a hard hat, and carried a large easel pad and a tripod. I waited outside the meeting while others gave comments. Finally, they called on Dr. Smello to give comments. The show was on! I entered with the easel pad, walked to the podium, and did a skit lampooning the credibility of this state agency which had scientists, industry, and business people all sitting at the dais. They didn't stop me, couldn't stop me. I had a skit worked out based on an actual technical report written by one of the members of the agency, titled “Bad is Good, Good is Bad”. This report tried to

demonstrate how groundwater flow can be both good and bad for the environment. I took that to the bank, used the easel to help deliver the message, “Good is bad, bad is good, down is up, up is down, left is right, right is left, over is under, leftover is in the refrigerator.”

After I had done this act, I invited all the members of the authority sitting there, half a dozen individuals, to demonstrate to the audience how safe radioactive waste dump sites would be. I had prepared six cups with smiley faces on them and gave each authority member one of these cups. I took out a thermos bottle full of boiling hot water colored with green food coloring, filled their cups with the steaming hot green water, poured one for myself, and said, “Gentlemen, let's demonstrate to the people in the audience that this water is perfectly safe. I brought it from the Chem Nuclear site in Barnwell, South Carolina. I'm sure you want to demonstrate that this water is perfectly safe to drink.”

They looked at me like I had two heads. I put the cup to my lips and asked, “Gentlemen, what's wrong? Nobody's drinking.” A man in the audience pointed to one of the authority members and said, “He did!” One authority member had actually taken a sip of the green water. I got to know him later, a sweet guy who worked as a local county commissioner in western North Carolina. I had prepared a mock Geiger counter to show that the effects were harmless. It was a cassette tape recorder with white noise on it and a mike that looked like a radiation detection device. It made noise that sounded like a Geiger counter when I would turn the volume up. I walked up to Albert Canipe, the guy who took the



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sip of green water, and said, “Do you mind if I do a test?” I held the wand close to his belly, then made the noise of the Geiger counter go sky high, so that it looked as if Albert was radioactive. 300 people in the room were on the floor, laughing. The industry people in front couldn’t stop me. The whole skit took about 15 minutes.

Janet said the North Carolina Low-level Radioactive Waste Management Authority never came back to western NC after that to do another public hearing.

Dr. Smello also did the Miss Nuclear North Carolina Pageant involving BREDL staffer, Therese Vick. A meeting of the North Carolina Low-level Radioactive Waste Management Authority had been scheduled in Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina. At this time, the Authority had eliminated all the candidate sites for the nuclear waste dump except for two, and they were scheduled to make the final selection at this meeting. The two sites that the Authority was considering included one in Hamlet, in the Sandhills region of North Carolina, and one in Apex, North Carolina, near Raleigh, an area where the predominant geological formations are underground

structures called diabase dikes.

We used this meeting as an opportunity for another skit, one which we called the Miss Nuclear North Carolina Pageant. The rule of this beauty pageant was that the loser would go on to the final competition, inverting the whole concept. We staged our beauty pageant on the back of my truck. Our pageant had two contenders. One was Miss Sandy Hill from the Hamlet area, played by BREDL staffer Therese Vick. She showed up in a resplendent purple sequined gown, purple eye shadow to the nth degree, looking every bit like a beauty contestant. The other contestant in our pageant was played by an activist named Matt, from Apex, North Carolina. He came dressed like a ballerina, in a pink tutu and leotards, and a huge blonde wig. His name for the pageant was Miss Diabase Dike. He played the role admirably.

After enacting our pageant for the media, we decided to walk into the hotel where the Authority’s meeting was being held. As Pageant moderator, I still had my clown nose, white coat, and polka dot tie

on, and was smoking a cigar. Therese and Matt entered in their Pageant costumes. We walked right in like we were there to hear the proceedings, paraded down the middle of auditorium, slowly, looking for seats in the front row. You could have heard a pin drop. We totally stole the show, it rattled their cage.

The upshot is, we’ve

continued to use those tactics. In April 2017, we travelled 1,000 miles through areas crossed by the Atlantic Coast Pipeline and Mountain Valley Pipeline, pulling with us a mock natural gas compressor station. It made smoke with a smoke machine, and played noise that was a recording of an actual compressor station that was given to us by a community in Pennsylvania. We used a guitar amplifier to raise the volume to 90-



Lou being interviewed in Bent Mountain, VA during The Stop The Pipeline—Roll Back Pollution tour April 4-11, 2017. It included a Mock Compressor Station which replicated the noise from a compressor station.

95 decibels, a deafening racket. It created a focal point, something visual and tangible to see and hear, in order to make it more real. Before that the idea of a compressor station was an abstract concept. Here’s the demo – hold your ears!

The use of parody is not just for hijinks or comic relief. It is to build confidence and solidarity based on common understandings and symbols. Being negative and victimized doesn’t draw people. It’s better to portray a real sense of confidence and leadership based on the assumption that you are going to win either because you are right or you outnumber the opposition through your activism. People are drawn to success, not failure.



Dr. Smello at the Miss Nuclear North Carolina Pageant involving BREDL staffer Therese Vick

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