MARY DICKSON

Salt Lake City, Utah

An Interview by

Samantha Senda-Cook

July 16, 2009

Nuclear Technology in the American West Oral History Project

EVERETT L. COOLEY COLLECTION

u-3034

American West Center

and

Marriott Library
Special Collections Department

University of Utah

THE FOLLOWING IS AN INTERVIEW WITH MARY DICKSON ON JULY 16, 2009 CONDUCTED AT ECCLES BROADCAST CENTER IN SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH. THE INTERVIEWER IS SAMANTHA SENDA-COOK.

SS: Okay, so my name is Samantha Senda-Cook. Today is the sixteenth of July [2009]. It is about five minutes to two p.m., and we are at the KUED Headquarters?

MD: Eccles Broadcast Center.

SS: Eccles Broadcast Center and I'm here with Mary Dickson. Would you please spell your full name for us?

MD: Sure. Mary, M-A-R-Y, Dickson, D-I-C-K-S-O-N.

SS: And what is your current residence?

MD: Salt Lake City [Utah].

SS: And how long have you lived there?

MD: Ooh in Salt Lake City [Utah]? My gosh, what is it? Fifty-two years.

SS: Okay. And what is you current occupation?

MD: I'm the Director of Creative Services at KUED Public Television.

SS: Alright, what is your birthplace and your birthday?

MD: Joplin, Missouri, July fourth, 1955.

SS: Do you have any siblings?

MD: Yes I do. I have five siblings. I have one who died. So there were seven of us.

SS: Okay. And can you talk a little bit about your family life growing up?

MD: My family life growing up. Let's see. I grew up in the fifties and sixties which was kind of a great time to grow up. I had obviously a large family. So I grew up in a big noisy house because we always had more than just the seven of us. We had all the neighbors. We had all our friends. We had a cousin who tried to come stay one summer. But being basically an only child,

it freaked her out to have so many kids in one house. And she always said, "If I disappeared, nobody would even know I was gone." I said, "Yeah, isn't it great?"

SS: [laughs]

MD: She didn't see it that way. But we grew up in a time where you made your own fun, and you were incredibly creative. We would get old refrigerator boxes, cardboard boxes, and we would make little shops out of them. And we would bring up all the canned goods from the cupboards and sell them. And we would make lemonade and sell it. We were incredibly creative. We had different parts of the neighborhood that we dubbed as different states, so we'd get on our bikes and drive to different "states" for picnics. And we used to—there was a church not too far away that had this lattice work. And we used to always climb up the top of it. That was our Mount Everest. And we just had—we were really innocent really naïve and had a lot of fun. We would put on plays in the backyard. We made up our own newspaper. We were always doing incredibly creative things. We would build—this is in the day when we had clotheslines outside—so we would bring out all the blankets and build forts on the clothesline. It was really convenient. And we would sleep in them outside. And we would take long bike rides to the zoo with breakfast. We were always always outside and always with other kids. My mother didn't let us watch very much TV. So I just feel really sorry for today's kids who, you know, they're stuck in front of machines all day. They don't know what fun it is to just be incredibly creative and make things up. I mean we had wild imaginations. It was really fun.

SS: Great. Can you think of some major events maybe that have shaped your adult perspectives? Maybe, yeah…

MD: My adult perspective, let's see. So as an adult, not when I was a kid?

SS: Yeah—no, no, no. As a—through maybe childhood or adolescence, major events that have shaped who you are today.

MD: Well I think growing up in a very huge, large family makes a big difference to who you are. Because it's never about you, it's about all of you and how you all fit in. One event I think that really really shaped me: there was a family that moved in down the street from us when I was like thirteen or fourteen, and my mother said you should go see if they need a babysitter 'cause we also earned all our own money from a very young age. So I walked over one day, and here I am this like, you know, little kid. "Hi, I want to babysit your baby." And it was a man from Chicago [Illinois] and his wife who was just absolutely gorgeous and they had a one-year-old son. And I was their babysitter for the year they were here in their residency. But they would take me on all these trips. They would take me to the symphony, the ballet, the opera. They'd always say, "Oh you're culturally deprived. We're going to take you here and here and here." So they took me everywhere with them. And I just so adored these people, when they moved back to Chicago [Illinois] I was just heartsick. And so they took me with them. So I used to spend every summer with them. And just got exposed to a whole new world of ideas, of literature. I mean they'd give me things to read. They really, to a huge extent, shaped me I think. Just as much as my parents did, they did.

SS: Wow and that was actually going to be my next question, maybe who were some role models or major ethical influences for you.

MD: I think definitely those, those people were. I mean I grew up in this big Mormon family, but we were always like really considered kind of outsiders even in our Mormon ward because my parents were democrats. My father was a university professor. They thought we were too liberal. And I remember once this girl I went to church with saying that I must be a communist. I

don't even think she knew what a communist was. I mean these were pretty sheltered kids. At one point when I was young my dad was going to take us all out to Alexandria, Egypt for a year 'cause he got offered this position at the American University. We decided not to go. It was just—I mean can you imagine taking seven kids to Egypt? I think my mother finally realized that was a crazy idea. So we didn't go. But so we weren't like the other families, and my parents were always really open and understanding. My mom was a convert and had a really hard time dealing with Mormons here. So that was different. But I think all of that probably really shaped me. I think my dad, well and my mother. My mother taught me to just be good to people and that you just open your house to anyone. And, I mean, we would go downtown some days and she would meet people. I remember once she met this woman from Switzerland, this young woman who was just here visiting. And my mom said, "Oh why don't you come to our house for dinner." So my mom dragged her home for dinner with all these noisy kids, you know. But, it was really fun. She used to do stuff like that. She just really had this warm heart towards people, because she really liked people kind of the underdogs—she really liked the underdog. And you know, my dad always taught us that it was better to ask a good question than to have the answer. So I learned to be questioning from them and my dad always said you've got to be of use. And so it's kind of Mormon ethic cause he came from pioneer stock. It was you have to be of use and there's nothing that you can't do. You can fix anything yourself, you can sew your own clothes, so I always grew up thinking, well okay, I can figure out how to do this. I can figure out how to do this. I'll do it myself. And even today, I have friends who laugh at me, my goddaughter she cracks me up because every time we go somewhere, we'll go to an art exhibit, we'll go to the arts festival and she'll look at me and say, "We could make that couldn't we, Mary?" I mean now she's learning that from me 'cause I would always say, "Oh I could do that. I could do that."

Or like if something broke at home, "I could figure out how to fix this. Oh I could build that." And it's like kind of I think the Mormon thing in me that doesn't go away. I mean I left Mormonism early on, but a lot, I have to say I think a lot of my ethics were shaped by that. I think a lot of my ethics and values were really shaped by the family from Chicago [Illinois]. I mean they taught me to love literature, to love the arts. They taught me that there's this whole world out there that I wanted to explore and see all of it. They taught me that there were all sorts of different people and that basically all people are alike and they're good. I mean, it just did me a world of good I think to go away from this place. That really helped.

SS: Yeah and so how old were you when you moved from Missouri to Utah?

MD: I was only two.

SS: Oh, okay. So you spent, really most of this time that you're talking about here in Utah.

MD: Exactly. Exactly. My parents—we lived in Denver [Colorado] for a while. And then my dad got a position at the University of Utah, so we came here. So I basically have been here all of my life. But I love it. I love this place. I love the outdoors. I love the recreation. I love how easy it is to get around. I love how friendly people are. I mean you can really feel rooted here. And you have this real sense of community that to me is incredibly important. And I know I've had friends who have left and then they come back and they say, "I never made friends anywhere like I made friends in Salt Lake [City, Utah]." And interesting most of my friends are from out of town and from out of the country. My very best friends are not even American. Isn't that weird? I don't know how that happened, but it did.

SS: It just worked out.

MD: It just worked out. I mean my very best friend here is a woman from Poland. And my very very best friend of my entire life is a woman from Québec—French speaking Québec. And yeah

it's just interesting. It just worked out that all my closest friends are foreigners. I don't know how that happened but…

SS: So how did you first get involved with nuclear waste issues or just nuclear issues in general?

MD: With all nuclear issues? I think, okay this was back in the eighties when everybody was pushing for a test ban. And this was when the movie *The Day After* came out that showed what happened. I think Jason Robards is in that, and Jane Alexander.[1] There was a nuclear attack and it showed what happened. I mean it was just horrific. I remember going to watch that out at Channel Four, Channel Two one

of the TV stations, and it just so shook me up. It was incredibly disturbing. And I was writing for *Network Magazine* at the time. Karen Shepherd who was then the editor, really wanted to start covering some of that. So I started kind of being their nuclear issues correspondent. So I was writing about that. I was writing about why we needed a test ban. I was writing about how you restructure an economy that's not based on military. And then meanwhile, I was working fulltime – mind you I had a fulltime job elsewhere, but I did all this writing on the side. And this woman who I knew called up and said, "You know we really want you to help us with this publication, *The Desert Sun*," which was Utah's peace news. She said, "Can you help us edit it?" And so I became co-editor of that. We were writing about all those issues and about the [Nevada] Test Site, and about leaks at the Test Site and doing all of that. So I kind of really got involved in it in the eighties and was really pushing for it. And I heard Helen Caldicott speak and just thought how important this was. And I couldn't believe that we would even consider testing again. And why wouldn't we sign this treaty. I just didn't get it.

And then, let's see it's 1985, I got diagnosed with thyroid cancer and I was only twenty-nine. And I had no idea how I got it. It was—you know, you're young enough then you really

still think you're immortal. You don't think anything will happen to you. So to me it wasn't that big a deal. I thought: "Okay. I'll just go get surgery, they'll take it out and I'll have to take these pills. Okay well that's not that bad and I'll get six weeks off." And I thought: "Oh how great I'll have six weeks off." And everybody around me was just panicking. My mother couldn't look at me without crying. My little sister gave me her favorite Madam Alexandra doll. And left me this note that: (gasp) "You're the only radical sister I have. Nothing can happen to you." And I mean, I thought: "Oh my gosh they're giving me their things. They must think I'm dying," you know. And people would come up and say: "Oh you're so brave." And I'd think: "I'm not brave. I'm just sick." I mean it was really weird, people's response when you have cancer. So I did, I had the surgery, stayed home six weeks, which was incredible. I loved staying home. And it was just nice to have time off, which is a horrible thing that in America you have to get sick to get time off that you need. And I still didn't think much about it I just thought: "Okay I had bad luck. That's weird I have thyroid cancer." And there was a girl I had grown up with who had it too and I thought: "That's weird she has it too." And there was a guy working down the hall from me who had it. He's about my age—and I thought: "Oh that's weird all these people are suddenly having this." And then a man I worked with he had it, but he had the worst kind. So I thought: "Well that's so weird that we'd all have this. Hmm." But I didn't really think that much more of it. You know I kept writing what I was writing, doing what I was doing.

And then this woman who was doing an oral history of downwinders—she was from New York and she came to Utah and spent ten years taking photos and collecting oral histories. And so one of the magazines I wrote for said: "Will you go do a piece on her?" So I went to do a piece on her and all her work. And she was telling me: "Oh and it causes—the fallout caused thyroid cancer" and this and this. And I said: "Well, I had thyroid cancer." And she kind of just

stops and says: "When?" "Well eighty-five." And she says: "Where'd you grow up?" "Salt Lake [City]." "Did you drink milk?" I said "Yeah." She said: "You got it from testing." And it's like, "No, no, no, no. I lived in Salt Lake [City]. That only happened in southern Utah." And she pulled out Richard Miller's map that showed where it all went. And she said, you know: "You people are so naive. You think it stopped at some county line. It went everywhere." I mean that map was just shocking. 'Cause almost all of Utah's black, Idaho's black. I mean the Midwest is this huge chunk of black. All the way up to New York there's black, all the way into Canada there's black. All the way past the Eastern Coast it's black. Into the Gulf of Mexico it's black. And I mean that was pretty stunning. And so that's one of those 'ah ha' moments. You go, "Oh my god." And then you start kind of figuring things out. And I ran into, not long after that, a woman who I didn't know that well but she grew up in my neighborhood, and we were both at a public hearing. I don't even remember what the hearing was against. But I was speaking at it. And afterwards she came up to me with this yellow notebook. And she said: "You probably don't remember me; I grew up on the street in back of yours. But I've got this and this disorder. My brother died of this, my sister has this." And she said: "You know, I've started making a list of all the people in our neighborhood who got cancer or tumors or autoimmune diseases." And she pulled out this list and I mean it was huge. And I said: "Oh my god. Well," I said, "you can add me to it now." And then I went home to my sister and my mom and, you know, 'cause they keep in close touch with everybody. And it's like: "Okay who else do you know of?" And my mom started giving me all these other names. My sister starts giving me all these other names. And it's like: "Oh my god." This list got up to fifty-four people. It's like a five-block neighborhood. And I'm going: "Something happened to us, something happened to us." And I'm showing them the maps. And then my sister started getting sick. And got sicker, and sicker and

they couldn't figure out what was wrong with her. And it took years. But they finally diagnosed her with lupus, which is an autoimmune disease. And the woman, ironically, who first showed me that yellow legal pad with the names on it, her sister had lupus. And I mean in the meantime other people were dying—you know had died. One of my best friends died. She had lupus. That's right she died of lupus and her sister died of a brain tumor. And so you just see all this happening. But so the more I started digging around, the more I found and the more disheartening it was. It's like every piece of new evidence is like getting socked in the stomach. It's like: "Oh my god they did this to us. Our own government did this to us and never would admit it."

And that kind of got me started on the road to being a real activist. I just kind of followed the research and where it took me and it's like: "This has to be what happened. This just has to be what happened." So I would obviously go to hearings and things. And I was at one hearing that I had helped organize and it was at the [Salt Lake] City library and all these people got up to talk. I spoke at this thing. Then a man got up and talked about how he had grown up on the rim of Parley's Canyon and that all this cancer, all these illnesses were in his neighborhood. And I thought: "Oh my god." And I went and found him afterwards, I said: "Where on Canyon Rim, where on Canyon Rim?" 'cause that's where I grew up. And it was higher up than where I lived so I didn't know those people. And I said, "Oh my god, all of Canyon Rim got it." Then another guy gets up to testify. He lived in another part near the rim. Same story, all these people, all their illnesses. And I'm thinking my god we really got socked along that canyon, which made sense because the more I started reading – there was a researcher at the University and somebody asked him why it was worse along canyons. And he said because the way it works is the canyon breezes. It would go up the canyon and the canyon breeze would blow it back down at night. So

you get a double dose, which made sense. But I thought "My gosh this is so interesting." And just the more and more you dig into it, the worse and worse it gets. And by then you know people know you're working on this. And because I write—I wrote about it all the time—and people would start calling me with their stories. So I would get so many stories and so much information from people. They'd send me their stuff, they'd send me reports. And I ended up calling Richard Miller, the man who made the map. I tracked him down and I called him because I just wanted to interview him. So I wrote about him so I kind of got to be phone friends with him. And he would send me all this information. I would send him stuff and it just kept kind of mushrooming and mushrooming until before you know it you become one of those go-to-people. Where you know they want to know about this, go to her, she writes about it. So, people kept telling me more about it. So I kept getting more and more. And people were giving me their books and their stories. And I had so much. I mean I have files and files and files at home. I don't even know where to put it all.

And then I called this man Preston Truman because I knew he'd been dealing with this. He's a farmer in Malad [Idaho] now. But he's from Enterprise, Utah, so I called him up and I said: "I've been meaning for years to call you." And he said "Oh, and I've been meaning for years to call you." So we started this phone friendship and email correspondence. And he—that man has a photographic memory and collects everything and has massive files at his house. So I drove up to Malad [Idaho] one weekend to just start going through his stuff. And he was giving me stacks and stacks of things to copy and take home. And he's and you know just a real character. He's like Yosemite Sam. He's just passionate and fabulous and kind of this one man movement. And so he would just start sharing everything with me. And then we'd start plotting together on things. And it just kept mushrooming and mushrooming, like I said, and we kept

expanding what we did. And we would pull other people in and we found people in seven different states that we would send things to and they'd send things to us. And so I mean we kind of slowly have been letting people know: "You know, it wasn't just southern Utah. It wasn't. The wind blows, the water flows. It's not going to stay in one place. And there's plenty of research to back that up." So we kind of just kept plugging away.

But, I'll tell you, being an activist on that thing, you meet so many people who are in their final days and who are dying and are too sick to do the work themselves. And it's really really heartbreaking. And it's hard work, I mean emotionally. It just takes a huge toll. I had a woman call me up one morning, I was on my way to work. I answer the phone. She was telling me about how she lost three babies to leukemia back in the fifties. And now her two surviving adult children have cancer. And I couldn't even got off my swing. I just sat on the swing and I can't even go in to work that day. I was just, some days it would just really get to me and I think I just can't stand hearing any more of this. And then, you know, of course my sister's getting sicker and sicker. And she's trying to do what she can. And then she died, which was like a huge kind of pivotal turning point for me. When she died it was like okay now I have to really fight. I have to fight for her. I have to fight for her kids. And that's when I think I just jumped into it. And a little bit at the expense of other areas of my life. Because you just only have so much energy in a day and to do emotionally really hard work like that. And it's also work where people are constantly saying to you: "Well how do you prove it? How do you prove it? Prove it. Prove it." And there are these detractors who say: "Oh you have no evidence." And they're nasty a lot. Most of them have connections to the defense industry. But they can really make your life miserable. And so some days you think: "God, why do I even do this? Why don't I just do what other people do and just have a nice normal life where I go home and have fun? Why do I go

home and I just work on this?" And but in a way there's something that just keeps pulling you and you can't stop doing it. And I, I've just met so many incredible people whose—I mean they're suffering so much. And I mean they're people who can't walk, there are people who've lost multiple organs, and I just think: "You know, I'm one of the lucky ones, 'cause I'm pretty much okay now." And all I have are my words so I will use my words to fight this fight and just kept doing that. And the people, really the people you meet are just so amazing. And a lot of them would say to me: "I used to fight this. I just can't do it anymore. I don't have it in me anymore. I have to let someone else do it now." And you know one thing we all worry about—like I always say to Preston, it's just like you know he wasn't that well, he's had a lot of health issues. And I think you know he's like the institutional memory of the whole Downwinder thing. And I think, "God when he goes, who's going to take over for him? I mean who's going to step in to fill these shoes of the people who are going to die?" And it's almost like we need this new generation that gets it to come up and help fight that fight and to take over and keep the word alive. Because if people don't know what happened, it's as though you're erased. It's like it's not there. And the worst thing is to be erased and that's kind of, especially with my sister, I just don't want her to have died in vain you know. People have to know that that whole Cold War had casualties and that people died. You know they always say, 'Well you know it saved us… from war, it saved us from this." And I think no it didn't. We had a war we just didn't admit that we were in it. We killed our own people. And Russia killed its own people. What kind of crazy governments do that? In a way there's this thing, there was a professor at UVSC[2], well I guess it's the university now but he talked about this Japanese thing called tsi gu giri[3]—I think that's how you say it—where Samurai warriors had this practice to make sure that their swords were sharp enough for battle. They would hide in waiting and then they would jump out and attack

one of their own. And they would do this cross cut that would go from the shoulder to the hip crosswise. If it didn't cut the person in half, their sword wasn't sharp enough. And in a way, what's the difference between what they did and what our government did? It was all about making sure your weapons work and testing them on your own people to make sure they work. So to me it was an incredibly unethical thing to do. And not telling them—not warning them. So they never gave people any warning. They gave Kodak and other film manufacturers warning so that they could protect their film, but they never gave people any warning. And so we were all put in harm's way. We were all put at risk. And you know, you look at the… they're called atomic veterans, the soldiers that they would—have in these trenches at the test site when they blew up the bombs.[4] Then they'd march them into ground zero through that dust and everything else. All to see how soldiers would behave in the event of a nuclear attack. Well there were about four hundred thousand of those troops. Our government made our own troops guinea pigs. It was strictly to see what it would do to them. They were guinea pigs. That's the role they were playing in the defense of America which to me is immoral. So we had nuclear testing—and it doesn't kill people outright—it takes sometimes decades for those cancers to show up. It can take up to forty years. So people are still getting sick from that. When you look at that lag time, that's why people just don't put it together. They don't get it. So it's not just the testing though that killed and sickened our own people, then they decide they have to do something with this nuclear technology they have. So they do that whole Atoms for Peace thing. Well, let's do nuclear power. Let's use it for good, not evil. They even thought of building the Panama Canal with a nuclear bomb. They thought of building a bay in Alaska with a nuclear bomb. They did insane things. That was all called a Plowshares Project, you know. But you look at then what you get once you have nuclear energy, and you look at the nuclear waste it creates. So we're still dealing

with all these vexing problems created by that damn splitting of the atom. I mean we've got nuclear waste now and they have no clue what they're going to do with this stuff. And yet you know we're in a place now where they say no global warming. It would make sense to go to nuclear. But you go to nuclear and to me that's irresponsible until you've figured out what you do with that waste. And they don't have a plan. You don't shoot an astronaut into space without a plan to bring him back you know. And they just think they can keep creating this stuff and one day we'll figure out what to do with it. But they don't know what to do with it. And meanwhile it's leaching through. It's breaking you know into, into places. And you've got the whole disposal of those nuclear weapons. Look at Hanford [Washington] and just what a toxic dead zone that is. And Hanford, I mean that stuff's starting to leak into the Columbia River. And once it gets to the Columbia River what'll they do? I mean how do you stop it? I think they've just created this massive poison and they don't know what to do with it. It's like this horrible Pandora's Box and you can never stuff it all back in. So we've kind of doomed ourselves. I just think that what mankind kind does in the name of protecting their people is sometimes worse than what the enemy can do to you. So it's really, I think to me it's just a tragic tragic thing. And yeah, I hear the word nuclear it makes me sick to my stomach. So I do have a built in prejudice.

SS: So you anticipated my next question which was, what is the problem with nuclear waste.

MD: Oh, ya, ya, Okay.

SS: But I'm wondering what do you see as a solution in the nuclear waste problem?

MD: You know well, A, I see not creating any more of it until we can come up with a waste solution. And you know it's kind of interesting 'cause people will always ask that, "What do you see as a solution?" and I think that's so funny that they ask people with no science background, with no physics background, "Well so what's your solution?" It's like, you're asking me? I'm

not someone who can come up with a solution. We need some of the best minds around to be working on this, to find a way to deal with this because I don't think storing it's such a good idea. You never know what'll happen over all those years. I mean the half like of that stuff is so long that you're not just finding a solution for now; it's got to work for eternity basically 'till the planet goes. So I don't have the solution, but there have to be minds out there. If there were minds that figured out how to split the atom, if there were minds that figured out how to get a man on the moon, we should be able to find the minds who can figure out what to do with that waste.

SS: Who has been and will be affected by nuclear waste disposal?

MD: I think everybody, I mean when you look at—obviously the people who live around nuclear plants will be affected. Obviously the people who live at the sites where they're trying to dispose of nuclear weapons will be affected. Anybody who are immediate downwinders are going to be affected. But it doesn't just affect them, it affects—if you look at the maps of where they propose to ship all that nuclear waste – you know when they were thinking of shipping it temporarily to Skull Valley, in Utah, and you look at those maps, they were going to use regular rails and road. I mean regular transportation systems mean the waste would've gone through Chicago, it would have gone near our [commercial/industrial railroad] tracks [or city commuter light-rail TRAX], you know by the Rio Grande [a historic rail depot opened in 1911]. I mean it would have gone through major cities. And how irresponsible is that to have this stuff that's so toxic you really can't clean it up? I mean how irresponsible to think we're just going to drive this across the country? You know accidents won't happen, fires won't happen. I mean they're so worried about acts of terrorism. Do you know how easy it would be for a terrorist to just make that a bull's eye? Wait 'til it got to a city and just hit it? It puts anyone on that road at risk. It puts

anyone at risk where they wanted to temporarily store it. They have this idea that because they're not physically by the problem, they don't really care that much. I remember going to Washington, and trying to lobby. And these people saying well I think it's safe. It's like "Oh if it's so safe why aren't you storing it here in Washington? And if it's so safe, why aren't you testing near Washington?" And some of them would say, "Well, I have no problem with that, I have no problem with that." "Then why don't you push for it?" "Let's watch you push for it." I just think they don't look at the consequences of their actions. They never look long term. They just want an immediate solution. They want something easy, something politically expedient, so they can say well we took care of it. And they never look at the long term, because on this one if you don't look at the long term, you're an incredible fool because that stuff lasts forever. So you can't just say well for now I'm going to do this. That'll take care of it. To me it's like having a string of murder cases and the police just pick someone they're going to say did it so they can say it's solved and put it away. And you can't just do that. You can't find a fast political solution. You have to be incredibly thoughtful. And you have to have long-range vision. Which, let's face it our politicians aren't encouraged to have long-range vision. They are encouraged to have a vision long enough to the next election and that's it. Very few of them look farther than that.

SS: And so how did you see your current role in the nuclear issues debate. Because if you were an activist, primarily to advocate for getting more compensation for people who were downwind, has your role changed since then, or do you see you're still raising awareness about that?

MD: Right. I think my role is to raise awareness and to put a human face on it. I think it really helps people, I mean you can get up and you can talk numbers and you can tell one horror story after another. But if they see you and they have to look in your eyes and you tell a very human, very moving story, that's really hard to ignore. And I think for me probably my biggest role was

to write that play, *Exposed*. Because that I think reached people on a gut level in an incredibly personal way that I was never able to do just by speaking. I mean speaking I did a lot and I still do a lot, but I never saw the impact of words like that play had. I mean that really shook people up.

SS: Can you talk about some of the reactions to that?

MD: Sure, sure. I think one of the things and it started early on when I first had the script and Plan B Theater that wanted to produce it, said let's do a week of workshops. I didn't know what that meant. And "Okay sure I'll do that. What could we possibly do for a whole week?" I have no clue. And what they do is they would have actors read through it and then at the end of it, the actors would give you feedback about what works dramatically, what doesn't. It was so interesting because we got to the end of it, nobody wanted to talk about the dramatic structure or any of that. They all had a story. One of the women said, "You know, I had thyroid cancer." Another guy said, "My mom's dying right now of liver cancer. I never even thought about this." Another one said, "My aunt has lupus." And the director said, "Oh my god, my mother has cancer now and is fighting for her life," because she was from one of the counties that can be compensated. So all of the sudden it becomes incredibly personal to people and they start making connections. They wanted to talk about the issue. And they wanted to tell their stories, until finally you know, this went on for like an hour and the director said, "Okay now we have to get back to the play. Let's talk about the play. What works, what doesn't" and one of the actors said, "Well obviously it works 'cause look at us. It's all we want to talk about." And we had a reading for an audience, and it was kind of nerve-wracking. And I thought, "Okay how're they going to take it, how are they going to take it?" And one of the women was visiting from San Francisco. And I thought well she's not going to get this at all. But she was sitting next to me. And oh my

god, during this whole play, that's all I would hear. "Oh my god. [Gasp] Oh my god," through the whole play. And I thought: "It works. It works, it works, it works." It's like being slapped in the face. And then it gets to the end, and the end is just a reading of the list of names of people who died. And the very last name is my sister's. And by the time you get to that, people are sobbing. And I would have people come up and say, "Would you add this name? Add this name." And so we decided that during the production, we had this huge chart on the back of the wall in the theatre and we encouraged people to add names, and every night we got more names. By the end of that run we had triple the number of names we'd had. And I would be outside, and I went to a lot—it was really hard for me to watch it over and over because it's my story and it rips me up. My own words make me cry. And I would be outside when people came out, and Oh my god this playwright I really respect, Julie Jensen [playwright, Resident Playwright at Salt Lake Acting Company] came out just sobbing, she couldn't even talk. She said "I'm speechless. I can't talk, I can't talk." She said, "I've got to help you get this around." And then she said, "And add my cousin's name, she just died." And it's god everybody who came had someone they've lost. It was unbelievable to me. So the reaction was incredible. I mean this columnist from Chicago writes about nuclear issues came out on his own dime. They didn't send him. He came; he wanted to see it. He brought his sister. His wife had died of pancreatic cancer. Her husband had died of cancer. So the two of them came to see it and were just incredibly moved. And he wrote this column that was just the greatest thing that ran in—the Chicago paper and papers all over the country. So then I start getting calls from other people. Then a columnist from *The Guardian* London was speaking at the U [University of Utah] that week and I was moderating. I invited him to come see it. So he wrote about it in *The Guardian* in London. And it went online and it was like wow. I mean it really hits people. And it's kind of amazing, and and I

still have people calling me up saying, "I saw your play and now so and so's died." And there was a woman in my office—this was during that whole workshopping—and the whole Divine Strake [a planned test of a high-explosive, non-nuclear, large-yield weapon at the Nevada Test Site] thing. And Divine Strake got cancelled that day. So I'm madly writing a scene before I go down to this reading. And I'm frantic cause it's four o'clock. I'm trying to get done. I have to be there at six. And I get this phone call from the woman down the hall here who said, "They just told me I have stage three ovarian cancer." And it's like, "Oh shit," they were rushing her to the hospital. And it's like "Oh my god. It just never ends." Six family members of hers had died of various cancers. She was from the Circleville [Utah], which is pretty close. So it was like, I can't take much pleasure in this victory of Divine Strake because it's not going to stop anyone from dying. And she's since died so her name's now on the list and it's just I think the power that thing has to me is just pretty remarkable. It's like I said, it tells a story and makes it human in a way that speaking about it and showing the maps and everything just doesn't. And so that's my role. I think my role is to put a really human face on it. And I've kind of slacked off, cause I'm just exhausted. You know I'll tell you, that play took everything out of me. We toured it around Utah last November [2008] so I had to like live through the whole thing again. And we've done it a couple other places. They're doing it in St. George in September [2009]. And I haven't done that much activism because I am just worn out. I need a rest. So I really understand now what this woman in St. George said when she said "I just have to pass the torch to someone else." I get what she means. It just sucks it all out of you. I mean there was a time I came home and my husband was like—you know it was really incredibly hard on my marriage too—and my husband came home and he said, "How long are you going to be doing this? How long is this going to last?" And I just looked at him and said, "It's never going to end. Don't you see, it's never going

to be finished. It's never going to be over." We're upstairs on our balcony we have these big catalpa trees. And he said "I just worry about you, you're always surrounded by death and dying. I just worry about you, I worry about you." And I'm sitting there and I look up at these tree branches and I say, "Oh look that one's dead. That one's dead." Then he says, "Would you stop looking at the dead? Just look at the living. Look at the living." And I thought god maybe that's what I need to do. Maybe I need to just stop this. I didn't but…

SS: Thought about it.

MD: I thought about it. Yeah. It does take a toll. It does. But in a way I had this one friend and he said, "You know knowledge is responsibility and now you can't stop." And sometimes I wish I had the luxury of not knowing all this. But I don't. And I feel like I should be doing more with the whole nuclear waste thing. I should be keeping up on that more, but it's so much work to keep abreast of all that. I try to help out when I can. But it's, it's kind of hard and I think maybe what I need to do is just focus more on getting this play around. I have an agent in New York. I got an agent and I didn't know that she would take me because she works with real playwrights. When she called me up to say she wanted to represent me, she said you know I had my assistant read it. He asked me if you could please write a comedy next time 'cause he cried the whole way on his train ride to work. I said, I don't think I'm going to write any more plays, but I'll keep that in mind. Anyway that's my role. To be a voice. I'm lucky cause I work in television, and it gives you a bit of credibility especially when it's public TV. And I'm fearless about speaking and I give good speeches. So I think that's kind of my role, too, to go around and talk about it. I've been all over talking about it. I was in Japan last summer. I went for the anniversary of Hiroshima and Nagasaki with this group from American University. I spoke at a university in

Kyoto. It was interesting because they started calling me the American hibakusha. Do you know what a hibakusha is?

SS: No.

MD: It means survivor of the bomb. That's what they called all the people of Nagasaki and Hiroshima who weren't killed; they called them hibakusha. So they started calling me American hibakusha. And I got these great letters from Japanese students who were at this university saying, "We never knew America had hibakusha too." For them to be moved by my story after what we did to them. I lost it big time going to the museum in Hiroshima. I was a mess. I met the most amazing people and I never wrote about it. I should have. But I met the woman who was the daughter of the minister in the book Hiroshima –you know John Hersey's book—the minister in that book, his daughter was eight months old the day the bomb dropped and his wife had covered her, so she survived. The daughter was in that audience and she was amazing. Koko. I loved her. And I actually went to the museum with her and a group of students and I was such a mess after that museum. She kept saying, "Are you okay? Are you okay?" I said, "You're the one who survived the bomb. I'm just looking at what we did to you and I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry we did that." It was—it was a powerful, powerful experience. So I think it's not just spreading the word in this country. Other countries don't know what we did to them. Our radiation was measured in the milk in Québec and in Toronto. They measured it there, which violated international treaties, but Canada never did anything about it. They measured it in the soil in Great Britain. The fallout went everywhere and there's still a lot of it floating around out there. In fact, this is interesting 'cause I got to be friends with this incredible Air Force crewman. I just love him. He just called me today. He's in his mid-to-late eighties now and he used to fly the planes they sent out after the tests to measure the fall out. And he told me he tracked it all the

way to Canada. And he told me how hot the planes were when they came back. And he told me how they would just rinse them off with a hose and how that water would go into gutters. He's got all sorts of great stuff for me. I just love this man and once he retired he started telling all this. I guess the Army or the Air Force doesn't like him at all now. He's kind of persona non grata. He says, "I just hope they don't take my retirement away." Here's this sweet little eighty-four year old man. One day I was at his house 'cause he's been giving me all his files bit by bit cause he said his kids don't really want them, so he called me today 'cause he has some more for me. And he said, "I've got a core sample of the granite at the test site before and after. And I'd like to give them to you cause I know my kids don't want them." I said, "Of course I want them." And then I started thinking. And I said oh my god the one after is going to be full of radiation. He had shown it to me at his house. He pulled it up, it was just solid pink like quartz. That's what happens when granite melts at extremely high temperatures. I said, "Oh my god, get that thing out of here. Get that thing out of here." And now he wants to bring them to me. What will I do with them? I don't know what to do with them?

SS: Put them in the city dump. No just kidding.

MD: I don't have a lead box. Do you think I could buy a lead box?

SS: Maybe donate it to the University of Utah or something.

MD: You know what, maybe that's what I'll do. You know what I should see if the Museum of Natural History wants it. I'd give it to the Atomic Testing Museum but I don't trust them. They're paid for by the Department of Defense and by all of the defense industries and they're… god their museum's disgusting anyway. I went down there too. I said I represent downwinders in seven states which I did. I had letterhead. So I went down to meet with their director who takes me on a tour and tells everybody to be really nice to me, that we're all going to be working with

her so we get downwinders represented here. Of course they never did. But their whole thing is like big cheerleader for the bomb and how the bomb saved us. It would make you sick. It gave me a huge headache. But I wrote about it. That column went all over. Yeah I think the writing helps me. But I haven't written anything since that play. Isn't that awful? I just don't have the energy. Press releases for KUED!

SS: Well I had another question about the play. I'm wondering if you think audiences make a connection between the play and your experience and nuclear waste issues—current nuclear waste issues.

MD: I think it makes them a lot more skeptical of nuclear waste. If they see what radioactive isotopes do to people. I think it makes them very, very skeptical. And mostly if they see the way the government lied for so many years and covered up for so many years. They don't trust what the government tells them now about it being safe. It's made them more skeptical, which is always a good thing. So I do think that helps. I think they do make a connection. They think we can't trust them. They'll lie to us about this. So I see that. I do see that.

SS: And then what was your writing strategy when you were writing the play? Or what made you do a play instead of …

MD: That is such a good question. It was an accident. I had actually—I had been invited to the Mesa Refuge in Point Reyes, California to work on a book about testing because I've got files and files of stuff—and I'd written this fifty-five page journal article and I thought, "I need to turn this into a book." Terry Tempest Williams helped get me into this writer's retreat and said "You need to write a book. This is your book; this is your book." So I thought, okay I'm going to write this book. So I was there one summer, working on it, working on it, working on it. And when I went home it wasn't finished. I had two hundred and seventy-five pages but I hadn't finished it. I

got so depressed when I came home, I can't tell you—'cause I thought I'm going to go back to my job, to my busy life. I'm never going to have the luxury on just working of this again and. I'm never going to finish it. And of course I haven't touched it. And so I got really really depressed. Well this woman came to town; this is such a wacky story. She played the hippie mom on *Dharma and Gregg* that TV series, but she's a real activist. She was in town for something and I had to give her a ride. Somehow we get to talking and there had been all this thyroid trouble in her family in New Jersey. And I said, "were you from Bergen County." She said, "Yeah how'd you know." And I said, "Oh cause that was an area that got a lot of fall out." And so then I said, "I'll send you a piece I wrote." So I sent her my journal article. I still have her message on my phone. She called me up and she said, "Wow. You have to write a play. You have to write a play." And I'm like, "No I'm a journalist. I don't write plays." She said, "No, you need to write this. I'll get my friends to do it. You need to write this." So just for fun, I—no no I know what it was. I didn't do anything. Cause I'm thinking oh sure you get your friends to do it. So she calls me up and says, "How's the play coming?" And it's like, "Oh fine." "Well when can I see something?" "Oh soon." And so that night I started working on it. And I had no idea what I was doing. But I had… these great minutes from Atomic Energy Commission meetings. And I had all this great material so I thought I'll just do a series of monologues. Which is what I did. But it just didn't work. I didn't know what to do. So I have a lot of actor friends and I asked them to come over and read it for me and give me feedback. And it was really obvious hearing it out loud that the monologues didn't work. I needed to do something else. But I just wasn't sure what to do. So I sent what I had to that actress. And she said, "Mary you're not telling your story. You have to tell your story." I said, "I can't. It's too painful." "You have to tell your story," she said. "That's where the drama is. You've got to tell your story." And she said, "You've got to have the

sisters in it. You've got to have the sisters. They've got to frame it." And so I started writing scenes with me and my sister. And that's how I ended up starting it. There are scenes and monologues with all the people, like Preston, who I've dealt with. But the glue is the story of the sisters. And she was right, it worked. And oh my god that was hard to write. I would just sit at the computer and cry, and cry. That was really hard. But you know what, she was right. She just kept saying. That's got to be it. The best writing comes from pain. And then I hooked up with Aden Ross who is a playwright in town. I just love that woman. She's the best woman ever. And she had run into me at a dance concert and said, "I've got to talk to you. I want to pick your brain. I want to write about the downwinders." I said, "Oh well you know I'm kind of writing this thing." And she said, "Oh, oh then you write it. It's your story. Of course you should write it. I'll help you. I'll give you any feedback you want. But you should write it, of course it's your story." She was just so gracious and so beautiful and wonderful. And so I would go have coffee with her. And I'd give her what I'd written, and she would come back the next day. This was so generous of her, well she would type up notes on what I had written and what worked and didn't. And she was like this godsend. And she was just so so amazing. I couldn't have done that without her. She knew how to structure things. And then she'd say, "Oh you've just got this great arc here. I love the way you arced it so it goes…" I had no idea that's what I was doing. But, you know, I got it done. And in a way you're never finished. Poor Jerry Rapier, the director—he'd say, "Mary I've got to have it by this date cause we've got to start rehearsals." Okay, okay, okay and I'd sent it to him and then I would call him up and say, "Okay I want to change something. Okay I need to add this piece. Okay I need to change that." And finally he said, "Mary it's finished. You cannot make anymore changes. It is finished. You can't keep changing it." It's like, "Okay, okay." I had to just abandon it. So I did.

SS: Last set of questions. Who do you think is responsible for the nuclear waste situation?

MD: I think that would have to be—I don't know which branch of the government it is but they never insist—well it's obviously the nuclear industry, too, but there was never a plan laid out for how to get rid of it before they started storing it. And I think the industry, you can't trust it to police itself. And the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, you can't trust them to police it even. They're all responsible for what happened. Then did not do the right thing at the very beginning, and say, "before we start doing this let's have a plan for what we do with this waste." They kept extending deadlines and then they'd give them deadlines. And they'd say, "Oh never mind cause you can't do it." Then the industry would say, "Well we don't want to store it here anymore. We can't store it near our facilities. We need a place to put it." They dragged their feet so much—all of them. They don't really have an incentive to do anything about it. But even if they got rid of their waste and moved it to some government repository like Yucca Mountain—they're all Limited Liability Corporations which means they have no liability for anything that goes wrong which I think that's a huge mistake. That to me is a little nutty, too. Maybe it's just something I don't get, but to me that's nutty.

SS: Is there anything that I haven't asked about that you would like to add?

MD: No, I just think that so often people have this idea—and I've seen it all around me. You know people are saying, "Why do you bother? Why do you do this? You're not making a difference." And I've just seen too often how a few passionate people who make a lot of noise can change things. I've seen it happen over and over. Look at the whole Divine Strake thing. I look at that, that was the people getting motivated, writing letters, sending emails. Eleven thousand people responded to say "No, you cannot do this test here." When you make a noise, and you get people behind you, they will listen. They canceled it. I couldn't believe they

canceled it. I was sure they were just going to go ahead and do it. So I think people underestimate their own power. If you don't do something you're kind of leaving your future and these decisions that will affect you in deeply personal ways to people who have no incentive to watch out for you. So you're abdicating your future. You're abdicating what happens to you. You're letting someone else decide what will happen to you and what you'll be exposed to. People should never underestimate their own power. We do make a difference sometimes. We're not going to win every time and the fight's really never over. It's this constant battle. You can never say, "Well, we stopped Divine Strake we can go to sleep now." No cause they'll always come up with something new. There will always be a new thing to fight and you have to be ready to do it. Cause all victories are temporary. That's something Preston Truman always says, "all victories are temporary." And it's true. They are. So you have to constantly be on guard. You have to constantly watch. And sometimes I think all it takes is just saying, "We're watching you. We're watching you. Don't think you can just do whatever you want because we're watching." I think sometimes, that's incredibly powerful too. Otherwise they will get away with murder. If you just say there's nothing we can do. And they'll try to get away with everything you don't want them to get away with. People need to be aware that they can be part of a change. They really can.

SS: Great. Is there any other person that you would suggest we interview?

MD: Well you know if you could interview Preston. Oh my god you'll get the biggest kick out of him. He's such a cowboy and he's got the most colorful language.

SS: What's his last name?

MD: Truman. He's like, "Well if you can't buy'm off you might as well stick a pitch fork up their ass."

SS: [Laugh.] So…

MD: I mean, he's very colorful. He was the comic relief in the play.

SS: Oh good.

MD: And everything was exactly what he said. I didn't make up his lines. I'm going to give you his number.

SS: Oh great, Okay.

MD: He would be great. I'd give you Michelle Thomas, but she's just so worn out from it.

SS: Okay.

MD: I don't think she's got the energy to do it any more. Let's see did you talk to Vanessa Pierce, from HEAL?

SS: Yeah.

MD: And Jason? Jason Groenwold.

SS: I don't know if we have.

MD: He might be out of town for the summer. Let me get you Preston. I like Preston. And you know what's so great about Preston, he is like this total farmer with this big bushy red beard, big red hair, always wears a cowboy hat. Has a voice like this, and raspy and just so off color. He's great but... He's actually been with his partner since he was fifteen. And they went to California to get married. So he's a gay activist too.

SS: That's super long.

MD: Isn't that amazing? Somebody needs to make a movie of his life. I tell you that man's one of a kind. I just love him. Okay where's the number. Okay, it's 208-766-5849. But you know what, you better look at it my eyes are bad. Make sure I gave you the right number.

SS: 208-766-5649. 5649.

MD: Okay, see I can't see.

SS: That's it. Thank you.

MD: Okay. He would be great. I'm trying to think of who else. I'm watching this and working on it. Well you know Steve Erickson—let me get you his number. He does a lot of behind the scenes stuff with the legislature. How many do you need? I could just keep giving you names.

SS: [Laugh] I don't know. I think that yeah I'm not sure what Danielle's ultimate goal is at this point.

MD: [muffled] I don't know what's wrong with my iTouch but I have like fifty numbers for everybody.

SS: So if it doesn't have an area code do you think that's 801?

MD: Yeah, he's 801. Sorry.

SS: That's okay 801-3—home number or work number or home or cell. What do you think would be better?

MD: I'd call his cell. It's easier to get him on his cell.

SS: 554-9029.

MD: You know who else is great, did you do Claire Geddes?

SS: I'm not sure.

MD: She's fabulous. She was at every hearing. Oh she's a fire brand. Lets the legislature know how bad they are, and misguided. She's great. You'll really like her. I've just met the best people who work on all this. Okay, there's Claire. She's gone to about just every hearing I've been to. I bet you can reach her at home.

SS: So home, 801-943-3654. Thank you. If you think of anybody else, you have my email.

MD: Okay great I will, I'll send them to you.

SS: Thank you so much for this

MD: You are so welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW

---

[1] According to imdb.com, this 1983 film starred Jason Robards but Jane Alexander does not make the cast list. Possibly instead referring to JoBeth Williams who played Nurse Nancy Bauer. http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0085404/

[2] Utah Valley State College – now Utah Valley University located in Orem, Utah

[3] The Japanese art and practice of "test cutting" is known as tameshigiri. The specific cut referenced here, shoulder to hip, or downward diagonal, is referred to as Kesa-giri. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tameshigiri

[4] For more on atomic veterans visit: http://www.atomicveterans.org/ or http://www.naav.com/