

It's The Environment!
Remembering Theo Colborn
December 16, 2014

Two days ago, we lost a hero to the passage of time and the inevitable fading of life energies that come over all of us. Theo Colborn died on Sunday, December 14, 2014, in Colorado after a distinguished career in environmental science. She was known for her work on endocrine disrupting chemicals that began more than 25 years ago and continues today. A brief obituary is on the web site for The Endocrine Disruption Exchange (TEDX) that she founded and continues on in her memory (see www.edocrinedisruption.org). An excellent biography written by Elizabeth Grossman is linked to the TEDX web site.

Any time we lose someone who is personally close to us is a time for reflecting on the life that has passed, their accomplishments and how we were touched and changed by that person. I met Theo in the early 1990's in Washington, DC, at a workshop on endocrine disruptors when she was at WWF. Theo had recently completed one of the early publications on the topic, following a Wingspread meeting, and this event was one of a series that was "touring" the country with her co-authors. I had not heard of Theo Colborn, but knew the late Howard Bern and had heard of John McLachlan and other speakers. The event was one of those life changing events because the intellectual connections were accompanied by personal connections - all of which endure today.

Over the past 25 years, the field of environmental science has grown, become more visible, become more public and now counts endocrine disruption as a major effort worldwide. The Colborn had a great deal to do with the eye-opening that took place in the 1990's and later. While Theo was well received, her message raised eyebrows and concerns. Honest scientific skepticism gave way to discovery and realization as biologists working on different parts of the topic learned from the perspectives of colleagues working on other animals, other systems and at completely different levels of organization. Thanks to Theo, the "Wildlife Human Connection" opened the eyes of so many people in the environmental fields. The eye-opening extended to the managers and regulators, legislators and decision-makers. Twenty-five years ago the term endocrine disruption was not in use, and the topic of chemical alteration of hormone systems was little known outside of pharmaceutical fields and entomologists. Thanks to the efforts of Theo and others who joined the effort to make a safer world, we find that BPA is no longer in our water bottles and green chemists are in demand.

The effort that Theo Colborn began years ago has now entered the mainstream, and we will never be able to go back. Thank you, Theo.

Peter deFur, Ph.D.
Henrico, Virginia