

Feature
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In Pursuit of Waste

Annie Leonard's crusade has spanned 20 years, 30 countries, and tons of garbage.
By Noelle Robbins

Annie Leonard doesn't see herself as a superhero—just someone doing her job. During the past 20 years, she's squared off against her share of bad guys, managing narrow escapes and prevailing against injustice. She's taken risks and leaps of faith, witnessed heartbreak, set in motion forces of change and hope, and played a crucial role in making the world a cleaner, safer, and healthier place for us all. In the process she has garnered praise as one of the top activists in the field of environmental and social justice—praise she accepts with genuine modesty.

Annie, 43, coordinates the Funders Workgroup for Sustainable Production and Consumption. The organization's goals fit right in with her worldview: we can create a flourishing global economy that conserves fragile resources and promotes human well-being.

Although Annie's current work often finds her spending time behind a desk and on the phone setting up meetings and conference calls, her life has not always been so tame. Annie's résumé detailing the past two decades includes investigative reporter, gymnast, and undercover cop. She's rubbed shoulders and shared feasts with judges and rag pickers, legislators and rickshaw drivers, working with Greenpeace International, Health Care Without Harm, and other nonprofits on the front lines of a struggle to raise awareness about the toxic hazards and the human costs of our contemporary consumer lifestyles.

Downright scary, physically treacherous, and lonely at times, Annie's labors have also often been, as she likes to say, "absolutely hilarious!" Many of her tales of environmental sleuthing revolve around terrifying misadventures with unexpectedly comical twists. Despite the hardships and the fear, she never loses her perspective or irrepressible sense of humor.

Annie is "enthusiastic to the point of obsession," says her good friend, former Greenpeace colleague Kenny Bruno. "She laughs a lot, even at the depressing, dirty

nature of our work and the uphill battles we face.” And, Kenny adds, “Annie is principled but not preachy.”

Her principles served her well when her search for the truth about international hazards of toxic waste and recycling met her resolve to share the facts with consumers worldwide, resulting in the creation of her video web documentary, *The Story of Stuff*, released in the fall of 2007 (www.storyofstuff.com). This spunky, rapid-fire 20-minute film features Annie and, with lively graphic animation, illustrates the birth and the death of consumer products—the tons of stuff we buy, throw away, and buy new again, often without a second thought about where it comes from or where it goes. Annie’s message distills her years of experience: what we purchase, how it’s made, and where it’s disposed of can have negative consequences for people in poor countries throughout the world. Annie never lectures, just asks us to become conscious consumers, offering concrete tips for making choices that can shift the balance toward a cleaner, healthier planet. It’s a punchy presentation delivered with a dose of wit, and it’s become a global phenomenon.

Making a film about the realities of resource use and waste disposal was far from Annie’s mind nearly 16 years ago when she embarked on her quest to uncover the fate of the mountains of plastic we deposit in our recycling bins every day. Working for Greenpeace International as an international toxic trade campaigner, she used the Port Import Export Research Service database to locate ships hauling plastic out of the United States to China.

“In 1991, over 75 million pounds of U.S. plastic waste” went to Hong Kong, she says in her Greenpeace investigative report. In 1992 these shipments represented more than half the total of all U.S. plastic exports. Annie found conditions in Chinese recycling factories primitive. She discovered that although the U.S. government does not list plastics as hazardous waste, many contain toxic chemicals, exposing workers, including children, to significant health risks. Plastic residues also find their way into local soil and water supplies. As if that is not enough, Annie learned that products made with recycled plastic are of inferior quality because manufacturing changes plastic composition. The result: shoddy products that ultimately end up in landfills.

Uncovering the human and environmental costs of the plastic recycling export business propelled Annie forward through rough, grimy work, her relentless cheerfulness and sense of adventure rarely letting her down. “Oh, my god, it was so funny tracking this stuff down,” she says, feeling a little like Nancy Drew. Our plastic recycling was off to Hong Kong, with Annie in hot pursuit. Armed with nothing more than a list of addresses written in Chinese, which she couldn’t translate, Annie hopped an overnight boat from Hong Kong and rode buses deep into the Chinese countryside, following the trail of plastic. “I had no idea where I was going. I just kept going until I got to the factories and found tons and tons of plastic waste.”

Annie would boldly walk into factories using fake ID. She was a student, a journalist, sometimes a savvy waste trader. “I would say, ‘It is so great how you are developing your country on the discards of the United States I want to hear more about it.’ Or I would say,

'I want to send my garbage here for processing.' Sometimes I would say, 'I'm doing a research project.' Nobody would stop me. I would just walk into these factories. It was so rare for a white person to even be there. The assumption was that there must be some good reason (I was there) because I was in the middle of nowhere in China in these industrial areas. This was before there was a heightened awareness of environmentalists. I got away with a lot of stuff that I could not get away with now. I walked in, started taking all these pictures, and just walked out." Except for the time she was stopped cold in her tracks.

"One time I took so many pictures of this factory that was just full of United States garbage. As I was walking out, a worker came charging after me, and I was like, Oh shit! He demanded that I see the manager. I thought, Oh no, I'm in big trouble! It turns out the manager was upset because I was leaving before I had tea. So we had a cup of tea together," she laughs.

The findings of Annie's stealthy work supported Greenpeace International's campaign to ban exports of hazardous waste from the world's richest countries to the world's poorest. "Recycling is very often a superdirty, toxic industry, and Greenpeace asked the question, Why do people in third-world countries have to bear the price of our consumption in the U.S.? If we are going to use disposable toxin-laden stuff, we should have to deal with it ourselves," she says.

Annie knew that her research was a key element of the Greenpeace argument, and she followed every lead, inspired and determined. Sometimes, though, during her assignment in China, an overpowering sense of aloneness left her reeling.

She remembers renting a video camera from a Hong Kong electronics store to document the horrendous plastic waste processing conditions, endangered workers, and damaged local environment that she observed in factory after factory. The weather turned nasty, and Annie felt trapped.

"I was traipsing around the countryside in China, and it started pouring rain, and I had this video camera I had to keep safe. I just remember walking in the pouring, pouring rain, and I had to take my coat off to wrap around this video camera." She wandered the empty streets in the soaking torrents and became aware of eyes watching from behind curtains in the houses she passed. "I thought, You guys are all watching me in the pouring rain, and nobody even invited me in." She finally sat on a curb, drenched and miserable, momentarily filled with doubt, and wept. "Why am I not at home in my nice apartment in Washington, D.C.?"

In her heart Annie knew that the answer to that question had taken root many years earlier, while she was growing up in the beauty of the outdoors near her Seattle, Washington home. Spending hours with her family, camping and hiking in the forests of the Pacific Northwest, Annie developed a deep love for the natural world. She recalls long drives in the car, gazing at the green farms and woodlands flowing past her window.

She also remembers watching suburban sprawl slowly eating away at her beloved woods. Where are the forests going? she wondered.

Annie's mother, Bobbie Leonard, remembers her daughter's acute ability to observe and act, starting at a very young age. "She was interested in nature ever since she was a little kid. She would never step on a bug," Bobbie says. "Once a neighbor illegally cut down some tree branches to improve his view. Annie promptly got on the phone to report the violation." Needless to say he was not happy about being turned in. Annie was about 11 years old at the time.

When Annie left Seattle to attend Barnard in the urban jungle of New York City, she took her passion for nature with her. To her environmental science professor she declared her intention to be the first female secretary of the interior. But somewhere between her dorm room and the White House, garbage got in the way—piles of refuse on the sidewalks of New York to be exact. Annie found herself sifting through the discards initially fascinated, then horrified, by what people were throwing away. A college field trip to the Fresh Kills Landfill on Staten Island, which is large enough to be seen from outer space, produced an aha moment: This is where my forests are going!

Annie graduated in 1986 with a degree in environmental and political science and spent the next 10 years working on the Greenpeace International Toxic Trade Team. She never completed her master's in urban planning at Cornell. "When it came to Friday nights, it was a choice between working on degree requirements and stopping toxic waste dumps in Haiti," she says. For Annie the choice was easy. And the choices, if not exactly the work, have been easy ever since.

In the early 1990s, a Toxic Trade Team assignment took her to the Philippines to record the conditions in factories processing used car batteries and computer scraps for lead recovery. "That was so depressing," she shudders. She witnessed scenes straight out of the Middle Ages. "It was so horrific. These people, with no worker protection, smashing open the batteries, draining out the acid, pulling out the lead. I have photos of these guys standing over open vats of melting lead. It was unbelievable."

And it was extraordinarily risky. Work in the Philippines was perilous because officials were used to meddling environmentalists and were certainly not eager to have their hazardous recycling operations exposed to global public scrutiny. Annie hired hotel workers to accompany her to factory sites, leaving them with firm instructions to wait outside. "I'm sure they must have thought I was nuts." She told them, "If I am not back in one hour, call the U.S. embassy." She would climb over the walls of factories that wouldn't grant her access, run around taking samples and photographs, and run out. "In one battery factory, the guards pulled a gun on me and told me to get out of there, so I said, 'okay!'"

One of Annie's former Greenpeace colleagues and good friends is still in awe. "Annie was always completely focused on raising awareness, on a global level, of the practice of exporting waste to impoverished countries," says Heather Spalding, associate director of

the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association. “She traveled to dangerous regions of the world with only a camera, a few pieces of clothing, and very limited knowledge of the language.” Annie would capture images of what was happening, sometimes at great risk to her own health and life. “No matter what, she was always totally fired up and ready to go to places on earth that are poor, filthy, and polluted,” Heather says. “Annie is brilliant at strategies and at the same time so humble. She doesn’t care about recognition. All she cares about is getting information to effect change.” And she cares deeply about connecting with local residents in countries where she works. Robert Weissman, editor of the *Multinational Monitor*, has known Annie for more than 12 years. “She does not operate based on an abstract concern for the planet,” he says. “She is driven by concern for people living in marginalized communities all around the world—people too poor to live anywhere else.” This heartfelt concern shaped one of Annie’s most fulfilling experiences.

Seeking R&R between her Greenpeace India assignments, Annie discovered Varanasi, a small, quintessential Indian town on the Ganges. Annie and her cohorts who often came to visit became friends with a rickshaw wallah named Mongol. Mongol acted as tour guide to the local temples. Annie and her pals took their turns pedaling the rickshaw. When she asked Mongol what his house looked like, she was in for a big surprise. “He cleaned the whole house,” says Annie. “His wife cooked this phenomenal feast. There were live musicians, all the neighbors—it must have been a source of pride for Mongol but also an enormous expense, a feast for dozens of people in what really was a slum.” The feast became a regular ritual, but Annie insisted on footing the bill.

And her financial assistance went far beyond the neighborhood banquet. “One of my friends wondered if Mongol’s kids went to school,” she says. The answer, sadly, was no. So Annie and her friends chipped in to create an education-funding program for his four children. They covered tuition and uniforms and hired a tutor because the parents couldn’t help with schoolwork. “All of that came out to the price of one latte a day per person,” Annie says. “So my friends at home took up a collection and bought me an espresso machine.” In the past 10 years, Mongol’s children have received an undreamed-of chance at a better life.

Bharati Chaturvedi, a toxic waste activist in India, has known Annie since the mid-1990s. She’s not surprised that Annie took charge of the children’s education. “In Hindi we talk about firecrackers. There is no guarantee any will work. Some light up; some fizzle out. Annie is like a firecracker you know will always work. She explodes getting ideas done,” Bharati says.

For some problems, however, even Annie comes up short on solutions, a situation she finds heartbreaking. One particularly poignant moment stands out for Annie. In the early 1990s, her work on the toxic trade campaign took her to a Bangladesh village marketplace to search for fertilizer mixed with toxic waste, shipped from a U.S. company and sold to unsuspecting farmers for \$5 a bag. Annie found a man who had spread the poison on his fields. “I took soil samples, and he asked me what I was doing. With the help of a translator, we told him the problem and he got so excited. ‘Well I am glad you

found out. Now that you found out, I am sure your government will come clean it up.’ My heart sank. I had to tell him, ‘Well, actually, no,’” she says. It made her realize how disposable some people are—and how important it was to change that reality.

Sometimes, however, reality dramatically veers from Annie’s expectations, like the time she went to Cuba in 1993 on a global exchange program. When everyone in her group headed off to the beach, Annie went to the dump. “The tour leaders kept saying how great Cuba was, but I was skeptical. The only way I can know what is going on in a country is to visit the dump,” she says. Every dump tells Annie a story. Richer countries have more recoverable materials in the dump; poorer countries have an informal recycling population, which strips the dumps bare. Annie’s spent time in dozens of dumps in Latin America, Europe, Africa, and Asia. “I am used to seeing 20,000 people scavenging for food. I asked one young boy I saw in Cuba, ‘How come nobody lives here?’ I was just stunned. I had never seen a third-world country dump with nobody living there. He looked at me like I was from outer space. ‘Why would they want to live here?’ he asked. ‘They could live in a house.’”

Most of her work, however, does not uncover the kind of pleasant shock she found in Cuba.

Annie faced one of her biggest challenges on the Greenpeace team in India in the mid-1990s. The goal: support the UN effort to implement the Basel Convention, a ban on the export of hazardous waste from rich to poor countries for recycling. Annie’s task was to investigate import shipments and document the waste trade. She was up against powerful Indian business interests touting the economic benefits of job creation in their desperately needy country. Annie’s urgent charge was to expose the dirty, dangerous recycling industry before India could insert loopholes in the Basel Convention that would undermine its international clout—and time was running out.

In Bhopal, a city in central India, Annie found the evidence she needed. Huge industrial states were processing waste. “I went to the government guy whose job it was to develop industry, told him it was great they were recycling and that I would love to visit a factory that recycles,” she says. When she was granted access to the factory, nothing could prepare her for the appalling surroundings. “There was hazardous waste everywhere. The workers were carrying baskets on their heads—lead dripping out.” Her secret photos of the scene led to the making of a Greenpeace movie, *Slow Motion Bhopal*, which was screened at a key international meeting. The film offered graphic proof of the revolting work conditions at the factory and was instrumental in overcoming India’s objections to the Basel Convention.

Annie chuckles recounting how events unfolded. “By total coincidence the minister of the environment in India took the head of a factory—the very same polluted factory I had visited, the one Greenpeace filmed—to this pivotal Basel Convention international meeting. This factory was supposed to be a shining example of how well India handled waste,” she says. All the countries at the meeting were unified in their refusal to be the West’s rubbish bin—except India, where government and industry officials insisted that they wanted to take waste for recycling because they handled it so well. “Then they

showed Slow Motion Bhopal and jaws dropped.” The factory head was embarrassed and in grave trouble for violating environmental laws. Annie’s undercover work helped save the Basel Convention, but she had roiled the political waters, and her life was in danger. Andre Carothers, a longtime friend and neighbor, was used to hearing from Annie late at night, at least once or twice a year, with pleas for help. “She would call, ‘Get me out of this pickle!’” he laughs. “But really there was no one I would rather be with in India. It was thrilling to find yourself in the middle of an adventure with Annie, swept along in the Annie vortex.”

Andre, co-founder of the Rockwood Leadership Program, which would later present a life turning point for Annie, had no idea how serious this particular “pickle” was. Death threats followed her back to India. Thugs lured her to clandestine meetings in dark alleys.

She managed a slim escape during a hair-raising chase at a factory site by leaping into a bus of startled schoolgirls. Greenpeace hired a bodyguard for her protection, but, she says, laughing, “I was committed to nonviolence; I wouldn’t let him carry a gun.” And she remained undeterred in her mission. “I thought, What kind of inspiration am I to people if I say, ‘Hey, guys, let’s fight toxic waste,’ and the minute it gets scary I run away?”

Eight years ago, at 35, Annie’s life mission shifted forever when she gave birth to her daughter, Dewi.

Gary Cohen, co-executive director of Health Care Without Harm, who had known Annie for more than 10 years, saw a new, deeply intimate side of her life. “She protected that relationship—the mother and child bond—with fierceness, like a mother lion with her cub,” he says. At a Health Care Without Harm meeting, Annie demonstrated the power of that profound bond. “We were supposed to bring something that inspired our work, so I brought my brand-new infant and talked about breastfeeding: ‘We think of all the ways big polluting companies violate us—they contaminate our water, put toxins in our shampoos, our food, maybe our breast milk. I wanted to be a mother my whole life; I longed to be a mother. And when I finally got to be a mother, I should have been able to bring my daughter to my breast with 100 percent love and nothing else. But I had a shadow of fear when I breast-fed.’” Her impassioned speech continued: “I feel breastfeeding is the most fundamental human act of nurturing, and it should be safe and sacred. I want mothers everywhere to be able to breastfeed without fear.”

Annie’s motherhood fuels her commitment to her work and keeps her close to her Berkeley, California, home. This is fine with her because her world travels impressed on Annie one inescapable truth: change needs to start in your own backyard. “It is like the analogy—you see babies floating on the river and you can keep pulling them out, or you can say, ‘Who’s throwing the babies in the river?’ I had to come home,” she says, “because we’re the ones throwing the babies in the river.”

Annie wanted to share what she had learned—the ripple effect our consumer habits have in developing countries around the globe. She wanted to keep the babies out of the river. She had to tell the story. She just needed to figure out how.

A Rockwood Leadership Program training retreat supplied her inspiration. This nationally recognized organization coaches nonprofit leaders and activists. “One of the things we talk about is how we communicate our purpose,” she says. Annie launched into a presentation about “materials.” As she reached her conclusion, a well-known political activist raised his hand and said, “I have no idea what you just said.”

She was astounded. “I said, ‘You’re kidding! What’s not to understand? Too many materials, too-toxic materials.’” His response? “What’s a material?” She told him it was what he was sitting on. “No,” he said, “I’m sitting on a chair.” Annie didn’t see a chair. She saw vanishing teak forests, displaced woodland dwellers, and toxic varnishes. Then it hit her: “I had gone to so many factories and dumps around the world, where our stuff is made and where it is disposed of, that when I look at something its whole life cycle flashes before my eyes.”

The group challenged her to find a way to talk to regular people, and *The Story of Stuff* was born. Since its web release, *The Story of Stuff* has had more than 3 million views and has been seen in 214 countries. On some days Annie receives hundreds of e-mails from around the world.

Annie admits to mixed feelings about what she has seen during her years of global environmental activism. “I have a love/hate relationship with recycling. I love that it is a way to get people in this country to start thinking about stuff, especially young kids,” she says, “but I worry that it is too often presented as a magic bullet that will solve everything. Recycling is still dirty, it still takes lots of oil, and it still causes pollution. Our goal should not be to recycle more but to waste less.”

Gary Cohen calls Annie one of the midwives of a global movement. “She ranks with Al Gore as an iconic spokesperson for sustainability and health on this planet,” he says.

Annie accepts praise from her colleagues and friends—accomplished environmental trailblazers in their own rights—with a refreshing blend of reticence and bashful pleasure. But for Annie it’s never been about the accolades; it’s always been about making a difference.

Annie Leonard is many things: funny, passionate, and fearless. And when it comes to uncovering the toxic truth about all the stuff we buy, use, and throw away—or recycle—maybe a little bit of a superhero too.

Annie’s Tale

Annie’s film is funny and frightening and something every consumer should see. Here in the United States the message really hits home because, as Annie says, “If everybody consumed at U.S. rates, we would need three to five more planets.”

You can watch this 20-minute film at www.storyofstuff.com. You will also find tips on what you can do to help promote a more sustainable world—a world that values all its

citizens and uses its natural resources wisely. And remember, as Annie also likes to say, “When you throw stuff away, there is no away.” You can learn more about Annie’s work at www.sustainabilityfunders.org.

If you would like to follow in Annie’s footsteps, check out these websites:

Greenpeace International: www.greenpeace.org

Basel Convention—Basel Action Network: www.ban.org

Rockwood Leadership Program: www.rockwoodleadership.org Environmental

Grantmakers Association: www.ega.org