Speech by Michael Rose
at the Commemoration of
the 60th Anniversary of the Santa Susana Partial Nuclear Meltdown
July 13, 2019

Hello, I'm Michael Rose, and I'm so happy to be here at Rock the Clean Up. I want to thank the organizers Melissa Bumstead and Cindi Gortner for the opportunity to share how I stumbled on the Santa Susana meltdown. Also, to Denise Duffield who's been working on this for years with the Physicians for Social Responsibility, and her husband Michael Collins who's written extensively about it and my mentor and friend Dan Hirsch who's dedicated a good portion of his life trying to get this cleaned up and to make this area safe.

That is something that's long overdue. Actually, this July 13th marks the 60th anniversary of when this tragic accident occurred. You, the community, have been waiting far too long for something to be done. Since then people have tried everything they can to make it happen but have run into wall after wall and denial after denial. In too many cases, the results have been tragic. I couldn't have imagined that I would be here to today to talk about this not getting done 40 years after I uncovered what had happened at the Santa Susana Field site. To me, it's a crime scene.

Let me turn back the clock to March 16, 1979. That's the day when a low budget feature film "The China Syndrome" about a young reporter, played by Jane Fonda, and her brash cameraman, played by Michael Douglas, along with their soundman were filming at a fictional nuclear reactor in Los Angeles. Their guide, Jack Lemmon, is showing them how swell things work when suddenly all the lights, light up in the control room and the room starts shaking. They're told not to film this but Douglas does and he sneaks out the footage and shares it with some experts who conclude the plant almost melted down. The builders of the reactor and the operators deny there are any problems and falsify documents (that will never happen – right?) they show them at a hearing when they're trying to get permission

to build another reactor. Long story short, when Fonda and Douglas return to the reactor to confront the perpetrators about the cover up, another melt down occurs that could have taken everything "all the way to China." The China Syndrome. It was a terrific thriller but initially the critics panned it as being farfetched. Until 12 days later, when Three Mile Island happened.

Suddenly the China Syndrome didn't seem impossible. The country was transfixed by the endless news coverage of the partial nuclear meltdown occurring near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Remember, partial nuclear meltdown.

I was transfixed too. I'd seen the China Syndrome before taking a trip to Mazatlan, to spend some time on the beach where I thought I could come up with some ideas about a film I could make for my Project 1 at the UCLA Film School. I'd taken a leave to work with a group that produced a weekly investigative news show for LA's PBS station KCET and hadn't thought about school. I was a news junky, so I tracked down a copy of the International Herald Tribune while I was in Mexico and saw the headline about Three Mile Island. That was it. I decided immediately that I'd do a film about nuclear LA and what hazards there are in the city. I cut my vacation short.

I couldn't wait to get back to LA where I immediately went to see my friend, Dan Hirsch, and talk to him about my idea. While there, I spotted this letter (hold up the letter) from Leo Goodman, a scientist in Washington, D.C. who had been researching nuclear accidents in the United States. It included explosions, near-meltdowns and several deaths. One talked about an "incident" at the Sodium Reactor Experiment, the SRE that occurred on July 24, 1959. That's the reactor at the Santa Susana Field site. He was writing to Sandy Silver of an LA group, Another Mother for Peace, who along with Dorothy Boberg, had been researching nuclear sites in California.

Now an "incident" doesn't sound too bad. Does it? It went on to say that the operators had "observed" a series of "reactivity excursions." Again, an "excursion?" I'd just gotten back from Mexico. That was an excursion. As I waded through the scientific obfuscation that talked about "overheating of some fuel elements" and

"unusual situations" it dawned on me that there was more here than they wanted us to know.

Dan agreed that this could be something. So I started digging.

I went to the UCLA Engineering library which was an Atomic Energy Commission repository and had all of the nuclear program files on microfilm. Unfortunately, the microfilm reader light bulb was broken and the reader was outdated. The librarian didn't think they still made the bulbs but vowed to try to find one. About a week later she called and said she'd found one and I was in business.

I almost immediately found the press release that the Atomic Energy Commission issued on Saturday, August 29, (35 days after the melt down) according to the documents I'd seen before. Releasing this on a Saturday morning meant none of the newspapers would pick it up. They effectively killed the story but to be safe they loaded it with banal assurances for the public. It talked about "a parted fuel element" and the second paragraph followed that with the "fuel element damage is not an indication of unsafe reactor conditions." Basically, don't worry your pretty little heads, we got this.

For some reason, I didn't buy this. And ramped up my research at the library and learned to use the Freedom of Information Act when Rockwell International, the owners before Boeing, refused to cooperate with my investigation. The only thing I got from them was their explanation of why I couldn't find a license for the reactor. I was told "licensing was not required" because it was a government research operation.

While they'd gone silent after the accident, I discovered that the SRE's start up was a national event.

Edward R. Murrow, the famous war correspondent who'd stood on the roof of buildings in London and reported live while the German Luftwaffe bombed the city night after night, brought his CBS "See It Now" news crew to record the launch of the SRE. It would be the first nuclear reactor to provide electric power to a community. Murrow, along with the head of the Atomic Energy Committee were joined by 250 federal and local government officials and numerous business leaders

who came out to witness the lights turn off in Moorpark and then turn back on as Southern California Edison shifted to nuclear power. Murrow's crew stationed itself in the bedroom of a young boy doing his homework by a lamp festooned with cowboys on its lampshade. Nuclear power was going to help him see to do his studies. "A new era is born," said Murrow.

As the government studies started coming in from my requests it became clear this "new era" was going to be a nightmare.

Documents revealed that 13 of the 43 fuel rods in the reactor had melted, rupturing and spilling that caused a "massive release of fission products (aka radiation) into the coolant," according to one study.

When pressed about this, the company still wouldn't say how much of this radiation was released into the atmosphere and if any was released it "posed no hazard." We later learned that quite a spike of radiation was detected on monitors installed on the roof of City Hall in Los Angeles, 42 miles from the Santa Susana Field Laboratory.

This was due to the company opening the doors of the containment facility and letting enormous doses of radiation drift out of the damaged reactor. They collected the dosimeter badges of the workers so there would be no record of radiation exposure when they sent them in to wrest control of the reactor and to clean things up. They weren't ready for this disaster and it was so pitiful that they ended up using sanitary napkins to mop up because they were so absorbent.

Pete Noyes, a young reporter for the City News Service, noticed high radiation levels on the City Hall monitors and was going write a story. City officials got wind of that and told him he would be fired if he did. They didn't want to alarm the public.

Flash forward 20 years and Pete Noyes is the head of the investigative unit at KNBC and he green lights a series pitched to him by Warren Olney about the SRE meltdown. We'd gone to Warren and when he got the OK from Noyes they put together a ground breaking five part series that finally brought this story to the public. It was much better than my pathetic documentary I'd ended up shooting for my student project. So much for me being the Mike Douglas of documentaries.

We thought we'd done our job and whatever needed to be done would be done. Boy, were we wrong.

I got a couple of grants from the Liberty Hill Foundation and over the years Dan and a cadre of student volunteers worked tirelessly to make the truth be known. They uncovered numerous accidents and cases of worker exposure at the site; four reactor accidents that had occurred on the hilltop and that a number of reactors built by the company had suffered the same fate. These accidents left behind a legacy of radioactive pollution including plutonium -239, cesium-137, strontium-90 and tritium as well as toxic chemicals such as perchlorate, dioxins, trichloroethylene (TCE), heavy metals and PCBs. All of which can migrate into the surrounding communities.

All of this hard work attracted media attention that brought pressure on local governments and institutions to do something. The UCLA School of Public Health conducted an exhaustive study of the impact and found excessive levels of cancers among the exposed workers. There were mothers whose children had lost their eyes due to rare cancers, clusters of neighbors with life-threatening thyroid cancers, and numerous deaths of family members from cancer. Scientists determined that from 1988 through 1995, the incidence rate of thyroid, upper digestive tract, bladder blood and lymph tissue cancers were more that 60% greater among residents living within two miles of the field lab.

The data spurred politicians like Sheila Kuehl, and Senator Barbara Boxer to get an agreement in 2010 from NASA, the EPA, and the U.S. Department of Energy to agree to clean up their sections of the Field Lab to safe levels. The owner of the largest section of the Lab, Boeing, wouldn't sign on. And they've been refusing to do the right thing ever since. They claim it's already safe.

This is Boeing, the same company that makes the supposedly safe 737 Max jet that's killed 346 people because the company cut corners. They continue to say the Field site is safe even when confronted with the fact that the data they used to make these claims were faulty. Instead of fixing things, they have tried to pit factions in the community against each other while they shirk their responsibilities.

This toxic legacy is a ticking time bomb in a community where children should be able to do their homework by a light without their parents fearing for their safety.

I'm sorry my research wasn't enough to make this happen but seeing all of you out here today, gives me hope that you will finally see the day when your community is no longer a threat to your health and safety. You deserve nothing less.

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