

# A Fellowship of Extraordinary People



With John Dean visiting Santa Clarita on Saturday, 8/15 at 6pm at St. Stephens Episcopal Church, I've been thinking of other whistleblowers I have long admired. These are generally ordinary people who are extraordinarily brave. In corporate and governmental bureaucracies the culture promotes a "look the other way," "It's not my problem," "I don't want to make waves," mentality. But whistleblowers generally take extraordinary risks to expose what is wrong, corrupts, illegal or harmful.

In the famous Pentagon Papers US intelligence analyst Daniel Ellsberg leaked to the New York Times and other newspapers a comprehensive study documenting the 'secret history' of US military and political activity in South East Asia. This revelation helped to enlighten the American public about Viet Nam and turn public sentiment against the war. A couple of years later, "Deep Throat," Mark Felt, former second-in-command at the US Federal Bureau of Investigation, supplied crucial

information to reporters Woodward and Bernstein about the misdeeds of President Richard Nixon.

Dr Jeffrey Wigand disclosed questionable practice by tobacco companies. After Wigand, a former Brown & Williamson head of research and development, told the US media in 1996 that cigarettes were the "delivery device for nicotine", he faced lawsuits and death threats but revealed in a television interview that tobacco companies knew nicotine was addictive, that carcinogenic material was knowingly added to cigarettes, that research exploring the dangers of cigarettes was suppressed and that attempts to develop a "safer" cigarette were axed.

Karen Silkwood gained attention for claims of malpractice by nuclear fuels group Kerr-McGee before coming to what was portrayed



in the 1983 Hollywood feature *Silkwood* as a suspicious death. Other famous whistleblowers include Enron's executive Sherron Watkins;

(Picture Credits: Sherron Watkins (from her website); Karen Silkwood: Union Martyr, Art: Nick Sweeney); Cynthia Cooper: Bill Jackson/ Gil Ford Photography ; Peter Rost (from his website); and Wendell Potter (from his website)

WorldCom's Vice President Cynthia Cooper and Duke Energy executive Barron Stone and Xerox Assistant Treasurer James Bingham who was fired in 2000 after publicizing creative accounting that had boosted the group's reported earnings.

Pfizer vice president for corporate marketing Peter Rost claimed in 2003 that Pharmacia, acquired by Pfizer earlier that year, illegally promoted the sale of human growth hormone for unauthorized uses such as anti-aging therapy. The claim was followed by an often public disagreement, including criticism on *60 Minutes* that Pfizer had sought to block US consumers from saving money by importing prescription drugs, and culminated in Pfizer firing Rost in December 2005.

The list of these heroes does on and on. The whistleblower often suffers ostracism, fierce reprimands, forced transfers, referrals to psychiatrists, dismissal and blacklisting. Retaliation for disclosing organizational wrongdoing/whistle blowing reinforces the "look the other way" corporate/governmental culture.

Now we have Wendell Potter. Last month, testimony in front of the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation by a former CIGNA health insurance top executive insider named Wendell Potter made news even before it occurred: CBS NEWS headlined, "Cigna Whistleblower to Testify." After the Congressional testimony the industry has scrambled to do damage

control by spending hundreds of millions of dollars on "Harry and Louise" ads, unrelenting Congressional lobbying, Internet e-mails full of lies and distortions, fake "citizen" rallies and disruptions of town hall meetings on Health Care Reform.

Potter told Bill Moyers why he left his successful career as the head of Public Relations for CIGNA, one of the nation's largest insurers, and decided to speak out against the industry. "I didn't intend to [speak out], until it became really clear to me that the industry is resorting to the same tactics they've used over the years, and particularly back in the early '90s, when they were leading the effort to kill the Clinton plan."

Potter began his trip from health care spokesperson to reform advocate while back home in Tennessee. After Potter attended a Remote Area Medical event, a makeshift health clinic set up at a fairgrounds for people without health insurance, he said, "It was absolutely stunning. When I walked through the fairground gates, I saw hundreds of people lined up, in the rain. It was raining that day. Lined up, waiting to get care, in animal stalls. Animal stalls." (This event will be coming to LA from 8/11-18)

Potter believes that the health insurance industry is going in the wrong direction and taking the country in the wrong direction. Looking back over his long career, Potter sees an industry corrupted by Wall Street expectations and greed. According to Potter, insurers have every incentive to deny coverage — every dollar they don't pay out to a claim is a dollar they can add to their profits, and Wall Street investors demand they pay out less every year. Under these conditions, Potter says, "You don't think about individual people. You think about the numbers, and whether or not you're going to meet Wall Street's expectations."

Thank God for whistleblowers like Potter. Hopefully the American public will hear him over the din of the industries propaganda. Plans are in the making to have him come to Santa Clarita soon. Stay tuned.

Carole Lutness

Carole Lutness, Chair  
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