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Pennsylvania farmer speaks out against fracking at memorial for wife

Sharon Abercrombie | May. 18, 2012 Eco Catholic

Stephen Cleghorn's roots are Catholic, but he led a powerfully personalized and wonderfully unorthodox ritual and public gathering honoring his late wife, Lucinda Hart-Gonzalez, on May 10. The energy of it combined his fierce undying love for her with an equally passionate element of rebellion against gas companies that are eyeing a part of his 50-acre Pennsylvania organic farm for hydraulic fracturing and against the politicians who support it.

He called for a moratorium on drilling for methane gas in the geological formation known as the Marcellus Shale until the public health risk and impacts are properly studied.

In his press release to *NCR*, Cleghorn wrote: "Today I act to declare my farm, all that lives above its surface, the very air and sunlight that caresses and enlivens all of us here today, and all that lies below it as firmament, all of this I hereby declare off-limits from shale gas extraction and its toxic impacts, in perpetuity."

Cleghorn scattered a portion of Hart-Gonzalez's ashes on a special high place above their land in Reynoldsville, Pa., the quiet, beautiful haven where the two of them would walk each day with their two dogs to view the emerald fields, the rolling hills and their grazing goats below.

He asked the more than 50 friends and supporters in attendance to say "Presente!" at the end of each prayer phrase.

"To recognize that she is here with us in spirit," he explained, "'Presente!' is a way of saying that she is here with us to take new spiritual action as guardian and protector of this farm that she so loved."

"May she who was tender and close and loving of me ... come now in these ashes to mingle with earth and water below our feet, come to protect the soil and water of this farm and all the lives which they sustain," he prayed.

"May she come now in these ashes to declare this farm forever inviolate of shale gas drilling or any other attack upon it as a living system," he continued. "Here now she declares a new right of love on the surface and below this farm that no gas drill will ever penetrate. Come, be with us now, Dr. Lucinda Hart-Gonzalez. Presente."

Lucinda died in November of a cancer that overwhelmed her in just months.

In 2005, Cleghorn and Hart-Gonzalez started an organic dairy and vegetable farm in Paradise, Pa., in Jefferson County. Cleghorn, who earned a doctorate in sociology from Emory University, previously worked briefly as a farmer, then joined the nonprofit sector serving the homeless. Hart-Gonzalez was a former language, arts and humanities teacher at universities and at the State Department.

A few brief years into their new careers, they began to reap the rewards of their dedication and hard work. Paradise Gardens & Farm, the first licensed goat dairy and creamery in northwest Pennsylvania, became the only certified organic farm in a tri-county area.

As Cleghorn recalled in a YouTube talk [1], the farm was nourishing the bodies and spirits of local residents. Families gathered around their kitchen tables, drinking goat's milk and eating the pesticide-free vegetables and healthy eggs that came from the pastured flock of 80 chickens thriving at Paradise Gardens and Farm.

Party guests circled around their friends' coffee tables enjoying Paradise's feta cheese goodies.

Before 2009, Clerghorn and his wife knew that the Marcellus Shale formation, which stretches under Ohio, Pennsylvania, West Virginia and New York, passed under their land, as well. But they assumed they might only have to live with the prospect of a relatively small, shallow gas well being put on their farm. Cleghorn and Hart-Gonzalez also thought they would have some control over the process.

Not so. They discovered that a future Marcellus Shale well takes up 5 to 10 acres of their land and is going to go in just 3,500 feet from their house. This location is upwind of the organic pastures where their goats graze. In an article he wrote for Truthout in January, Cleghorn referred to his and his wife's fears, which Lucinda had posted on the farm' website in 2011.

"At best it will forever change our idyllic landscape," he wrote. "At worst, we could lose our clean air, our health, our herd, our water, our organic status and our farm. We have already lost our peace of mind."

The research academic in Cleghorn went into action. He began a year of extensive research [2] into the topic of hydraulic fracturing. He prayed that all the bad things he had heard about the drilling process weren't really true, but learned that they were, he said in his YouTube talk.

Just a few of the facts he discovered:

- In the promised rush for jobs, there will be heavy industrial development of half of Pennsylvania's land mass for gas extraction in the next 50 years that will involve anywhere from 25,000 to 30,000 well pads. But Cleghorn counters, "Jobs are all well and good, but you don't want to be working on a job that's going to destroy the place where you want to live or you want your grandchildren to live."
- There will be surface disturbance of earth, forests and farms. The disturbances will require the bulldozing of 70 percent more land than all 350,000 conventional gas wells drilled in Pennsylvania since 1859, leaving behind a permanent footprint of so-called reclaimed sites that will take up 50 percent more land than all those conventional wells ever did.
- More than 15 million tons of chemicals could end up lying beneath half the state, as much as one ton per acre. Some of those chemicals are so toxic they can contaminate water at microscopic levels.
- Cancer-causing chemicals used in fracking can interrupt animal and human reproduction.
- There is a current well-casing failure rate of 6 percent. That means if 3,500 wells are drilled annually, more than 200 wells go bad with toxic flowback fluid and methane gas from the shale blasting out into the underground cracks and fissures to find their way into drinking water aquifers.

When the Cleghorns approached the former owners of their property about purchasing the gas right from them,

they were refused.

"We're greedy," the former owners admitted to the couple.

In last Thursday's ritual, Cleghorn said he asked them, "How could you allow the earth to be destroyed for some money? and you told me that it did not really matter because at the end of time, according to your faith, Jesus Christ would return and make the world whole again for his faithful, and those people who did the damage to the world would receive their just due. But don't you see, that 'those people' are you? 'Those people' are all of us if we allow the destruction of our earth."

And as one energy executive recently boasted, Cleghorn said, "The shale army has arrived. Resistance is futile."

Futility and caving in to the corporate establishment are not on Stephen Cleghorn's agenda. He draws his strength from St. Augustine, saying, "'Hope has two lovely daughters: anger and courage.' Those are what we will need as the bedrock of our hope."

"The politicians and the gas companies tell us we have to be polite to them, to listen to their side," said Cleghorn in the YouTube talk he gave last June. Given the facts about the dangers of hydraulic fracturing, "you are no longer entitled to our being polite to you. We will come at you with informed anger and courage, and we will continue to love you. We are not here to demonize you as persons, but to name the demons you are unleashing before us."

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[1] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gRxjH6d6JtI
[2] http://angerandcourage.wordpress.com/2012/04/20/