

Group hopes Nevadans can learn from mining film
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5/12/2005 12:12 pm

“Libby, Montana” focuses on the deaths and illnesses caused by an asbestos mine in remote northwestern Montana.

IF YOU WANT TO GO

Free screenings of “Libby” are at 7 p.m. May 18 at the Jeanne Dini Cultural Center, 120 N. California St., Yerington; and at 7 p.m. May 19 in the Jot Travis Student Union on the University of Nevada, Reno campus.

Details: 348-1986.

2,600 people live in a sleepy town called Libby in the extreme northwest corner of Montana. There hadn't been much to call attention to this working-class logging and mining town until residents started dying and getting sick by the hundreds after exposure to asbestos, a product mined for its durability and versatility, including fire resistance.

The problem with asbestos is the dust it creates in the mining process — dust that lodges itself into the lungs of those breathing it, often killing them over years of exposure. Libby had a huge asbestos mine that so far has killed more than 200 of its residents and sickened more than a thousand others. Miners carried the dust with them on their clothes all over town, and the town is still trying to clean up the contamination with the help of the Environmental Protection Agency, long after the mining company declared bankruptcy and packed its bags.

“Libby, Montana” is the true story of the town's struggles with the asbestos mine and the mine's failure since the 1960s to relay the dangers of asbestos dust. Great Basin Mine Watch will show the film in Yerington and Reno with guest speakers including Gayla Benefield, a Libby resident who appears in the film and has lost several family members to the lung disease asbestosis.

For residents of Nevada, with the most active gold-mining operations in the country, and Yerington, where a closed copper mine is polluted with high levels of uranium, the lessons learned in “Libby” could be valuable.

“We work to protect the Great Basin from the negative impacts of mining,” said Great Basin Mine Watch's Emily Heun. “We work with communities to assist them with protecting their land and water. Yerington hasn't suffered as much as Libby, but both Montana and Nevada have neglected residents.”

“Libby, Montana” was a finalist in both the Banff Mountain Film Festival and the Independent Feature Project Market. It has been shown in film festivals around the world since its release last year.