

MOVIE CITY NEWS

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Libby, Montana

After watching movies like “Erin Brockovich,” “Silkwood,” “A Civil Action” and “The Insider,” most viewers walk away from them believing that the heroic actions of a handful of Davids can topple the ambivalently murderous Goliaths of American industry. Many such documentaries end on a positive note, as well. It’s the movies and documentaries we don’t see that should scare us the most. “**Libby, Montana**” describes an environmental horror story that began decades ago, claimed hundreds of patriotic Americans and ended in 2009 with the monsters being cleared of all charges. In this case, the fiend is the huge and powerful conglomerate W.R. Grace, which knowingly put its workers in harm’s way and withheld its own warnings from them. It closed its Zonolite plant in the remote mountain town of Libby, Montana, in 1990, but, even today, residents of all ages and job background continue to die of asbestos-related ailments. Zonolite has been used as a source of insulation in millions of U.S. homes, so it’s impossible to fix a firm number on the harm it’s caused. Grace executives must have feared being found culpable, if not guilty of great crimes, because it began stashing billions of dollars of earnings in “daughter companies” before declaring bankruptcy in 2001. At the time, it was facing 270,000 asbestos-related lawsuits nationwide, of which 150,000 have been settled. This put the responsibility of footing the bill in Libby on the shoulders of taxpayers.

There is no happy ending to “Libby, Montana.” The only thing the red-state governor offered Libby residents was prayers. Health insurers could hardly wait to begin denying benefits and cutting co-pays for drugs. All that was left for the citizens was to pray, themselves, taxpayers would come to their rescue through Superfund designation. If the citizens felt less than hopeful during its decades-long ordeal, it might be traced to an announcement by then-President Reagan, naming the head of W.R. Grace to lead a panel dedicated to streamlining business affairs and eliminating the roadblocks in the way of conglomerates profiting from the misery of others. For his part, President George W. Bush worked mightily to diminish further to ability of the EPA to protect citizens by cutting jobs in the department. All of the politicians we meet in “Libby, Montana” are Republican. You do the math. The DVD adds interviews with director Dru Carr and deleted scenes. – *Gary Dretzka*

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