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# Nader and NYPIRG

## Hang Speaks

by John Isbell

On Wednesday, September 16, NYPIRG's guest speaker, Walter Hang, talked to students about the travails of NYPIRG and the hazards of toxic waste. Ralph Nader was one of the main topics of the evening.

Back in the 60's Nader reported on the dangers of the GM car, the Corvair. Apparently GM did not appreciate the printed facts about the hazardous car (it had a tendency to flip) for they hired a private investigator to follow Nader. The detective "basically tried to set Nader up on all sorts of weird sexual things, but he couldn't because Nader was so intensely focused on work, he never really hung out with women. He didn't do anything. He didn't drink, he didn't go to parties — he just lived in this one little room and he read these government studies. This guy was really weird."

When Nader discovered the investigator, he told Congress, who, after making inquiries, made GM publically apologize on TV. He then sued for \$23 million and settled out of court for \$500,000. With that money he started his operation. "In 1968 he had nine people working for him. In 1969, after he trashed GM in the press; got national attention, he had a hundred people working for him." Nader then proceeded to give speeches around the country, advising people not to work for the government or for

corporations, but instead for the good of the people.

Students at these lectures used to come to Nader, "cluster about him, and ask, 'Well, how do we go about doing this? What do we do next?' And Nader used to say things like, 'Well, read reports' or 'go out and organize other students.'" Since no one really understood what he meant, he knew he needed to set up public interest groups all over the country. The idea was to get contributions from students in order to hire professionals. These professionals in turn would train the youths to be "junior Ralph Naders".

The only job Walter Hang could get when he came out of college was studying toxic wastes in the Hudson River with NYPIRG. He had to study "the pollution hazards of waste water discharges, of all things." In a year he put together a major study of the Hudson, claiming that it was "a giant sewer, even though there were all sorts of government pollution control programs. 180,000 people drank water from the Hudson, and no one was preventing literally hundreds of industries and municipalities from dumping billions of gallons of the most awful crud you could imagine right into the water — without treatment, without standards, without anyone even knowing about it."

He proceeded to Albany for his first press conference. The story was on the first page of the *New York Times*. Hang then met with the political leaders and reported on Hudson's problems. He asked what should be done, and they said "Frankly, kid, we don't care." And that was it. He was left with no options. His next step was to stir up more people, further away from Albany. "The only problem with working so close to Albany is that the politicians went and lied to the people. 'Drinking PCB's is not going to harm your health. Your chances of getting cancer are one-in-a-million.' Who's ever done that study? How do we know that?" So they (NYPIRG) wrote another story. This time on Niagara River. The result: he was "able to alert millions of people in these two very far away ends of the state about these problems."

However, the problem of toxic waste is more widespread than thought. The clothes we wear, the chairs we sit on, and the various conveniences of life made out of plastic are all things that cannot be found in nature. "In the last 40 or 50 years we have stopped using naturally-occurring materials such as cotton, and wool and linen and we started to use synthetic materials such as plastic. These materials never before existed in the world and many of them, unfortunately, can cause very serious health problems."

"At the turn of the century, cancer was the number eight cause of premature death in America. Right now it is number two. In 1975 the chance of getting cancer was one-in-four. Today it is almost one-in-three. Meanwhile, the ability of the scientific community to treat and cure cancer has not gone up very much since the 1950's," claims Hang. "The key is prevention. We have to reduce our exposure to the causes of these diseases. We *don't* have to get them, so we don't have to get them treated or cured, which we can't."

Hang rhetorically asks why the government won't put as much effort into attacking the toxic waste problem as it does the crack problem. "Why isn't Alphonse D'Amato dressed up in a moon suit to go to landfills the way he gets dressed up as a drug dealer to go the upper west side and buy crack?" He states: "It is not a problem they want to deal with. Why? It's money. Money and power. Because the corporations in America rule the decision-making process that guides all of our lives."

Remember: "unless we can organize ourselves, educate ourselves, and then go out and make a difference in the community, it's not going to get any better. Make sure that even though we've been exposed up to now, we don't get exposed in the future."