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Profiles in Later Life

Taking On Mountains—and Toxic Chemicals

Three decades after leading a charge against the use of toxic chemicals in consumer products, Arlene Blum is back in the fight.

In the 1970s—between heading the first all-woman expedition to the summit of Alaska's Mount McKinley and working as an assistant professor of chemistry—Dr. Blum became an accidental environmental activist.

After she published papers in *Science* magazine detailing the dangers of brominated and chlorinated Tris, two carcinogenic chemicals used as fire retardants, her research helped persuade federal regulators to ban the use of Tris in children's sleepwear.

She took a 26-year break from her scientific research to scale mountain peaks around the world, pursue a successful career as a lecturer, motivational speaker and author, and raise a daughter. But in 2006, with her daughter off to college and Dr. Blum having just completed her memoir—a book she had been working on for decades—she found herself back on Tris's trail.

"Three years ago, my cat got sick, and I found out she had extremely high levels of PBDEs," another chemical fire retardant, says Dr. Blum, now 64. "Then I tested my couch and discovered it was also full of PBDEs." Dr. Blum soon found out that Tris and related toxic fire retardants are still routinely used in consumer products. "I was shocked to find out that the dangerous chemicals I'd succeeded in getting removed from children's sleepwear in the 1970s were still being used to treat furniture and other products."

So Dr. Blum, who lives in Berkeley, Calif., began conducting new research on chemical fire retardants, and in 2008 started the Green Science Policy Institute. The organization, which has 40 volunteers and four paid staff members, is a sort of environmental think tank, providing scientific research on dangerous chemicals to government, industry and non-governmental organizations. The aim: to reduce the use of such substances in consumer products like toys, electronics and furniture.

"Part of what we do is to promote safer alternatives, because there are many nontoxic ways to make products flame-resistant, as well as to promote regulation, because so few of the chemicals in our homes are regulated in any way," says Dr. Blum. Her new efforts, she says, have helped stop the use of hundreds of millions of pounds of toxic chemicals in consumer products.

Born in 1945, Dr. Blum was raised in Chicago. Despite what she calls an "overprotective" family urging her to study something more "ladylike," she developed an early interest in science. She ended up getting a Ph.D. in biophysical chemistry from the University of California at Berkeley in 1971. She also became a celebrated mountaineer.

Dr. Blum was the first American woman to attempt to climb Mount Everest, and led the first all-U.S., all-woman team to the summit of Nepal's Annapurna I. During that climb—which the group financed by selling T-shirts with the motto, "A woman's place is on top"—two women from her team made the summit, but two others died trying. That experience resulted in her first book, "Annapurna: A Woman's Place." She has also walked 2,000 miles across the Himalayas from Bhutan to India, and crossed the Alps with her baby daughter in a backpack.

Though she looked forward to a slower pace following the completion of her memoir, "Breaking Trail: A Climbing Life," published in 2005, Dr. Blum says she has no regrets about starting the Green Science Policy Institute and working 16-hour days in her 60s.

She spends much of her time conducting scientific research, writing papers, talking to governments and policy organizations, and conducting public-information campaigns to raise awareness about toxins. She has also recently expanded her work to China, where she hopes to get manufacturers to reduce the use of toxic chemicals in consumer products exported world-wide.

"I had planned to retire to Katmandu, leading treks into the Himalayas," she says. "But my love for science has resurfaced after all these years as a tool to help people live healthier lives, and that has become the second phase of my life's work."

Helping Refugees Settle

Fargo, N.D., probably doesn't come to mind when thinking about multicultural melting pots. But through federal resettlement programs, more than 3,700 refugees from 42 countries have arrived in the Fargo area in the past decade, and more than 14,000 of the area's 190,000 people speak a first language other than English.

Michele McRae, 72, has devoted her retirement to helping refugees make a start for themselves in the Northern Plains. She is director of Giving + Learning, a group that pairs volunteers with newly arrived immigrants to help them learn English, pass their driver's test, train for jobs—and anything else a disoriented African, East European or Middle Eastern immigrant may need to acclimate to life in Fargo.

"Just imagine what it's like to be dropped off in town that's 90% white, and reaches icy temperatures of 30 degrees below during the