

Inspirational voice

LIFESCAPE hears the moving story of one woman's tireless campaign against the crop-spraying that threatens us all

BY RAJASANA OTIENDE

Four-and-a-half years ago Georgina Downs sat on the floor of a friend's house and decided she was going to change the Government's policy on crop-spraying. As a musician, who mostly spent her time singing, she knew absolutely nothing about politics and very little about science. But she launched a determined and relentless campaign that could result in a complete overhaul of the UK's regulatory system for pesticides, along with massive repercussions for the multi-billion pound agricultural industry. LIFESCAPE'S editor reports on Georgina's remarkable story.

I first met Georgina Downs in 1989. We were both on the same Performing Arts college course. She was really petite but the image I still have of her is someone with "big hair" and a "big voice." I also remember how confident she always was, and what a perfectionist!

But there was a kind of shadow over her which I didn't really understand. I guess she just didn't seem very healthy, but we were all students and didn't think much of it. But some days she'd come in and have difficulty eating or drinking anything. When I asked her what was up she'd open her mouth and there were blisters everywhere, right down her throat. She regularly suffered from headaches and flu-type illnesses as well, and was off sick a lot. We wouldn't see her for weeks on end and before we got to know her well we sometimes wondered if she was still on the course.

Towards the end of our second year Georgina started to complain of pains in her legs. She seemed really wobbly, and told me she was suffering from

muscular weakness. I remember she parked her car in spaces usually reserved for the lecturers, as she found it difficult to walk the few extra yards to and from the main college car park. Some people thought she was being lazy, but quite a few of us began to realise something was seriously wrong. Soon after leaving college in 1991 Georgina was admitted to hospital with severe muscle wastage, overall muscle weakness and other chronic symptoms.

"I was absolutely devastated. I didn't know what was wrong with me, my body just completely failed me," says Georgina. "I had only just turned 18 and kept thinking that this is the time that I should be out enjoying myself, but instead I could see everything slipping away and there was nothing I could do about it."

On leaving hospital Georgina was determined to find out what had happened to her health. Her perfectionism really kicked in even though the rest of

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her had fallen apart. "It wasn't until I was sitting at home one day looking out the window that the penny finally dropped," she says. "I saw a tractor in the adjoining field spraying something and didn't know what it was."

Georgina was astonished to discover the tractor was actually spraying a cocktail of poisonous chemicals into the surrounding air where she lived. Despite being so sick, or just because she was so ill, Georgina began gathering information. She looked at the health effects caused by exposure to pesticides and discovered that many of them were the same symptoms she'd been suffering from for years. At this point, she decided it would be better for her to be away from the area whenever the fields were sprayed. ▶





Georgina (left) has worked tirelessly on her campaign against the widespread routine spraying of crops (below), while (opposite) a young Georgina and her brother visit Downing Street



"Considering the main spraying season can run for five months or so, I ended up staying on friends' sofas and going from one place to the next for weeks at a time. I was literally living out of a suitcase. Friends nicknamed me the 'bag lady'."

It was in early 2001, when Georgina was staying at a friend's house in nearby Portsmouth, that she finally decided "enough is enough!". "I was sitting on the floor and I remember thinking, if a farmer is legally allowed to be doing this, then there has to be something seriously wrong with the Government's policy. From that moment on, I knew what I had to do. I had to change the Government's policy on pesticides."

Georgina knew nothing about politics. Her naivety at that time becomes apparent when she admits that she thought it would only take a year: "I decided that I would put everything else in my life on hold for a

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year, my singing, work, relationships and just give it my best shot."

Needless to say, once Georgina commits herself, there's no stopping her. And this time she had a big mission. Her life – and those of other people – were on the line. She did a lot of extensive research and it was clear that there were serious and fundamental flaws in the existing regulations and monitoring system for pesticides. Her investigations led her to uncover and expose an astonishing failure by the

Government to protect people in the countryside from exposure to pesticides.

Basically, the current method of assessing the risks to public health from crop-spraying is based on the model of a "bystander." This model assumes that there will only be occasional, short-term exposure from the spray cloud at the time of the application only, and furthermore, to only one individual pesticide at any time. So yes, the figures don't add up. Most things can have a delayed effect, like cigarette smoke, and if a mixture of pesticides is breathed in...

This set the scene for a debate that is still going on. Georgina set about exposing the model's inadequacy. "Crop-spraying has been a predominant feature of agriculture for over 50 years and yet the fact that there has never been an appropriate or realistic

assessment of the risks for rural residents and communities makes a complete mockery of the Government's policy. It does nothing to address the long-term exposure for people who actually live near fields repeatedly sprayed with mixtures of pesticides, throughout every year and in many cases, like mine, for decades."

Georgina was also astonished to discover there was no legal obligation for a farmer to warn neighbouring residents before spraying, or to disclose

information on what chemicals were being used. "A worker is legally allowed to know what chemicals they are using, the potential health effects and are required to wear protective equipment, yet members of the public, breathing in the very same air, are not."

The Government's chief scientific advisors on pesticides first became aware of Georgina in July 2001 when she attended the Open Meeting of the Advisory Committee on Pesticides. She asked a number of penetrating questions including whether each member of the committee would be happy to be exposed in the same way as her and her family.

Georgina left quite an impression on the Chairman, Professor David Coggon. She regularly harangued him at subsequent conferences and in private meetings. It was in early 2002 after being accosted by Georgina for two hours in a hotel

bar, that Professor Coggon invited her to give a presentation to the Advisory Committee at the 2002 Open Meeting on the adequacy of the "bystander risk assessment."

Little did he realise what he had unleashed, as it was this presentation that was to catapult Georgina and her campaign right into the heart of the political and media spotlight. "I produced a video with mannequins to illustrate the dangers of crop-spraying. I chose mannequins that resembled some of the more vulnerable groups, including a pregnant woman, two babies and a young child. When I asked the attendees to raise their hands if they thought that the video had shown an acceptable system for protecting public health, not a single hand went up."

Georgina's masterful display subsequently led to a meeting with former DEFRA Ministers Lord Whitty and Michael Meacher in December 2002. She showed them the video and presented the case for a change in the regulations and legislation governing agricultural spraying. This included a call for a ban on crop-spraying within a certain distance of homes, schools and workplaces and other places of human habitation and direct access for the public to all the necessary chemical information.

On July 21, 2003, as a result of this meeting and extensive media coverage of Georgina's relentless

the facts

campaign, DEFRA launched two Consultations on crop-spraying. They put forward proposals to introduce the measures that Georgina had been campaigning for. The Consultations resulted in the highest number of responses since DEFRA records began.

Georgina kept me updated on and off over all this period. At times I wondered how on earth she was going to make it. She spent thousands of pounds she didn't have on a legal and scientifically-based submission. She also produced a second video of case studies of people from all over the country reporting illnesses and diseases in rural areas, including clusters of cancer, leukemia, Non-Hodgkins lymphoma and Parkinson's disease, amongst others. Her voice never wavered, and was always – yes – so big, and so determined.

On June 16, 2004, following the DEFRA Consultations, former Minister for Rural Affairs, Alun Michael announced the introduction of a new law for farmers to keep records of what they spray, though not the introduction of any no-spray zones as was hoped. He also asked the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution to carry out a study to assess the risks to people from crop-spraying. This was the first time in history that an individual campaigner's work and efforts had resulted in a Royal Commission, which would examine all the same issues that Georgina had been raising.

Within a week of the study being announced, Georgina set up a meeting with the Chairman, Sir Tom Blundell and two members of the Secretariat to present her case. Subsequently she was asked to make a presentation at their public meeting held in September 2004 and to give oral evidence to the Commission a few months later.

In another first, she was asked by the Royal Commission to peer review four chapters of their report – something no other lay person has ever been asked to do. Georgina is remaining tight-lipped about the contents of the report, but rumour has it that the Royal Commission will be recommending a complete overhaul of the UK's regulatory system for pesticides.

This would vindicate Georgina and her arguments, but would obviously have massive repercussions for the multi-billion pound agricultural industry.

In another twist, Georgina has a Judicial Review application lodged in the High Court against DEFRA and the result of the Royal Commission's study could help strengthen her forthcoming legal action.

Whatever the outcome of the study, the fact that it has even taken place is testament to how the determination, meticulous planning and sheer audacity of one woman and her quest for justice can make a real difference. Those who have had their health and lives affected from exposure to pesticides will now know the reason for their symptoms, and hopefully many people in the future will now be protected from such risks.

She has attracted many powerful allies from all over the world. Michael Meacher, the former Environment Minister and one of the ministers that Georgina originally presented the case to, said: "Georgina Downs is a phenomenal campaigner, the like of which I have never met. The one great benefit of not being in DEFRA is that I escape being on the receiving end of endless missives, meetings and pressure from Georgina. She is wonderful."

Georgina has made incredible sacrifices for her campaign. She continues to suffer from chronic health problems, including osteoporosis, but the biggest personal set back has been the loss of her singing voice following a vocal strain last

year. It is still unclear whether she will be able to sing again. "Singing was everything to me. It was how I expressed myself, so the last year has been very difficult."

Georgina has put all her energy into protecting people and the environment. She continues to meet with key Government representatives to argue the inadequacies of the current system for pesticides and has recently met with the new DEFRA Minister, Lord Bach.

**LIFESCAPE will be following Georgina's progress as she takes her song for justice into the Parliamentary charts.*



- Pesticides are poisonous chemicals deliberately designed to be toxic. They include insecticides, herbicides, fungicides and biocides
- There were 30, 546 tonnes of pesticides used in agriculture and horticulture in 2003
- There is currently no legal obligation for farmers to notify anyone of any intended spraying or on the chemicals to be used
- Legally, crop-sprayers can spray repeatedly mixtures of hazardous chemicals right up to the open window of any occupied premises whether it be a resident's home, a school, a home for the elderly or any office or workplace
- Studies have shown pesticides located miles away from where they were originally applied. Scientific research from California has calculated risks within a 1.5 to 3 mile radius of pesticide treated areas
- There has been over 50 years of scientific and medical evidence in relation to the dangers of pesticides. Linked illnesses include: –
- Acute Effects – Sore throats, burning eyes/nose/skin, blisters, headaches, dizziness, nausea and flu-type illnesses
- Chronic Effects – Various forms of cancer, including breast and prostate, leukaemia, Non-Hodgkins lymphoma, tumours and asthma

WHAT GEORGINA SAYS

- The "bystander risk assessment" is not representative of the long-term exposure of a resident living in an agricultural area
- There is no monitoring or collection of data on chronic effects, so the full extent of ill-health related to pesticides is currently not known
- A number of previous reports have criticised heavily the existing regulations and monitoring system for pesticides including the BMA's 1990 report *Pesticides, Chemicals and Health* and the Select Committee on Agriculture report in 1987
- The Government regulators, the Pesticides Safety Directorate (PSD), are responsible for both licensing of pesticides, as well as policy, which creates an inherent conflict of interest, as their principle aim is meant to be the protection of public health and the environment and yet PSD receives approx. 60 per cent of their revenue from the agro-chemical industry
- For further information on Georgina's campaign see www.pesticidescampaign.co.uk or contact her at georginadowns@yahoo.co.uk or on 01243 773846