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An advocate for openness

By Kristie (Patterson) Rickerd '97

Franklin D. Roosevelt famously said December 7 was “a day that will live in infamy.” He was of course referring to 1941 and the bombing of Pearl Harbor, which killed more than 2,400 U.S. citizens even though the country was a noncombatant in World War II at the time.

December 7, 1993, brought a different type of infamy, as then-Secretary of Energy Hazel O’Leary stepped up to a podium in Washington, D.C., and acknowledged that the United States had conducted secret radiation experiments on humans for more than three decades – often without consent from subjects.

In attendance that day in 1993 was Roger Heusser '63, then deputy director in the Office of Classification for the new Clinton administration. The press conference opened a new chapter of Heusser’s career, which began when he drove out of McMinnville the night of his Linfield graduation and went straight to the Hanford Nuclear Reservation in Richland, Washington.

The echoes of what America learned that day in 1993 continue to reverberate in ways the now-retired Heusser says we all need to hear in 2021.

Uncovering atrocities of nuclear proportions

Heusser was working in research and development at Hanford in 1971, when he says scientific curiosity compelled him to seek information about what was happening at other nuclear sites.

“I walked to the storage vault facility and asked to look at some documents,” he explained recently, sitting in the living room of his Salem home. “The guy got a little red in the face and refused to let me in. Finally, he said, ‘I’ll tell you what, if you tell me the name of the document, I’ll get it for you. But we may need to have a patrol officer in there when you read it.’”

After Heusser called one of the top managers, security relented – and what he discovered was shocking.

Heusser found himself reading about plutonium injections given to citizens without their consent, as well as a national program to secretly collect cadavers (including stillborn infants) for experimentation without notification to families. The documents detailed the government’s role in human radiation experiments from 1941 to 1972.

“I had tears in my eyes as I read about the radiation experiments,” Heusser recalled. “The government had a group that was going around [conducting research] because they wanted to see the effects of radiation exposure, from the air to people.”

A Hanford executive quickly warned against doing or saying anything about what he had found.

“He said the magic word: Leavenworth,” said Heusser, referring to a federal penitentiary in Kansas. “Basically, ‘keep your mouth shut.’”

And the Tillamook native did ... until he couldn’t anymore.

From the Oregon Coast to the U.N.

It sounds more like the plot of a political thriller than part of the life story of a small-town Oregon native.

Heusser first heard about what was then Linfield College during his senior year of high school. One of his science teachers was a Linfield alumnus and encouraged him to apply. To save tuition money, he ended up working six days a week from 4 p.m. to midnight at a local sawmill that school year.

He would go on to major in chemistry and minor in Russian history at Linfield, learning lessons that would aid him throughout his career.

“Professor Garlick brought history to life and showed me how to look at history in order to help solve today’s problems,” he remembered. “I appreciate Linfield College for the understanding and dedicated professors and staff, as well as for the small class sizes.”

On June 2, 1963, after attending Commencement with 142 other graduates, Heusser jumped into his Plymouth and drove 300 miles to his first job at the Hanford Site.

Over the next couple of decades, he worked first for General Electric and later for the Department of Energy, eventually earning a promotion to a Senior Executive Service (SES) position in 1979 by President Jimmy Carter. Established in the wake of Watergate to create more public accountability, members of the SES serve in the key positions just below the top presidential appointees at approximately 75 federal agencies.

Heusser became recognized as one of the top national security experts on nuclear energy. He was called at one point to testify before the United Nations after the 1986 disaster at the



Roger Heusser '63 reflects on his career at his Salem home in March 2021.

Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant in what is now Ukraine – one of the worst man-made catastrophes in history. But his career found its true focus in being an advocate for more openness and transparency in government. That started when he could no longer keep his mouth shut.

Breaking the silence

In December 1993, the Albuquerque Times published a three-part series describing what Heusser had read in that storage room – how 18 U.S. citizens had been injected with plutonium as part of an experiment, without their consent. Reporter Eileen Welsome was able to identify five by name, had tracked down their surviving family members and medical records and detailed the lasting effects that these experiments had on the victims.

Two weeks later, Heusser was called to a large meeting in Washington, D.C., led by O’Leary.

“The secretary said that there were some reporters who were asking about human experiments with radioactive materials,” he remembered. “She asked, ‘Does anybody know about this?’ So, I put my hand up.”

He remembers being the only one who did.

After some discussion, O’Leary asked for a vote about releasing the information to the public. Once again, the Linfield alumnus said he was the only one to raise his hand, arguing that the government should come clean with the details. Despite the vote count, O’Leary agreed with Heusser.

In her press conference on Dec. 7, O’Leary announced the Openness Initiative, committed to ending Cold War classification practices and rebuilding trust with the public.

“We were in a struggle for survival as a nation [in the 1940s] and national security was at the heart of everything that happened in the Department of Energy,” O’Leary said. “We were shrouded and clouded in an atmosphere of secrecy.”

O’Leary committed to releasing information about nuclear testing, plutonium inventory and spent fuel.

“We are declassifying the largest amount of information in the history of the Department of Energy,” she said. “And perhaps most importantly ... we’re also putting behind it the systems, the technology and the people to get that declassification work done.”

Heusser was one of those people. O’Leary appointed him director of the Office of Declassification (a new office previously known as the Office of Classification) and asked him to lead the effort to find and declassify documents related to the plutonium experiments. That meant sorting through 32 million cubic feet of archival records.

“The country was transitioning to more openness,” Heusser said. “I knew that if we didn’t do it, it wasn’t going to get done.”

Despite what he says were personal threats and significant pushback from many government officials, Heusser helped the administration declassify information regarding 204 previously unannounced nuclear tests in communities like Oak Ridge, Tennessee, where plants had major spills and uranium contamination was found on the high school track. Information was shared with the public about the amount of plutonium and nuclear waste stored in the United States. And his office declassified documents that described the nationwide study that examined how fast plutonium traveled through the body.

A national apology, commitment to change

In October 1995, President Clinton delivered remarks on accepting the stunning 900-page report on human radiation experiments.

“This report I received today is a monumental document,” Clinton said. “It will shape America’s future in ways that will make us a more honorable, more successful and more ethical country.”

“Every one of its pages offers a lesson, and every lesson will be learned from these good people who put a year and a half of their lives into the effort to set America straight.”

Clinton issued a public apology on behalf of the U.S. government and put forth a new executive order for all federal agencies to evaluate and report publicly about any human experimentation.

“When the government does wrong, we have a moral responsibility to admit it ... it offers an apology to the survivors and their families and all the American people who must, must rely upon the United States to keep their word, tell the truth and do the right thing.”

By 1997, rules were adopted by federal agencies prohibiting secret scientific experiments on humans, requiring informed consent by subjects and mandating external review.

By the time he retired, Heusser earned four gold medals for outstanding leadership.

Heusser is proud of his work, and believes he did the right thing when he could. But he also believes that there’s a lot more to be done by future advocates for openness and transparency in government. State and federal employees who discover information with a clear public interest, he said, have the same obligation he did, to “work within the system, to reach the right people.”

EXECUTIVE CORRESPONDENCE



Department of Energy
Washington, D.C. 20545

ROGER K. HEUSSER

DIRECTOR, DIVISION OF MATERIALS
OFFICE OF THE DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR
DEFENSE PROGRAMS

Mr. Heusser is Director of the Division of Materials and is responsible for operation of the Savannah River, South Carolina, and civilian applications of nuclear materials. The major projects are being implemented at Savannah River, South Carolina; Idaho; and Richland (the new Fluorinel and other projects are being implemented at Savannah River, South Carolina). Heusser is responsible for processing nuclear materials.

Mr. Heusser received a Ph.D. in Chemistry (1963) in Oregon; a M.S. in Chemistry (1968), and a M.S. degree in Materials Science (1980) in Maryland, Summer 1980.

Mr. Heusser completed his undergraduate work at the Electric Company and received his M.S. from State University in Pasco, Washington. Mr. Heusser had worked with the Atomic Energy Commission as Branch Chief and Director, Division of Materials.



Assignments for the General Manager of chemistry at Oregon State University at Columbia Basin College. He has accomplished many things as a manager.



Above: Heusser at the United Nations, 1986.
Middle: Heusser (center) pictured with wife Nadine, received commendation from Department of Energy Secretary Federico Peña, 1997.
Below: One of Heusser’s gold medals received for outstanding leadership.