

FOOTPRINTS ON BLACK SNOW

A Chalice Reflection by Eric Kluz on Earth Day Sunday, April 20, 2008

This past August I had the honor of delivering a talk at the Department of Environmental Studies at Tongji University in Shanghai, China. The focus of my presentation was on ways in which we can reduce the impact of our ecological footprint embracing alternative energy sources, primarily those that reduce the harmful effects as well as our dependence on fossil fuels such as coal and oil.

Speaking to an audience of eager young ecologists I began my talk with a short story about my childhood and the harmful effects of pollution. I was born and raised in a small town, what you would call a village, I said, just outside of the American city called Pittsburgh. Pittsburgh in the mid-20th century was the largest industrial city in America and home to the Steel Industry. It was located at the convergence of two rivers that joined to form the great Ohio River which further connected to the Mississippi, the life line of commerce in middle America not unlike the Huangpu and Pearl rivers of China.

Pittsburgh thrived because of its location and easy access to iron ore and coal, resources essential to the manufacture of steel. During the early-1950's every steel plant in the region operated 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Workmen passed in solemn parade as they negotiated enormous stairways that clung to the side of Mount Washington and in inclines that rose and fell nearly 500 feet to the valley below. The smoke and soot that rose from the factories was so thick at times that it created midnight in the middle of day, necessitating that cars be driven with their head lights turned on at all times. The sun rarely shown through the thick clouds of carbon dioxide and filth. Pedestrians wore masks to shield themselves from the harmful effects of sulfur and other carcinogens that permeated the air.

Ironically, winter in Pittsburgh was always spectacular because of its high, steep hills that provided extraordinary venues, particularly for sledding. It didn't matter when it snowed, children would be out to play. It didn't matter if it was 6:00 or 9:00 in the evening on a school night or even 1:00 in the morning. We had to go out and take advantage of what nature had given us because the same industry that brought opportunity and wealth to the region also brought a vivid reminder that opportunity did not come without a price.

Each day at 7:00 in the morning and 10:00 at night a powerful horn would sound throughout the valley announcing the changing of the shift. Attached to the mouth of a massive metal chimney that rose over 45 meters above the Jones and Laughlan Steel Mill, the horn violently rattled and shuck the spewing pipe releasing thousands of pounds of soot and coal dust into the air. And we knew that within 10 minutes the brilliant white snows would be covered with lumps of black ash, ironically, themselves, the size of snow flakes. There would be no more sledding. We would be leaving our footprints in the blackened snow.