

# WOMEN'S VOICES FOR THE EARTH

Making the world safer and healthier for all...  
from Missoula

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**ARTICLE BRIANNA RANDALL**  
**PHOTOGRAPHY PAMELA DUNN-PARRISH**

Erin Switalski remembers the moment when she realized she wanted to dedicate her life to creating a safer, more just world. As part of a trip she took to Colombia several years ago, Switalski visited a farmer who had been accidentally sprayed by glyphosate, a Monsanto-made herbicide used to kill weeds (more commonly known by its trade name, Roundup).

"He was lying on the floor of an office. He couldn't talk and he couldn't walk," she recalls. Although this farmer was an extreme example, it drove home that toxic chemicals are dangerous—and they're everywhere.

"It's really a human rights issue," she explains from her office above Sushi Hana in downtown Missoula. "Our communities and our bodies are the test sites for these chemicals—including my daughters, my sister, my mom—and I'm not okay with that."

Now the executive director of Women's Voices for the Earth (WVE), Switalski is part of a team of visionary women who are making significant headway removing cancer-causing chemicals from everyday products like shampoo, perfume, and baby toys. WVE mobilizes thousands of women across America to demand safer products.

"We show women how to speak up, feel powerful, and make change on a big level," she says. Switalski points to the group's win in Cincinnati this past fall as an example: WVE staged a rally outside Procter & Gamble's annual shareholders meeting—part of WVE's multi-faceted campaign outing the company for using ingredients that include reproductive toxins, carcinogens, and neurotoxins. As a result, the corporation agreed to start disclosing ingredients used in feminine hygiene products.

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Erin Switalski started working for WVE in 2005  
and has been its executive director since 2009.



  
**WOMEN'S VOICE  
FOR THE EARTH**  
OUR HEALTH. OUR FUTURE. TOXIC FREE  
[www.womensvoices.org](http://www.womensvoices.org)  
406.543.3747

The Missoula-based nonprofit group has racked up a variety of successes like this over the past two decades through grass-roots organizing. WVE uses a three-part strategy to improve the health of women:

- Change consumer behavior to encourage the purchase of safe, toxic-free products.
- Shift corporate practices by convincing companies to remove harmful ingredients from their products.
- Create government policies that ensure chemicals are tested and regulated before they are used in consumer products.

"Right now, chemicals are used until proven harmful. That means the burden of proof is on us rather than the corporations that should be testing the safety of ingredients before they sell them to us," Switalski explains. More than 85,000 chemicals are now in use in the United States, but only 200 of them have been tested for safety.

Switalski isn't daunted by the uphill battle. She's fueled by the conviction that we have a fundamental right to live in a clean and healthy environment, no matter where we live or how much money we make.

Bryony Schwan agrees. That's partly why she founded WVE in 1995, after hearing about the marginalization of women in the environmental movement while pursuing her master's degree at the University of Montana.

"I took a course in toxics and was really shaken up when I learned that breast cancer rates in women skyrocketed from 1 in 20 to 1 in 8 within just two decades," says Schwan. "Women and our children are being poisoned from an industrial complex that we didn't create."

She founded WVE to give women a voice and to put them in the leadership roles. Schwan ran the organization on \$9,000 that first year, and spent a decade building coalitions and campaigns that raised national awareness about the threats posed by toxins. Schwan eventually left WVE to help launch the Biomimicry Institute, a nonprofit that empowers people to create nature-inspired solutions for a healthy planet.

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Bryony Schwan founded WVE in 1995, was the executive director until 2002, and served as the program director until 2006. Schwan is now the CEO of Kindkudos, an app that helps spread kindness and compassion.



Dori Gilels took the helm at WVE in 2006. Gilels honed in on the fact that consumers control the purse strings of corporations through their purchase choices. An important role of WVE is to give consumers the knowledge and opportunity to demand healthier products by providing resources like toxic-free shopping guides or recipes to make their own green household cleaners.

"I have a lot of faith in the power of consumers to drive social and environmental change," says Gilels. She also has faith in the power of Missoula to launch national organizations like WVE and her current venture, Mamalode LLC.

"Missoula is a great place to test ideas and prove concepts," she says. "Doing business from Montana is also a story in and of itself, since Montana has intrigue and authenticity. It's a conversation-starter across the board"

Switalski seconds the positive results of basing WVE in Missoula. "As a homegrown organization, we have a real connection to everyday people that can get lost if you're operating in big cities. We believe in the Montana-made value of face-to-face relationships." And that, she says, is key to helping women create a toxic-free future.



## 20 YEARS OF WOMEN'S VOICES FOR THE EARTH

- **1995** WVE founded.
- **1998** Launched campaign on removing PVC plastic from children's toys.
- **1999** Won precedent-setting lawsuit affirming Montanans fundamental right to a clean, healthful environment.
- **2002** Co-released report, *Not Too Pretty*, and ran a full-page ad in the *New York Times* exposing cosmetics products that contain harmful phthalates.
- **2004** Co-founded the Campaign for Safe Cosmetics, a coalition of women's, public health, labor, environmental health, and consumer-rights groups.
- **2007** Released *Glossed Over*, a report on toxic chemicals in nail products and their health impacts to salon workers. Convinced the largest global manufacturer of nail products for salons to eliminate several major chemicals of concern.
- **2008** Set an industry precedent by influencing the Soap and Detergent Association and the Consumer Specialty Products Association to release an ingredient communication plan.
- **2011** Released *Dirty Secrets: What's Hiding in Your Cleaning Products*, a report revealing hidden toxic chemicals in top brand name cleaners. Convinced Clorox to disclose all ingredients in their products and to remove synthetic musks.
- **2012** Convinces Johnson & Johnson to phase out chemicals that can cause cancer and harm health from all of its products in 57 countries.
- **2013** Convinced Procter & Gamble to remove the carcinogen 1,4 dioxane from their laundry detergents.
- **2014** Worked with Representative Carolyn Maloney (D-NY) to introduce the Robin Danielson Feminine Hygiene Safety Act.
- **2015** Convinced two of the world's largest feminine care manufacturers, Procter & Gamble and Kimberly-Clark, to start disclosing the ingredients used in their pads and tampons, some of which are toxic.

For the full timeline, please visit [WomensVoices.org](http://WomensVoices.org).

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I BELIEVE CONSUMERS  
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Dori Gilels served as the executive director from 2006 to 2008 and also served as a board member and contract employee for WVE. She is currently the co-owner/publisher of Mamalode LLC, a website and magazine featuring authentic parenting stories.

