



What Kent, who now lives near Laguna Beach, Calif., didn't know at the time was that she was among a number of people who were unintentionally present at the dawn of the nuclear age, exposed to fallout from the world's first atomic bomb. As some developed cancers and other maladies in succeeding years, they began to blame that exposure and the government that did nothing to warn them about potential dangers before or after the sudden blast and its towering mushroom cloud.

Cries for help by Trinity's downwinders were ignored for decades. Now, 70 years later, they have at least become part of the conversation as they battle to get written into the history books and compensated for illnesses and deaths they believe were caused by the radioactive cloud that drifted away from the Trinity Site.

Kent said it was many years later that she learned the "snow" was actually fallout from the massive explosion at ground zero.

Neighboring campers came out to watch as the "snow" covered streets and grass and coated the top of the river that flowed alongside the campsite, she remembered. "We put it on our hands and were rubbing it on our face," she said. "We were all having such a good time in that river, trying to catch what we thought was snow. ... There was a lot, let me tell you."

Of the 12 girls at the camp, Kent said, only two lived to be 40. She herself survived skin cancer and several other cancers. Her mother, who was staying in the nearby Noisy Water Lodge 70 years ago, died of a brain tumor. The dance teacher's daughter, also present that day, died of cancer, Kent said, and the teacher died about five years later.

"This thing really caused so much suffering," she said, "and the government never wanted to acknowledge anything."

Over the past four or five years, after decades of no media attention, the downwinders' plight has drawn heightened awareness, including coverage in the *The New Mexican* in 2011 and from global media such as the *Wall Street Journal*, *Time* magazine and Al-Jazeera television news in the past year.

"This is exactly what we were always hoping for, that all the work we have been doing would take off in a meaningful way eventually," said Tina Cordova, director of an advocacy group called the Tularosa Basin Downwinders Consortium.

"We've come a long way," Cordova said. "I used to struggle to get the *Alamogordo Daily News* interested. ... Now we have Al-Jazeera calling us. Now we are part of the dialogue when people talk about Trinity."

As though to demonstrate Cordova's point, an Albuquerque woman recently touring Trinity Site said that until she passed downwinder protesters wearing Day of the Dead masks outside the Army gates at White Sands Missile Range, she had been unaware that anyone claimed to have suffered because of the Trinity blast and fallout, which some scientists say was found hundreds of miles away.

"It's sad," said Susan Lee of Albuquerque. "We should write letters to the president, or our senators or whoever is responsible."

And that is where Cordova's focus has turned, especially to Congress, which has yet to acknowledge Southern New Mexicans' claims of decades of suffering in which entire families have been wiped out by what they believe were radiation-induced cancers, thyroid disease and other afflictions.

Residents of nearby towns, the Mescalero Apache community and ranchers within 15 miles of ground zero were not included in the 1990 Radiation Exposure Compensation Act, which was intended to help resolve claims from those adversely affected by radiation due to government programs. And they have never been added to amendments that apologize to and offer a modicum of compensation to those downwind of the 1950s Nevada nuclear tests and similar detonations in the Marshall Islands.

Military veterans and the scientists and other workers present at the test site about 80 miles north of Alamogordo have been included under the federal law.

In the past several years, New Mexico lawmakers, particularly U.S. Sen. Tom Udall, D-N.M., and Rep. Ben Ray Luján, D-N.M., have offered amendments to the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act that could include many more New Mexicans under that law. But the measures have gone nowhere.

A measure introduced this year by Republican Sen. Mike Crapo of Idaho, SB 331, would include Idaho residents who were made sick by government radiation activities, but chances that law will pass also are considered slim to none.

In the current session of Congress, Luján re-introduced a [Radiation Exposure Compensation Act amendment, HB 994](#), which also would extend compensation to those affected by uranium mining.

Speculating on why the bill never budges — not even scheduled for a hearing by the Republican leadership — he said: “Many members of Congress from other parts of the country that were not impacted by the legacy of uranium mining and testing are not familiar with the plight of these individuals or their efforts in the Cold War. And sadly, some of my colleagues will not vote for a package because some have contended the costs are too high. ... It is a cost we must bear to help generations of families who have gotten sick or died because of uranium mining and nuclear testing.”

Luján added, “When I talk to the elders in these communities, they ask me if people in Washington are just waiting for them to die.”

Udall attended a July 1 gathering in Tularosa that drew about 150 people. The senator said he was there to listen to their experiences in battling generations of family illnesses and deaths that they believe are related to fallout from Trinity Site. Participants said it was the first time any elected or policymaking government official had come to the area to hear their stories.

Eight residents told the senator that radiation from the blast had destroyed lives and families.

“I had breast cancer,” said Edna Hinkle. “My baby sister had it, and now mama’s got it.”

Another resident, Jimmy Reed, said, “Neighbors died by the droves.”

Udall vowed to work with others in Congress to add New Mexican downwinders to the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act.

“The community made a passionate case today,” he said. “The government did wrong. They’ve got to admit they were wrong and step forward and bring justice to this situation.”

The office of Rep. Steve Pearce, R-N.M., who represents the Tularosa area in the U.S. House of Representatives, declined a request for an interview and said Pearce had no comment on the issue.

**(Congressman Steve Pearce has now co-signed the RECA amendment.)**

Over the past year, the National Cancer Institute, at the urging of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, began a lifestyle history survey of New Mexico residents who may have been exposed to internal doses of radiation from the Trinity fallout, as well as from food and water supplies contaminated by radiation resulting from the blast.

National Cancer Institute project investigator Jennifer Loukissas said last fall that atomic scientists around the world have asked, “How come you Americans haven’t investigated Trinity?” — noting that U.S. scientists have been involved investigating other nuclear events around the world, including Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Chernobyl and Fukushima.

The institute’s survey follows on the heels of a Centers for Disease Control study of historical records at Los Alamos National Laboratory that found that Southern New Mexicans were never warned about the Trinity detonation or advised to take safety and dietary precautions either before or after the blast. The Los Alamos Historical Document and Retrieval Assessment Project also concluded that radiation levels in some public areas were 10,000 times what would be considered safe exposures.

When asked about the status of the National Cancer Institute health surveys, spokesman James Alexander in an email said only that “Our researchers are developing the protocol for the next phase of the effort. Scientific reviews are in progress.”