

In Praise of Environmentalist Becky Tarbotton, 1973-2012

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By Tina Gerhardt, December 30, 2012

"We need to remember that the work of our time is bigger than climate change.

We need to be setting our sights higher and deeper.

*What we're really talking about, if we're honest with ourselves,
is transforming everything about the way we live on this planet.*

We don't always know exactly what it is that creates social change.

It takes everything from science all the way to faith,

and it's that fertile place right in the middle

where really exceptional campaigning happens -

and that is where I strive to be."

-- Rebecca Tarbotton

Leading environmentalist and human rights activist, Rebecca "Becky" Tarbotton, executive director of the San Francisco-based organization Rainforest Action Network (RAN), died in a swimming accident north of Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, on Wednesday, December 26, 2012. She was vacationing with her husband and close friends.

She was swimming in the open ocean, encountered some rough waves and inhaled water. Although she was rescued and brought ashore, she could not be revived. According to the police report, she died of asphyxiation.

Nell Greenberg, communications director for RAN, said, "Becky was an emerging star who was galvanizing an ever-growing movement of people demanding environmental and social change."

Tarbotton was an environmentalist and human rights activist. Born in Vancouver, British Columbia, on July 30, 1973, she completed her B.A. in Geography at McGill University and a M.A. in Community and Regional Planning at the University of British Columbia.

Her work began with indigenous communities in far northern Canada. She subsequently lived in Ladakh, India, for eight years, working for the International Society for Ecology and Culture.

Tarbotton took the helm of RAN in 2010, the first woman to do so in the organization's 27-year history. She led campaigns to preserve rainforests and protect indigenous rights, pushing to the fore the nexus of fossil fuel use, forest degradation and global warming.

Michael Brune, former executive director of RAN and now executive director of the Sierra Club, said, "Becky was a force against deforestation and corporate greed. She was a rising star. We need more women to be leading environmental, and losing a leader and friend like Becky is especially painful."

Her most recent success was brokering a deal with Walt Disney that would eliminate their use of paper produced from the logging of endangered forests.

Bill McKibben of 350.org said, "She was a fighter with a spring in her step and a bit of fire in her eye."

"Becky was a leader's leader. She could walk into the White House and cause a corporate titan to reevaluate his perspective, and then moments later sit down with leaders from other movements and convince them to follow her lead," Ben Jealous, executive director of the NAACP and a close friend, said. "If we had more heroes like her, America and the world would be a much better place."

She is survived by her husband, Mateo Williford; her brothers Jesse Tarbotton and Cameron Tarbotton, and her mother, Mary Tarbotton, of Vancouver, BC. Her ashes will be scattered off of Hornby Island in British Columbia where her family owns a cabin and where she spent much time with family and friends.

Public memorial services will be held in San Francisco and in Vancouver. Dates are still to be determined.

For those who would like to send condolences to her family, please send them to the RAN office, 425 Bush Street, Ste 300, San Francisco, CA 94108.

Tina Gerhardt is an independent journalist and academic who covers international climate negotiations, domestic energy policy and related direct actions. Her work has appeared in Alternet, Grist, The Nation, The Progressive and the Washington Monthly.