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Whistleblowers "terrified" at TVA nuke plants?

In the wake of the Fukushima disaster in Japan, the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission has released a task force report on the safety of America's 104 nuclear reactors.

And on "The Early Show" Wednesday, CBS News Chief Investigative Correspondent Armen Keteyian offered Part Two of his investigation into one troubled nuclear power plant, in Spring City, Tenn.

On Tuesday, he reported on whistleblower Ann Harris, a 71-year-old great-grandmother who's made it her life's calling to hold those operating the plant accountable when it comes to safety.

[Fukushima-type disaster inevitable in U.S.?](#)

On Wednesday, he looked into the culture war at the facility known as [Watts Bar](#).

Linda Nadeau worked for more than 20 years as a security guard for the Tennessee Valley Authority, the government-owned electricity corporation, patrolling the most secure areas of its nuclear power plants, including Watts Bar.

"I want people to know how we were treated," she told Keteyian. "I'm not the only one. There was other people."

Over the years, hundreds of such *people* have found their way to Harris's home -- long a safe haven for insiders seeking counsel from the former Watts Bar employee who has won a record six whistleblower lawsuits against the TVA.

"Not on anybody's life," says Harris, "would I let anybody know who come through here."

She's not alone.

A 1986 report documents what investigators called "widespread intimidation, harassment and discrimination by TVA management," along with "widespread mistrust."

A crying Janice Overall told CBS News her husband, Curtis, "paid the ultimate price."

In the comfort of Harris's kitchen, Overall spoke of Curtis, an award-winning employee who helped run Watts Bar's unique ice containment system, designed to prevent a nuclear meltdown.

But in 1995, after Overall discovered what he believed were problems with the system on the eve of Watts Bar's long-delayed startup, he got harassed with threatening notes, and even a fake bomb discovered in the back of his pickup. Battling a bad heart and deep depression, Overall died in 2007 at the age of 56, without any proof of who had harassed him.

Bill McCollum is the current Chief Operating Officer of the TVA.

Asked if he feels the TVA has "a culture" in which "people feel comfortable coming forward ... because that hasn't been the case in the past," McCollum responded, "Our culture today is -- safety is our highest value. ... And our surveys and assessments of the culture here at Watts Bar support that over 95 percent of the people do feel comfortable in raising any of those sorts of issues today."

That's news to attorney Lynne Bernabei, who specializes in whistleblower lawsuits.

"It has turned out," she says, "that I've represented more whistleblowers at TVA than any other place."

Bernabei told CBS News that's more than 60 people since the 1980s - at least eight since the TVA says it beefed up its employee feedback program a decade ago.

"People are terrified to come forward at TVA," Bernabei asserts. "It's just like back in 1985. Nothing has changed. They're terrified to come forward because they know that they will not get employment at TVA."

Nadeau informed her supervisors that other security guards at Watts Bar were sleeping on the job. In 2008, she was fired for what was termed "inappropriate abusive communication behavior."

She thinks it was retaliation, saying she "was told by one of the supervisors that I am -- above-average clean. I'm too moral. And I'm paranoid and eccentric."

Says Bernabei, "The whole regulatory system is based on self-reporting by the utility employees. If those employees are scared of coming forward, you're not going to get the safety problems reported, and you're gonna have a plant that is not safe."

CBS News spoke with one whistleblower, Gail Richards, who said she was too afraid to appear on-camera for "fear of further risk of retaliation for me and my family by the TVA and NRC."

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