Names were substituted: Donna = Maureen Reynolds
Rhonda = Karen Robinson

(Women and Environments International Journal. Volume 62/63. Spring 2004)

From Environmental Ill to Environmental Health: Women activists taking care of Halifax, Nova Scotia

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Women in the grass roots environmental health movement deserve most of the credit for transforming Halifax, Nova Scotia, from the environmental ill capital of Canada to a leader in environmental health. Halifax became infamous after hundreds of people became ill, en masse, from indoor air pollution at Camp Hill Medical Centre in Halifax. This set the stage for grassroots activists to lobby for a healthy environment, indoors and out, and for environmental health treatments for those made ill by unhealthy environments. Women's leadership in environmental health was critical to obtaining a pesticide by-law to restrict cosmetic pesticides, scent-free policies in public buildings, a government-funded environmental health clinic, a "state of the art" $26 million healthy school, and a curb-side compost pick-up program that diverts 68% of organic material from the landfill. Rallying against a proposed municipal incinerator in 1994, on environmental health grounds, was also a rally for a composting program.

At the oldest Farmers' Market in North America, amidst an abundance of organic fruit and vegetable stands, as well as free-range chicken and organic beef stands, activists network with local residents and farmers. Conversations with Donna, who struggles to reduce pesticide-use, and Rhonda, who labours for healthy schools, started with discussions of how much they learned from the Camp Hill workers.

Camp Hill and Toxic Exposures

When high profile health professionals as well as kitchen staff, nurses and janitors at Camp Hill became ill, the dangers of unrestricted toxic chemical use, and the importance of ventilating with fresh air, rather than recycled or contaminated air became a health issue in Halifax. Seven hundred of 1250 workers at Camp Hill had work-related illnesses. Three hundred workers required long-term leave and 100 were deemed permanently disabled, mostly women. Neurological testing of workers identified exposure to solvents, while hygiene testing showed contamination from the parking garage and other departments, creating a toxic soup of exposures from 1989 to 1993.

Many Camp Hill victims call their condition multiple chemical sensitivity. Cynthia, a dishwasher at Camp Hill, attributes her breast cancer and environmental illness to caustic sodium hydroxide re-circulated from the exhaust through the air intake. More than ten years later, Cynthia is only able to cope with her chemical sensitivities by strictly controlling exposures to toxic chemicals to prevent triggering her illness. Thus, everyday living presents challenges and requires spending money she does not have to filter her air, drinking and bath water, eat organic food, and renovate her house to be mould and toxic-free in a toxic world where petrochemicals and organochlorine chemicals are replacing many natural products.

Cynthia and other Camp Hill victims are not unique. According to several surveys, one-third of the North American population reports feeling ill from chemical odours. The vantage point of the chemically sensitive, who report strong reactions at levels hundreds or thousands of times lower than allowable occupational exposures, turns the government regulatory framework of a tolerable dose upside down. Governments permit exposure to carcinogens, neurotoxins, and other toxic chemicals in the workplace and consumer market that are at dangerous levels for people's health. Governments take a risk analysis approach sanctioning, for example, an excess rate of one in a million getting cancer, without asking whether a technological or chemical risk is necessary. Although four million chemical mixtures remain untested, research links more than a thousand chemical mixtures to fertility and pregnancy abnormalities. For example, of the 34 most common lawn chemicals, 29% cause cancer, 35% cause birth defects, 21% interfere with reproduction, 59% are neurotoxic, 38% cause kidney or liver damage, and 85% are sensitizers according to the US Environmental Protection Agency and the National Toxicology Program toxicological references. In addition to being human health threats, these pesticides cause environmental impacts, as 32% are toxic to birds, 62% to fish, and 35% to bees, while 35% have been detected in groundwater. For the cosmetic need of achieving the perfect green lawn, homeowners apply 5.5 to 12.5 kg of pesticides annually per hectare of lawn, which is five times the level used in agriculture.

Restricting Pesticide Use

Donna considers herself to be a canary in the coalmine, warning of toxic exposures to pesticides. Donna, an elderly woman, had a stroke and several epilepsy attacks after different exposures to pesticides. She showed me her three doctors' letters stating that minute pesticide exposures could kill her. Donna dedicates all her time and energy to phasing out pesticides. Co-leading the group, Real Alternatives to Toxins in the Environment (RATE), she says, "I try to tell people about pesticides and I feel that if I tell enough people I may save one child from leukemia. I'd do an awful lot to save one child's life."

RATE with 5,000 letters of support and 600 people signed up to testify, demanded a task force on pesticide-use in the Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM). Hundreds of doctors wrote letters to support the phasing out of the cosmetic use of pesticides after RATE circulated a 300+ page binder to each doctor containing medical and scientific journal articles on pesticide health risks.

A by-law restricting pesticide use around schools, parks, and 50 metres around the homes of chemically sensitive people in the Halifax Regional Municipality was passed in 2000. As well, city council approved funding for educating people on the many alternatives to toxic chemicals for healthy lawns. And what a difference it's making! A 2002 survey found Halifax is an anomaly in pesticide use across Canada, having only 7% of households using pesticides compared to 31% for the rest of Canada. RATE also works to reduce other toxic chemical-use, particularly those that expose children to risks.

Improving Air Quality in Schools

Concerned about their children going to school healthy but coming home sick, Rhonda and a few other mothers, formed Citizens for A Safe Learning Environment (CASLE) in 1994. Deferred maintenance and poor indoor air quality are widespread in Canadian schools, according to a national survey, indoor air quality is compromised by mould, asbestos, overcrowding and lead paint. When Rhonda discovered friable asbestos in her child's classroom, and the school board

did not have an asbestos protocol, she went to the press with a groundswell of support from teachers and parents. CASLE organized a joint meeting with all ministries impacting health in schools - Education, Labour and Environment – demanding, "Tell us what you can do to make children's health better in this Province."

To keep public services and on health and safety grounds, parents and workers were instrumental in breaking up large private contracts both with *Servicemaster*, for maintenance and repairs; and with private contractors that build and lease schools. Rhonda explains how they linked health risks to cost-cutting measures, through meticulous documentation of hazards to convince the school board of the danger: "We brought in the cleaning materials they were using and showed the chemicals on the list...that included carcinogens, teratogens and mutagens, as well as accounts from workers about using those materials and what it did to them. Accounts of cost cutting on maintenance were recorded. Instead of removing the mouldy ceiling in the gymnasium, they just built a false ceiling below it so you couldn't see it but it still made you sick. We cancelled the P3 (Public-Private Partnership) schools and the government took over."

Media savvy and resourceful, Rhonda and other CASLE women used legal mechanisms of the *Freedom of Information Act* and *Occupational Health and Safety Act*, press conferences and strategic partnerships. To assist CASLE in protecting at-risk workers and students, unions provided financial support to hire experts to provide scientific evidence. When CASLE insisted that experts from University of Alberta analyze Halifax West Secondary School, it was found to be both a fire and mould trap, wicking water up the 48 year old building that had no insulation or vapour barrier. Condemning the school spawned a healthy school design and construction guide and a "state of the art" $26 million school, which merges sustainable and healthy building design. Also, with union support for a no-fragrance policy for public places, CASLE flew in "two experts from other parts of North America to counter all the claims that were being made by the fragrance industry" and explained the neurotoxic effect of many synthetic fragrances. CASLE credits its success to its informed co-operative approach and the groundswell of parents, teachers and unions demanding healthy workplaces and schools.

Conclusion

Rhonda and Donna are heroic in their struggle to make Halifax a healthier, more sustainable place to live. Excluded from positions of power in government and corporations, but responsible for childcare and family health, they leveraged authority over public health through organized resistance, volunteer labour, and the institution of motherhood.

In *Yearning*, bell hooks links environmentalism with social justice in everyday praxis. "We are concerned about the fate of the planet, and some of us believe that living simply is part of revolutionary political practice. We have a sense of the sacred. The ground we stand on is shifting, fragile, and unstable".

For more information on school health: http://www.chebucto.ns.ca/Education/CASLE/casle.html
For more information on pesticide reduction: http://www.chebucto.ns.ca/Environment/RATE/

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