

Storybook Farm’s Backyard

Beverly Kerr



This year my husband Julius and I celebrated our 40th wedding anniversary. Julius has a medical condition that causes severe cramping of his muscles, especially in his legs. He is often

in pain and there are times when he cannot walk. The doctors do not know what the condition is or why he is having these symptoms. We wonder if our environment is to blame. This is a sad situation, but it does make us grateful for each day we are together.

Our Neighbor: A Toxic Polluter

Our family was settled in our home and our child care business, A Storybook Farm, was in operation for over ten years when a galvanizing plant opened next door to us. We received no warning about the galvanizing plant, even though this polluting industry adjoins our property.

Galvanizing plants operate with almost no pollution controls. Their tanks of hot metal, acid, and caustic chemicals are open to the atmosphere.

Galvanizing contaminants include lead, zinc, chromium, and particulates. Our soil shows elevated levels of these pollutants. Our daughters and grandchildren are showing signs of the same condition that torments my husband. They were all raised or spent much of their childhood right here in our home beside the galvanizing plant.

Before this polluting industry showed up in our backyard, we never gave much thought to clean air and water or our peaceful neighborhood. We took it all for granted.

Share the Test Results

What statements should Beverly make when she talks about her soil test results?

Pollutants Found in Three Soil Samples in Storybook Farm’s Yard				
Chemical Name	Sample A	Sample B	Sample C	Typical US Level in soils
Chromium	43.3	86.6	40.6	40.00
Lead	23.7	23.2	14.5	10.00
Zinc	181.0	30.1	258.0	50.00

1. On average, zinc levels are _____.
2. Sample C of zinc is _____ times higher than typical U.S. soil.
3. The lead levels look lower than the others, but Samples A and B are still about _____ times higher than typical.

Data on soil results are in mg/Kg . Table provided by BREDL. BREDL staff advise using the highest level for comparison. There is a chance that a person in Storybook Farm’s backyard may be exposed to the highest level. To learn more about the dangers of exposure to chemicals, check <www.atsdr.cdc.gov>.

We Used to Take Clean Air for Granted

After many complaints by our family and others in the community, the North Carolina Division of Air Quality (NC-DAQ) set up air quality testing equipment to monitor the galvanizing emissions. The results of the air testing were “inconclusive.”

Before this polluting industry showed up in our backyard, we never gave much thought to clean air and water or our peaceful neighborhood. We took it all for granted. We were not active in environmental work or volunteer work except through our church. We didn’t pay much atten-



Here's Julius on the far right, getting ready for an old fashioned tractor-pulled hay wagon ride!

tion to politics. Now that we have opened our eyes to environmental threats, we are aware and active. My husband Julius and I and many of our neighbors monitor the community closely for new activity, new permits, and new threats.

We know that once a business is in place, it is almost impossible to stop it. This is why we took quick action when a neighbor noticed workers clearing land in our community. He alerted neighbors that we might have a problem. We found that an application for an asphalt plant had already been approved by our county commissioners.

Learning, Organizing, and Getting Help

We needed help to figure out how to stop the asphalt plant. We held meetings in each other's homes and discussed our battle plan. A typical meeting would be held Sunday afternoon, with a gracious hostess serving iced tea and key lime pie. We invited Blue Ridge Environmental Defense League (BREDL) to help us organize our campaign to stop the asphalt plant.

BREDL provided technical reports that gave an overview of 7 toxic substances released from asphalt processing facilities. Their report showed that asphalt plants are sources of gaseous volatile organic compounds (VOCs). These pollutants are dangerous to human health. Some VOCs are also suspected carcinogens or cancer-causing agents. Here is a list of pollutants typically found in emissions from asphalt plants: hydrogen sulfide, ben-

zene, chromium, formaldehyde, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), cadmium, and arsenic.

BREDL also taught us how to talk to the media and the public. For instance, we learned that it is better to compose a press release to say exactly what you choose instead of answering the questions of a reporter and risking saying something that might not help your cause. Our group presented our goal to help free our community of serious pollution, noxious

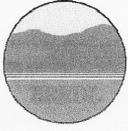
odors, excessive noise, and heavy traffic that can destroy the health and environment of our rural neighborhoods.

An Important Win!

We befriended our county commissioners and had individual meetings with them to explain our concerns. We placed yard signs everywhere that read "NO Asphalt Plants!" We made phone calls, mailed letters, emailed, faxed, and spoke at every available public meeting. We called for a public hearing and spoke as if we had already won. "Our community is grateful that our county commis-



My granddaughter and I in our backyard, standing beside an air monitor. The air quality tests were "inconclusive." We later found out they were testing for Particulate Matter (PM), which is not the biggest problem with galvanizing plants. When we asked the state why they did that, they said that was the only equipment they had, and that the equipment required to test for galvanizing chemicals was too expensive.

 <h2 style="text-align: center;">Odor Log Book</h2> <p style="text-align: center;">A system for recording information about noxious odors from industrial facilities. Blue Ridge Environmental Defense League Information gathered on this form will help determine where and when testing of air samples should take place.</p>		
DATE <small>month/day/year</small>	TIME <small>AM or PM?</small>	WHAT DID YOU EXPERIENCE? <small>Any smells? health effects? smoke? noises?</small>
Wed 6-10-09	6:30pm	WEST WIND 3mph, SMOKE TALLOW SMELL BURN BAD METAL TASTE, LOUD SLAMMING OF STEEL
Thur 6-11-09	3:08pm	LOUD FORK LIFT, LOUD BEEPING APPX 65 DB WEST WIND SLIGHT, BURN METAL SMELL
6-11-09	3:41pm	HAMMERING ON STEEL 73 DB
6-15-09	8:44 AM	SLIGHT WIND S. BURN METAL SMELL
6-15-09	9:14 AM	SLAMMING STEEL SLIGHT S. WIND BURN METAL SMELL

An odor log is one way Julius and others monitor their area.

sioners will not allow polluting industries here. If you appreciate our commissioners, stand up and give them a big round of applause.” The whole room of citizens stood up and applauded, and our

We won! No longer can polluting industries open in Alamance County.

commissioners smiled and thought of all those votes and approved a moratorium on the asphalt plant. Next, BREDL helped us to propose a polluting industries ordinance for our county,

which was also approved. We won! No longer can polluting industries open in Alamance County.

Now We Protect Each Other

We feel powerful and useful; we are grateful that we have come together to know each other better and to work to stop environmental threats. We are an extended family now, protecting one another. We know our neighbors by name. We’ve visited in each other’s homes. We monitor our planning board and our county commissioner meetings. We know that we are responsible for our own protection. We cannot leave it up to anyone else.

Sadly, the galvanizing plant is “grandfathered” in under the ordinance and continues to

operate. We are working towards better control of the toxic emissions.

I have many mixed emotions about my environmental work. I am mad when I am insulted for trying to protect my family and my environment. I am discouraged when results are labeled “inconclusive” again and again.

I am determined to tell my story and to help others protect their community.

I am embarrassed for our system when county, state, and federal representatives say they are short-staffed and cannot help. I am concerned when I get veiled threats. Yet, I am determined to tell my story and to help others protect their community.

I started out with no knowledge of environmental issues. Now I work full time with the Blue Ridge Environmental Defense League as a community organizer. The misfortune of having a galvanizing plant next door has given me a most interesting and rewarding job. I am certainly not in a perfect situation, but I do believe I am exactly where I should be in my life and I count my blessings every day.

Beverly Kerr is a wife, mother, grandmother, childcare provider, and community organizer with the Blue Ridge Environmental Defense League <www.bredl.org>.

Lessons Learned?

List some of the things Beverly used to take for granted.

What did she learn about herself and her community?

How has her story affected you?

Write about a time you went through a transformation. What was hard about it? What was inspiring?