



BELLEVUE, PA

LEWIS BRAHAM

CONCERNS



ODORS



HEALTH



QUALITY
OF LIFE



ENVIRONMENTAL
JUSTICE

HEALTH EFFECTS



ASTHMA

I've been a resident of Bellevue for almost seven years now. My wife and I had never lived here before, but Allegheny County kept getting great scores in the media as one of the best places to live. We liked Bellevue because it was affordable with good public transportation. The people here are also nice and hard-working. But we didn't know about the Shenango Coke Plant when we bought our home.

I'm a freelance writer and I work from home so I'm exposed to this air 24/7. I've heard the smell described as rotten eggs but it also smells sort of like charcoal or garbage. **And then you'd see this thin film of soot everywhere. I initially didn't know what caused it. I'd just look at the houses and they seemed dingier than where I am from.** We would go jogging and you would just feel it in your lungs. It created this ironic situation where you felt bad about exercising.

I overheard people talking about the Shenango plant at the barbershop when I was getting my hair cut, and I decided to join Allegheny County Clean Air Now (ACCAN). I became much more interested in air problems because a year after we moved

here, my brother developed pancreatic cancer. The situation really put things into perspective for me. My wife's asthma also got a lot worse after we moved here. She became winded after only walking up the stairs, and I had to invest a lot of money in air purifiers.

I did some research and found out that asthma, along with heart and lung disease, were much more prevalent here. That's when it all began to click: Shenango was the cause for major health problems in this community. **But when you own a home it's not a liquid asset. We had the feeling that "Oh, I have this piece of property and I'm kind of trapped." I can't afford to move but there is an actual, physical cost to our health living here.**

As I began to canvass the neighborhood, I realized that the people were as aware of the situation as I was. I discovered that Shenango was not only an environmental but a class issue. Clean air should not be something that only rich people can have. It should be a basic human right. The owners of Shenango expect the working class to bear all of the negative health effects from the plant, while they collect a dividend check. They don't live here, so they don't care if we get sick.

I wrote two editorials that were published in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette on the need for something to be done about Shenango. My area of expertise is financial journalism and I happened to know that there were some big asset managers that owned large stakes in DTE Energy which owns Shenango. They could potentially influence how DTE behaves so I became very interested in writing about that. I figured what little I could do, I would try.

After my second editorial came out, I got a call from a woman who said her husband used to own Shenango. She'd read the article and was very unhappy with what had been done with the facility and wanted to help. The thing that impressed me about her concern was it seemed like a very Pittsburgh thing. If I had written that article in New York, there's no way that the wife of the former owner of the facility would call me afterwards.

When I first heard the plant was closing, I was overjoyed. I also felt sad people would be losing their jobs, but you have to think of the greater good. There are about seventy thousand people who are downwind from this facility, and there were 173 people who lost their jobs. **It seems like such a paradox that I am so torn between the two sides. These companies try to divide us, when really the workers had to breathe the pollutants in too, and it was probably far worse for them.**

I think in Allegheny County, DTE Energy has a black stain on its record. They created a few jobs but polluted us a lot along the way. If they turned that facility into a solar array it would really boost their corporate image and it would create jobs. That facility has a long history of polluting the air and causing all of these problems. To actually turn it into something green would be a nice ending to that story.

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Now that the plant is closed, I feel like my life is going back to normal. I walk my dog every day and I totally notice the difference. Or rather, I really don't have to think about it quite as much. I don't have to smell that horrible smell anymore and I don't have to wonder what horrible thing I'm breathing. I feel like I can run again. My wife's asthma has also improved. All the soot on the buildings isn't gone yet though as it's caked on.

Overall, I think people in the community are happy about the closure. I've talked to a lot who are glad they don't have to worry about the air anymore. I think the business owners are happy, too. They think it will increase foot traffic. To have a community that is not as polluted may actually help the real estate prices because people don't want to bring their kids to a place that's polluted.

However, the fight is not finished. There are still some facilities on Neville Island and throughout the county that affect our air. Plus we still don't know what is going to take place on that site. It's built for industrial use so we have to make sure that a good industry takes its place. I think a solar array would be a great idea. It would certainly improve community relations in the Bellevue area.