



OHIO TOWNSHIP, PA (FORMERLY BEN AVON, PA)

KAREN GRZYWINSKI

CONCERNS



ODORS



SOOT



HEALTH



STANDARD OF LIVING



VIOLATIONS AND FINES

HEALTH EFFECTS



ALLERGIES



ASTHMA



HEADACHES

When my husband and I moved to Ben Avon in 1986, we thought we had found the perfect neighborhood. Ben Avon is convenient to downtown, has sidewalks and plenty of trees, and an interesting mix of residents and homes. Our house and yard were small, but surrounded with trees, and we had a lovely deck. We felt lucky to have found this home.

Within a few years, however, we began to experience regular foul odors in our neighborhood. We learned that much of the pollution was generated about ½ mile from our home, at the Shenango Coke Plant. I learned years later that the coke ovens had been rebuilt in the mid 1980s. The plant may have been operating better when we first moved to Ben Avon.

The pollution in our area became horrible. It interfered with day-to-day life. We hesitated to entertain outdoors, because we never knew when odors and pollution was going to blow our way. The worst episodes occurred on weekends and at night. Often, pollution came through our open windows as we slept, so strong that it woke us up. We developed headaches during prolonged or intense episodes. There was gritty soot on the deck and specks of

black tar on the white window trim. By the late 1980s, I was calling the Allegheny County Health Department (ACHD) regularly to complain and ask why the pollution was allowed to continue. I became familiar with regulations governing Shenango and learned that the operating permit prohibited pollution and malodors from leaving the property. The lack of enforcement by ACHD frustrated me.

My concern was elevated after my son was born. He loved to be outdoors and, his favorite place was his treehouse. When I noticed the Shenango stench, I'd force him inside and close up the house so the pollution didn't get in. By the mid 1990s, I began to suffer from unusual and persistent allergies that I struggled to control and I also developed asthma. I was fearful of what effect the pollution could have on my son.

I lived in Ben Avon for 18 years. When we outgrew our home, I decided against another home there for one reason only: the pollution. We moved to Ohio Township, more than two miles from Shenango. It was disappointing to continue to suffer Shenango's pollution, albeit on a limited basis, even when our distance from the plant quadrupled.

I found that the Group Against Smog and Pollution (GASP) and Clean Water Action (CWA) were great resources to me. I eventually became a GASP board member. I also became a certified smoke reader in order to visually monitor the plant.

Over an 11 year period, I saw endless pollution firsthand. I made countless reports of violations to ACHD. In response, I was regularly admonished to "be patient" and to understand the difficulty in controlling and maintaining a coke plant.

I came to view the numerous Shenango consent agreements as a revolving door. First, pollution complaints from residents that ACHD or the EPA could no longer ignore them. Then, inspectors would increase their presence at the plant and document significant violations. Negotiated fines, the promise of improved performance, and consent agreements followed. After a short period of improved compliance, pollution would ramp up as maintenance and adherence to proper practices declined, complaints would increase, restarting the cycle....

I participated in monthly Neville Island Good Neighbor Committee meetings that were headed by CWA. I also attended meetings held onsite by DTE Shenango until I realized that residents like me were being pacified by the company while pollution continued, unchanged.

In my opinion, two breakthroughs occurred in the Shenango battle. First, an energized group of residents formed ACCAN and focused their attention solely on Shenango. Then, ACCAN connected with the CMU CREATE Lab to develop a camera system to provide 24/7 documentation of Shenango's emissions that regulators could not ignore.

The asthma I developed when I lived in Ben Avon will never go away. I worry about what other health problems my husband and I will suffer because we lived in Ben Avon for 18 years, and worse, what problems my son could develop because he spent the first half of his life there.

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The CREATE Lab produced a video for ACCAN's 2015 Annual Meeting which was attended by community members, ACHD, EPA, and Shenango workers and managers. Throughout the meeting, the video looped non-stop, illustrating the most egregious episodes of pollution. I believe a turning point for DTE occurred when an EPA administrator remarked to the audience that what he saw in the video "is totally unacceptable."

A month later, when I read the first email about the Shenango shutdown, I thought it was a joke. It didn't seem possible that the pollution would ever stop.

When my son, who now lives in Philadelphia, heard about the closure, he immediately phoned me. His first question was “Mum, what are you going to do now?” The question stunned me as I realized that, for his entire life, my battle with Shenango was ever present. He was now approaching the age I was when I moved to Ben Avon, and nothing had changed until that announcement.

When Shenango shut down, a cloud, literally and figuratively, lifted from the area. It wasn't just the pollution that ended, but also the cloud of frustration and helplessness that hung over many of us who dealt with it. I'm confident that the economics of environmental compliance played a role in DTE's decision to shut down. I feel especially happy for those who live closest to the plant and suffered the most. But we still suffer the effects of pollution from Shenango.