

Air pollution is more than an inconvenience or eyesore. It's a cocktail of dangerous particles, including the most microscopic, that can ruin the health and lives of individuals and families, as the following personal accounts reveal. By Jeffery Fraser

AIR SICKNESS

Thaddeus Popovich, 75, lives about 13 miles north of Pittsburgh in the suburb of Franklin Park and used to be a resident of Ben Avon, another suburban community nearly eight miles north of the city. In Ben Avon, he lived across the Ohio River from the former DTE Energy Shenango coke plant, which closed in 2016 and was razed in 2018. He is co-founder of Allegheny County Clean Air Now (ACCAN), a citizens group advocating for better air.

I knew of pollution growing up in Beaver County. There used to be a drive-in theater in Baden and between double features we could see the open-hearth furnace. It looked like fireworks. Of course, in those days, I don't think any of us thought about pollution. What's the saying? Where there is smoke, there's money?

My work took me to Asia—to all of the major cities in China—and to Kosovo and Croatia. I found out how dirty places could be, air-wise and water-wise. It really hit me in Kosovo. They had one power plant, and they'd turn off the scrubbers to save electricity. The pollution was so thick I could chew it. During that period, I had bronchitis two or three times. It's interesting how it takes a while before you realize, "I'm getting sick because of the air."

When I returned to Pittsburgh, I moved to Ben Avon. I didn't know about the air quality. Shame on me. I was like a lot of Pittsburghers. The air was better than it used to be. But I'd go out in the morning and think, what's that god-awful smell? Like rotten eggs. I'm not going to exercise here. I'm going to North Park or a YMCA gym.

One stinky night, my whole bed started shaking. I went to [UPMC] Presbyterian Hospital and told the nurse, there must be an earthquake. She said no, that's your heart agitating your body. That happened during a spike in pollution at Shenango. I talked to my cardiologist and a researcher at CMU [Carnegie Mellon University]. The conclusion was that in my case, since I lived a half-mile from the coke plant, the air quality was affecting my health. It was probably 40–50 percent of the problem. The rest was my lifestyle.

That was a telling moment for me. I had to stay away from dirty air. My cardiologist said, "If you can move away from that coke plant, please do." And I did. I moved north to Franklin Park. But I could afford to move. A lot of people in environmental justice areas, particularly around coke plants, can't afford to move. They're stuck.

Even before my heart surgery, I thought, why isn't anyone doing anything about this? Having been in sales and marketing most of my career, I'm not too shy. We—the ACCAN group—rolled up our sleeves to have our voices heard.

We'd go to county council meetings and board of health meetings and testify; go to local municipalities, get them to pass resolutions to get the health department to get Shenango under control. We went to the local [state] legislators' offices. Anyone who'd listen to us. We wanted to fix the problem. Some of us bought one share of DTE Energy stock and went to shareholder meetings and gave testimony so we'd be on the record.

Many times, you get the impression your voice doesn't mean anything. But it does. If you put together a Greek chorus, it can make a difference.



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“I’d love to leave here, but I’d want to take my family with me, to give them a better life. I don’t want my granddaughter to be sick all the time.”

Doreen Johnson

Doreen Johnson, 64, lives about 15 miles south of Pittsburgh in the City of Clairton, which is home to the U.S. Steel Clairton coke plant. She has two grown daughters and a son.

I was born and raised in Clairton. As children, we experienced black ash, which would cover everything. We called it black rain. It would be all over the cars. My mother and other women would hang clothes on the line to dry, but the clothes would all get dirty. So, they stopped. The air is still really bad here.

My father died from lung cancer. I had a cousin who died of emphysema. He had it bad. If he blew his nose, everything that came out was black. They had to revive him a couple of times. And he was a young man. I knew a few ladies who lived in Blair Heights [neighborhood of Clairton] who died from lung cancer.

One of my daughters has lupus. My son has asthma. The first time I knew he had asthma, he was around three years old. We were putting up Christmas decorations, and he was screaming and screaming. I thought something was sticking him. At that time, I didn’t have a car. We had jitneys. I called the jitney man to run me to the emergency room. That was when he was diagnosed with asthma.

When we got home, I ended up having to take him right back. As he got older, his asthma seemed to have gotten tamed, it was suppressed. All he needed was an inhaler. But four years ago, he came to my house and he couldn’t breathe. I think he was having an asthma attack, but he wouldn’t let me call an ambulance to come and get him.

I have four grandchildren who have asthma. One granddaughter, who is 14, has severe asthma. She was diagnosed at the age of 10 months. She has two different kinds of inhalers. She’s been in the hospital maybe about four or five times and in the ICU three times. She’s been transported to [UPMC] Children’s Hospital from her doctor’s office and from Jefferson Hospital at least three times.

Two years ago, I took her to the emergency room because she was having trouble breathing. They gave her treatment and then they released her. I brought her home. And she couldn’t have been home more than 15 minutes, when she said, ‘Grandma, I can’t breathe.’ I could hear her gasping for air. And I couldn’t help her. I was so scared.

It was on a Saturday. I called my daughter and told her to come get her and take her to her doctor. My daughter was at the doctor’s office no more than 15 minutes and she called me. I said, you don’t even have to tell me. They’re going to transport her to Children’s. My daughter said, yes. My daughter stayed with her at Children’s. I was so scared. When my daughter would call me from the hospital, I was afraid to answer my phone.

My granddaughter doesn’t go outside. She doesn’t do too many activities because of the asthma. We were watching some of the Olympics, watching the girls run, and she said, ‘I can’t do that.’ I don’t want her to say ‘I can’t’ because of her condition.

She’s very intelligent. She sits in the house. She writes stories, writes books. Stories she makes up. Not only does she write books, she draws her own illustrations. She really got into it. The teachers at her school took interest in her books. Now, she tells me, she wants to be a producer. She does have goals. But she is limited as far as being outside and going places, especially here.

I have asthma, too. And I’ve been diagnosed with neurosarcooidosis, which affects my nervous system. I get dizzy. When I first noticed it, I thought it was my sinuses, but it wasn’t. There’s a [convenience store] about two blocks from the mill. It’s hard for me to go down there. The closer I get, the sicker I get.

I bought at least three air purifiers. I have one in my bedroom. I have one in my living room. It helps me somewhat. But sometimes, I get an evening—I don’t know what kind of work they’d be doing down there [at the Clairton coke plant], but I’d be in my bed about to go to sleep and I’d feel dizzy. I also have an ultrasonic humidifier. And I bought another air purifier and gave it to my daughter for my granddaughter to put it in her room.

I’m on medication. I’m getting tired of all the medications. I have an inhaler, too, and I know when to use it. But one of the best things for me was when we had to wear masks (during the pandemic). When I have that mask on, I can’t smell the pollution. Even though they say we don’t have to wear masks now, I still wear mine—and I’m vaccinated—because the mask helps me, living here.

Someone told me that my family should move, that we need to get out of here. I’m like, that’s easier said than done. Who has the money to just uproot and move and start all over? And who’s to say we’d all be able to move to the same place?

I take care of my grandchildren. Both of my daughters work. I work, too, but I work part time at the Clairton Family Center while the kids are in school. Right now, unless the Lord blesses me with a windfall, this is where I’ll be. I’d love to leave here, but I’d want to take my family with me, to give them a better life. I don’t want my granddaughter to be sick all the time.