Message

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A toxic town, a search for answers

Industrial chemicals dumped long ago still haunt Minden, W.Va., a community beset by cancer and fear. Like her father, physician Ayne Amjad is trying to track the links.

Even before Hassan Amjad's family buried him on a West Virginia hillside, phone calls flooded his daughter's office.

The callers remembered him as a kind man, boundless in his curiosity, fiery in his convictions, who had long maintained a medical clinic in nearby Oak Hill, in an old whitewashed house with a squeaky screen door and creaking wood floors.

But some of them also sounded worried. Ayne Amjad, a doctor like her father, heard the same questions again and again: Who will stand up for us now? Will we be forgotten?

Her father had made it his mission to get justice — or at least answers — for the people of this once-thriving coal town an hour south of the state capital. He told anyone willing to listen that industrial chemicals dumped decades ago by the now-defunct Shaffer Equipment Co. had long been poisoning residents.

Physician Ayne Amjad examines Amy Garrison, 32, at the clinic near Minden that her father once operated. Like her father, who died in late August, Amjad is concerned about the prevalence of cancer in the area.

In the final months of his life, the elder Amjad and his wife spent many days in Minden knocking on doors, scribbling detailed medical histories, hoping to document potential links between cancer and the polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, that had been discovered throughout the area.

Local activists say that by their count, roughly a third of Minden residents have died from or been diagnosed with cancer in recent years. State health workers say the official numbers are much lower.

Many people want to leave this place, where ramshackle houses dot the small valley not far from the New River. Its population has dwindled to 250, and few who remain have the resources to move.

"He said if it killed him, he was going to figure out what happened in Minden," recalls Percy Fruit, 63, who lives in the house where he grew up near the old Shaffer facility, and whose parents both died of cancer. "He just wanted the wrong righted."

More than once, Amjad told his daughter, "If I'm known for anything in my life, I want it to be that I helped the people of Minden."

Percy Fruit, 63, with his grandson, Amren Johnson, 6, in Minden. Fruit's father and mother died of cancer, as did a grandmother who lived down the road.

A photo of doctor Hassan Amjad in the clinic where he practiced. His daughter, Ayne, is continuing his work.

Amy Garrison had a double mastectomy after being diagnosed with breast cancer two years ago. The cancer has since reappeared. Her mother, who also grew up in Minden, died of lung cancer.

Cancer clusters, which researchers define as a "greater-than-expected number of cancer cases that occurs within a group of people in a defined geographic area over a period of time," are notoriously difficult to prove. Hundreds of suspected clusters get reported to health officials each year, though most turn out to be statistical flukes — a random collection of cases in the same area, with no underlying cause.

Still, Minden's history of pollution has prompted decades of suspicion that PCBs were responsible for an untold number of deaths, miscarriages and other health problems here. The long search for answers got a boost last summer when, at the urging of Amjad and other community activists, the Environmental Protection Agency agreed to undertake new rounds

of testing in the area. Those found continued contamination but did not suggest an "immediate threat to human health," according to regulators.

Previous testing had detected PCBs at various places along Arbuckle Creek, which winds its way past the abandoned Shaffer site and through the heart of Minden. The EPA had returned several times over the years, including after a botched cleanup in the 1980s.

Workers eventually removed thousands of tons of contaminated soil but left behind resentment and mistrust.

"It's not only the Flint, Michigans," Hassan Amjad told a local group last summer as he pressed for government action. "There are many communities [that] have been neglected. And the common denominator is: The poor get the shaft."

Amjad never saw the EPA's latest test results. On a Tuesday evening in late August, he was found slumped over the wheel of his car on Interstate 64. All signs pointed to a massive heart attack. He was 70.

Weeks later, his physician daughter, still grieving for the father with whom she had shared dinner most nights, drove from her home in Beckley to meet with a group of Minden residents.

That night, she gave them her word: She would carry on his work. She would try to unravel more about the illnesses plaguing their town. She would push to have them relocated to a safer, less toxic place to call home.

Mostly, though, she would make sure those who remained were not forgotten.

Justin Bleiler, left, a site assessment manager for the EPA, and environmental scientist Jake Pellicano, a contractor with the agency, listen to the concerns of Minden resident Susie Worley-Jenkins.

From behind the wheel of her pickup, Susie Worley-Jenkins points to a row of houses off the main street of her hometown.

"This lady here, she died of cancer, Ms. Evans. This log cabin here, Mrs. Woodson, she died of cancer very young," she says. "This guy here, he's in terrible shape."

She drives on.

“The lady that lived in that house here, she and two of her sons died with cancer. That lady up on the hill, I just found out she has cancer . . . The girl in that house up there, she had leukemia. The woman in that house died of cancer.”

Worley-Jenkins still remembers Minden as it once was, with a bustling population of 1,100, grocery stores and baseball teams. Churches teemed. Trick-or-treaters filled the dirt roads on Halloween. “It was a real close-knit community,” she says. “People looked out for each other.”

Teens hang out along the main street in Minden. The boys said they once played in Arbuckle Creek but now avoid it because of concerns about PCBs.

The present makes that past hard to imagine. Abandoned houses languish on unkempt lots. The stores have vanished. The closing of the coal mines undoubtedly contributed to the town’s atrophy; however, residents say its history of pollution is what made it a place where people die or leave but rarely choose to move to.

“There’s just a sadness all over this town,” says Darrell Thomas, 59, standing in his front yard, where he has erected homemade signs warning of Minden’s toxic legacy.

From the early 1970s until 1984, the Shaffer Equipment Co. here built electrical equipment for the local coal mining industry, including transformers and capacitors that used oil containing PCBs. The chemicals, which can linger for years in air, water and soil, have been banned since 1979. The EPA classifies them as a “probable human carcinogen.”

When the state Division of Natural Resources inspected the site in 1984, officials discovered several hundred discarded transformers and capacitors. Investigators also found that Shaffer had buried or dumped PCB-laced oil in drums and other containers there, as well as in abandoned mines, according to federal court documents. Some had leaked.

Back then, few residents understood the health risks. Local kids often played on the site, at times using the oil to grease their bicycle chains. Shaffer’s workers even sprayed the chemicals on the town’s roads to keep down dust, people say.

Adriana Carson, 10, rides her bicycle near her home in Minden. The path behind her leads to the Shaffer site.

The EPA undertook its first cleanup of the area in late 1984. The agency’s on-site coordinator advocated for a new technology known as “solvent extraction” — essentially, treating the tainted soil to remove PCBs. One year and $1 million later, the effort had failed.

Ultimately, the EPA hauled away nearly 5,000 tons of soil, removed dozens of drums and declared the problem contained.

But a local citizens group, which included a young Pakistani doctor named Hassan Amjad, pushed for continued testing. Amjad had originally moved to the area to work at a Veterans Affairs hospital. When he noticed an apparent uptick of cancers in the community, he thought PCBs could be sickening residents. They would be near-impossible to clear completely from the ground, he warned.

The EPA agreed to return after protests by the group, plus pressure from Sen. John D. Rockefeller IV (D) and others. The agency tested additional samples, acknowledged that contamination remained, discovered nearly two dozen more barrels of chemicals and trucked out more soil. Beginning in the late 1990s, the EPA and the Army Corps of Engineers placed an earthen "cap" over the Shaffer site. Government officials assured local residents that they were safe, even after a massive flood in 2001.

The public outcry eventually died down, but not the mistrust and fear.

"All my people are gone," says Worley-Jenkins, who along with her husband has been treated for cancer. There have been stretches, she adds, when "I was spending more time at the funeral home than anywhere."

Several years back, she and others began a renewed push for answers. They compiled a list of scores of residents who have suffered from various types of cancer in recent years, as well as a much longer list dating to the 1980s of current and former townspeople who have died from the disease or experienced health issues that could be related to PCB contamination.

By last summer, Hassan Amjad was pouring more and more hours into studying those health problems while publicly advocating for additional EPA testing. By late 2017, federal regulators had returned for another round of soil samples. Another stretch of waiting began.

"If these deaths and diagnoses keep happening," says Brandon Richardson, co-founder of a local environmental justice group, "it's only a matter of time before Minden doesn't have a population at all."

Trell Rose, 14, and Cody Kelly, 13, take a break from a basketball game. Rose said he drinks only bottled water because of concerns about what comes out of the tap.

On a cool Friday afternoon, with her mother riding shotgun, Ayne Amjad leaves her family's small medical clinic in nearby Oak Hill and descends into the hollow where what's left of Minden remains.

Off Minden Tipple Road, she visits Anita Scarbro, 61, now living in a trailer on a hillside above the house where she and her husband raised their two sons — the house that no longer feels safe, in part because of the bank appraisal that reads, "This site has been possibly contaminated with PCB."

It's a lonely existence for Scarbro, whose husband, Roger, died nearly five years ago. He mined coal for decades, but liver cancer took him soon after he was diagnosed. She wonders if his illness had anything to do with their drinking water or the vegetables they grew in their yard, which often flooded when Arbuckle Creek overflowed its banks.

"I miss him," Scarbro says. "I miss him bad."

Back along the main street, Amjad encounters Steve and Cindy Hayslette. He's 48, a Minden native who runs a towing business. He sometimes stands on his front porch, counting the houses within sight where friends and neighbors have succumbed to cancer. The couple have a 4-year-old son and another due to arrive in October.

"The contamination is always in the back of your mind," Steve says.

A sign outside the home of David Miller, whose wife, Marlene, died last year of lung cancer. She was 52.

In house after house, Amjad listens intently, asks a litany of medical questions, probing each family's history. Hers is a calming presence to the residents she encounters. Yet internally, she doubts what she's doing and where it will lead.

"It's hard, because I'm not as smart as my dad. I don't know as much as he did," the 40-year-old doctor confides one evening. "My dad was very boisterous, very likable. He was able to connect to all different kinds of people."

Even as she gathers mountains of data, Amjad knows that scientifically linking the pollution in Minden to the many tales of cancer will be fraught and most likely fruitless. Such efforts rarely provide clear answers, and the state has said the official number of documented cancer cases is far lower than that reported by the community. The data, which goes through 2015, includes only people who were diagnosed while they still lived in the town.

"It's going to be very difficult to prove," Amjad says.

That's why she has relied not solely on science but also on activism and compassion. She helped residents write to the West Virginia governor, imploring him to ask the EPA to place the town on its National Priorities List for cleanup. She showed up to stand in the rain

alongside those protesting the lack of action. She delivered cases of bottled water for those who don't trust what comes from their taps.

In quieter moments, she thinks of how her father taught her that being a doctor "is not enough."

"It doesn't mean you're going to heaven. It doesn't mean you are a good person," she says.

Instead, there was a more important question by which he wanted his four children to judge themselves:

"What did you do for others?"

Workers for the Environmental Protection Agency examine runoff. The agency is measuring PCB levels and evaluating whether the area should be placed on the National Priorities List.

In early March, the EPA published the latest test results from Minden, which included 37 surface soil samples and 27 sediment samples from Arbuckle Creek. The agency said the tests "continue to show PCBs but do not indicate an immediate threat to human health. Therefore, EPA does not anticipate the need to take immediate action to address soils in residential areas."

West Virginia Gov. Jim Justice (R) responded quickly.

"We have some good news — the @EPA has told us there is not an immediate threat to the public in Minden," he tweeted.

Federal officials promised residents that they intended to keep returning to test the site. "We have an ongoing commitment in Minden to let them know what science has showed us," Cosmo Servidio, who heads EPA's Region 3 office, said in an interview then.

Braden Hoffman, a contractor with the EPA, marks a wetland in Minden.

Environmental scientist Jake Pellicano crosses Arbuckle Creek after collecting sediment samples.

Employees of the EPA and the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection examine an area of concern.

In Minden, the news hardly felt reassuring. Once again, residents had been told that their fears were unfounded. “It’s just hard to swallow,” Thomas said as he and others met to commiserate about the developments in the basement of the local church.

“I can understand why people are frustrated,” Ayne Amjad said that morning. “I would only feel good if I somehow got them out of there, and I really don’t know how.”

But there is this:

Thirty-five miles south of Minden, down a winding country road, sit 97 acres of undisturbed, unspoiled land in the West Virginia hills. There are apple trees and trails winding through thick woods.

Amjad closed on the property last October. She and her father had long pondered buying land like this, partly as a place to escape and relax. But she had another reason, too. A quiet wish that somehow, someday, she might also relocate some of Minden’s residents here.

“It’s kind of a daydream, I guess,” she says, though she has found herself researching grants that might help pay for relocations and surfing the Internet for what it might cost to buy mobile homes or put up small houses.

It would be fitting, she thinks, if the daydream somehow worked out. For the residents of a dying town, it could mean a new start. For the daughter of a man who had vowed to help them, it would mean a promise kept.

Emileigh, 11, and Adriana Carson, 10, play near their home.

Sent from my iPhone