

ENVIRONMENT

Toms River cancer cluster: Will environmental rollbacks bring back 'toxic' town?



Jean Mikle

Asbury Park Press

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TOMS RIVER - Linda Gillick remembers it all like it was yesterday.

Seated in an oversize armchair in her living room after a recent fall, she recalled the anguished faces of concerned parents at raucous town meetings; the late-night phone calls about waste dumping; the public officials who worried talk of elevated cancer rates among children in Toms River was damaging the town's reputation.

And she remembers the horrible illnesses, the mysterious maladies touching so many families, including her own, in homes seemingly grouped or linked together — in loose clusters of heartache, recriminations and uncertainty. She has attended the funerals of more than 150 children who succumbed to cancer since she began her advocacy 30 years ago.

Now Gillick, who for 22 years has headed a citizens committee tasked with investigating the higher-than-expected levels of childhood cancer that plagued this community in the 1990s, fears that memories of the town's pollution past slowly are fading away.

"I can't say that our government officials, on all levels, are cooperating," said Gillick, now 70, and fighting numerous health issues of her own. "I wouldn't want us to go backwards."

Ciba site a classroom: Ciba-Geigy Superfund site in Toms River now an open-air classroom

Ciba clean-up: Toms River Ciba-Geigy Superfund site will take decades to clean

Meetings of the Citizens Action Committee on Childhood Cancer Cluster, which once drew 40 or more residents, now attract fewer than a dozen people, most of whom represent various government agencies. Township officials rarely attend.

At the last meeting — held in April — there was no representative from the state Department of Health, which used to be a constant presence at such gatherings.

'Going backwards'

But in the decades after terms like "contamination plumes," "cancer clusters" and "carbon filtration" became local discussion topics, the worry here goes beyond meeting attendance. With the administration of President Donald Trump looking to rollback a host of environmental protections and industry regulations, the worry is, even more families will come to know the hardship Toms River families experienced first-hand.

The timeline below details Toms River's long pollution history:

"I think we're absolutely going backwards," said Michael Gillick, 39, Linda's son, who has been battling neuroblastoma, a cancer of the nerve cells, since he was 3½ months old. The cancer has severely stunted his growth and left him blind in his left eye, deaf in his left ear. "People who are in a place of power, they are helping to move it in the opposite direction."

Watch Michael and Linda Gillick speak about their concerns in the video above this story.

Reich Farm water testing: Notorious Toms River Superfund site gets 5 more years of water testing

More Reich Farm: Should water testing end at Reich Farm Superfund site?

Back in the late 1990s, many more people were paying attention to Toms River. In March 1996, a state Health Department report revealed that the levels of brain and central nervous system cancers in a section of Toms River were three times higher than expected.

The report caused panic in town and led to a lengthy investigation of possible connections between Toms River's long history of dumping and pollution and the higher-than-normal childhood cancer rates.

The township's two Superfund sites — the former Ciba-Geigy Corp. dye-manufacturing plant on Route 37, and Reich Farm, where drums of chemical waste were dumped in 1971 — were immediately suspected as potential causes of the elevated cancer levels.

The township's public drinking water supplier — then called United Water Toms River (now Suez) — had drawn an underground plume of pollution from Reich Farm into its Parkway well field, located about a mile south of the Superfund site.

The investigation culminated in December 2001, when researchers announced results of an epidemiological study had found associations between exposure to air emissions from the former Ciba-Geigy chemical plant and polluted public drinking water from the Parkway well field and the development of leukemia in girls.

Linda and Michael Gillick felt vindicated, even though the study did not find a connection between environmental pollution and neuroblastoma, the type of cancer Michael has battled since infancy.

Superfund sites: Toxic NJ: Burnt Fly Bog

Superfund sites: Toxic NJ: Lone Pine Landfill

During the investigation, Toms River's public drinking water supply was scrutinized and tested more than any other in the country. Some unusual discoveries were made: a previously unknown compound related to plastics production was found in some public drinking water wells, leading to a lengthy study of its potential toxicity.

And naturally occurring radiation also was discovered in well water, leading the state Department of Environmental Protection to advise water purveyors to provide treatment to remove the radiation.

But now it's 22 years later, and Linda and Michael Gillick, as well as other activists, are growing increasingly concerned.

Rollbacks possible

The Trump administration has proposed rollbacks of a series of environmental regulations, including a plan to loosen restrictions on the federal Clean Water Rule, which could cut protections for many wetlands and smaller streams.

The federal Environmental Protection Agency recently loosened regulations on certain sources of air pollution. And, in 2017, the administration moved to repeal a rule that had restricted the dumping of mining waste into streams and other waters.

Allaire Vilage history: Allaire Village: The fall, rise and myths of a 'hidden treasure,' 60 years after revival

Some of these rollbacks have been challenged in court, and so far, the EPA under Trump has not been successful in rewriting many major environmental laws.

In July, Scott Pruitt was forced to resign as EPA administrator following a series of ethical scandals. A former coal industry lobbyist, Andrew Wheeler, has taken the reins as acting EPA chief. Most expect him to maintain Trump's policies of environmental deregulation, albeit with less rancor than Pruitt.

Wheeler has stressed his commitment to deregulation, but said his office will be transparent and supportive of the work done by EPA employees.

The policy changes make little sense to Toms River residents who remember the days when a New York television station labeled this township "toxic town" because of its lengthy pollution history.

"I think that there is a catastrophe in the making," Linda Gillick said of the drumbeat of environmental regulation rollbacks.

Toxic chemicals: Are toxic chemicals in NJ making us sick? Tauro

Toxic Secrets DuPont investigation: Toxic Secrets: Pollution, evasion and fear in North Jersey

"Obviously I'm not happy about it," said Joseph Kotran, a longtime Toms River resident whose 22-year-old daughter, Lauren, battled nervous system cancer as a toddler. "They are putting people in charge at the EPA who are really not qualified to protect the environment. They are working to help the companies, and not the people."

Bruce Anderson agrees.

"I've always said that you can't trust the government to protect us," said Anderson, whose son, Michael, 37, was diagnosed with leukemia when he was 10 years old. The Andersons now live on a farm in Pennsylvania, although they still own property in Toms River. "They can't be proactive, they are reactive. I think the citizens have to be the first line of defense."

Michael Gillick said residents of Toms River and other towns have to get involved, to question public officials, to make sure their concerns are taken seriously."

"We have to let our voices be heard," Michael added. "Let's show them it's never going to happen again, not on our watch."

A history of contamination

Back in 1996, Toms River was quite a different place.

The state Health Department report on elevated childhood cancer levels set off alarm bells in town. Linda Gillick, who in 1988 founded Ocean of Love, a support group for families of children with cancer, had long lobbied state and county health officials to study what she believed were higher-than-normal childhood cancer levels in town.

Dozens of children with cancer — and their families — came through the doors of Ocean of Love's Route 37 headquarters. So many visited that Gillick and many others began to suspect that something was wrong in Toms River.

For years, she lobbied for an update of the state's Cancer Registry, which at one point had a seven-year backlog of unrecorded cancer cases. She also asked for Ocean County to be included in epidemiological studies of childhood cancer.

But nothing happened until March 1996.

At the time the state Health Department report on Toms River's elevated childhood cancer rates became public, Gillick's group was assisting 157 pediatric cancer patients and their families.

Toxic scum: Deal Lake beset by toxic scum, recreation halted

More than 1,000 people crowded Toms River High School North's auditorium on March 21, 1996, for a raucous meeting at which state health officials attempted to outline initiatives aimed at pinpointing the reasons for the township's elevated childhood cancer rates.

At the time, the state suggested increased water testing in town, including at the township's school buildings. But officials balked at the idea of a full-blown study.

Before they could even begin their presentation, Michael Gillick, then 17, approached the microphone to speak, and to ask for state representatives to endorse a full-blown study of Toms River.

"Is it a waste of time to save children's lives?" Gillick asked. "I ask you to honestly think of the answer, not with your brains, but with your hearts. I've battled this infestation of the body and soul for 17 years. I know what it is like to live in pain and fear, not knowing when you are going to die."

It was 90 minutes after Gillick spoke before health department officials were allowed to take the microphone.

NJ's most polluted sites: Toxic Waste: New Jersey's 10 most polluted sites

Angry parents, cancer patients and environmental activists refused to let officials speak until Linda Gillick, a former elementary school teacher, prevailed upon the crowd to allow the state's presentation to be made.

Map of New Jersey's Superfund sites below:

"It was chaos, and I was crazy enough to go up to the microphone and ask people to be quiet," Gillick remembers.

After taking charge of the meeting, it's not surprising that it was Gillick who was selected to head the citizens committee when the state agreed to form the group shortly afterwards.

Childhood cancer studied

At first, state and county officials seemed unwilling to undertake a lengthy study of Toms River's childhood cancer rates, citing cost and the difficult science: the causes of childhood cancer are not yet known, so it is notoriously tough to connect environmental contamination to cancer development.

But as Gillick and other parents continued to push for an investigation, federal funding became available and the study took shape. At first, Gillick and others' conviction that something in Toms River's environment was making children sick was questioned by many members of the community.

Business leaders said publicity about childhood cancer rates would lower property values and drive people away from town. Gary Lotano, a prominent local developer, said on a local television show that Toms River was "getting beaten up here in a big, big way. In my opinion, Toms River is not going to recover for a long, long time."

Gillick received nasty letters and threats, but she also got information: phone calls and leaked internal documents from Ciba and also the water company; they showed how pollutants from Toms River's two Superfund sites had migrated into the public drinking water supply.

The documents revealed that government agencies, including state and county health departments, repeatedly failed to do anything to protect residents from pollution.

Among the startling findings was the revelation that in 1974, Ocean County's public health coordinator had requested that a filtration system be placed on Well 26 in the water company's Parkway system, after groundwater contamination from Reich Farm had been discovered in nearby private wells.

Dry cleaner cleanup: Brick dry cleaner toxic cleanup will last until 2022

Well 26 was located closest to Reich Farm. The state DEP conducted an investigation following Kauffman's request, but in the end, DEP determined there was no evidence that chemical contaminants had reached the public drinking water supply. Filtration was not installed until 1987, when pollutants, including trichloroethylene, a known human carcinogen, were found in Parkway wells 26 and 28.

Kotran, whose daughter Lauren was only a toddler when she was diagnosed with cancer, said that he learned during the investigation that it's up to residents to advocate for environmental safety. Companies will not do it on their own, he said.

"With these companies, there is no pressure on them to do the right thing, unless people get involved and apply the pressure," Kotran said. "People can't blindly accept what's spoon-fed to them by these companies."

Eventually, a massive epidemiological study, which compared the habits of families of children with cancer with families of those whose children did not contract the disease, became the centerpiece of the childhood cancer investigation in Toms River.

Researchers created a historical model of the township's water distribution system, and also studied dust gathered in attics to see if it contained contaminants.

The childhood cancer investigation would not be completed until December 2001, and would cost more than \$10 million.

The study found an association between prenatal exposure to Parkway well water and air emissions from the former Ciba-Geigy Corp. plant in Toms River and the development of leukemia in girls.

Back in the 1980s, Suez Toms River's Parkway well field was contaminated by a plume of underground contamination that had migrated into the well water from the Reich Farm Superfund site, one mile north of the well field.

The polluted water was not discovered for several years.

"They thought back in the 1970s they knew everything. They thought they knew that those wells weren't contaminated," said Kim Pascarella, a member of the citizens committee whose 14-month-old daughter, Gabriella, died of neurological cancer in 1990. "The problem is, we don't know everything, even today. There are still things to be discovered, there still is science and technology to be discovered."

Landmark study

The Toms River study is one of only two studies in the U.S. to establish any connection between environmental pollution and illness; the other one, in Woburn, Massachusetts, was chronicled in the book and movie "A Civil Action."

But even at the time, researchers cautioned that the small number of cases studied in Toms River makes it possible that the associations seen between air and water pollution and leukemia development in girls could be the result of mere chance.

Still, Gillick and other parents felt vindicated. She called the study results "a victory."

Last year, she stepped down as executive director of Ocean of Love, but she remains involved in its work, and in touch with many of the children who have battled cancer, and their families.

Recently, though, her own health issues have kept her mostly confined to her home in Toms River's Brookside section.

Twenty years ago, Mayor Thomas F. Kelaher said many residents were afraid to drink Toms River's water, and some expressed reservations about moving into town because of the elevated childhood cancer levels.

"They said it was poison," the mayor said. "That attitude definitely existed. I don't think it exists now."

These days, Michael Gillick hopes to some day become a counselor. His illness has limited the number of college courses he's been able to take. He continues to serve as a big brother to many children who are battling cancer, some of whom were only infants when they are diagnosed with the disease.

"If they need to talk to someone, I am there for them," he said. "I give them my phone number."

He admits he's frustrated that so few people attend citizens committee meetings.

"It's a mix of anger and disappointment," Gillick said. "Even when we were really going through the bulk of it, we really, at these meetings, you wouldn't see many residents around."

He said he hopes people will become more involved in learning about and protecting the environment of their community.

"I think we're absolutely going backwards," Michael Gillick said of federal environmental rollbacks. "The people that are in a place of power are helping to move things in the opposite direction of where they should be."

Positive signs

When it comes to Toms River, there is frustration, but also positive signs.

Gillick criticized the state Health Department for not sending a representative to the most recent citizens committee meeting in April.

"There was nobody there from the state Health Department," Gillick said, "and no local officials. I am really upset with the Health Department. They're the lead agency."

Donna Leusner, a spokeswoman for the state Health Department, said a representative from the department is almost always at the citizens committee meetings.

"The New Jersey Department of Health has been attending the Toms River Citizens Action Committee on Childhood Cancer Cluster (CACCCC) annual fall meetings every year for more than two decades," she said.

Gillick, once at odds with Toms River's water supplier, Suez Toms River, now considers the company an ally.

Jim Mastrokalos, general manager of Suez in Toms River, agrees.

"At the end of the day, we do have the same objective, the health and safety of the community," said Mastrokalos, who has monthly discussions on water quality issues with Gillick and the citizens committee. "We should all be working towards the same end."

Mayor Kelaher also praised the water company.

"I can certainly say this, right now the town has a nice working relationship with the Suez water company, they are responsive to everything we ask for, they don't make a move without informing us."

The rate of childhood leukemia — the cancer that was associated with Parkway well water and Ciba-Geigy air emissions — has been lower than the New Jersey leukemia rate since 2000, state health officials have said.

"I still believe that our water is the safest in the country because of how closely it's being watched," she said. "When I put my head on my pillow at night and I turn on my faucet, I feel comfortable."

Jean Mikle: 732-643-4050, @jeanmikle, jmikle@gannettnj.com