



BEN AVON, PA

DEBBIE BLACKBURN

CONCERNS



ODORS



SOOT



HEALTH



STANDARD
OF LIVING

HEALTH EFFECTS



AUTISM



NAGGING
COUGH



SORE
THROAT



MENTAL
HEALTH

I have lived for 18 years in a neighborhood in Ben Avon that is 700 feet from the Shenango Coke Works on Neville Island. We have lived in the shadow of Shenango for both my sons' entire lives. When I got married, this was where we could afford to live. We didn't even know the plant was there at the time.

Shortly after we moved in, we were sitting on the porch and we saw a big flame shooting into the sky. We asked our neighbors about it and they informed us about the local coke plant. That was the first time I learned about Shenango. It was most noticeable on my porch. It was always dirty, no matter how often I cleaned it. We didn't want to sit out there because the cushions of the chairs were always grimy and it got on your clothes.

We considered moving but we wanted to stay in the Avonworth school district for my boys. But even when I could afford to move, we didn't really want to. I used to hear stories about people living in places affected by pollution and I'd wonder why they don't just leave. But now I know why. This is our home. We didn't want to leave. Pollution is very emotional. You don't think it would be, but it is.

I had a couple of episodes last year where we woke up coughing. Sometimes I noticed on my way home from work that as soon as I cross the hill of Ben Avon Heights, I can smell the air. And pretty soon I started noticing that I had a nagging, occasional cough that lasts maybe a day and half. **It's like our bodies aren't allowed to function the way they are supposed to, so we have a harder time staying healthy.** The unease I feel about the pollution was just growing and growing.

It's especially hard on my sons because they are on the autism spectrum. **I feel like my kids might be healthier or less symptomatic if they were born in another place, if they didn't have to breathe this air.** I want to live in a cleaner place, a place where I don't have to worry about my kids being so depressed. Many of the neighbors I talk to have

physical problems associated with air pollution, but there is also a lot of mental illness too like anxiety and depression.

I didn't make the connection between air pollution and autism until recently when I heard a statistic about autism rates being so high in the Ohio River Valley.

I feel guilty that they were born, that they were gestating, in a polluted environment. I breathed all of that in when they were developing. I can't fix that, it's already happened, but maybe I can alleviate the symptoms. So I just try to make my house as clean as possible. I get plants to filter the air, and we keep our windows closed.

I also try to do what I can by getting involved with air quality advocates. I got involved with a local group and started going to meetings. I feel like there isn't enough done to protect us from the hazards to our health. The plant is just constantly paying fines which I'm sure are cheaper than making improvements. It's very upsetting and sad.

Last Christmas, I received an email from Allegheny County Clean Air Now (ACCAN) stating that Shenango was finally being shut down. I was so happy that I went running through my house shouting to my kids, "Guess what! You won't believe it!" I called my mom who lives on the same street, and she asked, "does this mean that you don't have to move?" Because the pollution was so bad that I was only steps away from putting my house on the market. But I told her, "Yes, I guess this means that we don't have to move!" My mother and my sons were so thankful to be staying here.

Once the plant shut down, I could tell the difference in air quality right away. Within just a couple days, there was a dramatic change. It was like someone just shut the pollution off.

Instead of a haze, you could see a clear, blue sky. Everything just smells and looks so much cleaner. My family and I never used to go outside, but now we can just sit on the front porch and relax.

There was such a long battle concerning Shenango, and now that it has closed, I feel like justice has been served.

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My family and I are beginning to see huge improvements in our health as well. Our moods have even improved. I believe that pollution can affect mental health as well as physical, and I noticed that my sons' behaviors completely changed after the plant shut down. Both of my sons seemed to be depressed, but now I can hear them laughing in their bedrooms. They also had some sleeping problems, but now they are able to sleep through the night, and they wake up at a reasonable hour.

Everyone in the community seems happier because they are more willing to love our neighborhood now. It's like a huge weight has been lifted off of our shoulders.

Even though the plant supposedly shut down because of less demand for steel, I believe that it was the community groups, such as ACCAN and Clean Water Action, that pushed them over the edge. But, there is still more work to do. Now, we still have to worry about what company will be taking over the plant. My hope is that a clean industry will come in, like solar arrays. It's important to talk about improvement. That way, we won't accept just another dirty industry coming in. I know that the pollution problem isn't solved, but only one thing can be solved at a time.