



FRANKLIN PARK, PA (FORMERLY BEN AVON, PA)

THADDEUS POPOVICH

CONCERNS



ODORS



HEALTH



QUALITY
OF LIFE

HEALTH EFFECTS



HEART
DISEASE

I moved to Ben Avon eight years ago after returning to Western Pennsylvania from upstate New York. I lived near Avon Park and everybody would be out there walking their dogs and pushing their kids in baby buggies. There were sidewalks and a small downtown area. It was just a pleasant place to be. But Ben Avon is also 1/2-mile directly across the Ohio River from Neville Island and the Shenango Coke Works.

I knew there was air pollution because the air stank when I walked outside in the morning. It smelled like tar. One of the coke plant's byproducts was indeed tar, used for making asphalt and resealing driveways. Sometimes it smelled like rotten eggs. On occasion, I would notice a slight granular feeling all over the kitchen counters. It was soot from the coke plant.

It took me a while to realize that air pollution was going to be a serious issue for me and my health. After returning to the Pittsburgh area, I developed a gravelly voice which I have now. I went to my doctor who tested me for allergies and said I was allergic to mold and many other things in the environment. I never had allergies before.

June 12th, 2012 was a memorable day. I had bypass surgery to replace five clogged arteries feeding my heart. Surgery does not eliminate heart disease. I still needed to worry about my arteries clogging up again. I did some research on nutrition, talked to doctors, and found I could do a lot to help my heart by changing my diet. I'm a vegan now.

Later I attended a lecture sponsored by Carnegie Mellon University and realized that I had a bad 'air diet' as well. Dr. Arden Pope presented a study he had done when a Utah steel mill shut down for six months. He said hospital admissions, heart attacks, and respiratory health problems decreased due to reduced air pollution. I asked him if air pollution contributed to my heart disease and he said, "absolutely."

My heart problems persisted. In October, 2013, **I woke up in the middle of the night. The windows were open and it smelled like Shenango was in my room. I moved to a closed window bedroom and laid down but my heart went into atrial fibrillation for an hour.** My cardiologist believes this was due to air pollution. I've told this story at Allegheny County Board of Health meetings and other public gatherings.

The Shenango coke plant created so much pollution that I was forced to move 10 miles north to Franklin Park where the air quality is pristine in comparison. There I could breathe more easily, no longer needing to keep the windows closed because of bad smells and dirty air.

I believe that DTE Energy, the company that owns Shenango, doesn't care. There is no return on investment when they spend money on maintenance or air pollution control. All they care about is the bottom line. There is no incentive to make changes, unless the regulators require it. DTE's mission is to make money for their stockholders. Period. I understand that. That's why I'm a DTE stockholder. I, along with others, bought one share of stock so that we could go to their stockholders' meetings and make a fuss. I have this kind of "why not" way of doing things in dealing with the company.

It was announced in December of 2015 that the Shenango Coke Plant was shutting down. My first reaction was disbelief and I said, "Wow! It's Christmas come early!" and "Pinch me, I think I'm dreaming!" My friends and I had always hoped that it would close by 2017 or so, but we thought that was a long shot.

Since the plant has closed, my friends tell me that the air has improved a lot in Ben Avon, and we can prove it. The Allegheny County Health Department's air quality monitor in Avalon has shown a decrease in particulate matter and other pollutants.

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I strongly believe that our grassroots organization Allegheny County Clean Air Now contributed greatly to the close of Shenango. We put in hours of work to show that the plant was seriously hazardous. We went to multiple borough councils meetings to let them know what was going on. We put forward resolutions approved by those councils to the Allegheny County Department of Health. We even went to the Allegheny County Council meetings, just to put ourselves out there. And it worked! We were so relentless that we even got media coverage. I remember one particular Board of Health meeting at which the director asked me, "Ted, when are you going to give it up?" I was convinced that the Board of Health couldn't be bothered by our concerns, so we had to keep fighting.

According to the American Lung Association, the Pittsburgh region has the most polluted air east of California. That's not good for attracting businesses or young people into the region. In my opinion "America's most livable city" is not very livable.

Now that the plant is shut down, I get the feeling that people think that all the work is done. However, there is still a lot to do. We need to make sure that a green, nonpolluting facility replaces Shenango. That would be so uplifting.

Throughout this whole experience, I learned that you cannot do things on your own. I counted all of the organizations that fought for this cause in some way, and there were more than forty! Our goal now is to keep developing a network of people and organizations that can help us, because the fight for good air quality never ends. There are still three major polluters on Neville Island.

But I believe that someday that could change, if we continue to fight for clean air!