

AUG 31 1997

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# Dying to **KNOW** BELDEN CENTER ASSESSES THE RISKS

## Residents worry for their lives

*ILLNESS: Neighbors think that living in Belden Center — and near hazardous waste sites — is the reason behind many of their illnesses.*

By Teresa Hoshell and Mike Kurilovitch  
*Niagara Gazette*

TOWN OF NIAGARA — Meet the Harris family of Belden Center.

There's mother Dorothy. In one year, she said she underwent three major surgeries: a hysterectomy resulting from ovarian cancer and operations to remove a cancerous tumor in her throat and all her teeth, a consequence of cancerous gums.

There's 29-year-old daughter, Tina Schenk. She had emergency surgery at age 17, minutes after doctors discovered her 6-month-old fetus had not developed bones. Mrs. Schenk said she also has suffered seven miscarriages, had a cyst the size of a softball removed from her ovaries and had kidney stones seven times.

Her sister Wanda Janowski, 34, has suffered two miscarriages. Her daughters are hyperactive and on medication, Mrs. Harris said.

Dorothy's son, 36-year-old Charles Harris, has been battling lymphoma, a cancer of the lymphatic system, since 1991, a battle he nearly lost a month ago.

But the Harrises are far from the only Belden Center family battling illness. Many of the 337 residents of the bedroom community counted in the 1990 Census suffer from various ailments, ranging from routine allergies to some of the rarest cancers known to man, an inordinate 157 cancers in all, according to an informal survey.

That's nearly one of every two residents, far exceeding what the American Cancer Society terms the national average of one cancer in every four people.

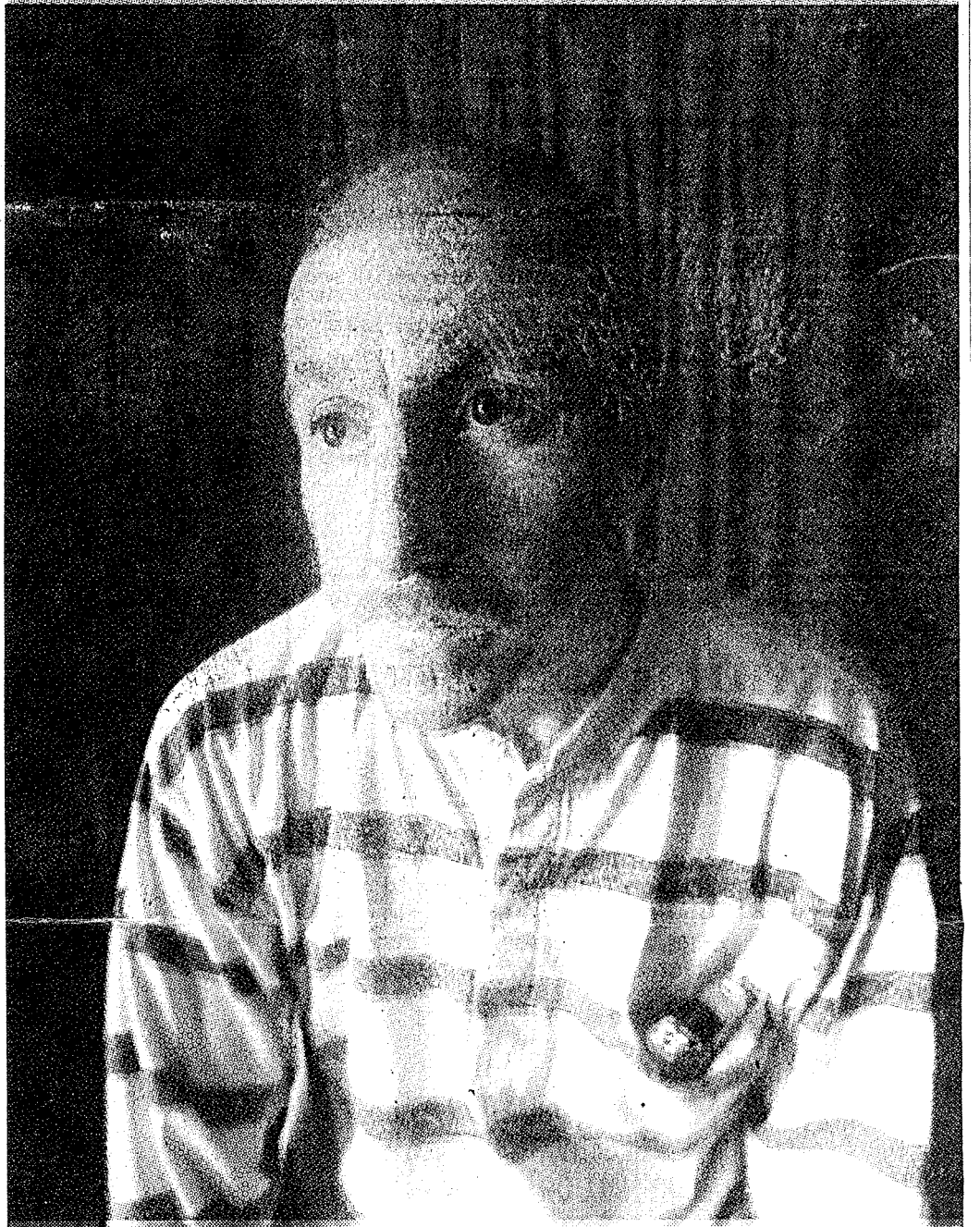
Why the apparent "cancer cluster" — although officials have been reluctant to term it that — in Belden Center?

Some residents blame the abandoned hazardous waste dump sites and landfills that border their neighborhood.

"I think it has to be the chemicals and stuff making everybody get cancer so rampantly," said Diane Peddicord, 40, a former resident who suffers from multiple myeloma, a cancer affecting the bones and internal organs.

"There's no doubt in my mind there are all kinds of toxic chemicals out there," another former resident, Fred Curtis, said. "I believe there is a very good possibility (all the cancers) are related to that."

Residents have been asking questions for years now but have gotten few concrete answers, said



James Neiss/Niagara Gazette

**CANCER VICTIM:** Charles Harris moved to North Tonawanda to escape what he believes are the risks of living in Belden Center, but he is battling for his life because of cancer of the lymphatic system. Other members of his family also suffer from various illnesses.

Robert Olszewski of Lockport Road, who suffers from a rare brain cancer.

The question many still ask is why? And what's going to be done? "Something needs to be done. But who am I?" Charles Harris asked. "I'm going to die and who knows what will happen?"

Many of the residents of the Belden Center neighborhood — an area bounded by Rhode Island Avenue and Lockport Road to the north and south, Hyde Park Boulevard and Norman Street to the east and west — have lived in the area for generations. In some cases, almost as far back as the mid-1900s, when several companies began dumping their refuse in the grassy expanses bordering the area.

Rhode Island Avenue resident  
Please see **Residents, 6A**

### ABOUT THIS SERIES

Some Belden Center residents have been living with illnesses and the fear that dump sites near the neighborhood could be the cause. Reporters Mike Kurilovitch and Teresa Hoshell explore residents' concerns in this three-day series.

#### Today

- ✓ Belden Center residents describe illnesses they and their neighborhoods have suffered. **1A**
- ✓ Robert Olszewski organized residents into a

group called CAPE. **6A**  
✓ One family has suffered a litany of illnesses. **6A**

#### Monday

- Not all the residents of Belden Center fear for their health. In fact, some fear that hysteria could hurt their property values.
- A family has lived in the same house for years, but many have died of cancer or suffer from other illnesses.

#### Tuesday

- Belden Center isn't the only residential area in the county that has dump sites as neighbors.

# Residents worry for their health, lives

*Continued from page 1A*

Bernie Welninski has lived with the putrid smells" and unexplained illnesses for more than three decades. He's at wit's end.

"Quite a few of the neighbors are sick. Some of them moved out," he said. "The guy across the street died of cancer. Three of my friends from the area died of cancer."

"They say environmentally it is clean (here), but I don't think so. Too many people around here are getting sick. That chemical-filled hill right back of the house? They tell me it's capped, but I doubt it. I don't believe nobody no more."

According to reports compiled by the state Department of Environmental Conservation, the area Welninski refers to — known as the Vanadium site — is a 150-acre parcel actually consisting of three lump sites.

The site contains 50,000 tons of ferro chromium silicon, 6,000 tons of ferromanganese slag, 25,000 tons of ferro silicon dust and unknown quantities of various other substances, including phenol, iron, zinc, barium, vinyl chloride, cyanide, sodium, ash, lime and slag.

The DEC classifies the site as Class 2, meaning it poses a significant risk to public health. Tests conducted in November reveal that the surface soil is contaminated. Exactly the extent of contamination is part of an ongoing investigation by the DEC in conjunction with the Department of Health.

Despite that, only a chain link fence with "No Trespassing" signs stands between children, their bicycles and mini-bikes and a white "mountain" offering the perfect site for dirt-biking.

Not to mention exposure to contaminants.

And the fence is cut routinely to allow even easier access to the slag heap.

"I used to hunt quite a bit around here, and I roamed a lot more than

I do now," longtime Norman Street resident Lewis Laurie said. "I saw how they dumped all kinds of garbage over there."

"When they first started dumping there, why, there was no one watching. They just buried it."

He wonders about drainage, about how much of that buried refuse may be leaking and threatening the ground water or the sewer system or residents' basements.

"I've been here quite awhile," Laurie said, "and it doesn't get any better."

## Demanding answers

Olszewski decided to take matters into his own hands when state environmental and health officials could not answer his questions. He started going door-to-door to find out just how many people were sick and how many people were experiencing catastrophic illnesses.

That pretty much started the citizen's action group, CAPE, which has grown to 150 members. The group circulated an informal health survey to help sway the state Health Department to conduct a cancer cluster study.

CAPE's survey revealed a whopping 157 cancer cases. It apparently did the trick with the state, as well.

An investigation is being conducted by the state's Cancer Surveillance unit, according to Frances Tarlton of the Health Department. The first phase of the study focuses on the rare brain cancer cases. A report on those findings is expected to be released in the next few weeks, and residents will be informed, Ms. Tarlton said.

Until then, the department is not prepared to release any details about the investigation, Ms. Tarlton said. She did say the probe will involve looking at the medical histories to determine if the number of brain tumors in the area is higher than what would be expected.

"If we are correct and there is an

abnormally high cancer incidence — especially rare brain cancers — then there has to be some cause, and we need to get to that," CAPE lawyer Richard Berger said.

Once the brain cancer study is completed, the state will turn its attention to other types of cancer in the community, using data obtained from the state's Cancer Registry, a registry required by law, Ms. Tarlton said.

## Valid complaints?

The Department of Environmental Conservation originally became involved at Belden Center about five years ago as a result of some complaints of potential problems, DEC environmental engineer Michael Hinton said.

"Our initial investigation revealed there was a problem," he said.

The site was upgraded to Class 2 and remains "a potential threat to human life," Hinton said.

Hinton and his counterpart, DEC regional hazardous waste engineer Dan King, are careful about commenting on their impressions of the Belden Center situation.

"We do not do health-risk assessment," King said. "We just generate information on what's there, the concentrations, identifying the pathways for migration."

It's the state Health Department's job to assess health risk, he said, and that is in the works.

County Health Department Assistant Public Health Engineer Paul Dicky said he understands the anxiety of Belden Center residents and their desire for some quick answers.

But it's a time-consuming process, he said.

"We are looking at contamination and how it exists, the potential for off-site migration," he said. "We understand the people of Belden Center are nervous, and we are making sure the investigations are handled properly."

"I know cancers are very prevalent (in Belden Center), but a lot of people are very surprised when they find out how common cancer actually is. We really need in-depth research to be able to flush out if it is abnormal. And we don't have the means or expertise here."

"We have to rely on the state. We are making progress, but it is a long process."

Dicky said that preliminary indications show "small to negligible" off-site contamination.

"We have not confirmed any contamination of concern to this point," he said.

Some Belden Center residents reported to the county's Health Department a noxious black, sludge-like material near the foundations of their homes and/or in the basements, according to a CAPE pamphlet.

Dicky said he investigated the complaints. One person had sewer trouble and was referred to the town plumbing inspector.

Another individual claimed material was leaking into his swimming pool, but it was determined that the pool did not have a proper winter cover and contained dead and decaying leaves, Dicky said.

"We have investigated a couple of Belden Center complaints about material found in basements," Dicky said. "It turned out to be mold that grows in damp surfaces. Sometimes, the foundation cracks and ground water tends to keep the wall moist."

Despite some ground water contamination at Carborundum/Globar, which is another dump site in the area, Dicky said the extent of that contamination has yet to be determined.

And the contamination is barely above detectable levels, Dicky said.

"We haven't had the information on their (DEC) latest round of wells, but that should be coming soon," he said.

## SURVEYING THE COMMUNITY

An informal health study conducted by the citizen's action group CAPE (Citizens Against Polluting the Environment) revealed numerous health problems among Belden Center residents. Among them:

### CANCERS

157 cases reported

Bone cancer
Myeloma
Brain cancer
Cancer of the jaw
Lung cancer
Colon cancer
Prostate cancer
Leukemia
Liver cancer
Pancreatic cancer
Breast cancer
Uterine cancer
Throat cancer
Oral cancer
Cervical cancer
Stomach cancer
Skin cancer - melanoma
Bladder cancer
Ovarian cancer

### OTHER MEDICAL CONDITIONS

	Number reported
Fibromyalagea	1
Benign tumors	2
Emphysema	5
Gout	1
Multiple sclerosis	2
Low blood pressure	1
Thyroid problems	3
Arthritis	2
Lupus	3
Heart disease	13
Cysts	11
Glaucoma	1
Diabetes	4
Prostate problems	2
Urinary tract infections	1
Moles	10
Seizures	2
Parkinson's disease	1
Alopecia	1
Kidney disorders	1
Cushing disease	1
Nervous disorder	1
Lou Gehrig disease	1
Alzheimer's disease	1

### OTHER PROBLEMS

	Number reported
X Sewer/gas smell in basement	1
X Leaky basement (standing pools of water)	13
X Seepage in basement	17
X Odors in basement	20
X Sulfur smell in basement	1
X Basement flooding in spring	1
X Water in basement with black sludge	1
X Street backup in basement	1
X Sewer backup in basement	1
X Basement mold and mildew	1
X Gas/sewage smell outside	4
X Water laying on ground outside	4
X Can't grow things on certain parts of land	3
X Takes longer for yard to dry after winter	1
X White, milky or chalky film on windows - hard to remove	1
X White ash on ground in morning	1
X Foliage has white coating	1
X Garden yield diminishing	1
X Harder to keep algae out of pool	1
X Odor in tap water and drains	5

Source: Citizens Against Polluting the Environment (CAPE) health survey.