

# NT nurse wants Simonds to 'own up'

Editor's note: *This is the second of a three-part series about former workers at the old Simonds Saw and Steel mill on Ohio Street in Lockport.*

**By Cindi Wittcop**

*Greater Niagara Newspapers*

NORTH TONAWANDA —

As a nurse whose career has focused on health and safety, Joy Christie was appalled when her husband, Gary, told her that several of the men he worked with at Simonds Saw and Steel refused to wear hard hats or steel-toed shoes.

"Good grief, this is a steel mill with all kinds of hazards — how stupid could these guys be?" she recalls thinking, unaware at the time that the men were being exposed daily to an unseen danger that protective gear could stop, she said.

What she also didn't know at the time was that the radioactive waste generated from processing government-ordered billets rolled at Simonds during the 1940s and '50s may have been a contributing factor to Gary's early death at 52, she now says.

Gary Christie worked first for Simonds, then its successor, Guterl Steel, from 1964 until the plant closed in 1982. He worked mainly on the rollers and furnaces, where from 1948 to 1956, Simonds rolled 25 to 35 million pounds of uranium and 30,000 to 40,000 pounds of thorium into billets for fuel rods used in nuclear reactors.

Joy Christie said after the plant closed in 1982, she and Gary moved to New Mexico, where he attended college and became a psychiatric registered nurse. He then worked with troubled teens and, she says, "unlike his years at Simonds, he loved this job and was excellent at it."

But the Christies' contentment was short lived. In January 1993, Gary was diagnosed with kidney cancer, which had already spread to his lungs.

Upon questioning the oncologist as to the cause of his illness, the Christies were told it was either hereditary or, more likely, environmental.

"At that time, Gary's mother and aunts were still alive and they had good memories," Christie said. "They could not recall anyone in his family ever having kidney cancer, and his uncle, who had researched the family's genealogy extensively, could never find anything."

Still living in New Mexico, Gary received every treatment available, but there was no hope for his survival, so the couple headed back to Western New York, settling in North Tonawanda. There he spent the last six weeks of his life surrounded by family and friends. He died in June 1994.

Though Mrs. Christie can't positively say her husband's illness and death were related to Simonds, she can think of no other place that would have exposed him to radiation. Gary served for many years on the safety committee at Simonds, and was never told that uranium and thorium had been milled there years ago.

"I'm sure he did not know that they had done all this work with radioactive materials," she said. "If he had known, he would have told me, and also, the safety committee would have been involved."

Charles H. Emery, who was president and general manager of the plant during the time the radioactive material was milled, denies workers were unknowingly exposed to radiation.

Emery says all standards and regulations of the time were followed, and that all employees were told about the materials they were handling. He also says he is in "extremely fine health" at age 75, and knows of several other workers who also are healthy.

As an oncology nurse, Joy Christie was in contact with many experts in the field and had an edge in understanding

Gary's kidney cancer. She says that kidney cancer is "not common or rare, but there's not a lot of publicity about it."

Her statement appears to be borne out by specialists on the National Cancer Institute's Web site, which says kidney cancer is not uncommon, but is also not nearly as frequent as other types of malignancies.

Though she says she's worked through most of the anger she initially felt after Gary's death, Mrs. Christie still can't quite come to terms with the apparent disregard to workers' health that she feels Simonds and the government displayed.

"What still makes me angry is I think of all the things we could be doing now — he'd only be 58. And he was not only taken from me, but also from the people he could have potentially helped through his work," she said.

She says she doesn't even think about financial compensation and she doesn't believe it's the concern of most other survivors. What she wants is for those responsible to own up to what they did so many years ago.