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* |**Mid-Ohio Valley Climate Corner: Capitalism and cancer**

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Twenty years ago, I lost my mother to cancer. She died two months before her 70th birthday. Her cancer had already progressed to stage 3 by the time of her diagnosis.

At first it was hard to believe she was sick. She looked perfectly healthy but her oncologist informed us cancer cells had been slowly growing inside her body for many years.

Our family wanted to know what caused my mom’s cancer. Her lifestyle wasn’t one that might have led to the development of cancer. Her oncologist told us that “unfortunately these tumors do not come with labels,” however, he pointed out that my mom, like many of his other patients, was born and raised in the heavily industrialized Ohio River Valley. There were few regulations in place in the 1930s and 1940s to protect human health and the environment.

The National Institute of Health Sciences reports more than two-thirds of cancer is from environmental exposures to substances including pesticides, solvents, heavy metals, benzene, dioxins, and vinyl chlorides.

My folks moved from Steubenville, Ohio, (a city once noted as having the dirtiest air in the nation) to Toronto, Ohio, in 1962. In 1970, Weirton Steel began construction of its coke ovens on Brown’s Island just outside Toronto’s city limits. Coke ovens heat coal to high temperatures to remove sticky coal tars. These tarry substances are collected and used to make various aromatic solvents like benzene, which are carcinogenic.

The coke plant drew national attention in late 1972 when 21 workers were killed in an explosion at the construction site. Our home, which was less than a mile away, was rocked by the explosion. By 1982, the plant was shut down. However, the pollution in the form of coal tars and benzene containing compounds remained.

Like many people who are diagnosed with terminal cancer, my mom was willing to try anything to gain a few more months. But once the cancer spread, she had to admit she wasn’t going to beat it. She would not see her grandkids grow up or see another birthday, she wouldn’t celebrate another Mother’s Day with us. She lost her hair, her life savings, her dignity and eventually her life.

We will never know for sure if living in the Ohio Valley contributed to my mom’s cancer, but our next-door neighbor died at the age of 14 from leukemia and another friend died at the age of 11 from stomach cancer.

For years the petrochemical industry has discounted the connection of environmental toxins to cancer and they continue to deny the major role they play in the climate crisis. Many consumers are unaware of the risks associated with these toxic products, which include many personal care products, cleaning products, and lawn and garden chemicals.

Countless studies show forever chemicals known as polyfluoroalkyl substances, “PFAS,” are now basically found everywhere on the planet. These compounds have been linked to cancer, birth defects, and numerous other diseases.

Environmental Lawyer, Rob Bilott said in a recent interview, “one of the things we found in the internal files of the main manufacturer of the chemical PFOS was that this company was well aware by the 1970s that PFOS was being found in the general U.S. population’s blood and was being found at fairly significant levels.” Yet the manufacturers failed to share this information with citizens.

In July 2021, a report by Physicians for Social Responsibility presented evidence that oil and gas companies have been using PFAS, or substances that can degrade into PFAS, in hydraulic fracturing. Ignoring the toxicity associated with fracking fluids and claiming a need for “energy independence,” local, state and federal politicians are calling for more fracking.

Corporate CEOs and cancer cells have this in common; their main goal is growth. The collateral damage is of no concern to them so long as their stock values climb. Scientists frantically warn us we are devastating fragile ecosystems and warming the planet to dangerous temperatures. Still CEOs, media, and politicians ignore the warnings.

Many people, including scientists, have become as desperate as cancer patients; searching for an answer, a cure, some way to stop the death of our planet. It was devastating to watch my mother slip away bit by bit until she was barely recognizable. It’s also devastating to watch the only habitable planet in our solar system, the one that harbors so many marvelous creatures and ecosystems, being killed by corporate greed and a dysfunctional economic system that requires the consumption of Mother Earth to make a buck.

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