

Pushing Back Against Polluters: Living Room Leadership with Tom Kilian of Citizens for a Clean Wausau



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In an interview on Wednesday, July 29, 2020 for CHEJ's Living Room Leadership Series, Tom Kilian of [Citizens for a Clean Wausau](#) shared his experience monitoring local polluters in Wausau, Wisconsin and bringing environmental justice to his community. Citizens for a Clean Wausau is an organization of volunteers monitoring and researching current and past significant polluters in the Wausau area. The organization's two main goals, according to Tom, are defining the nature and extent of industrial contamination and promoting and striving for stronger environmental justice in their community.

Tom got involved with Citizens for a Clean Wausau after learning about a major road construction program planned for his neighborhood, Riverside Park. While researching this project, the community stumbled across documentation that revealed there were significant contamination issues in their neighborhoods at the hands of a former window factory, SNE. In these documents, community members complained of alleged illnesses such as lymphoma, brain cancer, breast cancer and more caused by SNE's pollutants like [dioxin](#), a known carcinogen.

SNE had been using pentaclorofenol as a preservative on their windows since the 1940s. In their own internal memo from the 1980s, SNE disclosed in great detail the potential concern surrounding the dioxins in the pentaclorofenol and related health issues. SNE's window factory was located in a densely populated neighborhood in Wausau, and testing of soil and groundwater revealed significant levels of dioxin in residents' drinking water. Despite these results being

made known to SNE and the state regulatory agency, these results were not disclosed to the public until several years ago.

CHEJ got involved with Citizens for a Clean Wausau in 2019, helping the organization organize and move the needle against some of the powerful corporate polluters they were facing. When Citizens for a Clean Wausau gained traction and the media began reporting on the contamination, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR) triggered an investigation into waste burning at a railroad corridor near the window factory site. The WDNR learned that the dioxin levels were in excess of state standards in the railroad corridor and issued a responsible party letter to the city of Wausau, which owned the railroad corridor, to remediate the site. Citizens for a Clean Wausau criticized the WDNR for failing to issue a responsible party letter for contamination at the Riverside Park neighborhood, given dioxin levels were higher there than at the railroad corridor. Pressure from Tom's organization resulted in an order from the WDNR to finally test and remediate the Riverside Park neighborhood earlier this year.

Since getting involved with Citizens for a Clean Wausau, Tom has been elected to serve on Wausau's City Council. His advice to other environmental activists who are looking to get into electoral politics is to "know why you're going into politics" and "let the cause and the policies drive you".

To learn more about Citizens for a Clean Wausau and follow their fight for justice, visit <http://cleanwausau.com>.