

# TROUBLED WATERS

The government told the Holts their water was safe to drink. But when several family members came down with deadly diseases, suddenly they weren't so sure. **ESSENCE** traveled to Tennessee and followed the Holts to Capitol Hill to report on their charges of environmental racism and their continuing fight for justice

BY CYNTHIA GORDY

PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEVE JONES



A warning sign of contamination outside a local spring.

**SHEILA HOLT-ORSTED** COULDN'T WAIT TO GO TO TENNESSEE FOR Christmas in 2002. The Virginia military base where she lived with her husband, Corey, a U.S. Army sergeant, and their daughter, Jasmine, was pleasant enough. But she missed Dickson County, the rural community where she grew up, where her family had resided for seven generations and where her father and his three brothers owned 150 acres of sprawling grasslands.

"This was home," Sheila, 45, says wistfully from her mother's living room, decorated with family portraits, animal figurines and shiny plastic plants. "We planned to move here after my husband got out of the military. That was our dream."

That dream may never be realized.

Shortly before Christmas, Sheila's father, Harry, was diagnosed with prostate cancer. Although the news was devastating, the family took an optimistic attitude and expected he would beat the disease. But a few days into Sheila's visit, her mother mentioned that her aunt across the road had cancer, too.

*What a coincidence,* Sheila thought.

"Then my mom told me about our neighbor who lives on the property adjoining ours," Sheila recalls. "She had cancer. Then she told me that two of my cousins who live next door had it. So I'm like, 'Wait a minute. This is too many people.'" >



Sheila Holt-Orsted at her family's burial plot.

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uspicious, Sheila would later pull out the phone book and call everyone who lived on the road about a quarter mile from her parents' homestead. What she found was astounding: In nearly every household, somebody had cancer, or someone had died from it. "It was like a punch in the stomach," Sheila says of the shock. "Those numbers were just not normal."

Sheila returned to Virginia with a "hard gut feeling" that

she should get herself checked out, but she wasn't very worried. "I was teaching five aerobics classes—three of them to military personnel—and doing personal training," she says, ticking off each athletic achievement on her fingers. "I'm a former Miss Tennessee bodybuilding champion, and I was playing in two basketball leagues at the time. So I was physically fit." She was floored when the pathology report came back. She had breast cancer. Then, when her mother called a week later with news that her doctor thought maybe she had cancer, too, Sheila began looking for answers. She didn't have to look far. Fifty-four feet from her parents' house lies the Dickson County Landfill. Government records clearly show that toxic chemicals dumped there polluted the well water that the family had been drinking nearly all their lives.

The Holts now say the contamination caused an assortment of diseases, including breast cancer, prostate cancer, cervical polyps, diabetes, immune disorders, gastrointestinal disorders and tumors. In 2003 they filed a personal injury lawsuit, which was later amended with a civil rights claim, against the local governments of Dickson County. The lawsuit, which also names the automotive company that dumped contaminants into the landfill, further states that government officials *knew* about the Holts' polluted well since 1990. Yet the family was assured their water was safe for ten years before a warning finally came. On the other hand, White families with polluted wells were immediately notified, according to state records.

Government agencies at the federal, state, county and city levels say they're not to blame for what happened. They each believe their particular duties were handled correctly, holding a different agency responsible for any oversights. As the years go by with no accountability, the Holts suspect that the government is stalling the court proceedings for as long as possible, simply waiting for them to die. The family has already lost a loved one: Sheila's father, Harry, succumbed to his battle with cancer in January 2007, at age 66.

#### THE PAPER TRAIL

In hindsight, there had been a sign that something was seriously wrong with the Holts' water. A few years back, the Dickson County Landfill director, Jim Lunn, popped in and told them to stop drinking it, just as a precaution. Now Sheila was certain there was more behind this recommendation, but her suspicion was not always shared by family members.

"We thought she was a little crazy at first," her sister Bonita, 40, says, recalling how Sheila had angrily marched around the house



The Holt family (left to right): Bonita, Sheila, Patrick, Beatrice and Demetrius.

during her visit home, convinced that everyone's sickness was connected. "But she was right." During the six months Sheila underwent chemotherapy, which she received in Tennessee so that she could be near her parents and siblings, she began to dig through state records. Most days she felt violently ill and frail and vomited constantly. But periodically, when the pain was less raw, she drove to the state office in Nashville and pored over heaps of landfill documents.

"I was worried she was stressing herself," says Sheila's mother, Beatrice, 61. "I thought she needed to relax and concentrate on her illness. But I think her sickness just made her want to work harder on getting to the bottom of this water business." One night the enormity of it all hit Sheila. Sitting alone in her bedroom, she broke down—screaming, throwing clothes, pulling the mattress off her bed. When her brother, Patrick, came in to console her, she wailed, "I'm going to die."

After finishing radiation treatment, Sheila decided to stay in Tennessee to be with her ailing father and to research state records full-time. Supportive of her mission, her husband stayed in Virginia, even though it meant weathering a long-distance marriage. "I knew she had to do it to find some justification in her life" says Corey Orsted, Sheila's

husband of 13 years. "Part of me hated being away from her, but there will be many years after this period that we'll be able to spend together."

In the end, Sheila collected more than 900 pages of reports, test results, letters and memos, with piles strewn all around the living room, the den, bedrooms, the kitchen. "You know the proverbial can of worms?" she says, ready to tell all about the smoking-gun documentation she found. "Well, there were pythons and anacondas in that can!"

According to federal reports, the city of Dickson opened a city dump on Eno Road in 1968. Dickson County's small Black community—less than 5 percent of the population—has lived on Eno Road since the post-slavery era. It's a picturesque postcard of country life: winding gravel roads dotted with modest tract houses and faded barns, all surrounded by unspoiled woodland. The one blot on the landscape is the Dickson County Landfill. Today the noisy, debris-littered site operates as a garbage transfer station and demolition landfill. But in the sixties and seventies, local companies buried industrial waste there. Searching through thick reports on landfill activity, Sheila learned that waste dumped by an automotive company included a cancer-causing chemical, trichloroethene, or TCE.

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It's no accident that a mostly Black neighborhood was picked for the town dumping grounds, says Robert Bullard, director of the Environmental Justice Resource Center at Clark Atlanta University. Residents from San Francisco to the South Bronx have also suffered the effects of environmental racism. "Governments target communities of color that don't have money, lawyers or power in office," says Bullard, who has assisted the Holt family in their case. When the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was called in to inspect the landfill in 1988, they sampled Harry Holt's well as part of the investigation. What they found during the span of a five-year probe set off a string of events that has shattered the family.

In January of 1990, the Holts' water showed TCE pollution at a noxious five times above the level at which the government is required to intervene. Yet nothing was done. Seven months later, the EPA sampled the Holt well again, and a third time a year later in 1991. >

# Exposure to TCE can cause damage to the heart, immune system, prostate, cervix, kidneys and liver, according to the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry.



Clockwise from left: the Holt well; Holt-Orsted sorts through piles of landfill documentation; an EPA letter sent to the Holt family in 1991 assuring them their well water was safe; Harry Holt attends a 2006 protest in Dickson, Tennessee.

WELL: STEVE JONES; SHEILA WITH PAPERS AND EPA LETTER: CAROL GUTZWASHINGTON; POST: HARRY HOLT; ROBERT BULLARD, MOSSVILLE, FEELERS: RICHARD CARSON; BAYVIEW HUNTERS POINT, AP PHOTO: ERIC RISBERG; HARLEM AND ANNISTON, ROBERT BULLARD.

These last two times, the toxin levels were low. “Use of your well water should not result in any adverse health effects,” they were told in a 1991 notification letter from the EPA. The agency’s director, Franklin Hill, says their analysis was based on the last two tests with lower contaminant levels. And the state followed this shortsighted logic. “At that time it was concluded that the first sampling was due to lab error,” Joe Sanders, general counsel for the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation (TDEC) told ESSENCE.

Sheila, however, discovered a very different set of letters from 1993 and 1994 that the state sent to White families who used a spring near the landfill, which they suspected was polluted. Officials notified these families within 48 hours of detecting the chemical and cautioned them to stop using their wells. Their test results were not written off as a lab error. “They brought us 12 gallons of water a week,” says Kaye Stewart, a White resident, who adds she was reimbursed by the county for expenses incurred at the laundromat; she showered at a friend’s house during this time. “Three weeks later they dug us a new well to

find a different spring source for our water.”

At least one groundwater official, Tom Moss, questioned the EPA’s assurances about the Holt well. In a 1991 memo he stresses that the area’s rocky terrain is prone to varied contamination levels, so the last two test results were “in no way an assurance” of the water’s safety. But the state shot down his appeal for further monitoring. And the Holts drank toxic water for nine more years.

Exposure to TCE can cause damage to the heart, immune system, prostate, cervix, kidneys and liver, according to the Agency for Toxic

Substances and Disease Registry. It’s also linked to cancer and diabetes. Sheila thought about her brother, Patrick, who had an immune disorder so severe that, at one point, he was too weak to walk. Her mother’s cancer scare had turned out to be cervical polyps. Sheila, her parents and her sisters had diabetes. *Hell*, she wondered, *could those cows that mysteriously dropped dead on the farm back in 2001 be connected to this too?*



With some additional sleuthing, Sheila learned that the chemical can cause speech impediments. She was floored: Jasmine had a speech impediment, a slurring of words she had received therapy for since age 3. And her niece and nephews have chronic skin rashes, another



symptom of exposure to the chemical. More records show that between 1991 and 2000, state, county, and city officials repeatedly tested other water sources around the landfill. A sweeping geological study was conducted in 1997 and 1998, with 24 test sites, including duck ponds and a dog pound. Despite the Holt family’s property being closest to

the landfill, their well was excluded from that study.

“They were more concerned about duck ponds and dogs waiting to be put to sleep than my family,” Sheila says with an exasperated, can-you-believe-this chuckle.

By the time the Holts’ well was sampled again in 2000, TCE showed up at a whopping 29 times above the drinking water standard. The family was notified and put on city water, but the damage may have already been done.

itting nonchalantly behind their office desks, elected officials told Sheila not to worry about the findings, she says, because there were not enough toxins to hurt anyone. Still, she tried to get someone to listen. When she heard Oprah Winfrey would be taping her show at a Kentucky military base, Sheila and a friend drove up to the base, feverishly looking for the talk show queen to beg her to hold a rally for the Holts. “They had torn down the stage by the time we got there,” Sheila recalls.

But her greatest disappointment, she says, is how much she’s been let down by their neighbors on Eno Road, who she believes “scurred and hid” for fear of how the negative attention would affect them. She assumed they’d be outraged by the damage to everyone’s land and health, but that hasn’t been the case. “You have to understand the nature of a beat-down community,” says Bullard, who explains that there’s a great deal of hostility surrounding the issue. “This is a little Black enclave that’s been literally treated like garbage. People aren’t trying to rise up.” Myra Beard, a White resident, concurs that the lawsuit has caused divisiveness in the town. “People think that it’s been blown out of proportion,” she says. “The threat to their property values is part of it too—if they don’t believe it, then it can’t be true.”

Sheila distributes fact sheets from her parents’ home, now a strategy headquarters of sorts, for anyone who’s curious. She remembers a White man who stopped by, one of her father’s cabinet factory coworkers. “I want to know everything I can,” she recalls him saying. “But most people out here think that y’all are niggers trying to get money.”

Several White families in the city of Dickson also got organized. They even invited the Holts to join a class-action suit. Their children were all born with cleft palates, and even though they used either city water or wells distant from the landfill—and despite a study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention finding no link between the families and TCE—they believed the birth defects were caused by landfill groundwater contamination.

The Holts declined to participate. They lived practically on top of the landfill and had mountains of documents proving their well had been polluted. Surely a case based on murky [CONTINUED ON PAGE 176]

## DUMPING ON OUR COMMUNITIES

The targeting of communities of color for toxic waste

disposal and other harmful industries is a national problem



The rural African-American community of **MOSSVILLE, LOUISIANA**, is home to 300 residents and 17 major industrial facilities, many of which have admitted to releasing millions of pounds of toxic chemicals into the air and water. Residents have two to three times more dioxin, a carcinogen that attacks the hormone system, in their bodies than the general public.



One in six children in the predominantly Black **BAYVIEW HUNTER’S POINT** neighborhood in San Francisco has asthma, and a disproportionate number of residents suffer from cervical and breast cancer, congestive heart failure and emphysema. The low-income community contains one-third of the city’s hazardous-waste sites.



Residents in the largely Black and Latino community of **NEW YORK CITY’S HARLEM** live among six of Manhattan’s eight diesel bus depots, three highways, two sewage treatment plants and two train yards. Twenty-five percent of children there have asthma, and residents are 60 percent more likely than other New Yorkers to be hospitalized for asthma.



For decades a chemical plant in the mostly poor and African-American neighborhood of **SWEET VALLEY/COBB TOWN**, in Anniston, Alabama, released noxious chemicals into the air, lakes, rivers and soil. Since 2003, the military has burned chemical weapons at a nearby Army depot, exposing citizens to numerous toxins. Many residents have died of cancer.

# troubled waters

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speculation would be thrown out. They were wrong. Last November the city and county settled with the White families. Both government bodies agreed to pay them 75 percent of the money they stand to receive from their own \$4 million lawsuit against the company that dumped the toxin. “The Holts were given the opportunity to participate in the settlement,” wrote Debi Thomas, Dickson County public information consultant, in an e-mail to *ESSENCE*. Thomas also points to the EPA’s role in testing their water and telling them it was safe. The county had no part in that, she says.

Franklin Hill of the EPA denies the agency was culpable. He told *ESSENCE* that when the agency completed its investigation of the landfill in 1991, the state was in charge. Meanwhile, Joe Sanders of TDEC insists that the Tennessee agency was only following the EPA’s judgment, adding that the state is not in the business of testing wells unless a problem is raised.

When asked about the findings, Don L. Weiss, Jr., the mayor of Dickson, focuses his response on the landfill, which the city originally owned. The county and state are behind its operation and maintenance, he wrote in a faxed statement to *ESSENCE*; the city is no longer involved. “There’s a lot of ‘It’s not my job’ going on around here,” says Matthew Colangelo, an attorney with the NAACP Legal Defense & Education Fund, which took on the Holts’ case last December. “Our position is that they all had a responsibility to the Holt family, and nobody is absolved of that responsibility just because there were others involved in the process who also failed to do the right thing.”

## THEIR BATTLE CONTINUES

The Holt family’s tiny living room seems smaller today, crammed with an influx of ornate floral arrangements delivered by the undertaker. It is the day after Harry’s funeral. Hundreds attended, many spilling down the funeral home halls, to hear memories of a

gentle, soft-spoken man who loved animals, practical jokes and gospel music. Pastor Richard Sibert of Tennessee’s Missionary Baptist State Convention, one of the few organizations that has rallied round the Holts, used his eulogy to gently drive support for the family. “If we all come together,” he said, “there is power in this room.”

Back at home, Beatrice greets visitors with a smile and gracious offers of her special seven-layer salad. But her eyes have a sad, slightly distracted look. She was married to Harry for 46 years, ever since she was 15. While the grandbabies watch cartoons in the den, the Holt women—Beatrice, Sheila and her two sisters, Bonita and Demetrius—take a breather from the emotion of the preceding days. Full-figured, attractive and deceptively sturdy looking, the four have numerous medical conditions among them: acid reflux, cervical and colon polyps, diabetes, ovarian tumors, rheumatoid arthritis and breast cancer three years in remission.

Four years after finding what they believe to be the source of their ailments, they remain unwavering in their fight. “A desire for justice is what keeps us going,” says Demetrius, 40. “We’re determined to see that my daddy didn’t die in vain.” Sheila has her mind set on long-term goals of legislation to protect other families like theirs. A week after the funeral, she faced off against Charles Lee, an EPA representative, in Washington, D.C., as both spoke to a congressional panel. She fidgeted, her arms crossed, as Lee droned on about the agency’s commitment, within its limited jurisdiction, to fair treatment.

When she took the podium to tell the story of what she called Tennessee’s “contaminated conspiracy,” she broke into tears at the part where her daddy died. After a moment and a deep breath, she wiped her eyes and continued. “We must stop Black communities from being used as toxic dumping grounds,” she said, the confidence in her voice rising. “We must take back our communities. And we must fight for environmental justice.” □

**Cynthia Gordy is an assistant news editor at *ESSENCE*.**