

Readers' Theater:
*Using drama to understand experiences
with environmental health issues*

A Certain Measure

Script 1 of the Landfill series

Written by Richard Robeson



Exchange Project

BECAUSE OUR ENVIRONMENT AFFECTS OUR HEALTH

This script is intended to be a dramatic representation of a community experience. As such, some statements by the characters may represent controversial beliefs that warrant further examination in discussion sessions. Whenever possible, to further inform the dialogue, the Exchange Project will provide additional information on the issue or links to other sources via the website: www.ExchangeProject.unc.edu

The Exchange Project is designed to increase understanding of the social, legal, and ethical implications of environmental health issues and facilitate dialogue among stakeholders from communities, government agencies, and professionals about these complex issues. The Exchange Project was established with funding from the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences and is a collaborative effort among researchers at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, community organizations such as the North Carolina Environmental Justice Network and North Carolina Fair Share, and attorneys from the Land Loss Prevention Project.

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Background

This script is the first in the Landfill series, three scripts exploring the perspectives of a community member whose well has been contaminated by a landfill and a health department employee who is responding to her call. This script is inspired by community experiences in Vance County, North Carolina, where members of a community near an unlined landfill used media coverage to encourage action from local government and state agencies. Names are fictitious and characters are composites representing those people involved in the real situations.

A Certain Measure tells the story of Carrie Johnson, a new homeowner who discovers upon moving into her home that her well water is foul. She learns that there is an old, unlined landfill under the grove of trees near her house that has contaminated the groundwater. After receiving minimal response to her complaints from the county health department, she contacts local media outlets to ensure that her community's story is heard. The news story alerts activist Anita Gaines to the situation, and, with her assistance, Carrie organizes her neighborhood to seek the provision of clean drinking water.



How have real communities dealt with situations like this?

What is Readers' Theater?

Where can I find more scripts and other educational materials?

Visit www.ExchangeProject.unc.edu for resources to answer your questions!

Check out the discussion questions after the script!

Take 5 minutes to get people thinking about the issue before the performance

- Where do you dispose of your trash? Where does it go from there?
- Have you ever been to a landfill? What did you notice when you were there?

A CERTAIN MEASURE

RICHARD ROBESON
Exchange Project

CHARACTERS

CARRIE JOHNSON – A citizen in a rural community of people of color, living near a landfill.

ANITA GAINES – An environmentalist, interested in CARRIE’s case.

SHAUN DANIELS – A citizen of a different community with grievances similar to CARRIE’s.

NARRATOR

Suggested props: Glass of water, telephone, phone book

Scenes: Carrie’s home, Anita’s home

NARRATOR

When CARRIE JOHNSON turns on the tap, she gets water — water for making coffee or tea, for cooking, for bathing, to put in her dog’s water dish. This has not always been so.

Seven years ago, CARRIE was without a home. A hurricane had destroyed her mobile home and put her property under several feet of water. But there was a blessing hidden within the devastation: after years of chasing the dream, she was finally able to buy a stick-built home, off the flood plain, confident that the future was brighter than it had ever been.

As first buyer in a proposed three-dwelling development CARRIE gets the choice property — a house with twice as much acreage as the other two lots.

SCENE 1 – 7 years ago, CARRIE’s home

[Enter CARRIE with glass of water. Sits at table, raises glass and is about to drink, but reacts to smell of water.]

NARRATOR

On her first day in her new home, she learns that ...

[CARRIE looks suspiciously at glass of water. Sniffs water, inspects water/glass again.]

NARRATOR

... there is something wrong with her drinking water.

[CARRIE sets glass down, exits. Returns with phone book; looks up a phone number, picks up phone and dials.]

NARRATOR

Over a period of months, CARRIE repeatedly telephones the county health department to request having her water tested.

CARRIE

[Talking on phone]

Hello. ***[pause]*** Yes...I'm holding for Mr. Anderson. ***[pause]*** As I explained to Ms. Edwards the last time I called, and Mr. Miller the time before that, and Ms. Askew before that, I need to have my water tested.

NARRATOR

"Is there a problem with your water?" the person at the other end of the line wants to know.

CARRIE

[Into phone]

Well, it smells funny, is a strange color, and is undrinkable. Besides that, it's fine.

NARRATOR

"Hold, please," the receptionist says. "Hello," says a new voice. "This is Nathanson. How can we help you?"

CARRIE

[Into phone]

I've been trying for quite some time now to have the county send someone out here to test my water.

NARRATOR

"I apologize for the misunderstanding," he says. "Our records show that we took a sample from your well some time ago, and the water tested clean."

CARRIE

What?!?!? When was this?

NARRATOR

"It could stand to be a little softer," he says, "but ..."

CARRIE

[Hangs up. Looks up a number in the phone book; dials.]

Hello...this is CARRIE. I live in a community of people of color; and there's something you should know.

NARRATOR

CARRIE calls a local TV station, hoping that the media attention might pressure the county into taking her – or at least her problem -- seriously. By now she has an idea of what's wrong with the water in her well: the wooded area behind her lot disguises an unlined landfill, which CARRIE believes has contaminated her well. When CARRIE's story airs on the evening news, ANITA, an activist and environmentalist, is among the many who see it.

SCENE 2 – CARRIE's home

[CARRIE receives a phone call.]

ANITA

[Into phone]

Hello? This is ANITA GAINES. I was just watching the news and saw the story about your well. You and I need to talk.

NARRATOR

ANITA has never met CARRIE, but she is familiar with the region and has some insights into how CARRIE can improve her situation. They arrange to meet at CARRIE's home.

SCENE 3 – CARRIE's home

ANITA

Have you heard anything more from the county since the news story aired?

CARRIE

What they're saying now is that there was a mix-up, and the sample they tested came from a different well.

ANITA

You mean they never tested your water in the first place?

CARRIE

They claim that the results have been misplaced or something, and they'll have to test it again. But I don't believe they ever came out here.

ANITA

The news story said the property had been inspected before you bought it ...

CARRIE

Yes, but the inspector is a county employee.

ANITA

You didn't hire your own inspector ...?

CARRIE

I didn't know I couldn't trust the inspection report.

ANITA

There's more. Much, much more.

NARRATOR

The history of citizens' efforts to get clean water in the county had begun decades earlier, with nothing to show for it but delays and excuses. CARRIE, being new to the community, is totally unaware of this history. CARRIE and ANITA begin a collaboration that results in a series of action steps that range from grassroots activism and organization to legal advocacy. CARRIE founds an organization of concerned citizens, devoted to a unified environmental justice movement. ANITA brings the resources of her organization, Citizens for Environmental Justice (CEJ), to bear.

SCENE 4 – CARRIE’s home

CARRIE

They’ve finally admitted that my well is contaminated – the water is unfit for drinking, cooking or bathing ...

ANITA

That’s pretty much everything ...

CARRIE

But it’s going to cost every household two thousand dollars to get water and sewer lines laid.

ANITA

It’s not going to cost you anything.

CARRIE

The county said ...

ANITA

I don’t care what they said. You’re not paying, and nobody else who lives out here is paying either.

NARRATOR

CARRIE’s organization becomes a model for what is possible when citizens’ groups pressure local governments to take environmental justice issues seriously. By the time SHAUN hears of what is happening in CARRIE’s community, water and sewer lines are being

laid, and the county is providing bottled water for CARRIE and her neighbors – at no charge.

His own community has similar problems. He and his neighbors are no closer to having clean water than when their efforts began years ago. He contacts ANITA.

SCENE 5 – ANITA’S home

ANITA

Thanks for coming, CARRIE. SHAUN wanted to talk with me about how your community has been dealing with the county, but he really should hear from you.

CARRIE

So you haven’t met him either?

ANITA

We’ve met, several times. But the more I heard about his situation, the more I was convinced that you and he should meet.

CARRIE

What’s his situation?

ANITA

Water, the same but different; but I’ll let him explain. **[Looks LEFT to window]** I think I hear his car.

[Enter SHAUN]

SHAUN

[Crosses to ANITA and CARRIE, hand extended]

Good morning. ***[Shakes hands with both]***

ANITA

Good morning. CARRIE JOHNSON, meet
SHAUN DANIELS.

SHAUN

Pleased to meet you, CARRIE. I saw the news
story on you a while back. A lot has happened
since then.

CARRIE

The job's not finished, but we got this far with
a lot of hard work by some really dedicated
people, including ANITA.

ANITA

She's being modest. She has been tireless.

SHAUN

Well, you're a lot farther along than we are.
We're still trying to get somebody to admit that
there's a problem.

CARRIE

Once the state got involved, it was a lot harder for the local government to pretend they didn't know what we were talking about.

SHAUN

The state?

CARRIE

Yeah. The Department of Environmental and Natural Resources, through Citizens for Environmental Justice. Their investigation proved beyond any doubt whatsoever that the city's unlined landfill had poisoned my well. People have been getting sick – terminally ill, some of them -- and trying to get something done about it for over thirty years.

SHAUN

Thirty years? But ...

CARRIE

Over two hundred homes. You saw the news story, so you know I haven't lived there all that time. But I'm not moving, and I'm not going to drink poisoned water, so the only choice is to fight back.

SHAUN

The news story said you didn't know you were next to a landfill

CARRIE

Yeah ...

SHAUN

How is that possible? How could you not know?

CARRIE

Well, it's an old landfill. It's covered over and has a grove of trees growing on it. You can't see it.

SHAUN

So, what tipped you off?

CARRIE

I knew something was up, the first time I turned on the tap. But I was already moved in by then.

SHAUN

But you're satisfied with how things have turned out?

CARRIE

When you talk about how things have turned out, you have to count all the illnesses and deaths that are part of the story over the past thirty years. But I like the way things are going now.

SHAUN

So, how are things going now?

CARRIE

We're organized, and it's a lot harder for them to ignore us or make excuses for not doing anything to clean up our water.

SHAUN

That's what we really need to know: how did you get from there to where you are now?

CARRIE

Organizing, alliances and creative annoyance.

SHAUN

Creative annoyance? You mean, like, civil disobedience?

CARRIE

Not really. We'll do whatever it takes, including civil disobedience. But I'm really talking about challenging all the county's fairy tales about the hazard, how it came to be, and whose responsibility it is to do something about it. Civil disobedience is deliberately breaking a law that's unfair or unjust ...

SHAUN

Like a sit-down strike.

CARRIE

Exactly – demanding rights that we’ve been denied. Creative annoyance doesn’t involve breaking any laws, just being a pest by letting them know that we know about the rights we already have.

NARRATOR

In CARRIE’S own case, in addition to water and sewer lines being laid without cost, this strategy leads to a successful suit against the developer who sold her the contaminated homesite. She wins a settlement roughly equal to the original asking price.

CARRIE

That so-and-so had been pulling this kind of stuff all over the county for years. Every one of his properties was near some kind of hazard.

NARRATOR

And a glass of water ...

[CARRIE hoists a glass of water, takes a sip]

NARRATOR

... now means something different.

THE END

Discussion questions

Performing the script is just the beginning! Readers' Theater scripts are designed to get the audience and performers talking about environmental health issues. For more detailed instructions on how to lead a discussion, download our free facilitation guide at www.ExchangeProject.unc.edu

We have provided two sets of questions to use after the reading. Choose whichever set seems more appropriate to your audience.

Question set 1

Spend 5 minutes "warming up" the discussion.

- What images or words from the performance stick in your memory?
- Was there anything in the performance that you don't understand or that was confusing?

Spend 15 minutes exploring the different perspectives and possible solutions.

- How do you think Carrie felt at the beginning of the story? At the end?
- What do you think Carrie did that was effective in resolving her issue?
- What do you think this story says about the power of a community's voice?
- What made it difficult for Shaun to resolve his community's situation?
- Why do you think situations like these happen?

Take 10 minutes to bring the discussion to closure and look toward the future.

- What do you think the title means?
- In what ways was this a success story?
- What would you change about any of the characters to give this story a different ending?
- When you reflect on this story, what does it make you want to change about your own life or work?

Take 5 minutes to wrap up the discussion and conduct an evaluation.

Summarize key points and action steps that arose from the discussion. Thank the readers and audience for their participation! Refer readers to additional resources and related Readers' Theater scripts that cover other aspects of how the environment affects our health. Suggest that they continue the dialogue by asking other people in their lives what they think. Finally, ask readers and observers to complete an evaluation of the event before they leave.

Question set 2

Spend 5-10 minutes on Observations & Reflection

- What one or two words would describe what you saw?
- What characters or issues did you feel most strongly about?

Spend 10 minutes on Interpretation

- Why do you think that the local government and the health department acted as they did?
- What do you think Carrie did that was effective in resolving her situation?
- Why do you think that things like this happen?

Spend 10 minutes on Decisions (Moving Awareness to Action)

- What would you have done differently if you were Roberta or Sylvia?
- What would you have done differently if you were on the town council?
- When you reflect on this story, what does it make you want to change about your own life or work?

Other related materials

Other materials available through www.ExchangeProject.unc.edu

Real People, Real Stories

How have other communities dealt with concerns about landfills?

Holly Springs (Wake County): Residents of Holly Springs met the county's proposal for another landfill with community organizing and legal action aimed at halting Wake County's policy of waste disposal that disproportionately affected Holly Springs.

Snow Hill (Greene County): A citizens' group brought a lawsuit in 1998, stating that the Greene County Board of Commissioners approved a landfill site located in Castoria, NC, without adhering to proper procedures or considering alternative locations.

Research on landfill placement in North Carolina

Were landfills permitted between 1990-2003 more often sited in low income communities or communities of color? Check out a presentation of research findings about this question.

Also, read our short Background on Landfills as an Environmental Health Issue.

Facilitation guide

Need a hand planning how to lead a Readers' Theater performance and discussion? Download our easy-to-read guide!

Links

Find links to governmental and community organizations to see what they have to say about landfills, and find links to news related to landfills.