

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

A Matter of Engagement

Script 3 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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Published December 2006

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Background

This script is the second 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 actual events in Vance County, North Carolina. However, the main characters and interactions in this script are fictitious.

Walter Nathanson, a new employee at a County Health Department, seeks advice from his graduate school mentor about how to handle a challenging request from a local resident. The resident, Carrie Johnson, has been calling to complain that her well water has been foul ever since she moved into a house close to an old landfill. She has been ill and is wondering whether her poor health is connected to her exposure to contaminated water. While other members of the health department staff have been brushing off Ms. Johnson's complaints, Nathanson has looked into things a bit further and has started to wonder whether the old landfill IS causing the problem, and if so what he should do about it.



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

- What role do you think health departments play in protecting people's health?
- What would you do if you worked for an organization that was not adequately listening to people's health concerns?

A MATTER OF ENGAGEMENT

RICHARD ROBESON
Exchange Project

CHARACTERS

WALTER NATHANSON – Junior staff member, County Health Department.

JACK MILLER – Mid-level staff person, County Health Department.

PETER ARNSBARGER – Public health school faculty member, and former professor to NATHANSON.

ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT, County Health Department.

NARRATOR

Suggested props: Two telephones, Calendar or PDA, 4 chairs, 2 small tables, file folder with papers inside

Scenes: County Health, Nathanson's house, Special's Café

SCENE 1 – Nathanson’s office at County Health Department.

[JACK MILLER crosses to NATHANSON’S desk and lays a file down in front of NATHANSON, who is on the phone.]

NATHANSON

[Into phone.] Excuse me a moment – I’ve got to put you on hold, but I’ll be right back.

[To MILLER.] What’s this?

MILLER

The file you need to have in front of you when you pick up on Line Two.

NATHANSON

Why? Who’s on Line Two?

MILLER

Some woman from out on Highway 93 who likes to pester us because she doesn’t like the way her water tastes.

NATHANSON

Maybe she has a point ...

MILLER

[Interrupting] She’s got a well – all the water out there is hard, and tastes terrible. If she wants sweet-tasting water, she ought to buy it by the case, like I do.

NATHANSON

But ...

MILLER

I don't hear you picking up on Line Two.

[MILLER crosses back to his own desk.]

NATHANSON

[Into phone.] Ms. Gaines I'm going to have to call you back. What's your number?

[Listens.] What time is good? ***[Listens.]*** OK, thanks. I'll call you then.

[Flips quickly through the file; then switches to Line Two. Only NATHANSON's portion of the conversation is heard.]

Hello, this is NATHANSON. How can we help you? ***[Listens]***

[Still flipping through the file as he speaks into phone.] I apologize for the misunderstanding. Our records show that we took a sample from your well some time ago, and the water tested clean.

[Listens]

It could stand to be a little softer, but except for an above-average mineral content, it looks fine. ***[Realizes line has gone dead.]*** Hello ...?

[Listens] MS. JOHNSON ...? Hmm.

[Crosses to MILLER'S desk.]

MILLER

Well ...?

NATHANSON

Well, what?

MILLER

How did it go?

NATHANSON

She hung up.

MILLER

Boy, that's a shocker.

NATHANSON

I don't get it – what do you mean?

MILLER

Look – you're a newbie. You're – what – six months out of public health school?

NATHANSON

Eight.

MILLER

OK – eight. There's a lot more where CARRIE JOHNSON came from, and you haven't even heard the last of her. She's officially your problem now. If I were you, I'd keep that file handy.

SCENE 2 – Nathanson’s house.

NARRATOR

To NATHANSON, MILLER’S advice means taking the file home and studying it more closely. As he reads, he is increasingly dissatisfied with the answers he gave on the phone earlier that day.

[Picks up phone, and dials a number]

ARNSBARGER

Hello?

NATHANSON

Hello, PETE? Hi, this is WALT NATHANSON. Sorry to call so late....

ARNSBARGER

Oh, Hi, PETE. No problem – it’s not that late. Everybody but the baby is still up; and she could sleep through an earthquake. How’s the new gig?

NATHANSON

Pretty good, so far. But I get the feeling sometimes that my days are a lot longer than anybody else who works there.

ARNSBARGER

Life of a rookie, Walt.

NATHANSON

Yeah, I know. That's kind of what I'm calling about. I was wondering... are you free for lunch tomorrow?

ARNSBARGER

Depends [*grabs calendar or PDA*] -- what time?

NATHANSON

Noon?

ARNSBARGER

Tomorrow's no good. What about the next day?

NATHANSON

Well, it would be good to talk sometime tomorrow, if possible. How's your evening look?

ARNSBARGER

Teaching till 3:30, and I have a meeting afterward that should last about an hour. How about 5 o'clock?

NATHANSON

Great. There's that new place near your office
....

ARNSBARGER

Yeah, *Special's*.

NATHANSON

Right. See you there at five.

ARNSBARGER

Sounds urgent. What's up?

NATHANSON

I wouldn't say it's urgent, but I'm working on something, and I want to make sure ... call it a reality check.

ARNSBARGER

OK. *Special's* at five.

NATHANSON

Special's at five. Thanks.

ARNSBARGER and NATHANSON

[Together.] Bye.

**SCENE 3 – County Health Department, the
next morning.**

***[NATHANSON and MILLER at MILLER'S
desk.]***

NATHANSON

JACK, I took the file you gave me home last night, ...

MILLER

[Interrupting] Excellent! You're going to be running this place one of these days.

NATHANSON

Well, I don't know about that ... But I studied the file, and I wish I'd been more familiar with it before I talked to CARRIE JOHNSON.

MILLER

Why? What difference would that have made?

NATHANSON

Do you know how old those test results are?

MILLER

Hey, I gave the file to you, WALT – remember? It's your case. You're supposed to know, not me.

NATHANSON

The file is over thirty-five years old.

MILLER

[Silence.]

NATHANSON

JACK, did you hear what I just said?

MILLER

Yeah. It's over thirty-five years old.

NATHANSON

Doesn't that mean anything to you?

MILLER

Yeah, the paper's probably yellow and crinkly. Big deal. We've got lots of files that are that old.

NATHANSON

We've got a landfill out there, and it hasn't been there for thirty-five years.

MILLER

So, WALT, I've got a question for you.

NATHANSON

What?

MILLER

If you've got a point, what is it?

NATHANSON

CARRIE JOHNSON'S place is right next to the landfill.

MILLER

Yeah ...?

NATHANSON

And I told her we tested her water and it's fine.

MILLER

Look, there's nothing wrong with what you told her. Like I said yesterday, all the water out that way is hard and tastes terrible.

NATHANSON

But what if there's more to it than that?

MILLER

Such as ...?

NATHANSON

Such as, maybe the landfill is fouling her well.

MILLER

WALT, that landfill's ancient history. There's no way it's fouling her well.

[ASKEW Approaches]

NATHANSON

But what if it is? We don't really know for sure, do we?

MILLER

Well, when she calls again – she always calls again – you can tell her that you're a liar and that everything you said to her yesterday was a load of BS.

NARRATOR

As NATHANSON and MILLER are talking, their boss, Ms. ASKEW passes by on her way back to her office and is annoyed at what appears to be mere socializing on the job. NATHANSON's explanation of his conversation with MILLER doesn't make ASKEW any less annoyed.

MILLER, meanwhile, has hurried to the snack bar.

ASKEW

Look around, WALT. We're a small health department in a big, predominantly rural county. We can't be everywhere at once. We'll get to the Highway 93 part of the county ...

[MILLER returns]

NATHANSON

[Interrupting] But what do I say to her when she calls again. I'm the one that has to talk to her.

ASKEW

[Continuing] ... when we get to it.

NATHANSON

But ...

ASKEW

When we get to it. ***[Leaves]***

NARRATOR

As MILLER and NATHANSON are discussing what has just happened, NATHANSON's phone rings.

NATHANSON

[crosses to his own desk and answers the phone.]

NATHANSON.

ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT

Call for you on Line One.

NATHANSON

Who is it?

ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT

CARRIE JOHNSON.

NATHANSON

Great. *[Pause]* OK. *[Pause]* Put her through.

[Listens]

This is NATHANSON.

[Listens]

Good morning MS. JOHNSON. How can I help you?

[Listens]

Yes, MS. JOHNSON *[Pause]* that's right – I'm handling your case now.

[Listens]

Well, I know, MS Johnson, but I've only had your case for less than a day, and I'm still trying to get myself up to speed on everything....

[Listens]

The only thing I can tell you right now, MS. JOHNSON, is that we're looking into it.

[Pause] Hello? Ms. JOHNSON? **[Pause]** Oh, I didn't know if you were still on the line
How long have you lived at your house on Highway 93?

[Listens; takes notes]

NARRATOR

CARRIE JOHNSON tells NATHANSON everything she knows about the situation in her Highway 93 community. By 5 o'clock that afternoon, the agenda of his meeting with ARNSBARGER has changed.

SCENE 4 – Special's Café.

[ARNSBARGER sits at a table/booth in Special's Café. NATHANSON enters and takes a seat opposite.]

NATHANSON

Thanks for taking the time to see me, PETE. I really appreciate it. Sorry to have kept you waiting.

ARNSBARGER

No problem, WALT. I just got here myself.

NATHANSON

I thought I'd be able to duck out a little early, but I couldn't manage it.

ARNSBARGER

So, how is life as a public servant?

NATHANSON

Well ... that's why I wanted to see you.

ARNSBARGER

What's the matter, JACK MILLER's tired sense of humor got you down already?

NATHANSON

No, it's not that. **[Pause]** JACK means well, I think – at least I hope he does – but he's definitely not making life any easier for me.

ARNSBARGER

What's he up to now?

NATHANSON

I shouldn't blame him, really. **[Pause]** I called you last night to get your advice on how to handle something.

ARNSBARGER

So, fill me in.

NATHANSON

There's this lady that keeps calling the health department with complaints about her water. JACK says she's just a pest, with too much time on her hands.

ARNSBARGER

Why does he say that about her?

NATHANSON

Because she's been phoning the office a lot; and she's always angry. **[Pause]** I guess he thinks I've got too much time on my hands, because yesterday he told me she's officially my problem.

ARNSBARGER

And ...

NATHANSON

I called you to get some advice on how to handle someone that the whole office thinks is just a nuisance. You used to say that individuals matter, even though our work concerns itself with groups.

ARNSBARGER

I still say that, and I still believe it.

NATHANSON

And you know JACK, and just about everybody else in the office.

ARNSBARGER

Yeah

NATHANSON

The pieces to this situation don't really fit together.

ARNSBARGER

What do you mean?

NATHANSON

She has a well. JACK says she doesn't like the way her water tastes, and she's blaming us for it. He doesn't want to have to take any more of her calls, so he says she's officially my problem. He dropped a file on my desk yesterday and told me someone was on-hold, waiting to talk to me. It did not go well.

ARNSBARGER

Why? What happened?

NATHANSON

For one thing, I'm flipping through the file as this person is railing against me – or the health department or county government – about how nobody will take her seriously. I could see why JACK didn't want to talk to her.

ARNSBARGER

You couldn't have been much help, under the circumstances. What did you say to her?

NATHANSON

I told her our records showed that her water had tested clean – which they did.

ARNSBARGER

What did she say?

NATHANSON

I thought her anger was already maxed-out; but when I told her that her water was clean, she found another level

ARNSBARGER

Oops.

NATHANSON

... and then she hung up.

ARNSBARGER

So, if the file says her water is clean, what's the problem? JACK didn't give you the wrong file, did he? It would be just like him to screw up like that.

NATHANSON

Not exactly.

ARNSBARGER

What did happen, then?

NATHANSON

I took the file home and was going over it last night when I called you. The file is out of date.

ARNSBARGER

Out of date? By how much?

NATHANSON

Thirty-five years.

ARNSBARGER

Thirty-five years?!

NATHANSON

Thirty-five years. And counting.

ARNSBARGER

So JACK did give you the wrong file?

NATHANSON

Well, yeah. It's hard to tell if he or anyone else already knew the file was so old. Either way, trying to talk about it at work this morning is another thing that didn't go well.

ARNSBARGER

JACK give you a hard time?

NATHANSON

Not so much. It was PHYLISS ...

ARNSBARGER

ASKEW – not a person you want to get on the wrong side of.

NATHANSON

No kidding. Anyway, the lady calls back again this morning.

ARNSBARGER

Who is she, anyway?

NATHANSON

Her name is CARRIE JOHNSON. Lives out on Highway 93.

ARNSBARGER

I know where that is – there’s an old landfill out there.

NATHANSON

Right. And that’s what her gripe is. When she called this morning, I talked to her for a while ...

ARNSBARGER

[Interrupting] Didn’t bite your head off this time?

NATHANSON

No. I explained to her that for me the whole situation was less than a day old, and I took notes while she told me her side of the story.

ARNSBARGER

So, what is her side of the story?

NARRATOR

NATHANSON tells ARNSBARGER what he has learned from CARRIE JOHNSON: that she is fairly new to the Highway 93 community, after being flooded out of her previous home down-east by a hurricane; that the Highway 93 community has had water quality issues for years, and they have had no success at all in getting their grievances addressed, or even given a fair hearing.

NATHANSON

She's convinced that it's all about race.

ARNSBARGER

Because 93 is almost completely people of color.

NATHANSON

Exactly. They've been trying to get water and sewer lines out there since before CARRIE JOHNSON moved to the area, and they've gotten absolutely nowhere

ARNSBARGER

[Interrupting] Meanwhile, new developments are going up elsewhere in the county

NATHANSON

[Interrupting] ... in areas with almost no people of color....

ARNSBARGER

[Interrupting] ... and they haven't had any trouble at all getting water and sewer service.

NATHANSON

Exactly. CARRIE says it's racism – plain, old-fashioned racism.

NARRATOR

NATHANSON explains that CARRIE JOHNSON was able to buy the house – the first stick-built home she has ever owned – from the insurance settlement on her flooded-out property down-east. The new house seemed like a great deal – good price; excellent mortgage interest rate; the opportunity to be one of the first homeowners in a new development – but it's next to a landfill.

ARNSBARGER

Next to a landfill? Too close, you mean?

NATHANSON

I mean right next to it. The landfill is her closest neighbor. It's an old landfill. It's covered over and has a grove of trees growing on it. You can't see it.

NARRATOR

NATHANSON tells ARNSBARGER that CARRIE JOHNSON had no idea that anything might be wrong until she turned on her faucet for the first time, and the water wasn't clear and had a peculiar odor. She called the health department the next day and has been calling ever since.

ARNSBARGER

And that bring us to the present.

NATHANSON

Not quite. She's not well, and she blames the landfill.

ARNSBARGER

But you don't have any evidence.

NATHANSON

Evidence? I told you what happened when I just mentioned how old the Highway 93 file is. I'd like to at least do what I can to help her get to the bottom of this ...

ARNSBARGER

[Interrupting] ... but you feel like you already stuck your neck out pretty far,

NATHANSON

[Interrupting] just asking about the file. JACK pretty much said if I bring this up again, I'll be out of a job.

ARNSBARGER

Well ... *[pause]* you're working in a small health department in a big, rural county. If I remember correctly, you're the first new hire out there in several years.

NATHANSON

You sound like PHYLISS ...

ARNSBARGER

I wouldn't go that far. But it's true that the staff is stretched pretty thin, and the budget – well, there isn't exactly a gigantic tax base in that county ...

NATHANSON

[Interrupting] Yeah, too bad the county line isn't a few miles to the west – this joint *[looks around]* could help pay for some of what we need.

ARNSBARGER

Unfortunately, they have to prioritize. Looks like they've prioritized your Ms. JOHNSON to the bottom of the agenda.

NATHANSON

Worse than that, PETE. She says the county commissioners have told her that she isn't helping her community by continuing to make "unsubstantiated allegations" against the county about her situation.

ARNSBARGER

You believe her, don't you?

NATHANSON

I don't know if the water's making her sick or not. But I do know that something's wrong out there, and she ought to be taken more seriously than she's being taken right now.

ARNSBARGER

But you don't want to lose your job over it.

NATHANSON

I can't see how that would do anybody any good.

ARNSBARGER

I've been thinking while we've been talking; and I have an idea. If you're not careful, you'll not only get fired, you'll have to change careers, because everybody hates disloyal employees. There's someone you should contact, as quietly as possible. I don't know her that well, but I know her reputation, and you and she definitely should talk – an environmental activist named ANITA GAINES.

NATHANSON

Really?

**SCENE 5 – County health department, the
next day.**

NATHANSON

[At his desk, talking into phone].

Hello, Ms. GAINES.... ? Good morning. This is
WALTER NATHANSON at the county health
department. Sorry I wasn't able to call you
back yesterday. ***[Listens.]*** Look – are you free
for lunch today?

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 Walt Nathanson felt at the beginning of the story? At the end?
- What do you think makes Phyllis Askew and Jack Miller (the other health department employees) act the way that they do?
- What do you think of Nathanson's decision to call environmental activist Anita Gaines? What other options did Nathanson have?
- How would you describe the problem in this story?
- 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?
- 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 Nathanson acts as he does? What about the other health department employees?
- 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 Nathanson?
- 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 sued the county 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.