

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

Fall toward Grace

Script 2 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 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 inspired by real experiences in Vance County, North Carolina. However, the main characters and interactions in this script are fictitious.

Fall toward Grace portrays the scene inside the local health department to which community member Carrie Johnson is persistently making calls to seek assistance with investigating her foul well water. The staff is familiar with Ms. Johnson's complaints about her "contaminated" well water, and the responsibility of responding is given to Walter Nathanson (with a sigh of relief) by his boss. Nathanson is the newest hire in the understaffed health department and as he learns more about Ms. Johnson's situation, he begins to understand why his coworkers are reluctant to get involved.



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

- Have you ever been trapped between an unhappy customer and a boss who is not sympathetic?
- How would you describe your local health department?

FALL TOWARD GRACE

RICHARD ROBESON
Exchange Project

CHARACTERS

ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT 1, County Health Department

ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT 2, County Health Department

HERBERT ANDERSON, Senior Staff, County Health Department

PHYLLIS ASKEW, Senior Staff, County Health Department

JACK MILLER, Mid-level Staff, County Health Department

WALTER NATHANSON, Junior Staff, County Health Department

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

Suggested props: At least two telephones (preferably 4), 4 chairs, 2 small tables, file folder with papers inside

Scenes: Interior of a local health department

SCENE 1 – County Health Department.

NARRATOR

A typical morning in a certain small health department in a mostly rural county -- the phones ring early, and often.

[ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT 1 at County Health Department answers phone.]

ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT 1

County Health Department. How may I direct your call?

CARRIE

Hello. MR. ANDERSON, please.

ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT 1

Who may I say is calling, please?

CARRIE

This is CARRIE JOHNSON.

ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT 1

What is this regarding?

CARRIE

I spoke with Mr. Anderson two weeks ago about having my water tested.

ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT 1

Hold, please, while I transfer you.

[ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT 1 presses page button on phone.]

ANDERSON

[Answers]

ANDERSON.

ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT 1

You have a call from a CARRIE JOHNSON

ANDERSON

[Interrupting] I'm not here -- I've gone to lunch.

ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT 1

At 10 o'clock in the morning? I might have some trouble selling that.

ANDERSON

Well, tell her ... tell her I called in sick; have laryngitis; had to take my dog to the vet. I'm not here.

ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT 1

OK, OK. I get it. Who is she, anyway?

ANDERSON

Somebody who likes to make phone calls to the health department.

[ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT 2 opens CARRIE'S line, thinking it is a new incoming call.]

ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT 2

Good morning. County Health Department.
How may I direct your call?

CARRIE

Hello ...?

ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT 2

County Health Department. How may I direct
your call?

CARRIE

I'm on-hold.

ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT 2

Oh. I'm sorry. Who are you holding for?

CARRIE

I'm holding for Mr. ANDERSON.

ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT 2

One moment, please. ***[Tries Anderson's extension, which is busy.]***

Hello, Ma'am?

CARRIE

Yes...?

ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT 2

That line is busy. Would you like to continue holding?

CARRIE

No, I wouldn't like to continue holding, but I need to speak with Mr. ANDERSON.

ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT 2

What seems to be the problem?

CARRIE

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.

ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT 2

Is there a problem with your water?

CARRIE

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

ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT 2

You said you spoke with Ms. EDWARDS the last time you called, but you're holding for Mr. ANDERSON? So ...

CARRIE

[Interrupting] I spoke with Ms. EDWARDS. And she said Mr. ANDERSON is the person I should speak with. Mr. ANDERSON took my contact information and said I would hear from him by the end of the week. That was two weeks ago.

ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT 2

Hold, please.

[ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT 2 begins to buzz each person on CARRIE's list of previous calls to Health Department.]

ASKEW

[Answers.]

Askew ...

ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT 2

CARRIE JOHNSON on Line Two for you.

ASKEW

Who's she?

ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT 2

Says she spoke to you a while back about having her water tested.

ASKEW

And ...?

ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT 2

She says she's still waiting.

ASKEW

Oh yeah, I remember her – a real pain. I thought Jack was handling that.

ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT 2

She seems pretty upset.

ASKEW

She's always upset. Doesn't she live out on 93?

ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT 2

I think that's what she said – yeah.

ASKEW

[Muttering] If those people out there weren't complaining, they'd have nothing to talk about.

ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT 2

Beg your pardon?

ASKEW

Nothing. Which line is she on?

ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT 2

Line Two.

ASKEW

Alright. If she's still on the line, tell her somebody will be with her shortly.

ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT 2

OK

[ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT 2 switches back to CARRIE. ASKEW goes to ANDERSON'S desk. MILLER, who has heard ASKEW'S end of the conversation with ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT 2 joins ASKEW and ANDERSON. The three of them confer as ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT 2 speaks to CARRIE.]

Hello Ma' am?

CARRIE

Yes?

ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT 2

Sorry for the delay, but Mr. ANDERSON is on another line. If you'll continue to hold, he'll be with you as soon as he's free.

CARRIE

[Silence]

ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT 2

Hello ...?

CARRIE

I heard you.

ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT 2

I'm sure he won't be much longer, but if you'd like to call back

CARRIE

No, that's OK. I'll wait.

ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT 2

Thank you. *[A new call comes in.]* Hello ... county health department. How may I direct your call?

[The conference in ANDERSON'S office.]

ANDERSON

[To ASKEW and MILLER] ... and why am I still dealing with some ... annoyance from out on Highway 93 who thinks her problems – whatever they are – are my fault? *[To MILLER]* Do we have any files on the water out there?

MILLER

Uh ... sort of.

ANDERSON

Do I get to guess what "sort of" means, or are you going to enlighten me?

MILLER

We've got something, but it's not all that recent.

ANDERSON

And ...

MILLER

It doesn't say that there's anything wrong with the water out that way.

ANDERSON

Well, give NATHANSON the file, and put him to work.

[MILLER crosses to NATHANSON'S desk, and lays the 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.]***

NATHANSON

Hello, 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.

NATHANSON

[Still flipping through the file as he talks to CARRIE]

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

CARRIE

What?!?!? When was this?

NATHANSON

It could stand to be a little softer, but ...

CARRIE

[Hangs up.]

NATHANSON

... 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.

NARRATOR

To NATHANSON, MILLER'S advice means taking the file home and studying it more closely.

SCENE 2 – 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.

NATHANSON

That’s not exactly what I had in mind. I was thinking of something like trying ...

ASKEW

[Interrupting]

I’m sure you two are going to start working eventually, but now would suit me.

NATHANSON

We were working. I was asking Jack ...

MILLER

[Clears throat, trying to cue NATHANSON to keep quiet.]

NATHANSON

... about a file he gave me.

MILLER

[Pushes away from his desk]

[To NATHANSON AND ASKEW] Want anything from the snack bar? ... No? Be right back. ***[Leaves.]***

NATHANSON

[To ASKEW] Can I talk to you about something?

ASKEW

What's on your mind, Walt?

NATHANSON

I've been studying the file on CARRIE JOHNSON'S property, and it's way, way out of date.

ASKEW

If we had only one file to be updated, we'd be in pretty good shape.

NATHANSON

But I talked to her yesterday and told her a lot of stuff that wasn't right.

ASKEW

What did you tell her?

NATHANSON

That our records show that except for being too hard, her water is fine.

ASKEW

Do our records show that, Walt?

NATHANSON

That's what they show, but ...

ASKEW

[Interrupting]

So where's the problem?

NATHANSON

The water hasn't been tested in over thirty-five years. What if CARRIE JOHNSON is right about

...

ASKEW

Look around, Walt. We're a small health department in 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]***

NATHANSON

[TO MILLER] That certainly made my day.

MILLER

Do yourself a favor – don't ever tell PHYLISS ASKEW that she's not doing her job.

NATHANSON

I wasn't saying she's not doing her job. I just thought ...

MILLER

[Interrupting] If you don't want your career to be over before it starts, don't tell ASKEW she's not doing her job.

NATHANSON'S phone rings.

NATHANSON

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

NATHANSON.

ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT 1

Call for you on Line One.

NATHANSON

Who is it?

ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT 1

CARRIE JOHNSON.

NATHANSON

Great.***[Pause]*** OK. ***[Pause]*** Put her through.
[Listens] This is NATHANSON. ***[Listens]***
Good morning MS JOHNSON. How can I help
you?

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 Nathanson felt when he first talked to Carrie? At the end?
- How do you think Carrie feels?
- What do you think makes Nathanson's co-workers act the way that they do?
- What options does 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 the health department employees acted as they did?
- 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.