

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

Saturday Morning

Written by Erin Byrd



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 based on actual events that occurred in Holly Springs, North Carolina from 1998 to 2003. Names are fictitious and characters are composites representing those people involved in the real situations.

Saturday Morning tells the story of Roberta Herrin, a longtime Holly Springs resident. Roberta is disturbed to learn that town council members have approved a permit for the county to build a seventh landfill in her community.

After Roberta informs her close circle of friends, they, along with resident and community activist Annette Peterson, successfully pressure town council members into voting against the proposed landfill. When the county sues the town to force the landfill construction, Roberta and her friends fight a legal battle to block the construction.

What really happened in Holly Springs?

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?

SATURDAY MORNING

ERIN BYRD
Exchange Project

CHARACTERS

ROBERTA HERRIN – A 75-year-old widow who owns a farm adjacent to an existing landfill. She has lived in Holly Springs all of her life.

SYLVIA MAC – A 55-year-old wife with grown children. She has lived in Holly Springs for 25 years and is part-owner of Ma’s Kettle Restaurant.

ANNETTE PETERSON – A 40-year-old community activist/organizer and Holly Springs resident for 20 years.

JOE PETERSON – The 45-year-old husband of ANNETTE, and resident of Holly Springs for 20 years.

NARRATOR/MS. DELLA -- The blind owner of Ma’s Kettle. She wears an apron to signify she is speaking as the owner and hostess of Ma’s Kettle. To signify speaking as the narrator, the apron is removed.

Suggested props: Apron, 4 chairs, small table, coffee mugs, salt & pepper shakers, 2 silverware place settings

Scenes: Ma’s Diner

SCENE 1

[Set includes table with chairs, salt and pepper shakers, and four silverware place settings.]

NARRATOR

Welcome to Ma's Kettle, a local restaurant owned by MS. DELLA. Every Saturday morning at 8:00 a.m. longtime Holly Spring residents have a standing breakfast engagement. They get together and have opportunity to eat, fellowship, gossip, laugh, cry, organize, and share their lives. Today SYLVIA and ROBERTA are sitting down to breakfast.

[MS. DELLA puts on apron.]

MS. DELLA

What's for breakfast, ladies?

SYLVIA

We'll have the usual, MS. DELLA, thank you. So ROBERTA, what's the word?

ROBERTA

Oh, those fools are up to it again.

SYLVIA

Which fools are up to what? There are plenty of fools doing things to irritate me.

ROBERTA

Six landfills aren't enough. The Town Council is adding a seventh landfill. This one will be closer to the farm than the others. Already, my house isn't worth what it was 10 years ago. Don't all landfills leak? The groundwater is already contaminated. I have to pay for bottled water so we can have fresh water. Plus, we can barely stand the stench as it is. *NOW*, they want to dump even more trash here.

SYLVIA

I don't believe it. When did you hear about this? You know, you're getting senile, old woman.

ROBERTA

Not that senile. You just don't want to believe it. Get the wax out your ears. They're going to add another landfill.

[JOE and ANNETTE walk in and join the breakfast club.]

ROBERTA

[To ANNETTE.] Tell them about the new landfill the idiots over at the Town Council are planning.

ANNETTE

[Takes a deep breath.] The council voted to approve a permit to build the landfill last night. When the room is empty, they can get away with anything they want. No one is there to hold them accountable. To be honest, they didn't sound excited about it.

SYLVIA

I still don't understand – WHY did they agree to this?

ANNETTE

Wake County agreed to forgive \$250,000 of Holly Spring's debt if the Council would approve the permit to build the landfill. I think the folks from Wake County are pushing it.

ROBERTA

This is really frustrating. The air is making folks sick. We don't need more trash in our community. I'm tired of them filling our community like a bottomless garbage can. Debt or not, Sister Peterson, is it too late to stop them?

JOE

It's never too late. We will need to apply some pressure and maybe we can get them to take back their approval of the permit. There are six council members. We have known them since we were in school together, so we just have to think about how we can help them see the error of their ways.

[Everyone pauses as if thinking.]

SYLVIA

Well, Councilman Miller and Councilman Rogers go to my church. As a matter of fact, Rogers is on the Deacon board. I'll give them both a call. I'll also call the Pastor and the rest of the members of the Deacon Board and ask them to talk with both Miller and Rogers.

ROBERTA

Well, I can get the folks down at the Senior Center calling them. I believe Mrs. Cells was Councilman Calloway's first grade teacher.

JOE

Councilman Jones lives in our neighborhood. We should hit the streets and get some of the neighbors calling her.

ANNETTE

Well, let's work on them. The Council meeting is next week. Make sure you ask whomever you talk with to call at least two other people and get them to do the same thing. And see if they are willing to come to the Council meeting next Tuesday at 6:00.

[Everyone freezes except for ANNETTE, who gets up and leaves staging area. MS. DELLA removes her apron to speak as the NARRATOR.]

SCENE 2

NARRATOR

It's Saturday morning two weeks later. ROBERTA, SYLVIA, and JOE are sitting down to breakfast again. Over the last week they organized, and have gotten friends, family members, church members, neighbors and other community residents to call council members and apply significant pressure. At the next council meeting, hundreds of residents demanded the Council take back their approval of the permit for the new landfill. The Council changed its vote and agreed pay Wake County the \$250,000.

[MS. DELLA puts on her apron. Characters unfreeze.]

MS. DELLA

Good morning, folks. Whatcha having today?

JOE

Good morning, MS. DELLA. We'll have the usual? ***[Or, folks can ask for what they want.]*** I have never seen the Council room so full. I still can't believe we got them to change their votes.

MS. DELLA

[To herself, but loud enough for the audience to hear.] I can believe it. The Council members are a bunch of pansies.

SYLVIA

I will never forget that meeting as long as I live.

JOE

Where did all of those people come from?

SYLVIA

You told us to make calls, and that's what we did.

JOE

ANNETTE has been trying to get folks to come out for years without that kind of success. What did you say to get them to come?

MS. DELLA

[To herself, but loud enough for the audience to hear] I reckon folks are just tired of being trashed on.

ROBERTA

I think it was timing; folks are just tired of watching truckloads of trash come into our community hour after hour, day after day, month after month.

SYLVIA

We told them that they could expect a lot more of the same. Plus, you know how folks are about the traffic.

MS. DELLA

You told them there would be more time to their commute and that got their butts moving.

[ANNETTE runs into the restaurant, angry.]

ANNETTE

[Loudly.] You will not believe what happened now! Wake County is taking Holly Springs to court to force the landfill permit. I guess they weren't impressed with the meeting turnout.

MS. DELLA

Don't nothing surprise me anymore.

ROBERTA

I can't believe the court is forcing the landfill permit. Can they do that?

ANNETTE

Depending on how the case goes, the court can force the issue unless we can find some way to stop them. Wake County got letters of support from Raleigh, Morrisville, Knightdale, and Wendell for building the landfill in Holly Springs.

MS. DELLA

We're being ganged up on.

JOE

Wake County basically said that "it's a democracy," so we in Holly Springs have to consider what the rest of Wake County wants. They don't believe that Holly Springs residents should have a say in how much garbage comes into our own town. I bet they wouldn't let all the folks in Holly Springs dump trash in Raleigh, especially if the folks in North Raleigh said no.

ANNETTE

Well, I have been thinking about this and talking to other groups across the state like NC Fair Share and the Environmental Justice Network that have had similar fights over landfills. It turns out that there are laws that say that Wake County has to conduct demographic studies, investigate alternative sites, and hold public hearings before they can receive the permit to build the landfill.

MS. DELLA

AND WE KNOW they didn't do any of that.

SYLVIA

What do you mean by demographic studies?

ANNETTE

They have to determine the race and ethnic backgrounds of the people who live in the area surrounding the proposed landfill site. Wake County is saying that they don't need to do it. But we can push the issue because of a study released in the 80's that said communities with hazardous waste landfills also have the most people of color.

JOE

I think we should – every landfill in the county is near a black neighborhood. It's like they are saying it's okay to dump trash on the black people.

MS. DELLA

Or poor people.

SYLVIA

I'll tell you what really worries me: a study came out last week that said some of the highest rates of asthma are in North Carolina. In Holly Springs, I bet that's because of the air pollution from the landfills. Alice, my neighbor's daughter, had to go to the hospital twice last month. If they keep sending the trash here it's only going to get worse.

ANNETTE

I've been thinking about this a lot lately. We should consider starting some type of organization to bring folks together in the community. We have been meeting every Saturday for weeks and I think we should make it official. If we get a few more folks involved we can sue Wake County. Developing an organization will keep us from looking like a few lone agitators.

SYLVIA

I like the idea.

ROBERTA

I do too. Let's meet next Saturday and see who else we can get to come.

JOE

Sounds like a plan.

[Everyone freezes except for JOE and ANNETTE, who get up and leave the staging area. MS. DELLA removes her apron.]

SCENE 3

NARRATOR

Two years have passed. The Saturday Morning crew has started Holly Springs Community In Action. The group has worked with Lawyers For More Just Communities to sue Wake County because the county did not conduct demographic studies, research alternative sites, or hold public hearings that state law said they had to have.

[MS. DELLA puts on her apron.]

[SYLVIA and ROBERTA are sitting down. They are greeted by MS. DELLA as usual.]

MS. DELLA

Good morning, folks. Whatcha having today?

SYLVIA

We'll have the usual. So what's the word?

ROBERTA

We are still waiting to hear what the decision is going to be. Yesterday, Wake County asked to meet with us to see if we could settle the case.

SYLVIA

This fight has taken much longer than I thought it would.

ROBERTA

You're right about that.

SYLVIA

It occurred to me that we have spent all of this energy to stop them from building another landfill and the six already here are still making our lives miserable.

ROBERTA

I know what you mean. Every time I go outside I can smell the landfill. I can't stand it sometimes. I had some testing done, and they say that there is nothing dangerous about the water, but it tastes funny. I'm still shelling out money for the bottled water. My husband says he avoids me when the stench is strong because I become a "grumpy old lady."

SYLVIA

He's probably right. They say the smell makes people irritable. But I doubt that applies to you, you're irritable all the time.

ROBERTA

I've been meaning to ask, how is your neighbor's daughter, Alice?

SYLVIA

She isn't doing too much better. She's been to the hospital for her asthma again. My husband found out at the neighborhood association meeting that there are several children in the neighborhood with asthma. A few of them have been breaking out in rashes as well. I am guessing it's from the water.

[ROBERTA shakes her head as JOE and ANNETTE enter Ma's Kettle to sit down.]

ROBERTA

So what's the news?

ANNETTE

I have good news and bad news. The bad news is that we were not able to stop the permit for the landfill. The good news is that Wake County has agreed to review other sites and do a demographic study. We are also going to be able to place a person from our community on the Wake County Solid Waste Technical Committee.

SYLVIA

So that's what we get after all of this, a place on the committee.

ANNETTE

At least we let them know they can't do anything they want in our community anymore. Wake County is searching for more appropriate sites. They agreed not to put any more landfills within five miles of our community so that *IS* a victory. Well, we have to leave to run some errands. Will we see you guys next Saturday?

[JOE and ANNETTE rise from the table.]

MS. DELLA

That day was a real victory for us. Yet here we are three years later, and the county still received a permit to build a landfill in Holly Springs. Of course, the struggle never ends.

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 Roberta and her friends felt at the beginning of the story? At the end?
- What do you think Robert & Sylvia did that was effective in resolving their issue? (for example: creating a community organization, looking for outside help)
- What do you think this story says about the power of a community's voice?
- What kind of pressures did the town council members experience?
- Why do you think situations like these happens?

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

- 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 town council acted as they did? How about the county officials who pushed for the landfill?
- 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

Holly Springs (Wake County): The *Saturday Morning* script was based on this community story. 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 initiated legal action 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.

About the scriptwriter

Erin Byrd serves as the director of Southerners for Economic Justice (SEJ), a social justice organization committed to strengthening the voices and improving the quality of life of the most economically vulnerable persons in our state. Erin served for three years as the Director of Voters for Clean Elections, the North Carolina campaign finance reform coalition that was instrumental in the passage of the state's Judicial Public Financing reform bill. In addition to her duties at SEJ, Erin facilitates a parenting class for Prison MATCH, a program that works to strengthen bonds between incarcerated mothers and their children.

Erin is the Treasurer of the NC Black Leadership Caucus. She serves as the Board Chair of Democracy South, a regional multi-issue coalition of progressive organizations across the south. She also serves on the Southeast Raleigh Assembly, an advisory board to the Raleigh City Council. She has recently completed the Community Builders Learning Project.

A graduate of the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, Erin has two sons, Hausson & Jai.