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Art Institute docents' divisive dismissal

Controversy, calls of reverse bias belie complicated history

By Christopher Borrelli
Chicago Tribune

About 90 years ago, just after New Year's, in the dark of the Great Depression, the Chicago Board of Education began rooting through its proposed $93 million budget, eager to trim $7 million. It was looking for what it called "frills." Instances of glaring, unnecessary excess. And soon they found one, a frill in the guise of a single museum docent, whom the city had employed for years to provide Chicago schoolchildren with tours of the Art Institute of Chicago. Unlike most contemporary docents, who serve as volunteers, this one, Mary Buehr, had a salary; firing her, the city saved just $3,000 a year (or $60,000 in 2021). Still, fire her, they must: "This is the most ridiculous item I have found in the entire budget," board President Lewis Myers told this newspaper.

And that was that.

Except, of course, it wasn't.

A few days later, a letter arrived at the Tribune, a lengthy letter

Turn to Docents, Page 12

A makeshift memorial stands outside Oxford High School in Oxford, Mich., on Friday. **SYLVIA JARRUS/THE NEW YORK TIMES**

Parents of killing suspect enter pleas

Manhunt finds duo whose son accused in school shooting

By Kathleen Foody and Corey Williams
Associated Press

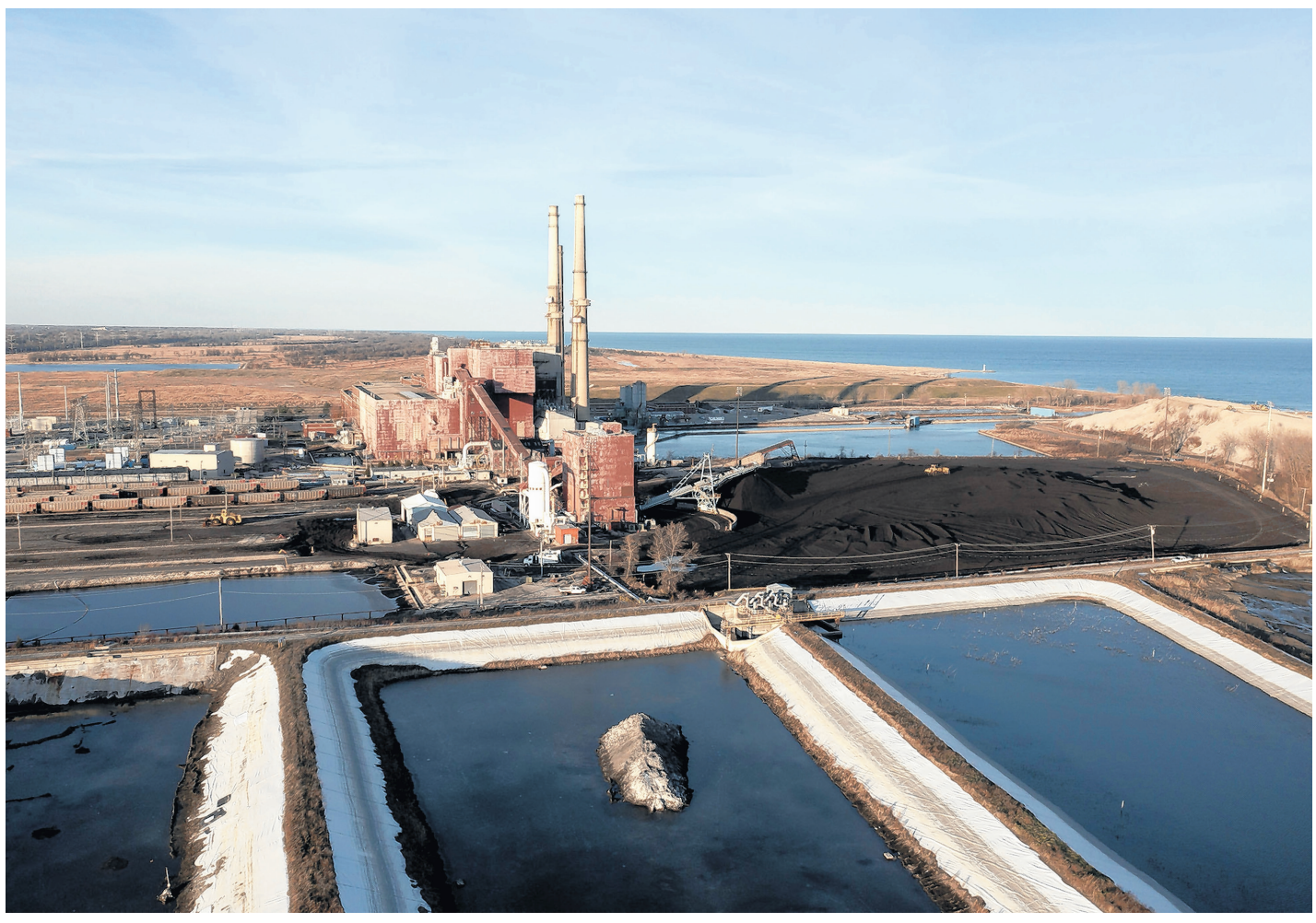
PONTIAC, Mich. — A judge imposed a combined $1 million bond Saturday for the parents of the Michigan teen charged with killing four students at Oxford High School, hours after police said they were caught hiding in a Detroit commercial building.

James and Jennifer Crumbley entered not guilty pleas to each of the four involuntary manslaughter counts against them during a hearing held on Zoom. Jennifer Crumbley sobbed and struggled to respond to the judge's questions at times and James Crumbley shook his head when a prosecutor said their son had full access to the gun used in the killings.

Judge Julie Nicholson assigned bond of $500,000 apiece to each of the parents and required GPS monitoring if they pay to be

Turn to Parents, Page 10

THE POLLUTION NEXT DOOR



The Waukegan Generating Station coal-fired plant can be seen from North Beach on Tuesday in Waukegan. **ERIN HOOLEY/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

Waukegan's legacy of industrial pollution

Residents organizing to fight in home of 5 Superfund sites

By Sylvia Goodman | Chicago Tribune

Growing up in Waukegan, Eduardo Flores didn't think much about the presence of inhalers on his playground. Every couple of months, one of his classmates or a kid from a different grade would suffer an asthma attack while playing tag or soccer at recess.

"Whenever someone got an asthma attack, I would always have to run and help get an inhaler," said Flores, now 19. "It was such a normal thing to me as a child that I never questioned it."

It wasn't until Flores got involved with environmental activism that he realized there might be a reason for all the asthma cases in his community.

In Waukegan, old factories, from a closed asbestos manufacturing facility to an active gypsum factory, sit discordantly alongside public beaches and forest preserves. Home to more than 86,000 people, the city contains five active Superfund sites. And on the shores of Lake Michigan sits the Waukegan Generating Station — a facility that has burned coal for decades — and its coal ash ponds.

Coal ash, a residual of combustion, is made up of particles including heavy metals and radioactive elements that are turned into a slurry and dumped into coal ash ponds. In June 2019, the Illinois Pollution Control Board ruled that the facility violated environmental regulations and was responsible for groundwater contamination from its coal ash ponds in Waukegan and elsewhere.

Studies have also shown coal ash ponds can emit pollutants into the air, possibly causing an increase in respiratory symptoms in the surrounding communities.

Turn to Waukegan, Page 16

Does testimony put pressure on Smollett?

Attorneys haven't said whether actor will take stand in his trial

Abimbola Osundairo, left, attorney Gloria Schmidt Rodriguez and Olabinjo Osundairo walk outside the Leighton Criminal Court Building on Thursday in Chicago. **ARMANDO L. SANCHEZ/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

By Megan Crepeau and Jason Meisner
Chicago Tribune

Not long after they allegedly pretended to beat up actor Jussie Smollett in January 2019, two Chicago brothers took off for their ancestral home of Nigeria, where they were going to audition for a show called "Big Brother Naija."

The brothers, aspiring actors Abimbola and Olabinjo Osundairo, never got the roles. But they wound up starring instead in a far higher-profile drama right here in their hometown:

Smollett's criminal trial.

Over two days this week, the Osundairo brothers' long-awaited testimony riveted

Turn to Trial, Page 2

Tom Skilling's forecast High **43** Low **32**

Chicago Weather Center: Forecast in Nation & World, Page 14

$5.75 city and suburbs and elsewhere
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THE POLLUTION NEXT DOOR

Dulce Ortiz of Clean Power Lake County stands on North Beach with the Waukegan Generating Station coal-fired plant behind her on Wednesday. **ERIN HOOLEY/CHICAGO TRIBUNE PHOTOS**

Waukegan

from Page 1

"I got older and realized, hey, asthma isn't as prevalent in other areas. It's prevalent here because we're so close to the coal plant," said Flores, who interns at Clean Power Lake County, a community-driven coalition advocating for environmental, economic and racial justice.

NRG, the current owner, said it plans to close the coal-fired units at the plant next year, but battles continue over what to do with the coal ash ponds left from decades of production. Waukegan, one of the most diverse cities in the Chicago area, with more than half its residents identifying as Latino, is one of several environmental justice communities the Tribune is visiting.

Activists and environmental organizations have been trying for years to improve the city for future generations through regulatory actions, political lobbying and youth movements.

Flores said he plans to return after college because he loves his community — both for what it is and what it can be.

"There's not a lot of people that want to come back. But the few that do want to come back?" Flores said. "They're so passionate about it. And so that's kind of like what gives me hope is knowing that, you know, hey, there are people that want to improve this place."

The Waukegan Generating Station coal-fired plant can be seen from North Beach on Tuesday in Waukegan.

'A beautiful community'

Dulce Ortiz moved to Waukegan when she was 10 years old after immigrating to the United States illegally. Now a co-chair of Clean Power Lake County and executive director of Mano a Mano Family Resource Center, a Lake and McHenry county organization that helps immigrant families integrate into their neighborhood, Ortiz has spent her entire career and much of her free time aiding the community.

Ortiz said she has never considered moving away from the city where her mother lives and where she hopes her own children will stay.

"It's a beautiful community. And it has so much potential," Ortiz said. "This is such a beautiful city. We have a jewel of a lakefront, and we just have to do a better job of ensuring that we get rid of all the industry that's there."

Ortiz said living near pollutants may have taken a toll on her and her family's health. Ortiz's mother developed adult-onset asthma after living for years near the plant. Due to her immigration status, her mother did not have health insurance and had to pay out-of-pocket for an inhaler, Ortiz said. Then, Ortiz developed asthma in her late 20s despite being an avid runner.

There is little scientific research on the effects of coal ash on respiratory health; however, several studies published in the past couple of years show that communities living near coal ash facilities are more likely to report respiratory symptoms than others.

Although Ortiz and Flores spent most of their lives in Waukegan, neither knew for years that the huge factory complex just down the street from Waukegan's downtown was a coal plant.

"I thought it was just like another factory," Flores said. "I felt betrayed by the school system honestly. I just I couldn't believe that I've grown up in Waukegan my whole life and there had barely been a mention of the coal plant."

Ortiz said the responsibility falls on residents to research environmental hazards like the coal plant.

As a culturally and economically diverse city, nearly 80% of Waukegan's residents are people of color and more than half are low-income. Many simply don't have the bandwidth to fight on another front, Ortiz said.

"It's really unjust and unfair to have to burden communities of color with having to do advocacy in regards to environmental justice, because environmental justice is one of the issues that we fight," Ortiz said. "And with Waukegan, too, how do you expect community members to come out and advocate when they're working two or three jobs? These families are in survival mode."

At the Waukegan Municipal Beach, where residents frequently go to relax and have fun, the top of the coal plant peeks out over the bluff. A nearby factory belches smoke into the sky, and a web of mostly defunct railroad lines crisscross over the roads.

A sign on the beach warns fishers not to eat the fish due to the potentially toxic buildup of pollutants. Ortiz said she frequently sees people fishing by the lake: "I don't think they're doing it for enjoyment."

What to clean up and how

Built by Commonwealth Edison in the 1920s, the Waukegan coal plant is among dozens nationwide that started generating electricity before Congress passed the 1970 Clean Air Act. Midwest Generation bought the ComEd plants in 1999 and kept them running as a growing number of scientific studies found that coal plant pollution triggers asthma attacks, causes heart disease and shaves years off lives. In 2014, NRG acquired Midwest Generation.

According to a report produced by the Environmental Integrity Project, Earthjustice, Prairie Rivers Network and the Sierra Club based on state records, 22 of 24 of Illinois' reporting coal-fired power plants have contaminated nearby groundwater with unsafe levels of toxic pollutants, many of them near low-income communities.

In Waukegan, the study found average concentrations of arsenic, boron, manganese, chromium, lithium, molybdenum and sulfate exceeded health-based thresholds at publicly reported monitoring wells. The level to which these toxic chemicals have seeped into the community's drinking water is unknown.

NRG announced this year it will close its Waukegan coal plant in June 2022. The decision came amid an ongoing regulatory battle that began in 2012.

Now, the battle revolves around remediation — what coal ash to clean up and how.

New state regulations require energy companies to clean up sites contaminated with coal ash pollution. The dumps will be sealed or, in some cases, excavated and moved to licensed landfills. But state officials are allowing companies to suggest a preferred option to close each site, then giving environmental groups and community leaders chances to challenge the industry's plans at public hearings and in written comments.

NRG submitted plans for two coal ash ponds. One involves draining the liquid, leaving the ash in place and capping it with layers of soil and drainage systems. The other would move the coal ash to a separate facility.

The complaint, however, also targets other, less regulated sources of coal ash near the factories, including a pond that was used before Midwest Generation and then NRG bought the plant and fill areas outside the ponds that contain coal ash.

Environmental organizations want the coal ash in those areas removed, saying it too poses a risk to the community's health.

"Based on the experience at Waukegan, based on what we've seen from other Midwestern sites and elsewhere, this coal ash, as long as it continues to be exposed to water from groundwater flowing into it from below, continues to pose a serious risk of contamination," said Jennifer Cassel, senior attorney at Earthjustice. "And it's clear that the liners are not stopping contamination. We think cap-in-place is a real problem."

NRG spokesperson Dave Schrader said the company plans to present its coal ash closure plans during virtual public meetings Dec. 15 and 16.

"Our plans will comply with all applicable regulations, approvals, and implementation schedules and Midwest Generation (now owned by NRG) will focus on the well-being of the community, the environment, and maintaining communication with the public and other stakeholders," Schrader said in an emailed statement.

'Joint values'

Much of the environmental advocacy in Waukegan began in or still exists within places of worship.

Clean Power began in downtown's Christ Episcopal Church, where the Rev. Eileen Shanley-Roberts was a founding member. Faith in Place, a nonprofit that fosters green initiatives through faith communities, operates throughout Illinois and has seven participating congregations in Waukegan.

According to Candace May, Faith in Place's Lake County outreach coordinator, places of worship are the perfect place to begin conversations around environmentalism because there is already a bond and a sense of "joint values."

May compared the faith aspect of her environmentalism to the civil rights movement, in which a great deal of organizing took place within churches.

"It's a good way to get people to come together. I think Faith in Place helps Christians and people of faith become stewards of the Earth and really see the Earth as a gift from their Creator," May said.

Faith in Place is a member of the coalition that advocated for the Climate and Equitable Jobs Act passed by the General Assembly in September. The bill was designed to improve air quality, cut carbon power substantially, and incentivize clean jobs, especially in communities of color and places where coal-fired electricity plants operate, like the Waukegan Generating Station.

The act created 13 clean jobs workforce hubs, one of which will be in Waukegan, and sets aside $40 million per year in grants for communities that are transitioning away from fossil fuel or coal industries.

Many Waukegan residents hope cleaner industry will replace the fossil fuels and factories that once

Turn to Waukegan, *Page 17*

About this series

In Illinois and the Midwest, there are numerous neighborhoods bordering properties that produce air, water or soil pollution. Some residents have lived in these areas for generations; others can't afford to move. In the 1990s, state and federal officials began establishing environmental justice policies to prevent toxic threats in communities of color and low-income neighborhoods. According to the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency, the principle of environmental justice requires that no segment of the population, regardless of race, national origin, age or income, should bear disproportionately high or adverse effects of environmental pollution. More than 25 years later, many question whether these policies have helped. In the coming year, the Tribune will visit some of these communities and tell the stories of people who live next door to a health threat.

Today Surrounded by Superfund sites and coal ash ponds, Waukegan residents hope their city can one day realize its potential: "We have a jewel of a lakefront."

Part One Fiercely proud of their home, residents of the Southeast Side — long a toxic dumping ground — are rising up against polluters. Go to tinyurl.com/southeastside

Part Two Many industries call the Southwest Side home. In McKinley Park, a controversial asphalt plant built four years ago has sparked complaints about noxious odors. Go to tinyurl.com/mckinleyparkresidents

Waukegan

from Page 16

defined the town, including the coal plant that dominates several acres of lakefront property.

Schrader, however, said NRG plans to continue partial operations at the site with two gas-fired peaking units, which do not produce coal ash, limiting future development on the lakefront property.

"We will evaluate opportunities to pursue renewable projects at our facilities. Our current development plans at the site include energy storage," Schrader said in an email.

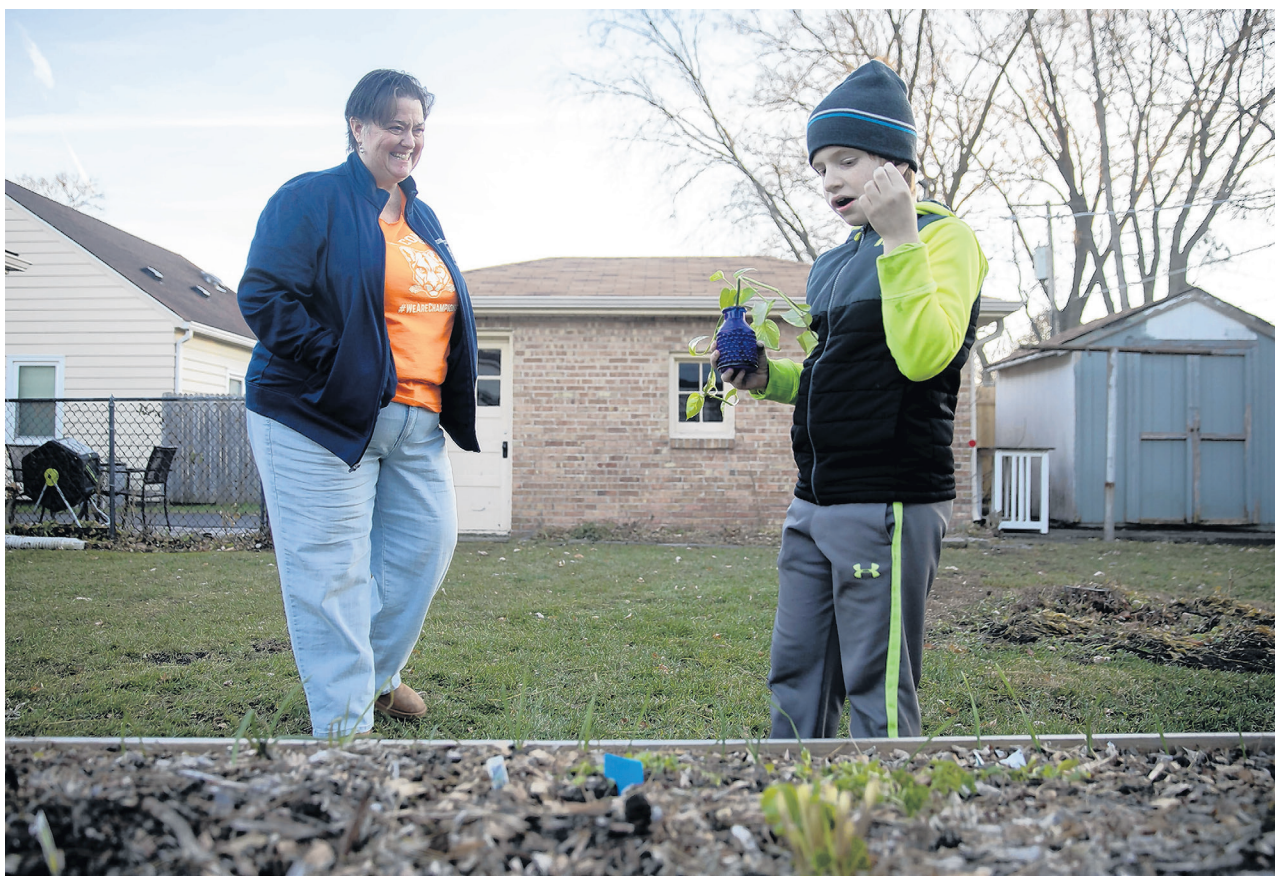
Some residents, like Flores, hope the land could be repurposed as a solar farm, providing clean affordable energy for the community and beyond. Others, like Ortiz, wonder if the land could be rehabilitated and turned into a lakefront park to create more green space if the company sold the property.

"Not only even going to Chicago, but even driving 15 minutes down (the shore), you have Lake Bluff, Lake Forest. And they don't have a coal plant. And they don't have all these brownfields by the lake," Ortiz said. "And not a lot of people of color live there either. It's kind of hard not to believe that this is by design, that this is on purpose. And so we have to change that."

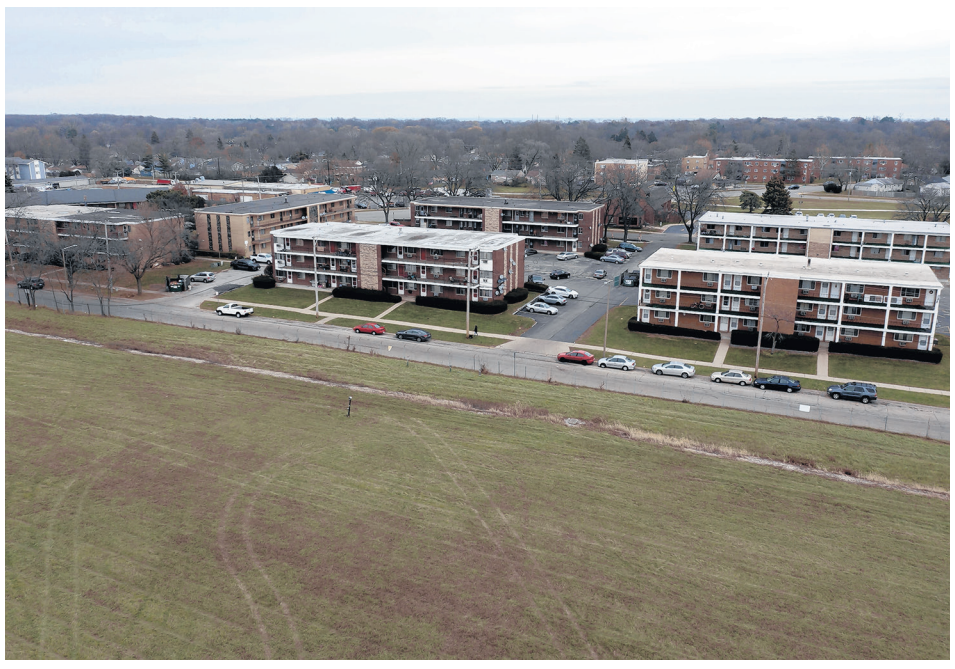
According to May, children are often the most receptive to learning about environmental work and are eager to make changes in their community. In addition to talking to congregants about how to reduce their carbon footprint, May runs a youth program that includes research, leadership training and environmental justice discussions.

Barbara Waller is the founder of another organization that helps kids connect with nature and engage in environmental activism. She grew up in the country in a segregated community outside Memphis, Tennessee.

"It was sort of just a natural thing to me to just enjoy being in nature: falling among the leaves in the fall and enjoying picking blackberries and making sure you don't get bitten by a snake," Waller said.



Lonna Drobi and her 9-year-old son, Omar, check out their raised garden bed at their home on Tuesday in Waukegan. Drobi has made some lifestyle changes, including a backyard garden and composting. **ERIN HOOLEY/CHICAGO TRIBUNE PHOTOS**



The 70-acre Yeoman Creek Landfill Superfund site is adjacent to apartment buildings in Waukegan. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, "A landfill operated onsite from 1958 to 1969 and reportedly accepted both municipal and industrial wastes."

She moved to Waukegan in the '90s, and several years later read the book "Last Child in the Woods," about the disconnect between children and nature in American society, affecting their health and emotional well-being.

The message hit Waller hard, and in 2008 she created Cool Learning Experience, an all-day summer program.

Waller said the Superfund sites that surround Waukegan and the coal plant just down the road are part of the discussions.

"That's a part of their history, whatever those decisions were made (about) the coal plant or other industries," Waller said. "We just want the children to know the facts. ... We want them to do their own critical thinking."

Lonna Drobi, who has lived in Waukegan for about 25 years, enrolled her 9-year-old son, Omar, in Cool Learning Experiences in 2020. Drobi said the program helps kids express themselves artistically and engage with the community.

"We need to do what we can and not just be so wasteful. Let's reuse what we can or let's bless others with it. Let's take it and make it something else," Drobi said. "I think the program opened his eyes."

Waller coordinates classes about healthy eating and gardening for kids and adults, which led Drobi to set up a vegetable garden in her backyard.

Enrolled at the College of Lake County, Flores plans to graduate with a degree in either education or environmental science and take that knowledge back to his alma mater, Waukegan High School. He wants to teach a class on environmental justice so students can learn about the things he had to discover by himself.

Although growing up in Waukegan shaped Flores' activism, some transplants also share his sentiments.

Karen Long MacLeod, another member of Clean Power Lake County, moved to the town in 2007. Her husband opened a business in Waukegan, and they decided to invest in the community.

When her husband died a few years later, MacLeod said she already felt part of the community and had no interest in leaving.

"We live here; we put down roots. We have family; we have jobs." MacLeod said. "And just because something isn't perfect doesn't mean you abandon it. You try to make it better."

"There's not a lot of people that want to come back. But the few that do want to come back? They're so passionate about it. And so that's kind of like what gives me hope is knowing that, you know, hey, there are people that want to improve this place."

— Eduardo Flores, who grew up in Waukegan

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