

All spiritual traditions revere water as a source of life and health. But if water becomes toxic, a family can nearly drown in the problems it causes—chronic health problems, financial burdens, and constant fear of harm.

The Scarbrough family in Wayne County, Georgia, knows all too well the human hardships of environmental pollution. They live in the country on family acreage, eight miles from the county landfill, where as much as 800,00 tons of coal ash was hauled for 8 years without public knowledge. The landfill sits in wetlands, above an aquifer, and coal ash contains dangerous heavy metals such as arsenic, lead, and selenium.

In 2016, when the community learned that high levels of beryllium and zinc had been found in monitoring wells in 2012, their litany of unexplained ailments began to make more sense. Frequent nosebleeds, severe hair loss, mysterious rashes, and immune system weakness have plagued their four children, now ranging in age from 7 to 16. They had suffered illnesses related to mold exposure in the past, but they got a new trailer and made drastic changes to a healthier diet.

The new, unexplained, persistent illnesses baffled them. “I didn’t think about the water as a possible source of the problems until [my kids] were staying sick and not getting better even with all the changes,” said mother Dasha Scarbrough, a Wayne County native who researched and worked nearly full time to address her childrens’ health woes. When the family travels, they tend to get sick with nosebleeds and respiratory issues.

They had always filtered water at the faucet but found a whole-house filtration system cost-prohibitive, with medical bills and prescriptions piling up. “I didn’t think about any issues with bathing in it until I started making the connection between the rashes on my children and a possibly tainted water supply,” she commented.

She knows that others struggle too. “There’s a lot of poverty in the county. Many can’t afford testing or filters or bottled water.” She recounted going door to door in the area, encouraging neighbors to get their water tested. She

encountered many families with concerns about the water, and reports of rare blood cancers, autoimmune disorders, and childhood cancer.

The corporation that manages the landfill never reached out to neighbors about elevated heavy metals in nearby wells, nor did they offer testing, water filters, or drinking water when citizens complained about disturbing patterns of health issues related to the water. Questions she posed to the company at public meetings went unanswered. They continued to claim that there were no dangers to the water supply and air quality.

She wants her water tested by a private lab (upwards of \$500), but not at her personal expense. "It would give me peace of mind, to get some answers. Is the water something, or is it nothing?"

Connecting with others in the community on this issue has given her strength, and she leans on her faith for courage to keep facing the issue and speaking out. She prays for protection for her children, hoping they will not suffer long-term effects of any toxic exposure.

"Their immune systems were shot," she lamented, but she fights daily to regain their health and stay afloat in churning waves of uncertainty.

Take action:

Faith communities can serve as life preservers for families like the Scarbroughs by raising funds and awareness. Funds are needed for independent water testing, whole-house water filtration, and clean drinking water. Faith communities can also stand with those suffering and amplify their voices, go door-to-door in impacted neighborhoods to provide information and support, host educational programs on coal ash and local environmental concerns, and share concerns with elected officials and community leaders.