

## Why are so many people getting rare cancers in this small Georgia town?

BY JOSHUA SHARPE - APRIL 23, 2019

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Photograph by Melissa Golden

*In Waycross, there's a tale about a boy who got a surprise while playing outside one day. He was behind his home on Brunel Street. This was back in the middle of the 20th century in a working-class neighborhood on the southeast side of the railroad yard. He got ahold of some matches. The boy was near a canal. These manmade creeks run all over town and keep the boggy, low-lying land from flooding. The boy was curious, mischievous. He struck a match, lit a piece of newspaper, and tossed it into the water. But when the burning paper touched the surface, it didn't go out. The water burst into flames.*

### **SUMMER 2015**

The girl is in such pain that her parents prop her up in bed so she won't wince while eating her Chick-fil-A nuggets. It's a Friday night at 14-year-old Lexi Crawford's house. She lives on Brunel Street across the road from the 755-acre [CSX Rice Yard](#), the largest railroad switching and maintenance facility in the Southeast. Over the last six weeks, Lexi, an otherwise healthy girl who is tall and slender with long hair of ever-changing colors, has gone nearly 10 times to the emergency room, complaining of back pain. Doctors have prescribed antibiotics, muscle relaxers, Tylenol. They've wondered if she's faking it. *Listen*, her mother has told them, *something's going on*. Lexi, an honor student on both the softball and riflery teams, has missed school repeatedly.

Lexi feels sick and rushes to living room watching TV when turning blue. She's tremblin

*Momma, please.*

*What is it, Alexis, what happened?*

Lexi can hardly breathe. Her whole body seems to hurt. Gary picks her up and they race once again to the ER. This time, a doctor the family hasn't met before is working. He orders a CT scan, her first ever. The scan shows that Lexi has cancer eating at her spine. The doctor isn't sure what kind, so he directs them to Wolfson Children's Hospital in Jacksonville, Florida, where the family learns it's [rhabdomyosarcoma](#), a cancer that forms in muscles along bone. There's no cure and no proven cause. In the entire United States, only 350 people under the age of 19 are diagnosed with it every year, and only a dozen or so in all of Georgia. But incredibly, in and around Waycross, a spot with far less than one percent of the state's population, Lexi was not alone. In a span of two months starting June 1, 2015, two other children were also diagnosed with RMS. A fourth family learned their daughter had Ewing sarcoma, an incurable cancer that forms in bone or soft tissue and also has no known cause. It's diagnosed in fewer than 250 Americans under the age of 19 a year.

What was happening?



Gary and Cristy Rice didn't know how close they lived to lingering contamination until activists reached out after their daughter, Lexi, was diagnosed with cancer.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MELISSA GOLDEN

As news spread on social media, many in [Waycross](#) came to wonder if these cases constituted a cancer cluster. Two years earlier, a resident in her early 50s named Joan Tibor had formed a group called [Silent Disaster](#) to spread the word about pollution in town. The idea sprang from her own health issues: a clouded mind, trouble speaking, a mass on her left leg. With no answers from doctors in town, she researched contaminated properties and became convinced those parcels were essentially poisoning the people of Waycross.

In late 2015, the [Georgia Department of Public Health](#) said it could find no link among the children's cancer cases. The December, the federal gover [Registry](#), an arm of the Cent

alongside state officials in evaluating contamination at the railroad yard as well as an Atlanta Gas Light property that once held a power plant, which was torn down after closing 60 years ago.

At the heart of the inquiry was a simple question: Had toxins on the properties contaminated nearby land, and, if so, could they be dangerous to the public? But the implications of the investigation were vast. It forced the community to consider whether the industries that gave it life could now be taking lives back.

***“There is no such thing as a ‘cancer cluster’ in Waycross.”***

It was also a fraught question, and, in this age of American tribalism, your answer became a kind of litmus test. As stories about local contamination spread to out-of-town media outlets, the issue became, for Waycrossans, impossible to ignore. “There is no such thing as a ‘cancer cluster’ in Waycross,” [an editorial in the \*Waycross Journal-Herald\* declared](#), before the federal investigation had even begun. “It’s a fabrication born of despairing parents and blown entirely out of proportion by an irresponsible broadcast media looking for ratings.” Residents confronted officials at public meetings. Folks got into squabbles on Facebook. It came up over beers at LL Creek bar. Other residents avoided the topic to keep the peace, the way families avoid talking Trump over Thanksgiving turkey. Some thought of loved ones who’d died from cancer and wondered if answers might finally come about why. Michelle Streat, 42. Barbara Fort, 70. Mattie Goble, 6. For me, Joyce Sharpe, 58. She was my mother.



Waycross sits in the southeastern corner of Georgia, where the hard dirt of the Atlantic Coastal Plain mixes with the hot sludge of the Okefenokee Swamp to form a swath of land so boggy that rumor once had it the high school sinks into the Earth an inch every year. In 1880, ground broke on a rail line from Waycross to Florida. Growth followed: hotels, shops, restaurants. As Waycross expanded, a vast canal network kept the low-lying land dry and carried runoff from the railroad and the AGL property. Waycross became an economic nucleus for a 60-mile radius. Postcards showed a thriving downtown with shops, restaurants, and ornate hotels. More industry followed: textiles, turpentine, processed food, munitions. A generation after the railroad came the Dixie Highway, bringing even more travelers and business. In 1956, a 21-year-old Elvis Presley headlined the City Auditorium, built in 1937 with funds from FDR’s New Deal.

But then I-95 came. Or, rather, didn’t come. The north-south interstate highway hugged the coast, bypassing Waycross and making residents here feel as if the future was bypassing it, too. Downtown started to fade in the mid-1970s after Hatcher Point Mall opened 2.5 miles away, on the far eastern edge of town. Other developments—importantly, the Walmart Supercenter—followed.



By the 1990s, when I was growing up here, downtown was limping into oblivion. Friends and I dared each other to trespass into abandoned buildings along historic Tebeau Street. Stagnation continued through the 2000s. The Great Recession made everything worse. In 2017, the U.S. Census estimated the median household income at \$29,000—46 percent below the state median. Nearly one out of three Waycrossans lives below the poverty line. Since 1990, the city has lost residents steadily; today, its population stands at 14,000. Statistics like these have a clarifying effect on a young person's decision about whether to stay. Maybe you could get a job at Memorial Satilla hospital, or build mobile homes at the Waycross industrial park, or try to get on at the railroad, cleaning cargo cars or working in the machine shop, but even that operation has scaled back through the years, now with about 900 employees.

Or you could just leave, which is what I did in 2013 a few months after my 26th birthday. I wanted to be a reporter. By then, both my parents, three of my grandparents, and several aunts and uncles had died. I felt untethered. I moved to Atlanta.

But I remained a proud native, as my parents had taught me to be, eager to evangelize about home. The place had always seemed mystical to me, with the swampy woods we roamed as kids and the lore of the Okefenokee's great characters: gator wrestlers, shape-note singers, deep swamp explorers. My mom, Joyce, had been a tireless civic booster. She helped start the local Relay For Life and, like my father, Randy, was a perpetual volunteer involved in various local organizations, including the Okefenokee Heritage Center.

Just as Mom did, local officials are working hard to sell the community. If Mayor John Knox sees you at Jerry J's, where buttery biscuits bleed through paper bags and slow hearts, he'll remind you not to move away. Downtown is seeing signs of a halting renewal: Kingsland developer Bill Gross completed a multimillion-dollar project to transform the long-dilapidated Ware Hotel into an apartment building; another abandoned hotel, the Phoenix, is now headquarters of the Jones Company, which started the Flash Foods gas station chain; and the old Elks club building, which housed many failed restaurants, finally has a steady tenant in—of all things—a sushi place.

News of the cancers interrupted this narrative of renewal. The truth was, in the Waycross-Ware County area's long lust for industrialization, it had become dirty. On [Georgia's list of the most contaminated sites in the state](#), Ware has had nine, with cleanup still ongoing at six. Another site was in recent years scrutinized under the federal Superfund program, which works to remediate the most contaminated grounds in the U.S. The legacy of contamination is hiding in plain sight here, from the shuttered operations rusting on polluted land to the less visible, like the nearly 200 lawsuits by former railroad workers filling boxes at the clerk of court's office. It's also hidden from view, permeating the dirt silently—a few hundred feet from Lexi Crawford's house.

**Summer 2016**

It's another painfully hot afternoon in Waycross, where the swamp keeps everything sticky. Here at Lexi's house, the AC is out; a window unit hisses futilely. Cristy just had to rush one of her three girls off to camp. Lexi, the oldest, is on the couch. The teenager's dark eyes are lost in a cellphone. Her silky black tresses are a wig, after chemotherapy made her own hair fall out in the bathtub. Lexi had asked Cristy to help wash it, because of the pain and nausea, and made Cristy show her every handful, so she could see what she was losing.

From the start, doctors said Lexi's stage-four cancer has a 10 percent cure rate. The long odds have left Cristy and Gary, both in their 30s, confounded and overwhelmed. Gary prays to be given cancer instead. Cristy has stopped going to church because she's so busy with Lexi's treatment, though her anger with God will later grow. Gary tries to keep his mind on his work as a truck driver. In his free time, he hunts arrowheads. They accumulate on the wood railing by the backdoor.

Lexi was the first local child diagnosed with RMS, on June 1, 2015. Cristy was only passingly aware of Silent Disaster, Tibor's group. But after Cristy posted the news about Lexi on Facebook, group members inundated her with messages. They wanted to talk about the railroad. Cristy didn't know about the pollution there and, honestly, couldn't muster the energy to much care. She was too busy making the 80-mile drive to Jacksonville to be with Lexi during chemo. In the rare moments Cristy could sit alone and reflect, she worried more about the result of cancer than the cause.

Then, Cristy heard about the other kids. A two-year-old boy named Harris Lott, who lived three miles northeast of Lexi, was diagnosed with RMS in July—just weeks after Lexi. Then, a month later, the same news was delivered to the family of five-year-old Gage Walker, who lived in neighboring Brantley County but had spent his first two years in Waycross. A five-year-old girl named Raylee Metts was diagnosed with Ewing sarcoma; Raylee's family lived in the Manor community about 15 miles from the center of Waycross. Around that time, Gary told Cristy a tale he'd heard from an elderly neighbor about the boy lighting a canal on fire.

In 2008, a few weeks after my father died of a heart attack, Mom learned she had ocular melanoma, skin cancer in the eye, diagnosed in only 2,500 Americans a year. Radiation worked, for four years, until the cancer spread to her liver. I don't recall hearing back then about pollution in Waycross. And I don't remember Mom fretting much about what could've made her sick. She'd also had breast cancer a few years earlier. Like Lexi's mom, she was far more concerned with the consequences than the cause. I could see that in her face at 2:30 in the morning when she'd hobble out of her room, unable to sleep. In December, Mom checked into the hospital. The doctor said her organs were failing.

*He said I have two weeks to live,* she told me, terror in her eyes.

He was wrong. Five days lat  
Mom's twin, held her hand ;  
saying is that I loved her.

Afterward, my brother, Jonathan, and I slouched against the wall in the tiled hallway, dumbstruck that our parents were gone so soon. I was 26, he 28. We knew one thing—it did no good to wonder why Mom got a rare cancer. How would an answer help us anyway?



Nihlia Griffin has studied the polluted Seven Out site and others around Waycross for years.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MELISSA GOLDEN

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Nihlia Griffin found out a decade ago she had breast cancer. She underwent an aggressive form of chemo that nurses called the Red Devil because it turns your bodily fluids crimson. Griffin has short, silver hair, loves to hit the gas in her Dodge Challenger. Today, her cancer is gone, thanks to treatment and a double mastectomy. She's proud she beat the disease but remains shaken by not knowing what caused it. She started researching environmental contamination and found plenty around Waycross, her hometown. When Silent Disaster was formed, she became one of its most vocal members. The group says it has a few dozen regularly active members, enough to make lots of noise. Today, Griffin and I are riding from one polluted site to another, on the kind of tour no Chamber of Commerce would ever sanction.

We head for the site that helped spur the founding of Silent Disaster. Along the way, we drive down South Georgia Parkway, passing the Gaines Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church, the Rollin' Rubber used tire shop, Edd's Package, the grass lot where a character known to locals only as the Peanut Man hawked slow-cooked gold until he fell ill a couple years ago.

Griffin and I stop at the old  
downtown, abutting the rail



treatment company that took tanks of contaminated water from industrial customers. The company's service was to remove toxins, compress the resulting sludge into a solid form, dry it, and send it to a landfill. The treated water was released into Waycross's wastewater system. But the city and company had disputes over whether Seven Out was properly treating water before releasing it. On March 1, 2004, the company stopped discharging. Later that year, the company moved off the site, leaving containers—some with the capacity to hold 44,000 gallons—with polluted water still inside, [according to the EPA](#), which was asked by Georgia EPD to evaluate the property to determine if waste needed to be removed. EPA tests at the property revealed the presence of polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), a group of chemicals that result from burning organic materials. In high concentrations, [PAHs can cause skin irritation, cancer, and other ailments](#). The EPA initiated what it called an “emergency” cleanup under the federal Superfund program on January 27, 2005, after wastewater was seen spilling off the property into a drainage ditch that emptied into the canal system. The EPA had crews remove 350,000 gallons of waste.



Some residents fear contamination is carried by canals, which are spread across Waycross.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MELISSA GOLDEN

The mess at Seven Out was not exactly public knowledge. For years, the *Waycross Journal-Herald* didn't cover it. It was Joan Tibor, Silent Disaster's founder, who raised the alarm in 2013. From her own research of public documents, she found that runoff from the Seven Out operation had, before the EPA cleanup, flowed into the city canal system, part of which bisected a park near her house. She hired a firm in 2013 to test samples from the canal in the park, which showed lingering PAHs eight years after the cleanup. One day, Tibor waited outside the newspaper to catch the editor, Jack Williams III, to alert him to Seven Out's troubles, which he told me I on the concerns. A year later reassure residents: The leve

danger. But the fact that the pollution was publicly unknown for so long made some residents, like Griffin, wonder what else they were missing.

Back in the car, Griffin drives down Brunel Street toward the railroad yard. Along the way, we pass Lexi's house, a long white one-story with a new wheelchair ramp for Lexi's hardest days. "Bless 'em, Jesus," Griffin says. "That little girl's sick."

On the opposite side of the railroad yard is the land that once held the Consumers Gas and Coke Company power plant. In 1994, the property, now owned by Atlanta Gas Light, was added to Georgia's superfund program, which is run by the EPD and is intended to oversee cleanups at polluted sites that have been left out of the federal Superfund program. The federal program takes responsibility to oversee cleanups only at sites [deemed an "imminent" danger](#) to the public or environment. Both the Rice Yard and AGL property remain on the state superfund list, meaning they haven't finished remediation. The power plant helped light Waycross from 1916 to 1953. Along the way, it discharged coal tar—a thick, black byproduct of converting coal to fuel—into the canal system. Prolonged exposure to coal tar has been linked to various types of cancer, according to the National Cancer Institute. In 1998, AGL agreed to clean up the mess. In all, 94,000 tons of contaminated soil and sediment were excavated from a two-mile stretch of the canals, and [30,000 tons of contaminated soil were removed from the plant property by 2001](#). AGL, whose spokeswoman said the company is fully cooperating with the public health inquiry, monitors the soil left with regular testing. But, at just one acre, the site is far smaller than the one that causes the most concern.

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One way to see the CSX Rice Yard in person, since the company declined several of my requests for a tour, is to stand against the railing on the Haines Avenue overpass. From here, you can see at least seven of the dozens of tracks. The Rice Yard is a switching and maintenance yard, where train cars are cleaned, painted, repaired, routed, and stored. When I was young, teachers explained that the yard had given Waycross its name, because the hub for Southern railroad traffic made the city where "the ways cross." The yard is named for W. Thomas Rice, the Virginia railroad baron whose Atlantic Coast Line company owned the yard after World War II. (No relation to Cristy and Gary Rice). The sprawling complex covers 755 acres over five linear miles.

The yard has been running since 1897, employing generations. The business done here produced untold gallons of chemical waste, including some that are carcinogenic. Employees regularly dumped it into disposal pits dug into the soil. One pit was nearly the size of a football field. Workers poured waste into it from 1980 to 1985, when regulators stepped in. Georgia EPD inspectors saw workers pouring paint strippers into the ground and solvents down floor drains. The EPD concluded that Seaboard System Railroad, then the yard's owner, was operating what v  
agency demanded a cleanup  
merger, inherited the mess :



150 wells, meant to reduce the contamination and, importantly, keep it on the railroad's land. The system, which pulls in and cleans polluted groundwater, has so far treated more than 620 million gallons. How much remains the company won't say, but they say they are committed to finishing the job and cooperating with public health officials.

***“It makes you wonder, don't it? . . . If your mom's [cancer] was caused from this?”***

One of the chemicals CSX is monitoring on the site is a carcinogen called [trichloroethylene](#). Also known as TCE, the degreaser became widely used to clean metal parts shortly after World War I. Rice Yard workers spilled and poured it onto the ground before TCE's dangers were clear, CSX acknowledges. The chemical has been linked to various types of cancers and harm to the immune and central nervous systems. In a pregnant woman, exposure can harm her fetus. By the 1980s, TCE use in the U.S. had plummeted, with CSX halting its use altogether. In Woburn, Massachusetts, TCE seeped into the water supply, [leading to protracted lawsuits](#) after five children in the area developed leukemia and died. The case is dramatized in the 1998 film *A Civil Action*.

The fact that TCE remains a concern at the Rice Yard is troubling for some in Waycross, particularly because of the property's location in a largely residential area. As of the 2010 census, nearly 4,000 people lived within a one-mile radius of the railroad, including 533 children below age 6.

The CSX and AGL sites are just two of six in Waycross and Ware County on the state's superfund list. Of the 10 Georgia counties with roughly between 30,000 and 40,000 residents, only Tift County has as many as Ware does, but the Tift sites could all fit into the Rice Yard property several times over. From her car, Griffin points out every stretch of canal we pass. She spies one by the football stadium. I mention that my family used to live on Dewey Street, right by that canal. Griffin knows my family story.

She turns to me.

“It makes you wonder, don't it?” she says.

“What do you mean?”

“If your mom's was caused from this?”

**Late 2015**

At the hospital, “child life specialists” bring video games for Lexi to play. She and her mom start making a quilt. With the stacks of prepaid gift cards well-wishers have sent her, Lexi starts shopping online from her hospital bed. Stuff arrives in the mail that Lexi, who's on morphine, can't remember what Cristy can only describe. Lexi won't be wearing.

When Lexi got sick, the family had been in the process of renovating the house. They paused the project, but doctors say having stray construction materials around could be dangerous for Lexi. Her spine is greatly weakened by cancer, as is her immune system by chemo. Their church, Swamp Road Baptist, offers to help. Then, [Mattie's Mission](#), a charity started by the family of a Waycross six-year-old who died of a brain tumor in 2013, steps up as well. A week later, while Cristy and Lexi are in Jacksonville, Gary sends a text: *You're not going to believe this*. In an attached photo, Cristy sees the road outside their house loaded with parked cars. Police are directing traffic. More than 200 volunteers, many of them strangers, are remodeling the house. Cristy sobs. The house, built in 1945, is soon like new, only better.

## **February 2016**

“Don't tell us we're like Flint, Michigan,” says John Knox, the mayor of Waycross. He is sitting in a leather chair in his office. In Flint, [lead contamination of the municipal water had sickened scores of people](#), leading to a state of emergency, lawsuits, and criminal charges for more than a dozen officials. “If we thought something was wrong, we'd scream it from the mountain tops.”

Waycross mayor is a part-time position; otherwise, Knox is retired from a career as a financial adviser. Still, as the public face of the city, he's worried that activists—“moms on Facebook,” he calls them—are hurting the city's name and chances at new development. So, he says, is state Rep. Jason Spencer, who pushed for the state and feds to investigate. (This is two years before Spencer is [forced to resign after using racist slurs](#) on an episode of comedian Sacha Baron Cohen's TV prank series *Who is America?*) So is Ken Amaro, the Jacksonville TV reporter who's been running occasional reports on environmental worries in Waycross over the past year. In his frustrations with the two men, Knox shares common ground with Jack Williams, editor of the *Waycross Journal-Herald*. They both complained when Amaro didn't attend a meeting the city hosted to answer residents' questions about the quality of the municipal water. There, elected city officials and representatives from the municipal water department assured residents the water was safe, largely because its source is the Floridan aquifer, hundreds of feet below the surface of the earth, too deep to be tainted.

Knox, who has had eight surgeries related to cancer himself, says he can imagine how the families hurt. He talks of how pervasive cancer is, how cruel. He brings up my parents, whom he knew. He remembers passing my mother on the street the day after my dad, the athletic trainer at Ware County High, dropped dead suddenly after a football game in 2008. Knox recalls his sadness and shock, which he felt again when Mom died.

“I know it was hard on y'all to lose both your parents in such a short period of time,” the mayor says.

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Over at the Ware County Co  
kin are. I've come looking fo

Waycross. When I type in “CSX,” several pages of cases appear. Some cases have a single word attached that catches my attention: asbestos. I pick one at random and ask a clerk for the case documents.

She leads me to the file room and presents the case of William A. Yawn Jr., who retired from CSX in 1982 in his early 60s, having worked at the Rice Yard for 40 years. He sued CSX in Ware County State Court in the early 2000s. According to the lawsuit, his various jobs over the years exposed him to asbestos, which can cause respiratory illnesses. Consequently, he was at a high risk of cancer, the suit alleged; he sought \$2 million. But the case went nowhere. Yawn died at age 82 on Oct. 7, 2003, according to an attached death certificate. Among the causes of death listed is respiratory failure.

I ask a clerk how many other CSX asbestos cases there are. She pulls out a large bound docket and flips it open on a table. She turns to a page where all the cases on the list are suits like William Yawn’s. I flip to the next page. More railroad workers. The next page, more. There are more pages in other books. Melba Fiveash, the clerk of court, tells me the suits started flooding in around 1991 and continued for a decade. Some were settled, some dismissed, and others languish to this day, still open but stalled perhaps forever because the plaintiffs died or aged too much to worry with legal action. At least one case went to trial. The plaintiff, a woman named Hattie Stewart who’d worked in maintenance at the railroad yard, lost in a June 2003 jury trial after CSX’s attorneys argued her ailments could have also come from smoking.

Fiveash doesn’t recall the cases getting any attention in the local media. “Wasn’t what was important, I guess,” she says.

Naturally occurring, asbestos can be spun into thread, [making it extremely versatile](#). Thanks to its flame-retardant properties, it was used for generations in [insulation, cement, and myriad other products](#). But as researchers demonstrated with a growing body of research from the 1920s through the 1970s, asbestos can also cause lung cancer and mesothelioma. In the 1980s and 1990s, lawsuits related to asbestos were filed against companies all over the U.S., and the railroad wasn’t the only company sued in Waycross. But the complaints against CSX were particularly important; it was the last time—until Silent Disaster, anyway—when people here asked if exposure to industrial products tied to Waycross’s cornerstone business had harmed them. “I’ve had a lot of friends that have died from the effects of asbestos in their lungs,” Vernon Fort, a Waycross native who worked at the Rice Yard from 1961 to 2001, tells me. “I couldn’t even count ’em.” But he doesn’t blame management; he says no one back then knew the dangers posed by asbestos exposure.

Of course, no one suggests the railroad operators would get anyone sick intentionally. But plaintiffs’ lawyers who worked the Waycross asbestos cases said past owners of the Rice Yard heard warnings as far back as 1935 about the potential dangers. In 1973, the EPA issued the first in a series of threats. Still, it wasn’t until the company warned workers of

Today, Fort is retired, a widower after his wife's death in 2015. The cause was breast cancer, which spread to her lungs. How she may have gotten it doesn't occupy his thoughts these days. He's in his 70s, just trying to get by.

### **March 2016**

The public meetings are big news around town. Three months after announcing its investigation, the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry will brief locals on what the investigation into the railroad yard and the AGL property will entail. It's also partly a fact-finding mission for investigators, who want to hear residents' concerns.

One of the first to arrive at South Georgia State College is James Thomas, who's been complaining of contamination since before 2001, when his wife was diagnosed with the first of two brain tumors after they moved near the railroad, by a canal. "The state's nothin' but a pack of liars," he promptly tells a fed at the door. Lexi's parents and the other families aren't here; they've found themselves suddenly very busy people, pulled out of town for treatments, for appointments. Tibor's here, though. So is Amaro, the TV reporter. Williams, the newspaper editor, works the room. He approaches Mayor Knox and pats him on the back.

"Ain't no headlines here," Williams says. The press conference hasn't even started.

"Thank you, Jack," Knox says.

Williams walks out.

He's leaving his news reporter to write the next day's story, but Williams is the one who writes the widely read editorials, who makes the pronouncements about whether Waycross has a problem. And, yes, he's missing headlines. People with stories to tell and questions to raise. Dr. John Wheeler, ASTDR's regional director, discusses TCE, the degreaser used at the railroad and now permeating the ground around it.

"The compound's still there, still toxic," Wheeler tells me. But he makes clear that he doesn't know how the children could've been exposed or, even if they were, if the chemicals could have contributed to their cancer.

It can take years—and millions of dollars—to prove what caused a person's cancer, if such an answer ever comes, and even if you think you have the answer, convincing others could be yet another fight, [as the Woburn, Massachusetts case demonstrated](#). Jan Schlichtmann, the attorney who represented the families, spent eight years, beginning in 1982, putting surviving victims through medical tests, taking depositions, negotiating, battling in court. In the end, various settlements reached \$8 million. But that was a rare acknowledged cancer cluster. In such investigations, not only must researchers determine the cause for one patient; they must find duplicate cases. (The CDC very broadly defines a cancer cluster as a group of cancer cases that occur w

time.”) [A 2012 study by Emory University](#) looked at 428 cluster investigations from the previous 20 years. Emory’s researchers found that only 72 showed sufficient evidence of a cancer cluster. And in only one of those, involving a naval yard in Charleston, South Carolina, was the cause—*asbestos*—determined by the researchers. Science is, practically speaking, unable to determine if a group of cancers spring from a common source.

During the press conference, officials from the Georgia Department of Public Health, which is working with ATSDR, take questions. Dr. Patrick O’Neal, then director of health protection with the state, says he thinks genetics could be the cause of the cancers, but possible environmental exposures are being investigated. He says any case of rhabdomyosarcoma is concerning, particularly when geographically close to others. The officials don’t know when they’ll finish. Thousands of pages of data from the remediation systems at the CSX and AGL sites must be examined by the state. “We take this very seriously,” O’Neal says. “Or we wouldn’t all be here.”

### **July 2016**

Lexi’s treatments appear to be working. Her latest scans are clear. Friends marvel at her bravery. She gives a shy smile at the thought, revealing her braces. She’s proud. She’s excited to go back to school. “I thought I would like not going to school,” she says, “but it’s boring.” She’s trying not to think about the cancer regaining strength, which the doctors have said is a likelihood. It sucks to think about it, she says.

### **August 2016**

Jack Williams has been at the *Waycross Journal-Herald*, which his grandfather bought in 1914, since 1980. Williams started off as a reporter and has been editor since 1991. He greets me in his office at the paper, a rustic, red-brick building catty-corner from City Hall. Like Knox, Williams believes the cancer concerns aren’t supported by the evidence and serve merely to make the city look bad while “we’re struggling to diversify our economy.”

He points out that he knew about TCE at the railroad in the 1980s and ran stories about it. He also has been critical of city and county officials in the past. I mention the scores of lawsuits alleging workers got sick from asbestos at the railroad. Did the paper cover them?

He looks confused. He says he never heard of the long spate of lawsuits. He wants to know when they were filed; there once was another editor who might’ve made a mistake, he tells me. I tell him the suits started in the early ’90s, right as he became editor, and they continued for some 15 years.

“I never knew about it,” he says. “I guess we just dropped the ball.”

Then, he says the paper would fail if it weren’t for CSX: employees are subscribers

Then, he says: “A lot of com



He turns around to his computer monitor and picks up a wallet-size photo of a little boy. It's Reese Walker, Williams's grand-stepson. The boy lived in the next county over and was diagnosed with leukemia as a toddler. Williams remembers the funeral.

"What happened?" he says. "No one knows."

He's talking like the mayor, about cruel coincidence. No one knows why these things happen, and he doesn't want it all to drag down the city and the railroad without evidence they deserve the blame.

Then: "Please don't portray me as some money-hungry ogre."

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Lexi used to go swimming in a pond on land adjacent to the railroad yard. Plenty of kids did. The pond is on a discolored, overgrown lot down a dirt road. "Some of the mud that's out there," Lexi tells me, "if you get it on your clothes, it don't always come out like regular dirt."

Lexi was there, swimming or riding four-wheelers, nearly every day when the weather was good, before she got too weak to go.

"There's not much for these kids to do," Cristy says.

As Cristy's learned more about the contamination at the railroad yard, she's become increasingly worried it could've gotten Lexi sick. Could this pond have been polluted? Just a few hundred feet long, it's identified on maps as Lake Lila. It sits about 400 feet to the east of the Rice Yard, close enough for a visitor to see trains roll by. The closest polluted part of the CSX property is about three-quarters of a mile away. Current and former owners of the land tell me they know of no testing for toxins on the property.

Lexi also got even closer to the pollution. Cristy recalls Lexi playing in water of a canal feet from the railroad property line occasionally for probably 10 years before she was diagnosed.

But none of the kids she played with got cancer. Why her?

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A few weeks later, Lexi gets bad news. The treatments no longer seem to be beating back her cancer. "God has a plan," Cristy writes on Facebook.

In September, bad news comes for another of the children. Raylee Metts, six, has Ewing sarcoma. Now, Raylee's cancer is unstoppable. Skinny with all her blond hair gone, she lies in a hospital bed at home. The Make-A-Wish Foundation steps up. She loves Christmas and wants to see one more. And so Christmas is September 22 at Raylee's house. Teachers and students from her school, R  
A machine makes it snow in

On October 13, at 5:30 p.m., it's ending. Raylee's mother and father, Haylee and Ray, are at her side.

*It's okay, the mother says to the child, you can go.*

It tears at Cristy's heart. Haylee has become a dear friend as they shared their pain. The next morning, Cristy stops in the car, turns the radio down, and talks to God. She sobs uncontrollably. She tells God she doesn't understand why these children and parents must endure this.

*How is it fair?* she asks.

In February 2017, the doctors say Lexi has no more than six months left. The family drives to the beach one morning when it's 28 degrees so Lexi can see the sunrise. They drive to the mountains in North Carolina so she can see snow for the first time. She goes to prom wearing a black dress and fentanyl patches to dull her pain. She smiles. She drags her left leg when it stops working. She enters hospice. Her dad and boyfriend hold her legs through wild spasms. Cristy doesn't pray; she begs God.

On May 29, nearly two years to the day from her diagnosis, Lexi is screaming uncontrollably, and Cristy calls their pastor to pray over her. Cristy and Gary try to sleep at her bedside throughout the day. By 6 p.m., Lexi is unconscious, and her breath is shallow and labored. Her mother and father feel an unrelenting urge to speak to her. They try not to cry, for her sake.

They tell her it's okay to go.

Gary holds two fingers on his 16-year-old daughter's neck. He can feel her pulse.

*One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . .*

### **August 2017**

McGregor and Mary Elizabeth Lott's fears of pollution in Waycross grow too strong for them to stay. Their four-year-old son, Harris, spent 16 months enduring radiation, chemo, and scans to watch the tumor behind his bladder. The parents suspect pollution. They are both doctors—he an ophthalmologist, she a pediatrician. They have their other child, a girl three years older, to worry about. The family moves to Jacksonville, where they'll also be closer to Harris's doctors. The Lotts don't tell people that fear helped drive the move. They don't want to cause alarm with their exit, because, as doctors, they know their opinions can carry weight. They also know they might always regret staying if cancer took him and they learned being in Waycross had contributed.

### **Summer 2018**

In June, [ATSDR releases the initial report](#), prepared with the Georgia Department of Public Health, on the railroad yard. The “conclusions” are largely inconclusive and skeptical of the community concerns. The report also addresses the portion of the canal system near the railroad and the city water supply. It doesn’t address the AGL property, which is being investigated separately.

The highlights:

- On the cancer cluster question, ATSDR cites data from the Georgia Comprehensive Cancer Registry to make the case that there isn’t one. GCCR data from the past decade shows childhood cancer incidence has been below the state average here. GCCR’s Waycross-area data, however, doesn’t include people who are diagnosed at hospitals in other cities, as Lexi, Harris, Gage, and Raylee all were.
- The researchers find it unlikely that exposure to the canal near the railroad would cause disease, because the pollutants detected aren’t in high enough levels, though investigators have no data on how often people go in the canals.
- The report affirms that the municipal water supply isn’t vulnerable to contamination because it comes from the Floridan aquifer.
- Researchers determined CSX’s groundwater treatment system was mostly successful at keeping the contaminants from seeping off-site, though it should be considered an ongoing concern. The report notes three times—between 2001 and 2013—when contaminated groundwater was found just beyond the canal on the edge of the property, on Lexi’s side of the railroad.

CSX releases a statement: “We are pleased the Georgia Department of Public Health found no evidence linking the operations at Rice Yard to health concerns raised by members of the public.” To read the report, whose findings would be unchanged when [the final version was released in February 2019](#), is to see what a difficult problem CSX inherited when it took over the property. The company has had to move and add wells to chase the polluted groundwater as it threatens to enter Lexi’s neighborhood. At the Old Drum Storage area, the closest part of the yard to Lake Lila, there were concerns about the levels of TCE and other chemicals between 2010 and 2016. But the report says adjustments to the wells appear to have “substantially curtailed” the issue.

The report gets mixed reception in Waycross. Many are dug into their positions. City officials and Jack Williams take the report as vindication. Silent Disaster members go on the news with Amaro to call the report bunk, criticizing researchers for relying on CSX-collected data and not doing new testing. The children’s families agree. They say they wanted a real inquiry into what gave their kids cancer. But they say no one from the local, state, or federal government has ever even contacted them. “The only people who have ever shown interest with us are journalists and lawyers,” Mary Elizabeth Lott tells me. The Lotts don’t regret moving.

Would the other families follow? Gage Walker already lived in the next county over. Haylee Metts and husband Ray, who have a son a couple years younger than Raylee, consider relocating but feel conflicted. Cristy and Gary dream of moving, but they can't afford it. Cristy worries when one of the girls gets so much as a sniffle. Recently, Cristy herself began undergoing tests after showing possible symptoms of lupus. She says she knows everything can't be connected, that people think she believes the environment is deadly just because her daughter is dead. She knows she doesn't have evidence. But, deep in her gut, she believes something is wrong here.

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I still don't know what happened to my mother. She never swam in any canals or sneaked around on contaminated property. She just lived here in this city, spending as much time as she could downtown, which happens to include a polluted railroad yard, which happens to be by the polluted AGL property, which happens to be near the polluted Seven Out site. After three years of asking questions, I am beginning to accept that I'll likely never know why she got such a rare cancer. But I still believe it's worth asking why. One night at home, I close my eyes, turn the music down, and try to imagine what Mom would think of what I've found and what I'm telling about the hometown she loved so much, the one I still do. I decide she'd be proud of me for searching because, as much as she loved Waycross, she hated cancer more.

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*Ed Altman, an 84-year-old retired house painter in a white newsboy cap, is in his backyard, telling me a story from 70 years ago. He excitedly taps my knee as if to make sure I'm still listening to the tale of the fire on Brunel Street. He laughs, remembering the columns of black smoke and the giant flames, taller than houses, climbing into the trees. The fire department worked for a long time to put it out while Ed and his brother Forest watched, snickering. No one ever asked the boys if they knew how the fire started, and Ed never told them he'd started it. Ed thinks this story is funny because of the absurdity of a canal catching fire and the thrill, even seven decades on, of getting away with it. But he also is proud of what he did, because he thinks it exposed the need for change at the railroad. "That's probably when the environmental people got on their ass," Ed says. "We done opened a can of worms. After that, I bet ya there was a lot of changes." It turns out Ed hasn't heard of the kids who got sick in 2015, nor does he know about the pollution at the railroad that went on another 35 years after the fire he started. I tell him about it.*

*"Is that right?" he says, looking incredulous. Like his story isn't quite so funny anymore.*

This article appears in our [May 2019 issue](#).







