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Fernald Checks Out, and So Do I

By Joe Wessels

My time as a lab rat is now officially over.

Growing up near the Fernald Uranium Processing Plant has allowed me a special privilege. Not only did I land about \$3,000 from a \$78 million class action lawsuit, but for the past 15 or so years I've been given access to bi-annual health checkups at Mercy Hospital Fairfield, part of the Fernald Medical Monitoring program.



I also give off a soft green light, like a glowstick.

Growing up, Fernald seemed to be a dog food company. My family would drive past the large gate on Cincinnati-Brookville Road on the way out to my aunt and uncle's farm in Okeana, and the sign had a checkerboard logo next to the words "Feed Materials Production Center."

To me -- and many others -- it appeared they manufactured dog food there. Dogs need "feed materials," don't they? Made sense to a kid.

It wasn't until around 1984, when I was 10, that everyone began to figure out what the water tower I could see from my Colerain Township bedroom window -- with the soft orange glow from the sodium vapor lights and the red blinking light on top -- really was. The place made "feed materials" for nuclear weapons (i.e., enriched uranium) and frequently leaked uranium and radon into the atmosphere and water tables all around the area.

Cloaked in secrecy as part of the Cold War, workers at the plant weren't allowed to say anything about what went on at the plant. But that all abruptly changed when the U.S. Department of Energy admitted that 300 pounds of enriched uranium oxide had leaked from a dust collector at the plant.

Local residents filed a lawsuit in 1984, and a few years later there were more radioactive leak mishaps. Public outrage fueled by local and national media reports and a live broadcast of the *Phil Donahue Show* from Ross eventually forced the plant's closing.

The subsequent attention also contributed to the closing of my beloved Fort Scott Camps and nearby Ross Trails, a Girl Scout camp, both of which saw dwindling enrollment as the bad news mounted. (See "Homelike and the Real Thing," issue of Aug. 20.)

Meanwhile, I lived up on Dry Ridge Road, attended Fort Scott, played on my parents' property in Ross, rolled in the mud on the farm in Okeana and drank the water from the watershed. Luckily, I don't have cancer or any other directly attributable health effects. Nor do any of my immediate family members, friends or former close neighbors.

Just this week I went in for my last medical exam. The office I've gone to ever since they started will be closing up at the end of November, and all the nurses, doctors and medical professionals will be out of jobs.

Medical monitoring was a conciliatory measure agreed to in the class action lawsuit so that those who lived within a five-mile radius of Fernald could get free health checkups. The data collected would then be available to researchers around the world, and we who lived close by could know we weren't dying from cancer or some other radioactivity-caused ailment.

They also drew blood, took urine samples, weighed us, measured us, checked our hearing and eyesight and let us speak with a doctor. There were always long questionnaires asking how much we exercised, what we ate and how we felt. I always checked out OK.

Out in the lobby, attached to a bulletin board, was a map of the area around Fernald. On the map were pins representing people who'd gotten sick with illnesses supposedly related to the radioactive leaks and where they were living while the plant was still open. There were hundreds of pins on the board.

As the nurse was drawing blood this time -- something I absolutely despise -- she was taking longer than usual. She was filling up seven vials this time, she told me, so extra samples could be preserved and frozen for use long into the future.

Turns out I still have better than 20/20 vision and my hearing is pretty good. I'll get the blood test results in about six weeks.

Fernald and its buildings are long gone now. This fall, the 1,050-acre site will open as a nature preserve, bringing a large degree of closure to the \$4.4 billion site cleanup. The rats who live around Fernald will now be able to safely play on its grounds, out of the lab and on their own.

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