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ABOUT POLLUTION

Escape From Greenpoint

By Stacey Morrison

MY FAMILY and I lived in Greenpoint/Williamsburg for three years. Last winter, we fled to the suburbs like so many middle-class families leaving New York every year. It wasn't just crime or the schools, however, though those worries were real enough. Fear of pollution and toxic contamination drove us out.

Shortly after my second child was born, I picked up a local activist newspaper and was horrified to read about a two-year study conducted by the Community Environmental

Health Center at Hunter College. The article said 11 facilities in our residential/industrial-zoned neighborhood were housing chemicals classified as extremely hazardous. I sent for a free copy of the study. Looking back, I realize the day it arrived was the beginning of our reluctant move out of Brooklyn.

Working-class Greenpoint/Williamsburg is the most industrial section of the city. Industry has been drawn to its East River location for a century. Eventually, the homes and businesses of the immigrant workers sprung up around the factories and warehouses. Poor zoning, ignorance and lack of concern created a dangerously haphazard combination of residential streets, mixed-use districts and industrial-zoned areas.

In the 1989 study, "Hazardous Neighbors? Living Next Door to Industry in Greenpoint/Williamsburg," I learned that NJZ Color, which was eight blocks from us, stores large quantities

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of sulfuric and nitric acids. Both chemicals eat through almost anything, react violently with many other chemicals, give off toxic fumes in a fire and can easily kill if ingested.

We liked the ethnic diversity, reasonable rents and the area's proximity to Manhattan. But we were afraid. I remember studying a map with the industrial danger zones marked. We picked a different apartment on Withers Street in Williamsburg, further from the manufacturers but within a mile of the huge Brooklyn Union Gas liquid natural gas storage tanks. There is no buffer zone between the tanks and residents, as is now required for new facilities. But the storing technology has supposedly improved, so we took the risk. After all, right beneath the tanks is a baseball field.

In neighboring Greenpoint, it's worse. Underground lie at least 14 million gallons of oil and

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