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# BETWEEN THE issues

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# In Whose Backyard?

By Sam Fraser

Dr. Ingrid Waldron has a hypothesis. She thinks that when indigenous Black and Mi'kmaq communities of Nova Scotia voice their opposition to toxic industries that are operating in their neighbourhoods, they are not being heard. As a result, members of those communities are suffering higher than normal rates of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, cancer, and cancer mortality when compared to the rest of the province. She doesn't believe Nova Scotian political leaders are deliberately ignoring these communities; rather, they choose to support other communities first.

"When you do nothing, that's a decision," says Waldron, an assistant professor in Dalhousie's School of Nursing. She has put together a team to explore and draw attention to the underlying issue of environmental racism. Her research project begins with five half-day workshops held in indigenous Black and Mi'kmaq communities around the province, culminating in a single full-day workshop in Halifax. The results of the workshop series will be used to direct the next phase of the research. The data collected will be added to an interactive map developed by her research coordinator and presented to the provincial government. Her goal is to influence environmental policy and regulations, to start a province-wide discussion, and to put environmental racism at the top of the province's priority list.

"Who are you choosing to support? What do they look like?" Waldron asks. She says Black communities are "largely excluded" from the decision making processes that will affect their future. The Mi'kmaq community's knowledge of and dependence on the land and sea are being ignored when decisions are made. She writes in an earlier article for *Between the Issues* that "higher rates of cancer in Aboriginal and Indigenous Black communities can be attributed to these communities proximity to

toxic industries and, consequently, their greater exposure to toxins, contaminants, and pollutants."

Waldron will use the workshops, planned for September, to rally these communities and build momentum around the issue. Called "In Whose Backyard?", they will create an opportunity for community members to discuss health concerns, both now and in the past, and share strategies. Speakers from within the community will lead the discussion. Community partners, including the Ecology Action Centre, will contribute to the workshops and the research project that follows. Waldron hopes that new relationships will form, and new methods of dealing with environmental injustices will arise.

The researchers will record the results of the discussion and gather data on the community makeup and location, including the proximity to toxic industries like mining and forestry operations and landfills. The experiences of community members will be documented by on-site video booths and by harvesting information from the discussions using methods such as World Cafe and Dotmocracy.

After the workshops are completed, the next phase of the research project will begin. The research team will decide what to act on based directly on what was brought up during the workshops. Potentially, they could be measuring cancer rates near Boat Harbour in Pictou County, or Lincolnville in Guysborough County, but it is the members of the affected communities who will ultimately set the priorities. The data will be compiled into a report under the project title Environmental Noxiousness, Racial Inequities and Community Health, or ENRICH.

The results of this phase of the research will be added to a map being developed by Dave Ron, ENRICH Research Co-ordinator and member of the Nova Scotia Public Interest Research Group (NSPIRG). This interactive map

will show the locations of indigenous Black and Mi'kmaq communities, the locations of toxic industries and landfills, and the data that was gathered after the workshops. Community members will be able to participate in a forum and upload their own quantitative and qualitative research to the map. Both the map and the report will be presented to government with the intent to establish future best practices and new environmental regulations. Waldron and her team will start a social and traditional media campaign to keep the conversation going.

Once created, the ownership of the map and the report will be given back to the communities who need it. "Everything we produce should be owned by the community," says Waldron. These tools will be in the hands of the community members who began the discussion, rather than with politicians or academics.

Waldron has embraced the principles of Community Based Participatory Research and Participatory Action Research. The report she creates will embody the experiences and the priorities of the affected community members. The community members she and her team meet with are not simply research subjects but active participants—they choose and direct the project, not the research team. The output of the project will be given back to the community to be used again and again to build momentum around the issue of environmental racism. It will not be turned into the government only to sit on a shelf gathering dust, ignored.

*Sam Fraser is a board member at the Ecology Action Centre and owner of tabletop game design company Grow Giant Games.*