



Duff's Corner

Jim
Duff

A relentless doctor and a compassionate mayor

Dr. June Irwin has a wonderful last line in Hudson: A Chemical Reaction, Brett Plymale's superb documentary film on the cosmetic pesticide industry. The film's narrator, U.S. safe-lawn activist Paul Tukey, is asking Hudson's eccentric dermatologist what drove her to convince her fellow townspeople to adopt and support a ban on spraying for weeds and bugs. "This was a community effort," she tells him. "This was the joy of it...it wasn't me, it was us." Tukey's quest for the story leads him to former mayor Michael Elliott, former councillors Chris Wilkins and Diane Togneri, greenscaper June Penney, Hudson town manager Louise Villandré and features a cameo by Jack Crombie. It's not all about Hudson - far from it - but the entire hour and 20 minutes will send shivers up your spine time and again in this outsider's view of the Town of Hudson's 10-year fight for the right to ban pesticides and herbicides within its borders. It's also an objective account of the historic role Hudsonites played in the worldwide legal campaign against "unsupervised human experimentation," as June succinctly puts it. Even if you don't care about pesticides, go see Tukey/Plymale's documentary and feel proud of Hudson on a level you've never experienced. Go Green Hudson is hosting a private screening at the Hudson Village Theatre next Monday, June 1 at 7 p.m. If A Chemical Reaction is accepted by the Toronto International Film Festival, you'll be able to say you've already seen it.

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The summer I turned 13, my father found a jim-dandy new Dow Chemical product at the Hudson

Hardware. Called a Weed Bar, it was a two-foot chunk of something that looked like yellow wax, with a rope to drag it around the yard. It killed the dandelions, but my mother hated the smell.

"Don, I don't want the kids or the dogs playing on that grass," she told my father. The Weed Bar went into the garbage, where it's still polluting some unsuspecting landfill.

Half a century later, I still wonder how many of us dragged those bars of 2,4-D around our yards, or sprayed Killex on anything that wasn't grass, oblivious to potential hazards - and what might be the result if Dow succeeds in its lawsuit challenging the right of Canadian jurisdictions to ban these potent endocrine disruptors.

In a worst-case scenario, Dow's action, filed under the umbrella of the North American Free Trade Agreement's restraint-of-trade clauses, could leave pesticide bans such as Hudson's exposed to the full force of an industry-driven campaign to return us to those blissfully ignorant days. Trouble is, people are now asking questions about the growing incidences of such diseases as childhood leukemia, early-onset Parkinson's and everything from soft-tissue cancers to autism. Can we prove a 2,4-D link? No. But should we need to?

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Dow's NAFTA challenge - supported, believe it or not, by one of Health Canada's own rent-an-expert agencies - provides the fast-moving political backdrop to Tukey's mission to explain why the U.S. stands alone in stripping its citizens of the right to decide what gets sprayed, injected or spread on greensward in its communities.

We learn that 41 of the 50 states have enacted pre-emption laws, effectively stripping municipalities of the right to ban pesticides the way Hudson did.

There's a villain, a shadowy organization called Responsible Industry for a Sound Environment. RISE, Tukey explains, is a front for a wide coalition of pesticide, herbicide and fungicide producers and lawn-care companies headed by one Alan James. Plymale's camera shows James at one of Tukey's safe-lawn rallies, but RISE refuses them an interview.

The drama will appeal to American audiences, but for Hudsonites, the heart of the film is Tukey's explanation of the precautionary principle, the legal argument that won Hudson's fight in the Supreme Court of Canada in June, 2001.

Tukey prefaces his interview with retired former Justice Claire l'Heureux-Dubé, the author of the unanimous judgment, by explaining it with a quote from his grandmother: "Better safe than sorry" and a great line from Louise Villandré: "Why wouldn't you be allowed to do something to protect the lives of people?"

We're all bit players compared to the real star, Dr. June Irwin. Tukey and Plymale weave her into every segment and reveal her as a visionary whose warnings were heeded in a town that cares about such things. Tukey himself sums it up perfectly in a line midway through the film: "They make quite a pair - a relentless doctor and a compassionate mayor."

At long last, they both receive the recognition they deserve. Catch this film and feel the pride.