

INVESTIGATION 7**HAVE YOU HEARD ABOUT THE CLINTON,
NEW JERSEY STORY?****INTRODUCTION**

What did you watch on TV over the weekend? If it was a movie video, sitcom, or perhaps a PBS play, chances are that a highly skilled team of professional writers created the story and wrote the entire script for the actors prior to its airing. Transforming an event or contemporary issue into a movie, play, novel, or short story can help us to better understand how people think, feel, and act in different situations. **In this activity, you will read about the City of Clinton's experience with radon and compose a play dramatizing the situation of a Clinton, New Jersey family as they attempt to deal with their radon problem.**

OBJECTIVE

To compose a play dramatizing the radon issue.

PROCEDURE

1. Read the following story about radon in the City of Clinton.

The Spring of 1986*

When Gary Radiator moved with his wife from Clinton to upstate New York four years ago, he happily left the specter of radon gas behind. Or so he thought. "We were kind of surprised to find that we had it up here, too -- that it was so widespread," Radiator said from his home in Clay, New York. "We didn't think we were going to be involved with it again like we were in Clinton."

The Radiator family was one of dozens in a Clinton neighborhood who learned in the spring of 1986 that their home was contaminated with the naturally occurring radioactive gas called radon, in some cases with remarkably high levels. The findings stunned state and federal researchers, who until then had never encountered a cluster of homes with such high levels of radon, which researchers say causes lung cancer.

In the months that followed, the Clinton neighborhood was turned topsy-turvy by fear of radon, an onslaught of environmental scientists, and by reporters. The neighborhood became a laboratory of sorts, with the homes used as models that became the basis of federal research on construction techniques to purge contaminated homes of radon.

Clinton Mayor Robert Needles recalls that particular spring when he steered his community through the scare of 1986. "The comfort is in knowing that there's nothing wrong with Clinton," he said. "I think no one wants to be singled out as the only one who has a problem." Needles almost proudly tells you he had a radon problem, if only to emphasize how he got rid of it and to show that radon did not deflate the value of his house. When he was contracting to buy it, the house registered a level of 130 picocuries (a measurement of radiation per liter of air). The

* This story is based on actual events but the names have been changed.

federal government recommends remedial action be taken when the level goes beyond 4 picocuries. Needles said that after a \$900 system of plastic piping and a fan were installed by a contractor, at the seller's expense, the radon level dropped to below 2 picocuries per liter of air.

Clinton resident Robert Tyson remembers the initial fear of radon he and his neighbors experienced. He said they worried about their health and the health of their children, and about the value of their properties. "The worst part was the fear, the word 'cancer.' I still occasionally think about it, but it's not in my mind all the time," Tyson said. Tyson had initial readings of 690 picocuries in his basement and 127 in his family room. After a contractor installed remediation equipment, the levels dropped to 3.1 picocuries in the basement and 1.2 in the living area.

2. On a separate sheet of paper, compose a play that features each family member from a Clinton, New Jersey neighborhood as they try to deal with the radon problem in their home.

Now let's go back in time to Clinton, New Jersey on a cold, crisp spring day on March 25, 1986. The Radiator family, long time residents of the Clinton neighborhood, have just been contacted by the Bureau of Radiation Protection and the Department of Health by telephone about their radon problem. Tests showed a radon level of 130 picocuries per liter in their living area.

Characters

Gary Radiator: AGE 31. Employed at the local telephone company in Clinton for the past 11 years. Father of Eddie and Cindi Radiator.

Ruth Radiator: AGE 30. Employed part time at Lucy's Pharmacy in downtown Clinton. Mother of Eddie and Cindi Radiator.

Eddie Radiator: AGE 11. A fifth grade student at Clinton Elementary School.

Cindi Radiator: AGE 7. A first grade student at Clinton Elementary School.

Setting

The Radiator dining room table at approximately 5:30 pm. Each family member is seated around the table. Gary and Ruth are dazed and frightened by what they've just been told about the radon problem in their home.

Sample

Ruth (sadly shaking her head): "Well, Gary, what are we going to do?"

[Gary leans back in his chair pondering the sudden turn of events during the past 24 hours]

Gary (looking down at the hardwood floor): "I don't know, Ruth."

Your job now is to finish the play.

ANALYSIS

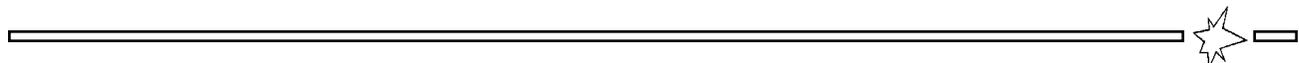
- 3. How would your family have reacted if they received similar news about excessive radon concentrations in your home?

- 4. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) recommends 4 pCi/L as an “action level” for radon in homes. If the average levels in your home are above 4 pCi/L, EPA scientists think your family should do something about it. The Radiator home had radon concentrations of 130 pCi/L. If corrective measures in the Radiator home were not undertaken in a timely manner, what potential health problem would you predict their family would be exposed to?

CONCLUSIONS

- 5. How did your play help you to better understand the radon problem in households across the United States?

- 6. What recommendations would you have made to the Radiator family after they learned about the excessive radon concentration in their home?





NOTES