

# Transcript of *What'sHerName* Episode 112:

## THE USELESS HOUSEWIFE SCIENTIST Beverly Paigen

[00:00:00]

[ad break]

**OM:** Hi, Katie.

**KN:** Hi, Olivia.

**OM:** We are on the playground of the 99th Street School in Niagara Falls.

**KN:** Oh, okay.

**OM:** It is 1976.

**KN:** Alright.

**OM:** Everyone's favorite thing is the huge field where they can build forts, ride bikes and - most excitingly - occasionally find *fire rocks*.

**KN:** Fire rocks?

**OM:** They are rocks that occasionally, spontaneously, catch on fire.

**KN:** Uh.

**OM:** Just burst into flames.

**KN:** I *would* love that as a kid.

**OM:** Childhood dream, right? The most exciting thing that could happen. [laughter] They will hoard these rocks, kids will put 'em in their pockets and bring 'em home...

**KN:** Uh...

**OM:** It makes for a very exciting childhood.

**KN:** Sure! Wow I'm jealous.

**OM:** Well, maybe you're not.

**KN:** Yeah.

**OM:** This neighborhood, the LaSalle neighborhood, will shortly become infamous across America and the world - but it is mostly known by another name, the Love Canal.

As our guest will point out, there is probably a sharp generational divide here, between people who go “Ohhh!” and people who go “...what?”

**KN:** Yeah - for being notorious, I've never heard anything about it.

**OM:** Which is shocking.

**KN:** I've been to Niagara Falls, I'm trying to picture the neighborhood...

**OM:** You haven't been there.

**KN:** Okay.

**OM:** *No one* gets to go there.

[music]

I'm Olivia Meikle

**KN:** And I'm Katie Nelson

**OM:** And this is *What'sHerName*

**KN:** Fascinating women you've never heard of.

[00:02:00]

**OM:** I have been mild-to-moderately obsessed with this story for about 25 years. I've been wanting to tell it here for a long, long time, but I didn't quite know how to tell it, because it's such a complex story. And then last year, Keith O'Brien...

**KN:** Oh, hey!

**OM:** From our episode on pilot Ruth Nichols.

**KN:** Right! Fly Girls!

**OM:** ...and master of taking complex and convoluted stories and making them clear and accessible, wrote a book about it.

**KN:** Handy!

**OM:** So I was thrilled to bring him back for this story.

**Keith O'Brien:** I'm Keith O'Brien, New York Times bestselling author of several books, including the one I'm discussing here today, *Paradise Falls*.

[00:03:00]

**OM:** *Paradise Falls* is the story of the Love Canal disaster, one of the most devastating and infamous environmental disasters in US history.

**KN:** Wow, how have I not heard of it? I even took Environmental History. And it even has a good name, the Love Canal disaster! ...and how does a canal make fire rocks, that's what I'm wondering. Fascinating. I'm intrigued.

**OM:** This is an absolutely mind blowing story of corporate greed, government indifference, power of the people, and... the unfathomable dangers that can lurk in your own backyard.

**KN:** Oh goodie. This is gonna be a heartwarming story...?

**OM:** There are very few stories in American history that make me angrier than this one. [laughter] So this episode is going to be an exercise in me trying really hard to not be *at an eleven* in terms of fury, the whole time. [laughter]

[00:05:40]

Our focus in this episode today is on Beverly Paigen, who is a heroine of gigantic proportions - but this story is really, at the heart, one of community.

**KN:** Cool.

**OM:** Specifically of a stunningly, unexpected group of *women* banding together to stand against the bad guys, in the fight of their lives, and accidentally sparking the modern US Environmental Movement along the way.

**KN:** Oh wow.

**OM:** We're focusing on a tiny handful of these women today, but there are so many incredible women who made this happen. So I hope that people will read the book, because we could've done an episode on any one of them.

But the story of this disaster starts... with a man.

*Typical.* [laughter]

**OM:** In 1893, a man named William T. Love rolls up in Niagara Falls with a charming personality and a daring plan. He wants to build a canal to link the Niagara River to Lake Ontario.

**KN:** Okay.

**OM:** And not just, he is going to build a *model* city.

**KN:** I mean, everybody's doing it, 1893 fashionable thing to do.

**OM:** He is literally going to call it "Model City."

**KN:** Ah.

**OM:** In this city, there will be no crime, no poverty. There will be parks with pavilions, wide boulevards laid out in a grid system, decorative water fountains at every major intersection.

**KN:** Okay.

**OM:** In Model City, everyone will own a home because everyone will have a job. The electricity from this canal will be able to power all of the nearby factories and create an industrial utopia.

**KN:** All right, I can picture - I mean this really is like a phenomenon of the industrial revolution all over the west. I can picture all kinds of advertising posters and propaganda, different towns, trying to lure people there.

**OM:** Yeah and, this... I just keep thinking of the monorail salesman in *The Simpsons*, um, pitching the perfect dream in rhyming...

**KN:** I feel like he really missed the opportunity to name it after himself though, like Model City's cool, but.

**OM:** Well, the canal will be named after him. And he *deserves it*.

**KN:** Ohhhh!

**OM:** ...she said, ominously.

**KN:** Dun dun DUN!

[00:08:33]

**OM:** Love has no qualifications, no evidence of his ability to carry out this plan, and no funding.

**KN:** Okay.

**OM:** But he's got a heck of a good sales pitch and a plausible smile, and the city of Niagara Falls is *in*. They fund this project to the tune of two and a half million dollars. That is over seventy million in today's money. And Love starts to dig.

**KN:** Wow.

**OM:** And... he gets about one mile into the project before he gives up and disappears.

**KN:** [laughter] Cool.

**OM:** The townspeople later discover that he has done this at least three times already.

**KN:** Oh my gosh.

**OM:** Rolled into a town, gotten a lot of money, and then... *noped out*.

**KN:** This has striking parallels to a certain someone who owns the boring company these days, who goes in and starts to dig, and then stops and moves on.

**OM:** [sarcastically] I *definitely don't know who you're talking about at all*.

**KN:** [laughs] Fascinating.

**OM:** There are *absolutely no parallels* throughout this entire story to our modern day. [laughter]

The canal will sit there, half full of water, used as an ad hoc swimming hole and ice skating rink by the neighborhood kids, until 1942.

**Keith O'Brien:** This cavernous, half-built canal was sitting there, about six miles due east of the city of Niagara Falls and the downtown tourist center that many of us might have visited at one time.

And it sat there until a local company by the name of Hooker Chemical acquired the land, and began using it as a dump for its chemical wastes and residues. Hooker Chemical, in the early part of the 20th century, was part of a legion of chemical companies that came to Niagara Falls for two reasons. They came there to harness the power of the river - to create electricity and to run their processes. And because of the natural salt deposits that existed in the ground and the earth there around Niagara Falls. And so they were able to use the earth and the resources of the earth to create chemicals, which were, at the time, a new and fantastic idea! That you could have better shoes and better furniture, better pots and pans. through the use of chemicals. And Hooker Chemical was one of these companies. And they acquired this land, the old Love Canal. And they begin using it as a dump. And they would drive their chemical waste in 55 gallon drums upriver a few miles, and dump 'em in the canal.

**KN:** Okay...

**OM:** And over the next eleven years, Hooker will dump around 21,000 *tons* of toxic chemicals.

**KN:** Wow, just...

**OM:** including at least twelve that are known carcinogens.

**KN:** Oh my gosh. Just in a hole.

**OM:** Yes. Into the canal. Minimal safety or containment protocols... I mean, they put some clay around it? That should work...

**KN:** Okay. Wow, wow, wow.

**OM:** These are the chemical wastes leftover from manufacturing, dyes, perfumes, rubber, household chemicals

**KN:** Hmm.

**OM:** ...chemical weapons.

**KN:** Really?!

**OM:** You know - [sarcastic] *normal stuff*.

**KN:** Wow.

**OM:** When they dump these barrels of wastes in - on top of each other, at random - this means they are *also* creating brand new chemical compounds which have *never been created before*.

**KN:** Amazing.

**OM:** That will *surely be fine too*. [rueful laughter]

Then - they cover the 16 acre site with clay, and sell it to the Niagara Falls School Board for \$1

**KN:** [gasps]

**OM:** with the agreement that they *will not ever be held legally liable* for anything that might go wrong when you... build a school on a chemical waste dump.

**KN:** So this was like, what the fifties by then?

**OM:** 1953.

**KN:** Wow. They were like, it's contained in clay, in the ground, no problem.

**OM:** To be fair to them, they didn't want to. The school board approached *them*.

**Keith O'Brien:** And my research shows that, at least initially, the executives at Hooker Chemical were hesitant and did not want to sell this land. As one attorney will say in internal documents that spring, you know, "this land is not suitable for that purpose." It's not suitable for a school, it's not suitable for a playground.

And yet the company, Hooker Chemical and the city of Niagara Falls come to an agreement to sell the land, and the city of Niagara Falls builds a school there.

**OM:** *Directly over* the chemical waste dump.

**KN:** Wow.

**OM:** They uncover barrels of chemical waste during construction

**KN:** Really?

**OM:** and just cover them back up again.

**KN:** What?!

**OM:** They build the school, they build the playground, and then they start selling off the outskirts of this land to developers who build 800 homes and 240 apartments on and around the dump.

**KN:** Wow.

**OM:** And for around the next twenty years, everything is fine. Well, everything *seems* fine. *Mostly*. Like, I mean, there are little problems - like spontaneously combusting rocks on the playground, or bizarre mutant vegetables growing in people's backyard gardens...

**KN:** Oh no! People are planting stuff in the ground?!

**OM:** Or the chronic acne that seems to affect everyone of every age in the entire neighborhood...

**KN:** Oh weird.

**OM:** Spoilers: it's a low-grade chemical burn.

**KN:** Oh my gosh.

**OM:** Orrrr the fact that the sewers, and the kitchen sinks, and the very *air itself* stinks like chemical waste all summer... but you know - *fine*.

**KN:** Wow.

**Keith O'Brien:** But it's not until the late 1970s when these problems really begin to manifest themselves in ways that the people who live there can no longer ignore. And that's really when my story begins. The story of people in this neighborhood, a working class neighborhood of factory workers and their wives and children, who were scraping their way to the middle class.

When these problems emerged in the late 1970s, a few of them, primarily mothers, begin to cry out for help - and ultimately want to escape their homes.

This is a human story, a story of resistance. It's a story of, of people trying to take ownership of their own lives. I mean, people moved to this neighborhood, LaSalle, *because of* that school. These were people who bought starter homes. Every single home in this neighborhood was a single story ranch. They were affordable, and folks moved there for that reason. The children in this neighborhood would walk to this school and they would play on this large playground - this was the American dream.

**OM:** And then in 1976, problems really start to rise. Literally. Into folks' basements, in the form of weird green or black goo that bubbles through foundations, smells to high heaven, and sometimes eats through shoe leather or furniture - or human skin - upon contact.

**KN:** What?!

[00:16:38]

**OM:** Residents start reporting puddles of bad smelling goo in their backyards, in the streets, on the playground.

**Keith O'Brien:** So because of these problems, some of these key characters decide that something has to change.

**OM:** And people are finally starting to connect some dots.

**KN:** Wow.

**OM:** People like: local reporter Michael Brown, congressional aide Bonnie Casper, stay-at-home mom Lois Gibbs, Tenement Housing President Elaine Thornton, activist nun Sister Joan Malone. and scientist Beverly Pagan.

**Keith O'Brien:** And the first of them to raise the concerns is a woman named Lois Gibbs. And Lois Gibbs is a name that some people may remember. Lois gained a measure of fame and notoriety because of how outspoken she was.

But in the beginning, way back in the spring of 1978, Lois Gibbs is a stay-at-home mom. Lois had barely graduated from high school actually, and was self-conscious about that, wouldn't speak up at the teacher conference, wouldn't speak up at the PTO meeting, because she wasn't sure that what she would say sounded right. But when Lois learns that her home is just two blocks from this land, she begins to ring alarm bells.

In the fall of '78, Lois's oldest son Michael begins kindergarten at the 99th Street School. And when she sends him there, Michael is a healthy boy, no problems. And by Christmas that year, Michael is now suffering from seizures.

But when she begins to hear of the problems and begins to hear of this old dump underneath her son's school, she begins to ask questions. And she goes door to door in her neighborhood gathering signatures on a petition that initially just asks to shut down the school.



It's an interesting thing to debate, like what might have happened if they had just sort of 'satisfied that request' - but they don't. It begins what will be, for Lois, a two-year fight to *escape her own home*.

[00:18:56]

**OM:** Among the many striking things about this story is that at every step of this story, and with a very few exceptions, it is *women* who realize the gravity of the situation, who agree to take it seriously, and who insist on doing something about it.

That means it is much harder for them to get taken seriously.

**KN:** That's *really annoying*.

**OM:** It also means that when they do finally start to speak up, it is so unusual, that the people kind of *have* to pay attention.

**KN:** Yeah, interesting.

**OM:** The housewives of 1970s blue-collar neighborhoods *don't* take to the streets with signs, they don't show up at company board meetings to talk about their children's deaths. They don't *take EPA officers hostage*. [surprised laughter] "There must be a reason these women are doing this - because this *isn't what women do*."

But unlike most of the people in this story, Beverly Paigen has no skin in the game.

**Keith O'Brien:** Beverly was not a resident of the neighborhood, she was not a homeowner, she had no mortgage at stake, nothing to lose. But Beverly, like Lois, was a mother of children - who lived in Buffalo about 25 minutes away - and Beverly was also a scientist, a biologist.

**OM:** She is a scientist at the prestigious Roswell Park Research Lab, affiliated with the University of Buffalo, and she has been watching this story unfold with increasing worry.

**Keith O'Brien:** She had spent the 1970s dedicating herself to this new idea that environmental hazards could have an effect on human health. So things like cigarette smoking and smog - and she wrote early papers in the 1970s that made a link between cigarette smoking and lung cancer, or smog and asthma. And it's worth noting, like at the time, this is like, cutting edge [laughter] - actually like a little controversial, that someone will be linking nicotine use to cancer.

And so of course when Beverly learns about this neighborhood, just 25 minutes from her house, she wants to go out, she wants to investigate, she wants to run her own soil studies, she wants to see what's happening. And she immediately befriends Lois Gibbs and other residents of the neighborhood, and gives them sort of the science to talk about what's happening.

**OM:** The women in the neighborhood are reading these newspaper stories, and they realize, "Oh, I thought it was just *me* that had had *seven miscarriages* in the past three years. You mean *everyone* on this street is having the same problem?"

They start talking to each other, they start forming groups, just to try to figure out what's going on. And here's where Beverly Paigen steps in. These are, largely, factory workers and factory workers' wives. These are not, mostly, college educated people - these are not, mostly, scientists - and they don't have a way of understanding what they are hearing. Beverly Paigen recognizes her responsibility here, and offers to explain the science of what's going on to women like Lois Gibbs, so that they can understand where they live, what is underneath them, and what the concerns really are.

She is not only educating them, she is *educating them on how to educate others*. She is explaining the science, and *explaining how to explain the science*, so that these women can go to their neighbors and help them advocate for themselves.

The [EPA](#) *should* be doing this. They should be involved in this. That is the whole point of this brand new entity which has just been created by the Nixon administration - but they're not. Nobody is. And it is up to investigative newspaper coverage - especially by a man named Michael Brown - and grassroots door to door activism by housewives and moms, that really begin to reveal a series of inexplicable illnesses in this neighborhood. Wildly disproportionate rates of asthma, epilepsy, migraines, kidney disease, liver disease... skin conditions, cancers, leukemia, birth defects, miscarriages, abnormally high rates of dozens of seemingly unrelated illnesses.

**KN:** Hmm.

**OM:** One of the things they were manufacturing at Hooker Chemical was this chemical called dioxin, which will also become famous in a few years - because it's [Agent Orange](#), and it will poison *millions* in Vietnam. And... there is more dioxin in Love Canal than was dumped on *all of Vietnam* during the *entire war*.

**KN:** Whoa!

**OM:** And it is leaching into the river, it is leaching into people's groundwater... and they *knew it for decades*.

**Keith O'Brien:** Why I think it's so important is not just that it was this sort of 'David and Goliath' kind of story. It was because the environmental movement at the time was still perceived, in the late 1970s, to be something that was for liberals, that was for the hippies, that was for *people in New York or San Francisco*.

And this neighborhood in LaSalle was working class, union, lunch-pail factory workers. And they didn't think about their environment in that way. Lois certainly didn't. But now she did. And that really awakened a lot of people around the country to problems in their own backyard.

**OM:** As it turns out, when several years of very wet winters in the late 1970s raised the water table...

**KN:** Ughh.

**OM:** they caused the chemicals to leach out of the semi-contained dump.

...also, the city and the state *punching holes* in the containment systems to put in sewers for the neighborhood or foundations for the expressway

**KN:** No

**OM:** and the chemicals start leaching via underground swales - so, underground stream beds - and a sewer system that drains into nearby creeks. And all of those chemical wastes are now leaching into the basements and yards of neighborhood residents, and the playground of the elementary school.

**KN:** Dang. I'm kind of - I mean, they *built basements* into it! Even that seems like...

**OM:** Yes. And they, they

**KN:** *Why did you do that?*

**OM:** This is... *nine hours right here*, that we could do. So, this will be the first of my many, many "*please read the book, read the book, read the book.*" [laughter]

I - that's the hardest part for me, I think. I think of the 70s, especially the late 70s, as being *very* distinct from the mentality of the 50s on this. But it is *really not*.

In the 50s, chemicals were going to save the world. We're coming out of World War II, and Science - in the form of chemicals, mostly - "will make a utopia. It will solve all of our problems." DDT was... it saved so many lives in World War II. It did! ...*and* it almost entirely eliminated the bird population of the United States.

We are not far out from Rachel Carson's [\*Silent Spring\*](#) here, from this dawning new realization that *perhaps chemicals are dangerous sometimes*. And in a neighborhood or state

**KN:** Dump 'em to a hole and they'll go away, and it's all fine.

**OM:** And - and even the idea that they would *need* to 'go away' is - so far out. It's, it's nearly impossible for us to understand. This is very much - even though it feels so recent - a case of "The past is a foreign country."

**KN:** Mm-hmm.

**OM:** It takes *so long* to convince even the people living on the dump, seeing it with their own eyes and their own children, that these things *might* have something to do with the chemical waste dump. Because chemicals are *life* in this area.

**Keith O'Brien:** Many of the husbands in the neighborhood worked in the chemical factories. Some of them actually worked for Hooker Chemical. And these were good jobs. These were the jobs with which they had the paychecks to buy the homes they were living in. And so on the one hand, many of them worried about losing their job or getting demoted, or paying some kind of price for being outspoken at work.

But on the second hand, they worked many times over vats of these chemicals. You know, they worked with these chemicals all the time and there was a sort of *blase* attitude about it.

**OM:** If I spend all day, every day, leaning over a vat of this particular chemical, breathing it in - and you're trying to tell me that that chemical might harm people? That's really hard for my brain to accept, because then... *what's been happening to me for 40 years?*

**KN:** Yeah, that's what I was just thinking like - that it's one thing to look back and be like, "I can't believe they didn't act!" but like, what it takes to make such a paradigm shift?

**OM:** Mm-hmm.

**KN:** Especially if all the conditions are *different*. Like, if everybody had the *same* kidney problem, you know, everybody had the exact same - then it would be easier to connect the dots. But since it's a huge increase in all kinds of different things? I can see, I can *totally see* why people would be like, you know, "let's not jump to conclusions." It wasn't so obvious.

**OM:** Yeah. And *every* major authority - from their bosses at Hooker, to officials of the Health Department - are *all* telling them that this is not a problem. They are doing everything they can to undermine these women's findings.

[00:29:43]

**Keith O'Brien:** They're dismissed at every turn, and especially in the early days, at every single turn. At one point in late 1978, the studies that Beverly Paigen is doing are dismissed by state health officials. They call them "useless housewife science."

It's stunning to think that these women faced this kind of adversity, again and again and again.

**OM:** "Hysterical housewife science"

**KN:** I need to put that on a t-shirt for all female scientists, that just says "hysterical housewife scientists."

**OM:** Yep. Amazing. Uh, I bet they did at the time - because if these women were anything, they were *marketing geniuses*.

**Keith O'Brien:** Beverly is putting her own career on the line. Roswell was associated with the state university, she was a state employee. And so when Beverly begins to make statements in the late summer and then into the fall of 1978, that she believes the problem is much greater than health officials in New York are saying - she is directly violating and contradicting what her bosses, all *men*, are saying. And she begins to pay a price for that - that she *knows* she is paying.

And yet she continues to speak out, she continues to help Louis Gibbs and the others.

**OM:** This is her job, this is literally her job: to observe environmental concerns and track them. But the newly named State Health Commissioner, David Axelrod, has been given pretty clear marching

orders - he needs to get her under control. She's talking to reporters, she's disagreeing with the state, she is disagreeing with the spokespeople of Hooker Chemical - who at this point are *firmly believed*, and they *are* the authorities, and there is [sarcastic] *absolutely nothing of concern here*.

**KN:** Why?!

**OM:** [sarcastic] In fact there probably really aren't *any dangers at all* to the chemicals that we have dumped in this dump.

When the city finally recognizes that those living directly on the dump are at risk, they offer this solution: *Any residents who are pregnant, or are children under the age of two, who live directly over the dump, should consider relocating temporarily until they are no longer pregnant or are over two years of age.*

**KN:** Wow.

**OM:** They do not offer funding for said relocation. They don't offer any suggestion for what to do if you have a one-year-old and a three-year-old. Does the one-year-old move to a motel by herself? Pushed *very* hard, they eventually offer funding to house pregnant people and children under two for a temporary period of time.

But of course, when residents point out "...and if I want to get pregnant? can I be moved before I get pregnant? Or do I have to wait until I'm eight weeks pregnant and the fundamental damage has been done before you move me?"

This leads to *amazing* signs at these protests, such as 'Relocation by Impregnation.' [laughter]

[00:33:16]

**KN:** I can see why it's all such a convoluted problem. Because the problem is - in the past companies could do whatever they wanted, and then they sold it, and *that* was perfectly legal - and then the school sold it, and people built houses, and it's *all perfectly legal*. And so it's like this massive problem - who's...

**OM:** Everybody's just passing the problem around.

**KN:** Yeah I can see why it's

**OM:** Oh, it's a *horrible* mess.

**KN:** Yeah, what an interesting and terrible mess.

**OM:** Yep. And meanwhile... children are dying. And nobody's doing anything.

[music]

**Keith O'Brien:** It is hard to wrap your mind around. And yet, we're still doing similar things today. And certainly this isn't part of the book, but it is a sort of a long legacy of this story - is that there are too many neighborhoods, too many towns, too many farmers, too many homeowners today, say for example, that are struggling with [PFAS chemicals](#) in their drinking water, these so-called forever chemicals...

In some ways the PFAS chemical issue is really, sort of, the new Love Canal. It's springing up all over the place, and we really have very little policy in place for how to restrict it and how to handle it.

[ad break]

**OM:** Beverly Paigen realizes pretty quickly, she is persona non grata at work. She is being told by her boss to submit reports of everything she does every day. *Everyone she meets with, every person she talks to...* her grants are being denied...

**Keith O'Brien:** So remember, Olivia, in my last book *Fly Girls*, which is about female pilots in the 1920s and 30s fighting for the right to fly and raise planes... Amelia Earhart was crucial to that story, but there were all these other female pilots around Amelia that were really just as crucial at the time and were only erased later.

And something similar was happening here. Lois, as we've discussed, gains the measure of fame because of what she did and because of who she was. But the women around her were just as important - and to me, Beverly Paigen was clearly crucial, because she has nothing at stake, you know? No mortgage, no house to lose, no kids to worry about. She puts her job on the line. She really does this of her own volition.

[00:37:00]

**Keith O'Brien:** And so of course, when I started working on this project in the late summer of 2019, I set out to find Beverly. And fortunately at the time, Beverly lived just about four hours from me here in New England, up in Bar Harbor, Maine. And so in early 2020, I made two visits to her house.

Beverly was in her early eighties at the time, and she had suffered a number of small strokes, she had lost a good chunk of her memory. She could remember some things in absolute granular detail and other things not at all.

But like a lot of people who lived through this time at Love Canal, Beverly kept *everything*. Every letter, every document, every memo that crossed her desk... And on that first visit to her house, she told me that, and she said it was *quite a lot*. In her memory, she thought it was four file cabinets and maybe a box or two. As it turned out, Beverly was wrong about that. It filled multiple racks of file cabinets and multiple boxes that she kept in two different locations.

So in my time with Beverly, she let me review everything she kept. And those letters and memos that she sent back and forth to Lois Gibbs and to others in the neighborhood were just so important to rebuilding this story for me. And Beverly told me in those interviews that she thought she was being followed at the time, she thought she was being watched. When you're blowing the whistle about something, you know, in that moment, that you are - you're putting yourself at risk.

And she actually reported at the time, in 1979 and 1980, she reported in an *official complaint* that her mail at Roswell Park was being opened and resealed.

**KN:** Wow.

**OM:** She is pretty sure her phone is being tapped. She starts making phone calls from payphones. She starts keeping copies of all of her paperwork in other locations, because she's very concerned that her office will be broken into and things taken.

**KN:** And who does she think is doing it? Hooker?

**OM:** She has no idea. All...

**KN:** Okay, just - *The Man*.

**OM:** Yes, the government, Hooker, Axlerod... *someone* is making sure she does not make any more waves.

**KN:** Ugh. I can *hear* the patriarchy in it, I can *hear* all the men in suits going "Somebody get these housewives to shut up!"

**OM:** *Dripping* with misogyny at every stage of this story.

But she's not going to stop.

**KN:** Wow!

**Keith O'Brien:** Over the course of my research, I did go to lots of different archives and lots of different libraries. One of the ones that I visited on several occasions was the New York State Archives in Albany, which has voluminous files on Love Canal, as you might imagine.

And so I went through the records that I came to see. But the other thing I do when I go to these archives is I always do a search in the database for *everyone* I might be writing about. And so at the state archives in Albany, I did find a file, and it was called 'Beverly Paigen Employment File.'

In the history of the state of New York, there's, I don't know, millions of state employees, right? And I can tell you that not everybody has a file at the state archives. [laughter]

And so of course, I requested the file - and I was denied. So I filed a Freedom of Information request. And I waited about 10 months. And finally, I received in the mail a disc, an old school disc, with about 330 pages of documents. And what I can tell you is: in those 330 pages, there's no evidence that her phone was being tapped, there's no evidence that she was being followed. That's not in there. But what I *can* say is that she was *absolutely* being watched. At the time in 1978, 1979, 1980, all the way to the doorstep of the governor, important powerful men were talking about Beverly Paigen. In memo after memo, and letter and report after letter and report, tracking her movements, tracking what she was saying to the press...

And they were clearly - sort of strangely - *still* worried about her today! Because in those documents I received, most of them were heavily redacted, for reasons that I cannot explain.

I mean, it was certainly very - very revealing. Very revealing.

**KN:** This is the same time as the ‘Vietnam Wives’ protests from [our episode, the Accidental Activist, right? Sybil Stockdale?](#)

**OM:** Yes, exactly.

**KN:** So she's setting the model.

**OM:** Yes. And the exact same things are *the problem*: “protesters are hippies, protesters are weirdo liberals.”

**KN:** We’ve got these like, nice compliant working class wives who are freaking out, Sybil Stockdale-style

**OM:** ...who are doing the same thing? *Something must be wrong.*

Nothing makes that clearer, I think, than even these women's *own* reactions. When a new scientist consultant arrives to help them, at the request of Beverly Paigen, Lois Gibbs *herself* is very skeptical because - *he is too young, he's got long hair, he dresses kind of like a hippie... How can this guy know what he's talking about? And maybe - we don't wanna be associated with him, because the environmental hippies are not the people that we need to be associating ourselves with right now.*

**KN:** Interesting.

**OM:** When *she's* leading the largest environmental protest *in the country*. [laughter]

**KN:** Oh, fascinating.

**OM:** The narrative runs deep.

**KN:** Yeah.

[00:43:07]

**OM:** They're using their *children* to get press attention. The children are holding signs saying, “Get us out, save our lives,” “Do I not matter because I'm three?” Uh, they're hanging Christmas ornaments with the names of all of the chemicals found in their backyard on their Christmas trees. *Anything* they can do to get the country on their side and get their children out.

The federal government relocates 239 families - *temporarily*.

**KN:** Hmm.



**OM:** while they remediate the canal.

This leaves about 700 families who are ‘at insufficient risk to warrant relocation.’ Even though tests conducted by the New York State Department of Health show toxic substances in their homes, their water, their *children*.

**KN:** Wow.

**OM:** Remediation is quickly making everything worse. They are opening up the swales, they are opening up these closed chambers that have been leaking into people's basements

**KN:** So is the goal, like we're just gonna get in there and, like, clean it?

**OM:** No, they wanna *divert it*, so that it will go somewhere else instead of the neighborhood basements. They're not gonna clean it up... they're just going to *make it someone else's problem*.

**KN:** I see.

**OM:** The workers are given gas masks because it's SO bad.

While this is happening, the residents are twenty feet away from open channels of unknown chemical wastes.

**KN:** Wow.

**OM:** Every once in a while it overflows, and the street becomes a massive river of green and black goo. No one - from the EPA, to the federal government, to the state, to the city - will do *anything* to help the rest of these families.

**Keith O'Brien:** A young and ‘green’ congressman from Tennessee will make one of the first visits to this neighborhood in 1979.

**OM:** He hears this story, he’s pretty concerned about environmental matters, he comes to visit. He’s so horrified by what he hears and sees here that he calls Congressional hearings into the problem of the Love Canal.

**KN:** There you go!

**OM:** His name is [Al Gore](#) [surprised laughter] ...and this will be his first major environmental action in Congress.

**KN:** Well, well.

**Keith O'Brien:** And it's fascinating to imagine a young Al Gore landing in Buffalo, and getting picked up at the airport in Lois Gibbs’ Buick Cutlass, to get - like, a tour of her neighborhood and of several others in Niagara Falls that were also essentially poisoned by dumping. Often by Hooker Chemical, but sometimes by other chemical companies.

And the spring of '79, it is Al Gore and his committee that invites Lois Gibbs to come to Washington and testify. And Beverly joins Lois Gibbs in testifying before Al Gore's committee in March of 1979.

**OM:** They also suggest the possibility of creating some sort of a *fund* - with money sourced from the corporations themselves, not from taxes - that could be used for these kind of disasters. We could have a huge amount of money in reserve, so that the government can intervene in situations like this, where man-made environmental disasters are putting people at risk.

**KN:** Mhm.

**OM:** It would have to be a really, really *huge* fund. Like a *Super fund*, if you will...

**KN:** [laughs] Oh my gosh!

**OM:** Yep. Louis Gibbs and Beverly Paigen are why we have the [Superfund!](#)

**KN:** Wow!

**OM:** This idea of the Superfund is ridiculous, and immediately taken off the table.

**KN:** [laughs] Of course.

**OM:** ...the Superfund will become law in December of 1980.

**KN:** Yeah! What a victory, like - I take it for granted now. It's like when I learned about in my Environmental History class, it's like, "Oh we had all these huge environmental disasters, so the government set up a fund, a superfund, to mitigate these sites." But like - the reality of going up...

**OM:** Yeah - the government set up a fund **because of** Beverly Paigen, and Louis Gibbs, and Elaine Thornton, and Louella Kenny, and... yeah.

**KN:** And the reality of getting that passed, like - what an incredible victory for the people!

[music]

**OM:** And then. The Federal Government finally gets the results of a genetic study that they have been doing for months now, looking for chromosome damage in residents of Love Canal. And the study has identified genetic abnormalities in *11 out of the 36 people tested*. Although the scientists are very adamant, and very clear, that this is an extremely preliminary finding, and that they are not sure how accurate this is.

*Everyone* in Carter's inner circle realizes how dangerous this information is in this climate, and they are determined to keep it hushed up until they can verify it and decide how to proceed. ...so of course it is leaked *immediately*. [laughter] Within 24 hours it was on the front page of every paper, and just as one of Carter's aids had predicted, "people went crazy."

Beverly Paigen is *angry*. Obviously about the results of this report and what it might mean for the people living there - but also about the *way* this information has been leaked. This leak might be good for the press, and possibly even for the cause - but it is horrific for individuals in the study.

The EPA has asked Louis Gibbs to call all of these people, and ask them to meet with the EPA the next morning - [sarcastic] *they can't call them themselves, apparently?* So she spends hours on the phone with panicked neighbors, trying to explain what's going on. These people don't have any idea if they are one of those who have been identified as having genetic mutations, and they have no idea what it means *if they are*.

Residents start calling Beverley Paigen, as their resident Science Explainer, freaking out. "*Does this mean I might be permanently broken? in a way that's not fixable? Does this mean I'm going to die? that my children are going to die?*" And she doesn't know what to tell them. She doesn't have the results. She could explain in hypotheticals what it *could* mean - but trying not to stoke panic or give false information...

This is total chaos. And when once again the city votes against relocating, Lois is *worried*. Things are getting out of hand. She can feel that the neighborhood is on the verge of an explosion. People are at their breaking point.

She is very, *very* concerned something bad is about to happen. They might burn the neighborhood down, they might really hurt someone...

**KN:** I'm actually surprised somebody didn't. Like, especially

**OM:** Uh, me too

**KN:** ...you have flaming rocks, like - that's easy to say, "It spontaneously burnt down!"

**OM:** Oh yeah.

**KN:** Like... [softly] I probably would've eventually landed there.

**OM:** Yeah, I... [whispering] I think I would have burned my house down.

[angry music]

**OM:** She needs to convince the neighborhood that she's serious, *and* prevent them from doing something dangerous.

[00:50:57]

She calls the two EPA officers who have been stationed in the city, trying to keep things under control. She calls them down to the office of the Homeowner's Association. When they arrive, she announces that *they are hostages*

**KN:** [laughs] Whaaaa?

**OM:** ...puts a two by four over the door, and informs the EPA officers that “it shouldn’t be more than two days.”

She calls the White House, and the APAs Regional headquarters in New York, to announce that they were holding Napal and Lucas hostage - until the president issued a new Emergency Declaration pledging to buy everyone's homes and move everyone out from the neighborhood.

**KN:** Okay, or else...

**OM:** Or else - *who knows?*

**KN:** [laughter] So I guess the threat in her hostage situation is like - they are trapped on this poisonous ground and they know it?

**OM:** Yes. Although she reassures them, “*Don't worry, I don't think you'll stay here long enough to have it damage your chromosomes.*”

**KN:** Mmmmm.

**OM:** Frank Napal, the EPAs PR man, was pretty new to the EPA. He is not at all alarmed by this state of affairs - in fact he's actually kind of impressed. Because before coming to the EPA, he had taught college courses about ‘how to motivate the public.’ [laughter]

But, at home in Buffalo, Beverly Paigen is *horrified*. This is *not at all* what she had signed up for, and she is very concerned that this might derail her last-ditch effort to prove her harassment case against Rosewell, and save her career with the state of New York. But much more so, she is worried that this situation could spiral out of control really fast, and leave Gibbs facing serious federal charges... or leave someone dead.

[music]

An FBI agent calls and tells Gibbs that ‘if they are not released before sunset, *the FBI will be coming in*’.

**KN:** Ooh.

**OM:** Nobody wants that. They don't want it, the *hostages* don't want it...

**KN:** Mm-hmm.

**OM:** but Lois Gibbs knows if she releases them - the crowd will lose their minds.

At 8:49, Lois Gibbs steps out of her office and makes an announcement: “*If we do not have a Disaster Declaration by Wednesday at noon, then what they have seen here today is just a **Sesame Street picnic.***”

**KN:** [Laughs] Cool. Wow! What a line!

[00:53:57]

**OM:** The crowd roars. The FBI collects the hostages. Lois picks up her children and takes them home to bed.

At the White House, Secretary Jack Watson is explaining to President Carter the situation, and the deadline laid by housewife-activist Lois Gibbs.

[music]

Jimmy Carter signed the relocation order: “Everyone will be relocated for up to a year” - quickly updated to “Everyone will be bought out.”

**KN:** Wow!

**OM:** Hundreds will leave within a week, and the entire neighborhood will be gone by the end of the year.

Early on in this entire saga, state officials had met in a secret Blue Ribbon Panel, and they had discussed several options. They could buy everybody out right now. It would cost \$10 million to buy out the whole neighborhood, but then they would be done. This was discussed as ridiculous or impossible almost immediately.

The state of New York will ultimately spend \$74 million on cleanup and evacuation costs at the canal. They spent 15 million dollars *avoiding* buying people out

**KN:** Ah.

**OM:** ...before they bought people out.

**KN:** Oh.

**OM:** The federal government will spend \$101 million.

**KN:** Wow.

**OM:** Hooker Chemical spent a quarter of a BILLION dollars, in lawsuit after lawsuit after lawsuit.

Jimmy Carter will finally visit Niagara Falls four months later for the first time.

**KN:** Hmm.

**OM:** He will lose in a landslide to Ronald Reagan. But before Reagan takes office, Democrats and Republicans will work together to pass sweeping bipartisan legislation, establishing the Superfund and forever changing US environmental policy.

**KN:** Wow.

**OM:** ...even while Reagan is *actively saying* he doesn't want them to do that.

**KN:** Hmm.

**OM:** And the Superfund, although weakened many times over the years, has prevented untold damage to human lives.

**KN:** Cool.

**OM:** ...and a new brand of environmental activism is born.

[music]

And I think this might be the thing that I find most remarkable. These women *don't stop* when their problem has been solved. It would be easy to say, "*I'm so glad we won, I want my life back.*" But instead they say things like, "*I need to help other people learn how to do this. I'm going to teach people how to advocate for themselves in their own communities.*"

**Keith O'Brien:** By the end of this story, men are calling Lois Gibbs and they're calling Beverly Paigen and they're asking them, "*What did you do? Because we've noticed these kinds of problems in our factory*" - and so it is a real awakening for them too.

**OM:** Just imagining the sheer level of burnout all of these women must have felt...

**KN:** Yeah!

**OM:** So to carry on after they don't *have to* anymore, to continue that fight for *other* people? That's a remarkable choice, and a remarkable person who makes that choice, I think.

[music]

**Keith O'Brien:** For everybody who lived in the neighborhood, this is a defining moment - you know, whether they were seven years old or a twenty-seven-year-old mother of three.

There is *before Love Canal*, and there's *after Love Canal* - but for Beverly Paigen and for Luella Kenny and for Louis Gibbs, they would spend the rest of their lives fighting for environmental justice anywhere.

**OM:** Lois Gibbs will become a totally self-trained, brilliant, media tactician. The condescension, the sexism, all of those things that people have been weaponizing against her - she can weaponize back.

Frank Napal, that she had held hostage, even wrote her a telegram after the passing of the Superfund, congratulating her for her success and wishing her all the best. "*I miss your oatmeal cookies,*" he wrote, signing it "*Your happy hostage, Frank.*"

She moves to Virginia and marries the homeowner's state-hired toxicologist Steven Lester, by the way.

**KN:** Aw!

**Keith O'Brien:** She's in her early seventies, and she *just* retired last year from a nonprofit, environmental justice organization that she started in Washington, DC - that has gone around to countless towns and cities and neighborhoods around the country in the last 40 years. Helping other residents learn how to organize, learn how to get attention, learn how to get your story told.

[00:58:57]

**OM:** Beverly Paigen could tell that things were not going to end well for her at Roswell Park. Two weeks after the Emergency Declaration, the board found *no evidence that anyone had interfered in her activities*. The press had a field day with that - it was, obviously, in the words of one newspaper: *bunk*.

**KN:** Hmm.

**OM:** But she was offered a new job at Children's Hospital in Oakland, her husband Ken running the genetics department at UC Berkeley, so they moved to California.

Axelrod gave Ken high praise for his *outstanding contribution to scientific knowledge* and acknowledged that Beverly Paigen 'had fulfilled a role' at Roswell Park. [laughter]

**KN:** Had *fulfilled a role*.

**OM:** Yes. In 1983, she published a comprehensive study of over 500 children who had grown up in Love Canal.

**KN:** Oh, wow.

**OM:** Identified at least seven illnesses that children from Love Canal suffered at rates, much, *much exceeding* control groups. This finding was used by these families to pursue justice for their children.

**Keith O'Brien:** She spent the rest of her life writing about environmental hazards and how they affect people, a multitude of scientific papers about various environmental hazards.

The one thing that I was devastated about was that she never got to see the book come out, she never got to have that sort of victory lap here at the end of her life. Because I do believe that she deserved that - that she should have had that.

**OM:** Keith O'Brien did over *230 hours* of interviews for this book.

**KN:** Dang!

**OM:** with residents, activists, scientists, politicians... really for the first time, giving credit to these women who have been largely ignored. This story is - is still one of the things that makes me the angriest. Maybe because it hit me at just that right moment, as an undergrad looking into ecofeminism...

But in the end, as Keith O'Brien points out, it is a - it's a story of greed, and incompetence, and and all kinds of horrible, horrible, horrible things- AND it's a story of *hope*.

**Keith O'Brien:** I do really see this story in *Paradise Falls* and the story of Love Canal, really, as a story of hope.

Because in the span of two years, these homeowners and residents go from being ignored by local officials, and being ignored by the school superintendent, to having the ear of Jimmy Carter in the White House. And so again, it's just a powerful moment of *what one person can do*.

That to me, is the - the reason why I was drawn to this story. You know, I think today a lot of us can feel small in the face of some of the problems that are happening in our world. Whether it's the war in Ukraine, or the refugee crisis, or the environmental problems in our own backyard, or the big issue of climate change and what that is doing to our world...

I think it's easy to feel small. And to me the power of the story in *Paradise Falls* is that you can make changes if you do the work - if you put in the time, and if you're willing to put yourself on the line for it, in the way that these women were.

[theme music]

[credits] Huge thanks to Keith O'Brien. Check out our website at [WhatsHerNamePodcast.com](http://WhatsHerNamePodcast.com), where you'll find links to the books, [\*Paradise Falls\*](#) and [\*Fly Girls\*](#), and all of Keith O'Brien's other amazing books, as well as other resources, links, photos and so much more. If you've enjoyed this photo please consider leaving us a review on whatever platform you listen, it really helps new people find us.

You can also follow us on [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#), and [Facebook](#) where we post lots of photos each week. Our theme song was composed and performed by [Daniel Foster Smith](#). *What'sHerName* is produced by Olivia Meikle and Katie Nelson and this episode was edited by Olivia Meikle.

[bonus end tag] OM: Humans are so stupid. [laughter] I won't put that part in, but we are *so stupid*.