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High School Class Exposes Toxic Dump; Students Use TV Course for an Investigative Environmental Project

By ANDREW C. REVKIN
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Correction Appended

The camera was in tight on Dutch Smith, a retired landfill worker with skin as wrinkled as a dried apricot. He sucked on a corncob pipe and unreeled stories of truckloads of old car-battery cases, medical waste and PCB-laden transformers being buried at a town dump in Orange County.

"I'll tell you this," he said in the 1991 interview. "Anything you can name, from radioactive waste to hospital waste, you name it and it's in that landfill. And I know it's in there because I buried lots of it."

Adding credence to his claims were more recent shots of a New York State biologist's finding discarded syringes and collecting samples of purple and orange pools of liquid amid canyons of debris at the Walkill town dump.

This was gripping television, but it was not "60 Minutes" or one of its clones. The video investigation was being reviewed in early November in a classroom at Middletown High School by the communications students who made it, following the lead of a teacher with an environmental streak. It has been shown on Channel 38, the public-access cable channel in Middletown, and has been excerpted by WWOR-TV in New Jersey.

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Since 1991, Fred Isseks, a teacher of "Electronic English," or communicating through television, has trained several hundred students in the use of cameras and public files to investigate illegal dumping and other issues in the fast-changing landscape of small towns and strip malls around them. Through their efforts, the students -- whose high school district includes Walkill -- have been beating the local news media and forcing Walkill officials to take a new look at the old dump and at the company they hired with \$3 million in state funds to clean it up.

While many of their peers focus on football or trips to the nearby mall, the budding television reporters, under the tutelage of Mr. Isseks (pronounced IZZ-eks), a self-described "product of the 60's," spend their spare time filing requests under the Freedom of Information Act at local town halls.

Some even take to the sky. Matt Gross, a senior with a pilot's license, took a classmate, Zach Been, on a flight over the dump recently to get some aerial shots. "Once he stopped shaking," Mr. Gross said, "he got some great stuff."

Mr. Isseks, a 1966 graduate of Middletown High whose preferred footwear is a battered pair of

peach-colored basketball sneakers, said he starts each school year with the same speech: "I look around the room and say, 'You're the largest news team in the Hudson Valley.' "

High school students are an untapped natural resource, Mr. Isseks said. "They're looking for a cause and they'd like to see themselves on equal footing with adults, especially politicians," he said. "Once they have a camera in their hands, that's possible."

Russell Budd, a private investigator who was a high school classmate of Mr. Isseks, said the students' interviews with people like Dutch Smith "unraveled the thread" that has exposed a series of questions about toxic dumping at the site that may yet result in criminal charges.

Mr. Budd, who studied illegal dumping in Orange County for Representative Maurice D. Hinchey when Mr. Hinchey was still in the State Assembly, said of the 1991 video: "It was really the kids in all honesty that scooped us. They brought the videos to us, which hooked us immediately."

Last month, Mr. Isseks and his students sent documents to the Orange County District Attorney, Francis Phillips, showing that the company the town had hired to seal the old dump, Tully Construction of Flushing, Queens, had such a tarnished reputation that three New York City agencies had refused to consider its bids this year.

When the students tried to present the same material to the Walkill Town Board in September, Councilman Thomas Nosworthy -- caught on their videotape -- responded: "Don't come here to this forum. Go to some place where something's going to be done." He suggested the District Attorney's office.

Mr. Phillips said that the environmental avengers at Middletown High were a prickly kind of asset for towns in the region.

"They're clearly a burr under the saddle of the local governments," he said. "But asking politicians questions and demanding answers is a very healthy thing to do. If I were on a municipal board and presented with what these kids have developed, it would make me pause."

The use of television to examine local issues began at Middletown High in 1991, when an acting superintendent bought enough gear to set up a small cable station there. Mr. Isseks, a veteran English teacher who had recently got a master's degree in media and communications, organized a series of classes to make use of the new equipment.

He said he had heard rumors that truckloads of toxic waste, much of it hauled by companies controlled by organized crime, had been buried at the Walkill landfill during its short life from 1965 to 1974. He decided to use the landfill as a testing ground for his media students.

Each fall, Mr. Isseks said, he ticks off a list of possible video subjects: they vary from an examination of discriminatory attitudes toward Middletown High, which, with a 40 percent minority student population, is more racially diverse than neighboring schools; to a look at an effort by local politicians to woo businesses to nearby malls with offers of cuts in their school taxes -- an issue close to the heart of the students at the financially troubled school.

Chad Kowalewski, a senior well practiced in the art of using freedom of information laws to collect documents, said the camera was an essential ally. Referring to local politicians, he said: "They used to say, 'I didn't say that' or 'You misquoted me.' But when you've got it on tape, it's right there."

With each year's class adding new interviews and information, the students produced documentaries in 1992 and 1994 and are now developing a 15-minute update describing the controversy over the capping of the landfill.

The material has been broadcast from the school's television studio, which reaches 50,000 people around Middletown through Channel 38, and has been excerpted by local stations.

When the students took their tapes of the landfill in 1992 to WWOR-TV, Channel 9 in New York and New Jersey, the "I-Team," an investigative news unit at the station, quickly followed up with a report using the students' film.

"They were so well informed, so professional, we basically reported on what the kids had done,"

Stephanie Christopulos, a producer at the station, said recently.

Parents have been strong supporters of the effort, students say -- even when they've ended up trudging through landfill muck.

Melissa Kubik, one of Mr. Isseks's most energetic students, said, "My mom told me do anything you want but just don't get arrested."

The documentaries are rough-hewn but include telling details. To show that officials knew the site in Walkill was never suitable for a landfill, the students juxtaposed a 1971 town map showing a stream running right through the dump site and later official maps on which no stream appears.

The strong point of view in the tapes has caused some members of the community to charge that impressionable students are being led by a crusader, not a journalist.

Howard Mills, the Walkill Town Supervisor, said he lauded the enterprise and energy of the students, but defended the landfill cleanup, saying the operation was under budget and had met all the rules set by state environmental officials. "There's a tendency on the part of Mr. Isseks to want to put things in a negative light sometimes," Mr. Mills said.

He said that there was no merit to the students' contention that the cap on the landfill, which is nearly complete, is an effort to cover up evidence that could incriminate many companies in the illegal dumping at the site. An investigation is under way to find companies that dumped there, Mr. Mills said, so that they can be forced to pay for the capping.

When taped by the students during a recent visit to the school, Mr. Mills did concede that the landfill probably contained far more toxic waste than had been estimated.

As he drove to Mr. Mills's office to pick up a pile of documents he had requested, Chad Kowalewski, who is aiming for a job in law enforcement, said his only goal was to improve conditions in his community.

He said he had little interest in attending meetings of the environment club at the school. "They look at world issues, like global warming, but they don't look in our own backyard," Chad said. "That's the thing. If you want to get anything done, you've got to start at home."

Mr. Mills's secretary, Betty Nolte, greeted Chad by name. "He's in here all the time," she said, as she pointed to a four-inch high pile of reports on the landfill cleanup.

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Correction: November 25, 1995, Saturday An article on Nov. 16 about an investigation of illegal dumping by communications students at Middletown High School in New York misspelled the name of the town where the dump is. It is Wallkill.

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