

outbursts

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spotlight on water crisis

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Addressing the failure of democracy in Flint

Save Our Towns offers special bonus episode

By Andrea Brunais

Among the many riveting moments during testimony before Congress in mid-March about the water crisis in Flint, Michigan, one stood out.

"If I had done this as a terrorist to the children of Flint and I got caught, would I be in jail?" asked Rep. Mick Mulvaney, a Republican from South Carolina.

Virginia Tech professor Marc Edwards' reply was succinct: "If a landlord did this, he would be in jail."

Edwards, a civil and environmental engineering professor whose team first conclusively found toxic levels of lead in Flint's tap water, was testifying about how the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency stood silent as Michigan's Department of Environmental Quality attacked him and his team of engineering students in an attempt to discredit their work.

As the world now knows, Edwards and the students were instrumental in halting the lead poisoning. LeeAnne Walters, the mother at the center of the storm, brought them on the case. Earlier this year she came to campus in Blacksburg, along with her daughter, Kaylie, and twin boys. People could see what the family



Three graduate students in civil and environmental speak out. From left, Joyce Zhu talked about the socioeconomic status of Flint, Michigan, while Rebekah Martin said, "We had the capability to determine whether they were lying," and Christina Devine concluded of implicated government officials: "They think they can get away with anything." Below, Marc Edwards testifies in Washington, D.C.



had been dealing with: One of the 4-year-old twins, hard hit by lead, is no longer as big or healthy as his brother.

After the public forum, when the Virginia Tech engineering students presented their findings, Walters said the hardest part of the water crisis was "not being heard, knowing that my child had been poisoned, and it was happening to other kids in the city, and nobody cared." (Walters, whose husband is in the military, is now a Virginia resident.)

Walters' statement came in the context of Save Our Towns, an award-winning monthly Internet program produced by Outreach and International Affairs that is now in its second season serving leaders of Appalachian small towns. A special bonus

episode of the program – an episode that includes reporting from the scene in Flint – addresses issues of local control, democracy and powerlessness.

Here are some interview excerpts:

On the City Council, five months before Virginia Tech students arrived in Flint, Councilman Eric Mays made a motion proposing that the lead-laced drinking water supply be switched away from the Flint River and back to the city's original supplier, Detroit. According to Mays, a state-appointed emergency administrator, who was then running the city's affairs, called his motion and the council's vote "ridiculous, irresponsible."

That administrator tried publically "to make that vote look like we didn't know what we were talking about," Mays said. "I was disappointed when the emergency manager kind of made a mockery of our vote, didn't dialogue with us." Mays also

continued on back

Flint Water



Detroit Water





Two ZIP codes in Flint showed the highest lead levels.

pointed out that while representative democracy isn't perfect, it's the system of government we go to war to preserve and protect.

He added, "The nation and in some cases the world is looking at us through the water fight. But it's also a fight over democracy."

Congressman Dan Kildee, a Democrat whose district includes Flint, concluded



Kildee addressed the congressional oversight committee before it took testimony in February.

that when Flint encountered budget troubles, the state stepped in – even though the state played a part in creating those troubles.

Michigan's state government "took over the city of Flint, suspended democracy and made a whole series of decisions that never would have been made by people who were directly accountable to their neighbors," Kildee said. And yet, "While on one hand it felt like the local voices were completely ignored, it was only for a while that they could be ignored."

In the case of Flint, democracy was powerful enough "to overcome law that actually suspends democracy," Kildee said. External forces might have robbed citizens of what he termed "the mechanisms of democracy," but this theft didn't "silence their democratic rights. Our democracy is basically a matter of people using their voices. And in this case it paid off, and it worked – sadly, after a big crisis. But it actually did work. The reason this whole Flint situation came to light is that people would not be quieted down."

(A footnote: Early in 2016, Kildee introduced a bill in Congress to require the EPA to warn communities immediately when water is found to be toxic. The bill passed the House. That will likely not be the only significant outcome. The FBI is investigating the tragedy, along with Congress and the Environmental Protection Agency's Criminal Investigation Division.)

And how did the students on Edwards' team feel? Three of them, all studying for doctoral degrees in civil and environmental engineering, gave interviews to Save Our Towns.

Joyce Zhu articulated the perception that the "slow response to solve this crisis has much to do with the socioeconomic state of the city rather than lack of science."

In Edwards' ethics class, Christina Devine learned how powerful organizational culture can be, leading to the silencing of whistleblowers. Nevertheless, it's difficult for her to comprehend. "I don't really understand the logic behind that because I can't see myself doing something like that," she said. "I think it's a cultural thing within the government. They think they can get away with anything."

Rebekah Martin called it "angering" that Michigan's Department of Environmental Quality let poisoned water continue to flow from Flint's taps and, later, attempted to discredit the team's work. "We just felt like we needed to do something about it," she said. "We had the capability to determine whether they were lying or not."

In an op-ed piece in the Richmond Times-Dispatch, Guru Ghosh, vice president for Outreach and International Affairs, said: "The deployment of Virginia Tech faculty and graduate students on behalf of the residents of Flint reminds us of the core values of land-grant universities – addressing society's most pressing problems through research, innovation and deep engagement."

"How far are you prepared to take something?" Edwards asked in his interview with Save Our Towns. "Determination is all powerful. ... You need allies. You've got to reach out to people. Never give up."

Save Our Towns recently won two national communications awards. The program won in Best Community Affairs in PR Daily-Ragan's worldwide Corporate Social Responsibility Awards competition. The second award, from Bulldog Reporter,

recognized Save Our Towns for best use of digital or social communications for cause/advocacy/corporate social responsibility and best use of video in a digital/social environment. The latter is the only U.S.-based contest exclusively judged by journalists.

The complete **Save Our Towns** episode on Flint can be viewed at: <http://tinyurl.com/FlintEpisode>



Ress: Democracy has its challenges

Dave Ress is senior political reporter for the Daily Press

in Newport News. Each year he looks for examples of proposed new legislation in Virginia prompted by the Dillon rule, which narrowly defines the powers of municipalities. In an interview with Save Our Towns, he explained:

"The Dillon rule is an old rule that judges have imposed since about the 1870s. An Iowa judge named John Dillon was the one who first promulgated it. It tries to sort the division between state and local government. In Virginia the way we have interpreted it is very, very tightly, so that local governments have very, very limited powers. ... The interesting lesson I think for Flint and for anyone in Virginia, or for anyone around Appalachia, is that democracy has its challenges. ... It's definitely worth it, if you are new to local government or maybe haven't had to really think about what you can or can't do as an elected official or as an appointed executive of local government, to be sure that you have a good understanding of what the courts in your state (have said), the constitution in your state and your state code – about the powers that you have, that you're inferred to have, and that you are denied from having."

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