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The Watras family outside their house; the parents worry about the futures of sons Christopher (left) and Michael

# A family that is living with fear

## *Radon still an unwanted guest in Pa. home*

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COLEBROOKDALE TOWNSHIP, Pa. — Nearly a year has passed, and Stanley and Diane Watras still struggle to accept the possibility that their stylish Berks County house may be killing them and their two young sons.

"You name an emotion and we have had it," said Stanley Watras. "Anger? Definitely. Hurt? Definitely. Sorrow, crying? Every emotion you name, we have had."

"I have a great amount of guilt," Diane Watras added hesitatingly. "About if in the future my kids should develop something. I

know I've thought a lot about how I am going to deal with that."

The source of the couple's trauma is radon, a naturally occurring radioactive gas that has been linked to lung cancer. By now, the story of how the radon was discovered in the Watrases' Colebrookdale Township split-level house is familiar, having been repeated countless times in newspaper stories and television reports.

Stanley Watras, 34, a construction engineer at the Limerick nuclear construction site, walked into work the first week of December 1984, setting off alarms, buzzers and flashing red lights in a newly installed radiation de-

tection system. But the plant was not the problem. When technicians monitored Watras' home shortly before last Christmas, they found the highest levels of radioactivity ever recorded in a house in America.

Since then, radon — a colorless, odorless gas that can seep into a house from uranium-rich soil beneath the foundation — has become a major national environmental issue. Experts now believe that dangerous levels of the gas threaten the health of tens of thousands of residents in homes all over the country.

Despite the magnitude of problem, radon,

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for the Watrases, remains a continuing personal tragedy — bringing fear, feelings of guilt and, most of all, uncertainty.

They divide their radon troubles into three distinct time periods: The three weeks that followed the alarms at the Limerick plant, a time the couple call the worst in their lives; the six frustrating months they spent living in a motel and rented duplex, after Pennsylvania officials told them in early January to leave their house immediately; and the period since they returned to their house in early July, after being told that a \$32,670 research project had made it safe. That conclusion was contradicted last month when high radon levels were again measured in the house.

In a lengthy — and, at times, highly emotional — interview in their home last week, the couple, who describe themselves as private and very religious, for the first time publicly discussed their nearly year-long trauma. They agreed to do so, they said, in the hope that other families who are being told that there are serious health hazards in their own homes will not feel alone.

The Watrases emphasized, however, that sympathy is about all they can offer. They have little solid advice and few answers — indicative of the general lack of knowledge about radon in homes, even among experts.

"It would be very nice to be able to say, this is what you do if you have a problem," said Diane Watras, 33. "You call this person, you pay this much to get it done."

"That would be ideal," added her husband. "But we don't have that."

Stanley Watras was standing in his kitchen when a technician brought a Geiger counter into the family living room shortly before last Christmas. Almost immediately, the device began chirping.

"I don't believe what I'm hearing," Stanley recalled thinking. "It came shooting out. . . . The guy said this little Geiger counter is supposed to go off every 20 to 25 minutes, and it's going off every two minutes. We have something in our house."

Stanley can still reel off the technical readings the radiation experts made over the next few days: "The living room on Dec. 19: 16 working levels. December 21: 9 working levels in the kids' bedroom, 14 working levels in the living room, 22 working levels in the cellar."

From the nearly 10 years he had worked at nuclear plants, Stanley well understood what the readings meant. One-fiftieth of one working level is considered by federal officials to be the maximum safe limit for radon. In other words, some parts of the house surpassed the limit by more than 1,000 times — greatly increasing chances for developing lung cancer.

As one federal environmental official would later say, the radon levels in the Watras house were the equivalent of having a chest X-ray every 20 seconds.

The Watrases spent most of the next two weeks on the telephone, desperately seeking advice from government agencies, medical experts and private corporations. But when they mentioned the radiation levels in the house, they said the typical response was: "No way could that be possible. It's wrong."

Even when they explained that the readings had been confirmed by high-level environmental officials, the Watrases said, they were unable to get their questions answered.

"The common answer was, 'I don't know,'" Stanley recalled. "Is there any way to fix the house? I don't

know. Are we medically hurt? I don't know. Is another day here going to harm us? I don't know."

Stanley Watras, a husky, muscular man who enjoys lifting weights, said his frustration during that time was so great that he broke down and cried in front of a half-dozen other construction engineers at work.

"The more we looked for answers, the more confused we got," his wife said.

The Watrases said they spent last Christmas flustered by conflicting emotions, including guilt. They began to blame themselves for placing the health of their young boys — Michael, 4, and Christopher, 2 — at risk by purchasing the house in early 1984, even though they had no idea at the time it had a radon problem. Was it not still their fault, they asked themselves, that their youngest son had, as Stanley put it, "spent 80 percent of his life in a radioactive cloud"?

The situation seemed particularly ironic. During her pregnancy with Christopher, Diane Watras said, she had repeatedly insisted that her husband, a heavy smoker, take his cigarettes outside — even on cold winter nights — because "of the proof that it causes lung cancer."

Now they were being told that the 11 months they had spent in the house breathing radon probably increased the family's risk of getting lung cancer significantly more than the threat posed by cigarette smoke.

Then came the morning of Jan. 5, a snowy Saturday on which the Watrases had planned to leave on a weekend trip to visit friends in Bloomsburg, Pa. and get their minds off radon, at least temporarily. As they were packing, a car with several officials from the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Resources pulled into the driveway.

They had come to hand-deliver a letter from DER Secretary Nicholas DeBenedictis. The letter stated: "I urge you to leave your residence immediately and find alternative safe shelter."

The Watrases said they were completely unprepared. First of all, they had nowhere to go. "We asked them, 'How soon do you want us to move?'" Diane recalled. Their answer, she said, was "Now."

The Watrases packed, took down their Christmas tree and decorations, and checked into the Holiday Inn in nearby Pottstown with their two sons and dog. They had no idea how long they would be staying. It ended up being five weeks.

"The first week was kind of like a vacation for the boys," Diane recalled. "They thought it was great. The second week, it began to feel more a drag. By the fourth week, I was ready to pull my hair out. With two kids and a dog living in a motel. . . ."

After the fifth week, the family moved into a rental apartment in the area. It had been difficult to find one, since they were reluctant to sign a long lease. They still had no idea whether they could ever move back in their house.

Stanley Watras was confronted with another tragedy as well. His mother had recently been diagnosed as having Alzheimer's disease, and she was being shuffled in and out of nursing homes in Delaware. His father had died the year before of colon cancer, and Stanley had been appointed his mother's legal guardian. So in the midst of his family's radon problems, he began commuting between Delaware and Pennsylvania to assist his ailing mother.

On April 2, his mother died. Two weeks later, Philadelphia Electric Co., owner of the Limerick plant, announced that it would fund a proj-

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ect to try to rid the Watras house of radon.

The Watrases were then paying the mortgage on their house as well as the rent on the apartment. Although PE's offer was generous, and the couple quickly accepted it, Stanley said he felt uneasy about taking what he considered "a handout."

"I still feel I should have paid for it myself," he said, his voice choked with emotion.

The work took about two months. Technicians ripped apart the basement and installed a special "passive" radon removal system. The Watrases had been told that there was no guarantee that the project would prove successful. But in early July, the project was declared a success and the family, who had not slept in the house for six months, moved back in.

Life was hardly normal. The couple was inundated with news media interview requests. There were telephone calls from other concerned families around the country, seeking information about radon.

There were some bizarre calls as well, including two from an astrologer in Atlanta. "She wanted to know our sign to see if we have radon in our stars," Stanley said.

In September, the radon levels in the house began to climb. Late last month, technicians found that a first-floor office contained radon that was nearly 100 times the level considered safe.

"That was very shocking," said Diane. "You get back to the point where you're upset about it again."

The Watrases hope that the increased readings are only temporary, that the technicians from Colorado who installed the removal system will be able to solve the problem. But the couple readily admitted that their future is filled with uncertainty.

Above all, of course, is the question of their health. Lung cancer can take up to 20 years to develop, so the Watrases say they are left with little choice other than to pray.

"We just have to live each day as it is and pray that God won't let our children have any problems from this," said Diane. "I would pray that one of us would get it, rather than my children."

There also is the matter of the house. The couple said they have no

intention of moving out — or of selling it. The couple paid \$67,500 for the rustic, two-acre property, and have added thousands of dollars in improvements.

"We think it's worth absolutely nothing," said Stanley. "But even if we could sell it, I don't think we could morally sell it."

Added Diane, her voice growing strong: "I'd rather walk away from this house, and just leave it ... than to ever sell this house. If I didn't feel secure here myself, I couldn't do that to somebody else."

There is one thing the Watrases say they are absolutely certain about. That is that more needs to be known about radon.

"We need more research," said Stanley, clutching his fist on the family's dining room table. "We need something definite."