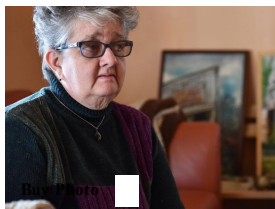


# Rubin: For ex-lead inspector, Flint issue close to home

Neal Rubin, The Detroit News 11:32 p.m. EST January 27, 2016



(Photo: Photos by Robin Buckson / The Detroit News)

In one house, a little boy was eating flakes of lead paint out of a potato chip bag.

In too many, there were no toys or books, and the only thing bored children could think to do with their tiny fingers was pick at the toxic walls.

Agnes Riordan-Gira spent a quarter-century as a health inspector in Detroit. Most of that time, she worked with restaurants. But the first five years, she was battling lead.

“It was the hardest job I ever had,” she says, with parents who didn’t know and landlords who didn’t care and kids who didn’t have any way to defend themselves.

At least she could see the opponent, though. She had testing equipment and expertise, and when it turned out that toy cars in the DIA gift shop were swathed in lead paint, she could take them away.

Flint is different, and it’s painful for her to watch, even from her home in Detroit.

In Flint, the mistakes and indifference of adults combined to sluice poison into sippy cups, baby bottles and bathtubs. Even if some of the water was visibly unsavory, the lead was undetectable by sight.

Not every home in the city was affected. Maybe not even many children were, if you can quantify “many” when the subject is children’s lives; we won’t know the extent of the damage for years.

But it only takes one face to haunt you.

“He looked like an angel,” says Riordan-Gira, 62, who retired in 2014. “His face was so sweet.”

He was tired all the time, though, and developmentally behind, and he would never catch up.

## In best neighborhoods

With her career behind her, Riordan-Gira devotes herself to painting and fawning over grandchildren.

She does both on the west side, in the only home her 71-year-old husband has ever known.

Jim Gira, a retired cartographer, was her sister’s ex-husband’s uncle’s best friend. They married in 1978, and after she went to work for the health department, she made sure their house passed the lead test.

Lead paint had been more expensive than the alternatives, so she found a lot of it in tony neighborhoods — Palmer Park, Sherwood Forest, Indian Village.

The [Jeffries projects](http://www.aerialpics.com/C/jeffries.html) (<http://www.aerialpics.com/C/jeffries.html>) were lead-free, and Herman Gardens was nearly as pure. She recalls a cluster of affected homes off Alter Road near Grosse Pointe Park, and pockets of lead and resistance throughout the city.

Often, she had to take landlords to court.

One of them scraped the lead paint off the side of his house, as ordered — but then fired up his lawnmower and mulched it across his lawn.

Iron-deprived children will eat dirt, says physician Charles Barone, chief of pediatrics for [Henry Ford Health System](http://www.henryford.com/) (<http://www.henryford.com/>).

That’s one way they ingest lead. Or they’ll eat flakes of lead paint, which tastes faintly sweet. Or they’ll breathe in microbits when window sashes scrape against frames.

Or there’s Flint.

## An invisible enemy

Average [blood lead levels \(http://www.cdc.gov/nceh/lead/accipp/blood\\_lead\\_levels.htm\)](http://www.cdc.gov/nceh/lead/accipp/blood_lead_levels.htm) are down markedly since the 1970s, due in part to the phasing out of leaded gasoline.

At the same time, Barone says, it's understood now that even low readings can indicate menace.

"It's going to take a lot to stay on top of these kids in Flint — to make sure they reach their potential," he says. "Even if everybody had screenings a few months ago, they need to be screened again."

Riordan-Gira remembers getting down on her hands and knees to talk to victims, putting them at ease so they would show her the source of the contamination.

"I loved those kids," she says, and the parents were often likeable, too — underfunded and over-matched but doing their best.

Now comes Flint, and she thinks of the countless bottles she fed her grandkids, and of parents 70 miles north doing all the right things.

The house is clean. The paint is smooth and safe. The children are watched and loved.

But they drank the water.

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