Don’t Drink the Water

Indie film documents effects of Asheville toxic site

The phrase ‘Don’t drink the water’ is hitting close to home with an award-winning documentary that focuses on a Superfund site in nearby Asheville, N.C.

Mary B. Martin School of the Arts at ETSU will present My Toxic Backyard with filmmaker Katie Damien as part of the South Arts Southern Circuit Tour of Independent Filmmakers on Monday, Sept. 22 at 7 p.m. in Martha Street Culp Auditorium. Following a screening of the film, producer and director Damien will engage the audience in a discussion about the film and her work as a filmmaker. A reception with the filmmaker will follow the Q&A session. Film and reception are free and open to the public.

My Toxic Backyard chronicles an Asheville community’s fight for clean drinking water as the contaminated soil of an old manufacturing plant continues to leak carcinogens into their water more than 20 years after the threat was first reported to the Environmental Protection Agency. Through investigative reporting and in-depth interviews, Damien’s film dredges up the sludge that accumulates after decades of inaction.

Damien’s first encounter with the toxic soil occurred while she was seeking a new home in the Asheville area. She was shocked when a friend said, “There’s something bad in the water out there.” That information sparked Damien’s interest.

“I felt like I had dodged a bullet, but I couldn’t stop thinking about all the people still living out there who weren’t as lucky,” Damien says.

The CTS Corp. Superfund site was ranked among the worst contaminated sites in the nation, yet now there are more than 100 homes within one mile of the site.

Residents in the area have been drinking high levels of contaminated water for years not knowing it’s the water that has been making them sick, and My Toxic Backyard documents the stories of many families struggling with the effects of the contamination.

“It’s very timely. It’s in our neighborhood, so I think it’s an important topic for us to discuss, because these kinds of things can happen anywhere and do happen in a lot of communities,” says Anita DeAngelis, director of Mary B. Martin School of the Arts.
The film “plays well to anyone for whom injustice strikes a nerve,” says The Asheville Citizen-Times.

Jeff Thomas from the not-for-profit Go Green America organization said “stories like this one need to be told.”

Filmmaker Damien, an award-winning filmmaker with a bachelor’s degree in film production from the University of Central Florida, lives in Asheville, the community chronicled in her film. My Toxic Backyard is her first feature documentary and was supported through a successful Kickstarter campaign.

Find out more about the film, visit mytoxicbackyard.com.

The Southern Circuit Tour of Independent Filmmakers is a program of South Arts. Southern Circuit screenings are funded in part by a grant from South Arts in partnership with the National Endowment for the Arts. South Arts, founded in 1975, is a nonprofit regional arts organization building on the South's unique heritage and enhancing the public value of the arts. Their work responds to the arts environment and cultural trends with a regional perspective through an annual portfolio of activities designed to address the role of the arts in impacting the issues important to our region, and linking the South with the nation and the world through the arts.

For information about the film, film series or the ETSU Mary B. Martin School of the Arts, call 423-439-TKTS (8587) or visit www.etsu.edu/martin. Please “Like” ETSU Mary B. Martin School of the Arts on Facebook and follow it on Twitter and Instagram @ArtsAtETSU.