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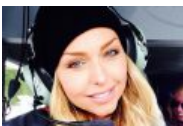
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Cancer survivor Sandra Steingraber decries the chemical soup we live in and wonders why we keep jeopardizing our health

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American ecologist Sandra Steingraber, left, runs in Toronto with Star columnist Catherine Porter.

By: [Catherine Porter](#) Columnist, Published on Wed May 19 2010

"It is the exquisite communion between the interior landscape of the body and the exterior," Sandra Steingraber says, barely panting, as we pad down the streets of the Oakwood neighbourhood side by side. She is talking about scenes from the new documentary *Living Downstream*, based on her book of the same title.

But she could be speaking about running, which she does in every city she drops into to give yet another speech about the soup of industrial chemicals we bob in and how it is killing us.

"It's my way of getting grounded," she says as we pass drooping lilac trees and dart across Christie towards the Wychwood Barns. "I'm a field ecologist who doesn't get much time out in the field anymore."

Steingraber ran her first half-marathon at 25 to celebrate the five years she had "survived" since being diagnosed with bladder cancer as a biology sophomore in college. Cancer runs in her family — her mother, two uncles and an aunt have all battled some form of the disease. But she was adopted. "What else does a family have in common besides chromosomes?" she asks in the film. "Wells, air supply, factories."

She approached her own diagnosis as a scientific case study, examining all the known environmental carcinogens she was exposed to as possible sources.

Things like atrazine, a chemical herbicide banned in Europe but still used by farmers in

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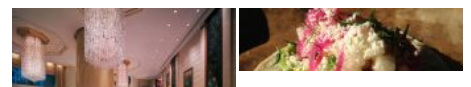


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Canada and the United States — particularly on Illinois cornfields near her childhood home.

California scientists recently revealed that 10 per cent of male frogs exposed to typical concentrations of atrazine turn into functional females, producing eggs instead of sperm. Why should we think humans breathing in atrazine fumes, drinking its runoff in our water and eating its residue in our food wouldn't be affected?

"How much evidence do you want before you do something different, and who gets to decide — those being exposed or those producing the chemicals?" Steingraber asks in the movie. "That is the question of our age."

In conjunction with the film, made by Toronto director Chanda Chevannes, Steingraber just released the second edition of her 1997 book, *Living Downstream*, which is a personal and scientific inquiry into her cancer. It's been called the sequel to Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, which led to DDT being banned.

Steingraber is also a published poet.

The research in the past 13 years has strengthened Steingraber's case that as part of the ecosystem, humans are susceptible to the poisonous chemicals we pump into it.

That seems obvious to me. But many people — including the Canadian government — still hold the "threshold" credo, that the dose makes the poison and small doses of it won't affect us.

Steingraber's theory just gained a powerful ally this month with the President's Cancer Panel, a three-member team that studied cancer for two years.

"The true burden of environmentally induced cancer has been grossly underestimated," it concluded in its 240-page report. Steingraber descends on the White House on Friday to brief staff on it.

Her hour has come, it seems. Is she excited? I can't tell. Despite all her public speaking, Steingraber is shy. She's incredibly thin and tall too. She loops beside me like a blue heron, gangly, fragile and beautiful.

Since *Living Downstream* came out, she's married an artist and had two children.

Every year, she returns to the doctor's office for tests. Most years, they turn up something, she says.

Three years ago, after repeated flags about her ovaries, she had them cut out. The result was early menopause, and she returned to running to calm the hot flashes. Last year, on the 30th anniversary of her diagnosis, she competed in her first triathlon.

"Cancer is not behind me," she says. "It's all around me."

Her bravery not just behind a podium but also in a doctor's examination room is what makes the film so powerful, I think. She is willing to expose her own vulnerability to remind us that cancer is personal.

The most haunting scene shows Steingraber, dressed in a backless hospital gown, clenching her jaw as a doctor slips a scope into her urethra to examine her bladder.

When her insides are projected on a screen, she does not look, but we do — and can see her capillaries stretching out like tree branches.

During our jog, I expected her to point out sources of toxins — smokestacks and the like. Instead, she wonders at the beauty of spring around us, stopping at a copse of giant, ancient oak trees in Wychwood Park. They were planted, she says, pointing out their large lateral branches. There's no room for stretching to the side in a forest.

"I think they are black oaks, as they don't have the red oak ski trail — with bark like ski trails down a hill," she says.

This is why they call her the poet laureate of the environmental health movement.

Catherine Porter's column usually appears Tuesday, Thursday and Friday. She can be reached at cporter@thestar.ca

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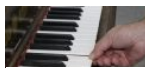
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