

A Well of Grief

local hero

Sheila Holt-Orsted fought to bring safe drinking water to her hometown—and she isn't stopping there.

BY THE TIME Sheila Holt-Orsted learned she had breast cancer in 2003, relatives had been diagnosed with prostate cancer, lung cancer, cervical polyps, and an autoimmune disorder. Holt-Orsted, who grew up on her family's 150-acre homestead in Dickson County, Tennessee, decided to "find out if there was a reason there were so many health problems in our family."

Digging through county archives, Holt-Orsted was stunned to learn that as late as the 1980s, industrial waste had been dumped into a landfill near the Holts' well. When the state tested the well in 1988 and found the carcinogen trichloroethylene (TCE), the results were chalked up to an error. In 1991, after further tests, the Holts were told their water was safe to drink. Their well went untested for the next nine years, during which time area white families' water was tested, found to be contaminated, and the families were advised not to drink it. It wasn't until 2000 that the Holts' well was finally tested again and deemed unsafe.

"During my treatment, I thought, *If I live through this, I'm going to hold someone responsible*," Holt-Orsted says. While recovering, she spoke to science professors about TCE's structure, met with local

officials, and organized town hall forums to galvanize her neighbors.

By December 2009, Holt-Orsted and her mother, working with the Natural Resources Defense Council, had sued the county, city, and several manufacturers, asking that the contaminants be cleaned up and contained. At the end of 2011, the case was settled—with no parties admitting liability—and the county and city agreed to provide funds to monitor water and connect residents at risk for contamination to the municipal supply. Holt-Orsted plans to educate people across the country about the dangers of TCE exposure. "This is what I'll do for the rest of my life," she says. "This is my calling." —K.R.



Meet and Eat

All alone in a new city, two friends brought something unique to the table.

In 2010, when Eddy Lu and Daishin Sugano moved from Los Angeles to Chicago to open a cream puff shop ("They're the next cupcakes!" they say), the pair realized they'd overlooked one aspect of relocation: making new friends. They tried chatting with people in bars, but "guys thought we were hitting on them," Lu says. "It was awkward." Then they realized their best connections had formed over food. "Eating together is the classic way to socialize," says Lu.

A few months later, the pair launched grubwithus.com, where users browse dozens of

upcoming gatherings at local restaurants and then book their seats at a table of strangers also looking to connect. The food is usually served family-style over multiple courses, which helps people settle in and get talking. "Grubbers" must adhere to a

few rules, however: Be on time, don't check cell phones, and avoid politics-and-religion talk.

Now in dozens of cities—and available for anyone, in any city, who wants to use the site to set up a dinner—Grubwithus meals have produced friendships, job offers, and a few romances. But Sugano says he and Lu are their own best success story: "We

we like these guys!

arrived with no social network, and now we have 25 real friends in Chicago." And all because they remembered that before Facebook, there was food. "People say this is a forward-thinking service," Sugano says. "But making time to eat together is old-school. We're just going back to basics."

—RACHEL BERTSCHE



Holt-Orsted on her family's land in Tennessee.