

Ashland artist offers healing vision at site of harm



WENDY MAEDA/GLOBE STAFF

Dan Borelli at the site that was linked to rare cancers.

By **Kathleen Burge** | GLOBE STAFF FEBRUARY 19, 2015

ASHLAND — This town has what local artist Dan Borelli calls a “folklore of color.” A waterway near the town’s Nyanza dye plant was nicknamed “Chemical Brook” because its color changed — one day blue, one day purple — depending on what tint the plant was producing.

The federal government calls the old plant a Superfund site. But Borelli sees a chance for healing.

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He is trying to transform the legacy of this frightening place — where companies made dyes that were later linked to rare forms of cancer among his friends and other townspeople — from despair into art.

Borelli hopes to create a public garden and memorial site whose hues will reflect the colors of the chemical dyes. He has been talking to town officials about placing the garden on a piece of land near the former Nyanza plant. He has even proposed changing the colors of the streetlights for one night to reflect the contaminants that are still in the soil.

“This is more about the human side of things that helps a community heal around a difficult part of its history,” said Town Manager Anthony Schiavi. “I think it’s very powerful, personally.”

Last year, Borelli received a \$75,000 grant for the project from [ArtPlace America](#), a collaboration of foundations, banks, and federal agencies. He is creating an [oral and visual history](#) of the town’s relationship with the Superfund site that will be stored at the [public library](#), where a small room is already filled with thousands of pages of EPA reports on the contamination.

“It’s a balancing between the challenging subject of trauma and loss,” said Borelli, director of exhibitions at Harvard’s [Graduate School of Design](#), who is continuing to raise money for the project. “And at the same time, there’s incredible stories of people fighting on behalf of those that they lost.”

The impact of the 32-year-old Superfund site runs deep in this town of 16,500 people west of Boston. Companies made dyes there for more than 60 years.

Borelli knew some of the stories from his own childhood in town. He read about other strange tales of color as he pored through hundreds of pages of records, newspaper articles at the Ashland Historical Society, and technical reports from the EPA and the state Department of Public Health.

Once, the falling snow turned blue. A family called the police when pink mist drifted over their house, Borelli said. Children who played below the plant's open waste ponds would often return home with blistered hands and clothing that had changed colors, according to the Department of Public Health.

Borelli was friends with Kevin Kane, a year ahead of him in high school, who became ill with a cancer called angiosarcoma. Kane had spent his final months researching the rare cancers that sickened him and four other teenagers and young men in Ashland in the 1990s. He urged officials to investigate the link between them and the Nyanza contamination.



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Newspaper clips of the Nyanza chemical contamination in Ashland Town Library.

Kane died in 1998, at 26.

His work paid off. Suzanne Condon, associate commissioner of the state public health department, oversaw a study of children who were between 10 and 18 from 1965 to 1985. A report from the state Department of Public Health, released in 2006, concluded that children who waded or swam in two areas near the Nyanza plant were two to three times more likely to get cancer — four times more likely if they had a family history of cancer.

The report recognized Kane, “who in the face of his illness never faltered in his search to find answers.”

After Borelli graduated from Ashland High School, he studied at the Rhode Island School of Design. He met his future wife during an internship at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice; she was also an intern. They lived in Sweden, her native country, for nearly a year, when Borelli was offered a job at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. They eventually settled near his old home.

“I don’t feel like running from it is the solution,” he said. “There’s also a sense of pride of being from there and having grown up with people that were affected by it and how they faced it — their strength and conviction and commitment.”

Borelli’s Nyanza work began as a less personal project. As a grad student at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, Borelli was examining the history of color for his thesis when he was stunned to discover that the Superfund site was home to one of the first dye manufacturers in the country.

Ashland was home to Henry Ellis Warren, an inventor who created the first synchronous electric clock, and was known as “the father of the electric time.” The town is steeped in temporal names. School sports teams are called the Ashland Clockers.

“There’s incredible symbolism in that the place that calls itself “Clock Town,” Borelli said. “I feel that the site has shifted off of human time, back to geological time. The site itself is going to outlive everybody.”

Borelli was startled to see that nothing marked the former Nyanza site when he returned to the land after a decade. The human story was publicly absent, although people who have lived in town hold its scar in their minds. Borelli thought openly

marking the physical and emotional space the contamination fills might help the community heal.

“I find this particular project so compelling because it’s not an easy project,” said Louisa McCall, program director of [Artists’ Prospectus for the Nation](#). “It’s unusual for its focus on something that’s controversial and hard, and looking to transform that into something that’s positive.”

As part of the visual history, Borelli wants to include a map of the contaminated groundwater plume that still exists, something he didn’t know until he dug through [EPA reports](#).

“It stretches from the [Superfund] cap to the river down to town hall,” he said. “It’s very close to the public library.”

Borelli now lives in Framingham, two miles from the bald hill where the EPA incinerated and removed hundreds of tons of contaminated soil, one of the country’s first Superfund sites. The agency capped the land to seal in sludge and debris. His parents still live in Ashland.

The emotional grip of the place became clear early in his research when he drove near the former Nyanza dye plant.

As he was about to step out of his car, near the gate leading to the site, his daughter, then 2, wanted to go with him. [Fear pierced him](#). He couldn’t open the car door.

“I was like no, absolutely no,” he said. “I know it was irrational. But you do have that feeling, having grown up around here.”

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