Radium Girls Redux

Here's to us all staying someplace metaphysically where we can say, "it could be worse." Here is to us learning as a world to protect others if and when we can, always.

June 15, 2018 By Lisa Vento Nielsen

I love to read (and write) — finding books that I can devour is part of what brings me joy. Yes, devour. I find a book a like and I read it voraciously until it is over and then I think about it and wish I could write something a fraction as good. See, for me, reading is a visible thing — I see the story in my mind the way you see it on your movie screen or TV.

As much as I love to read, the mechanics are lost to me — so I cannot take lessons from what I read to write my own books though I am doing fairly well with writing short stories, so that is a consolation…

I read a book about the Radium Girls — and just thinking about it gives me chills. This book details the work young girls did from the advent of WW1 into WW2 working at factories using duh radium. Radium found in the early 1900s was considered for the general public to be a "health" product. It was included in water tonics and medicines and it also was used to paint watches and more during both world wars as it allowed for the dials to glow.

Despite the fad around radium, scientists learned painfully that it could hurt them as they found their bodies burnt from the liquid form kept in vials or other painful growths — despite that, the element was hugely promoted and "researched" by firms that used radium in products sold to the government and the public all agreeing that it was safe for use.

Young girls (as young as 13) found work in factories in the early 1900s–1940s painting watches dials for planes and more. The technique shown to the girls was called the "dip, lip, paint" technique in which they put their brush into the radium infused liquid, then put the brush in their mouths to shape it to a point and then to paint. They were encouraged to eat at their workstation and even paint their clothes and faces with the radium — despite the fact that the science men employed at the same companies had to wear lead aprons and hold the radium with tongs to manipulate the radium.

These girls were known as "ghost girls" as the radium made them glow — they considered it a sign of the health benefits to working with the new miracle element.

Within a few years of the first radium girls hire, they began to get sick and most of them died painful, terrible deaths attributed to the first known case of "workforce poisoning." The radium

settled in their bones and ate away at them — causing cancers, bone disintegration (most of them died via mouth disintegration — their jaw bones literally broke off in their hands.

They and their families fought tooth and nail for medical help, recognition and in so doing also provided help to protect future generations of workers from environmental- / work-related poisoning. Ones who survived worked with the government to do studies on the effects of radioactivity on the human body and donated their bodies to science — radium lasts for 1,600 years so ALL of the radium girls are actually STILL RADIOACTIVE, even those who died in the early 1920s.

This book hit me hard because it brought to mind the countless other injustices that happen here and around the world, even now, today 100 years after these radium girls were lied to and told that the lip method they used was safe despite the few powerful folks who knew it was dangerous and enacted precautions for their more “valued” workers.

Of course, it led me to think of my experiences and that of countless others I know and love working in downtown NYC in the days, months and years after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Despite being told it was safe, we now know it was not safe. The air we lived in, the dust we trudged through, the thoughts of those who died in the attacks always in our minds.

And then, 15 years later, I was diagnosed with cancer, the first in my family. My husband was a first responder and was being monitored and checked through the WTC (World Trade Center) medical program and now I am hoping to be, too.

Cancer sucks and the reality is that no one knows why things happen — and my own personal motto after cancer changed from “everything happens for a reason” to “it could be worse.” Here’s to us all staying someplace metaphysically where we can say, “it could be worse.” Here is to us learning as a world to protect others if and when we can, always.

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http://beta.docker.cancerhealth.com/blog/radium-girls-redux