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Paper Trail

How the Planet-Altering Disaster of “Forever Chemicals” Was Kept Secret

3M knew that harmful “forever chemicals” had seeped into people’s blood decades ago and continued making them. A former company scientist helped reporter Sharon Lerner understand how a global environmental crisis was kept under wraps.



hosted by Jessica Lussenhop, with reporting by Sharon Lerner

September 3, 2026, 8:22 am



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that a secret. One 3M scientist helped reporter Sharon Lerner understand how they kept it quiet for so long.

[Read the original story here.](#)

Transcript

Editor’s Note: “Paper Trail” is produced as an audio series. If you are able, we encourage you to listen to the series. This transcript has been lightly edited for style.

Jessica Lussenhop: So I know that you don’t know me. But you and I probably have something in common. It’s quite likely that inside you and me and almost every living thing on this crazy blue marble ... is a little substance called ... “forever chemicals.”

I’m sure you’ve heard of them. These are the chemicals, invented by humans, coating products like nonstick pans. For decades, they were put in food packaging — like, they used to be on McDonald’s hamburger wrappers. They’re in mascara and firefighting foam. On couches, carpets and raincoats, to make them stainproof and water-repellent. And from those products and from factories they’ve spread ... everywhere.

Lerner: *It’s become clear that these chemicals are actually in every state and in every country and in everybody.*

Lussenhop: My ProPublica colleague Sharon Lerner is one of the many people who helped uncover this. Forever chemicals — also known as PFAS — are ... forever. They don’t break down easily in the environment or in our bodies.

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were doing it.

Lussenhop: She learned that 3M, the company that pioneered the production of these chemicals, *knew* that these chemicals were toxic for decades, since the 1970s, but they kept making them anyway.

Lerner: *That's what transformed, kind of, a tiny problem into a planet-changing disaster. It could've been stopped.*

Lussenhop: Sharon wrote roughly 60 stories about forever chemicals and investigated: What exactly did these companies know, and when did they know it?

But there was one question in all of her reporting that she *never* got an answer to: *How* did they keep it a secret for so long? No one inside 3M who knew the secret had ever agreed to talk to her. But then ...

Lerner: *I got an email from a scientist, and she said she used to work at 3M.*

Lussenhop: This person wrote that she had worked in 3M's environmental lab in the 1990s, when she was a young scientist. And she had handled, quote, "highly sensitive data." It quickly became clear that she had known something about forever chemicals long before the public did ... but she'd never talked about it publicly.

Lerner (reading): *She said, I recently left 3M [...] after a 27-year career ...*

Lussenhop: And now, all these years later, she wanted to talk.

Lerner (reading): *I realized that the narrative I have is a missing piece of at least one strand of*



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can that be OK?" But I'm looking at my own response, which was "Dear Ms. Hansen, I am so happy to hear from you," three exclamation points. "I would LOVE," all caps, "to talk."

REPORTING CALL, Sharon Lerner: Hello?

REPORTING CALL, Kris Hansen: Hi, this is Kris.

REPORTING CALL, Lerner: Hi, Kris, it's Sharon.

Lerner: I mean, of course I was interested.

REPORTING CALL, Lerner: I could talk. I would be happy, if you wanted to talk for days, I would listen, you know ...

Lussenhop: I'm Jessica Lussenhop. This is "Paper Trail."

Lussenhop: As it turned out, Sharon and Kris Hansen, the former 3M scientist, *did* talk for days ...

REPORTING CALL, Hansen: Hey, Sharon.

REPORTING CALL, Lerner: Hey, Kris. Is this still an OK time?

REPORTING CALL, Hansen: Yeah, it's great. I just got home. It's perfect.

Lussenhop: They had many phone conversations

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IN-PERSON INTERVIEW, Lerner: *Hi, Kris!*

IN-PERSON INTERVIEW, Hansen: *I’m glad you found it. Perhaps a little bit more out of the way than you’re used to.*

IN-PERSON INTERVIEW, Lerner: *It’s lovely.*

IN-PERSON INTERVIEW, Hansen: *This a nice spot, looks out on the river.*

Lussenhop: Kris told Sharon that the natural beauty here was one of the reasons why she lives in Minnesota. Not far from 3M’s headquarters. She first started work at 3M in the summer of 1996.

Lerner: *Kris had recently finished a Ph.D. in chemistry.*

IN-PERSON INTERVIEW, Hansen: *I was just coming off of a postdoc.*

Lerner: *And she considered herself an environmentalist.*

Lussenhop: Kris told Sharon that working at a big company like 3M wasn’t her first choice ... but she became convinced.

IN-PERSON INTERVIEW, Hansen: *People said, you know, some of the biggest impacts that you could have would be to work from the inside of industry, instead of on the outside. Because on the inside, you have access to a lot more information. And so I did come to believe that I could have an impact there.*

Lussenhop: Plus, 3M wasn’t just any old chemical company. It had an amazing reputation.

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3M Innovation Commercial: We make a difference in the world because we make the leap from need to innovation. 3M innovation.

Lussenhop: 3M came to mean so much more to people than just its products. It was a testament to American ingenuity. It was a playground for scientists.

IN-PERSON INTERVIEW, Hansen: *So I think I was a pretty typical new Ph.D. analytical chemist. I was, um, excited about starting a job that I felt I could make an impact.*

Lerner: *Her first job at 3M was working in the environmental lab.*

Lussenhop: By the time Kris started working there in the '90s, 3M had been mass-producing forever chemicals for decades, which they used in their own products like Scotchgard — a liquid you can spray on stuff to make it water-repellent — and they sold it to other companies for use in a whole bunch of other products.

After she joined 3M, one of the first things Kris learned was that sometimes, these chemicals made their way from the products into the bodies of 3M factory workers. This was discovered years before Kris even started at 3M, when the company would test their workers' blood for something called PFOS — a type of forever chemical.

Lerner: *So they knew that some of their chemicals get into the workers' blood.*

Lussenhop: But her bosses told her that the chemicals were not toxic. They were just keeping their eye on the levels as a precaution. 3M had recently hired an outside lab to measure the levels in workers' blood. But that lab ran into something unexpected.

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shouldn't have been exposed to 3M's chemicals. That blood bank blood was supposed to have no PFOS. But this outside lab ran into a problem.

IN-PERSON INTERVIEW, Hansen: *It was like, there's something here that looks like PFOS.*

Lussenhop: So Kris' bosses gave her a task.

IN-PERSON INTERVIEW, Hansen: *Figure out what that thing is so we can get rid of it and do an accurate count in the, in the workers' blood.*

Lerner: *And when she did start looking into it, what she found was ...*

IN-PERSON INTERVIEW, Hansen: *It wasn't an unknown contaminant. No, there's PFOS in the blood of the non-occupationally exposed population.*

Lerner: *And at first she thinks, "Oh, that's odd," and she repeats it.*

IN-PERSON INTERVIEW, Hansen: *I made a lot of changes to both the extraction method and the analytical method.*

Lerner: *Then she repeats it many times.*

IN-PERSON INTERVIEW, Hansen: *I was like, this is definitely PFOS.*

Lerner: *It shows again that PFOS is in the blood from the general population.*

IN-PERSON INTERVIEW, Hansen: *To find a chemical associated with your company in the blood of the general population and not really know how it got there is frightening. It just opened*



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IN-PERSON INTERVIEW, Hansen: *I showed him the data, and he looked at it and he said, “This changes everything.” And he walked into his office and shut his door.*

Lerner: *Jim Johnson doesn’t come out and give her any further info, and soon thereafter ...*

IN-PERSON INTERVIEW, Hansen: *He retired just a few weeks after the discovery.*

Lerner: *He says he’s taking early retirement, and he leaves the company.*

Lussenhop: *Oh my God.*

Lerner: *Yeah.*

Lussenhop: *Does she wind up having a conversation with him where he says, “I’m retiring, but you keep going,” or, “I’m retiring, but ...” — anything? Did he give her any sense of what to do next?*

Lerner: *No. There was not a clear conversation about her work or what she should do with it or how she should proceed.*

IN-PERSON INTERVIEW, Hansen: *I think he was supportive of me, but then he was gone. And so that left me isolated and without, uh, an immediate champion.*

Lerner: *And I think she really was confused and felt adrift.*

IN-PERSON INTERVIEW, Hansen: *I just remember sitting solitarily collecting more data and trying to process things and being like, do I talk about this? Do I not talk about this? What does this mean?*

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Lerner: *And people say to her, you know, “We think you’re wrong.”*

IN-PERSON INTERVIEW, Hansen: *Like, if you can’t find a sample without PFOS, we aren’t gonna believe that this is truly PFOS. And I was defensive. I felt very personally responsible. So of course I was working my tail off to try and, and do any experiment that I could to either say, OK, I guess we made a mistake, or more likely we didn’t make that mistake. And if you have another suggestion for us, we’ll do it.*

Lerner: *At one point, one of her colleagues comes in and says, “Oh, I have some blood for you to test. Why don’t you see if you can find PFOS in this?”*

IN PERSON INTERVIEW, Hansen: *And I said, what are they? And he wouldn’t tell me. He said, “Just analyze them.”*

Lerner: *And she does, and the next morning he says, “Did you find it?”*

IN-PERSON INTERVIEW, Hansen: *Let’s see the data you collected last night, and there was PFOS in those samples, and he was jubilant. He was like, “This proves you’re wrong, because I collected those samples from my horses, and my horses have never walked on Scotchgarded carpet or eaten at McDonald’s. I didn’t have an explanation. I had no idea how it got into his horses’ blood.*

Lussenhop: Kris ended up testing all kinds of nonhuman blood.

IN-PERSON INTERVIEW, Hansen: *We looked at chickens, cows, pigs.*

Lerner: *Rabbits.*

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And it's in fish, and therefore it's in people who eat fish, and it's in the food web, which means it's everywhere. It's funny for me. It's like I've always been fascinated with eagles. They're amazing birds. I love to watch them. And so every time I saw an eagle, I would wonder, oh, I see you have a fish and you're going to feed your babies and you're going to give them some chemicals, and I hope that will be OK for your little eagle family.

Lussenhop: After Kris realized all of this, she presented her work to her colleagues showing that it was everywhere.

IN-PERSON INTERVIEW, Hansen: *One of the scientists, he said something to the effect of, "Why are you doing this? What do you hope to accomplish? This isn't helpful."*

Lussenhop: It was strange. Having more data in theory should have helped Kris prove something big was going on here. But it seemed like the more data she gathered, the more her colleagues thought it proved the opposite: that it couldn't possibly be true. It seemed like the only thing that could convince them was to find a sample *without* PFOS in it. But where?

IN-PERSON INTERVIEW, Hansen: *So we were testing any blood samples that our epidemiology department could get from different countries, from Sweden. Just whatever samples they could come up with. And we kept finding PFOS in all of the samples. And they finally came up with a pretty small group of samples that had been archived, that were collected from Korean War recruits in the early 1950s.*

Lussenhop: Meaning ... this was blood collected *before* products containing forever chemicals ... products like Scotchgard ... were being mass-produced and sold everywhere.

IN-PERSON INTERVIEW, Hansen: *It was the first dataset that we found no PFOS. And that was transformative. There was huge relief.*

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chemicals in human blood.

Lerner: *And she realizes that one of the authors is still at 3M. And she arranges to meet him.*

IN-PERSON INTERVIEW, Hansen: *And he was very friendly, and I gave him, you know, “Hey, this is what we’re doing.” And he said, “Yeah, I know. I don’t understand why everyone is making such a big deal about this. We’ve known about this since the 1970s. I was like, “What? You’ve known that there’s PFOS in the blood of non-occupationally exposed workers for 20 years?” And he was like, “Yeah, I don’t know why they’re making such a big deal about this now.”*

Lussenhop: *What?*

Lerner: *Yeah. Yeah. She’s, you know, flipping her lid, but also quietly taking notes and just taking in what he says.*

IN-PERSON INTERVIEW, Hansen: *But also, like, why, why did people give me such a hard time that I was wrong, that my data was bad, that I was arrogant, when we knew. This is — I was discovering it for the second time, not the first.*

Lerner: *They had known all along, at least somebody had known all along. It really made me imagine what she was going through and how gaslit she really was.*

Lussenhop: This scientist told Kris that back in the 1970s, the company’s lawyers told him not to tell anyone that he’d figured out that PFOS had been found in the blood of the general population.

Lerner: *What she didn’t know was: Who else knew?*

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learned and give it to me. Don't email it; just give it to me.” And uh, so, you know, I did. I went into my office and I had my notes and I typed down everything that I had learned in that meeting and, uh, shared a copy.

Lussenhop: Kris had no idea *what* would happen to these notes she took.

IN-PERSON INTERVIEW, Hansen: *If it was so easily forgotten and buried back then, like, what — you know, what's gonna happen now?*

Lussenhop: That's next.

—

Lussenhop: In early 1999, Kris is invited to a really important meeting. She would have the chance to present her findings to 3M's CEO. Kris is encouraged by this. Maybe this is her big shot to get someone to finally listen.

Lerner: *So she prepares, practices, makes these transparencies and explains all her findings, and she's got many pages. She goes up to the executive suite on a special elevator.*

IN-PERSON INTERVIEW, Hansen: *And it is very intimidating because you, you get off the special elevator and you have to, you know, reshow your badge to the administrative assistant who's there.*

Lerner: *And when she gets there, they're at a big table, all these men with suits.*

IN-PERSON INTERVIEW, Hansen: *And the CEO was at the very end of the table. And it was just — even at the time. struck me as kind of comical because I'm at one end of this table. and wav at*

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Lerner: *It was her boss, yeah. And as this is all going on, she looks up.*

IN-PERSON INTERVIEW, Hansen: *I’m looking down this table, with the CEO at the head of the table. His eyes kind of droop, and his chin drops, and he nods off.*

Lerner: *He was asleep.*

Lussenhop: *No!*

Lerner: *That’s, yeah.*

IN-PERSON INTERVIEW, Hansen: *And I remember even in that moment, kind of stepping back and saying, well, this is just bizarre because these guys are way more agitated than I would’ve thought. And the person who they’re agitated for is asleep! You know, at some point he woke up, and he never said a word the entire time. And just, you know, at the end, one of the business leaders kind of dismissed me with a wave of his hand, and I grabbed my three-ring binder and left the room.*

Lerner: *She’s told not to ask questions, and going forward, it — there’s a different team who will be working on PFOS, and she won’t be on it.*

Lussenhop: *A few months later, Kris and her husband went to a picnic with a bunch of 3M scientists.*

IN-PERSON INTERVIEW, Hansen: *My father hosted this picnic for 3M’s top scientists, corporate scientists. And often, uh, my husband and I would just go and help. And so I was like, I don’t know, grilling corn. And one of the people came up to me and, you know, asked me if I thought I was*



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IN-PERSON INTERVIEW, Hansen: *I'm not trying to paint myself as some kind of an eco hero, because there was also very much an element of, like, my husband's in school right now, we have twins on the way and I'm in my first job. This isn't a great time for me personally to walk away, especially with a reputation now as someone who is kind of a troublemaker.*

Lerner: *She has twins and then another child, and she moves to another division of 3M that has nothing to do with these chemicals, and she leaves the environmental lab. She really buries the issue, and she seems to sort of seal it and put it on a shelf and walk away.*

Lussenhop: So here at last was the answer to Sharon's question, which was: How does a secret this huge, this planetary, stay a secret for so long in a company where some people knew? The answer, at least in the story Sharon found, isn't in burned records or violent threats. In this instance, it was, in part, discouraging and questioning a young employee so consistently and so harshly that she eventually gives up trying to talk about it. The secret was also kept because Kris didn't have all the information. Her bosses told her these chemicals weren't toxic.

IN-PERSON INTERVIEW, Hansen: *I mean, I really clung to that: "At least it's not harmful." I didn't look at that as critically as I should have, but it almost would've been too much to bear at the time. I think what I was afraid of is that I would find out that it was hazardous to human health.*

IN-PERSON INTERVIEW, Lerner: *And then what would've happened?*

IN-PERSON INTERVIEW, Hansen: *And then I, I'd just be, like, it's everywhere: that those eagles and those fish, like, there is real potential for these to cause harm.*

Lerner: *The scale is planetary, right? I mean, if you have a contaminated plant, you could clean it up. If it's in every human being and animals around the world, um, that's virtually impossible to clean up.*

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making PFOS-related chemicals. Which they did, in 2002. This was, in part, thanks to Kris’ research. But 3M swapped in another forever chemical as a replacement, which also stays in the environment and builds up in the body.

Around the same time in West Virginia, a bunch of cows who were grazing downstream from a DuPont site started getting sick, foaming at the mouth. More than a hundred eventually died. It turned out that the water on the farm contained forever chemicals. That ... became the subject of a lawsuit, which ended in a settlement, a three-part series by Sharon Lerner ... and the plot of a movie called “Dark Waters,” all alerting the public about forever chemicals.

But Kris didn’t know any of that. When she’d see news about forever chemicals, she told Sharon she’d just kind of avoid it.

IN-PERSON INTERVIEW, Hansen: *I maybe would glance at it, but I wouldn’t read it very carefully. It’s almost like I just didn’t really want to know.*

Lussenhop: Until 2021. An old college professor sent her a message with a link to a video.

IN-PERSON INTERVIEW, Hansen: *A John Oliver video.*

LAST WEEK TONIGHT WITH JOHN OLIVER, John Oliver: *Our main story tonight concerns chemicals. Specifically, we’re gonna be talking about a particular class of chemicals tonight, called PFAS.*

IN-PERSON INTERVIEW, Hansen: *He was reporting on PFAS and the effect that it had on communities.*

LAST WEEK TONIGHT WITH JOHN OLIVER, John Oliver: *The Teflon mesh decomposes to*



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IN-PERSON INTERVIEW, Hansen: *He’s wrong. He’s talking about all the ways that it’s harmful, and it’s not. I said, it kind of makes me mad, honestly.*

Lerner: *She writes back to her professor, and the professor says ...*

IN-PERSON INTERVIEW, Hansen: *“Are you sure it’s wrong?” And so I kind of rolled my eyes and then I went in and I was like, OK, I’m just gonna go to the literature.*

Lerner: *And sitting in her kitchen, Kris googles the health effects of the chemical that she had found so many years ago.*

IN-PERSON INTERVIEW, Hansen: *And I couldn’t believe how many articles there were on the toxicity associated with fluorochemicals.*

Lerner: *Just kind of open-mouthed scrolling, realizes that it affects children’s immunity, that it has links with cancer, that it can affect obesity. The health data starts to pile up, and it’s pretty damning. And she’s reading through this and she’s stunned and has, I think, a very uncomfortable mix of emotions.*

IN-PERSON INTERVIEW, Hansen: *Yeah. I mean, angry at 3M for many of the things that they’ve done. But also angry at myself for realizing how quickly I accepted a statement about toxicity because it was comfortable for me. Like, it’s a little bit unforgivable.*

Lussenhop: *It was after reading through all this medical literature that Kris sent Sharon that email and they started talking. A lot.*

And as the two spoke, Sharon went back through her old documents — internal 3M documents that had helped her report out *what 3M knew*. There was one document that had been a key



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like, she did do that work. She did her best at the time. She kinda like put this message in a bottle in the '90s, and, like, you got it. Eventually.

Lerner: *That's funny. Yeah. Yes.*

Lussenhop: But there were gaps in Kris' knowledge, too, about what had happened to her at 3M all those years ago.

Lerner: *I became curious about what she didn't know, which was who among her bosses actually knew what was going on while they were essentially gaslighting her. Which of them knew? So I did try to figure that out.*

Lussenhop: Around the same time that Sharon was speaking with Kris, there were all these lawsuits against 3M going on over forever chemicals. Courts were forcing 3M to release more and more of their own internal records. New documents that Sharon could get her hands on. Some of them further confirmed that 3M had known that PFOS was in the blood of the general public before Kris started working there.

Lerner: *One of those documents was written by none other than Jim Johnson, her former boss. So I literally gasped when I read that.*

Lussenhop: Jim Johnson had sent that document to another employee — the guy who ended up becoming Kris' second boss.

Lerner: *These were Kris' two bosses, one who had given her the assignment, the other one who had never let on that he knew anything about what she was talking about. So both of them knew the whole time. That's what that showed me.*

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Johnson said to me is that he saw himself as a good soldier and a loyal soldier, someone who will keep secrets because that’s what you do for a good employer.

Lussenhop: *Did you ever get a satisfying answer from him about why he did what he did with Kris and sort of sent her down this rabbit hole?*

Lerner: *He said that he was frustrated that the information about, uh, its presence in blood hadn’t become public, and that he basically wanted it to come out, and that he planted the seed by asking Kris to do the work analyzing the blood from the lab. He kind of set it all in motion, and he did it because he wanted it to come out.*

Lussenhop: *There’s something very puppetmaster-y about that.*

Lerner: *Yeah, the analogy he used, he said he compared her to a vending machine. He said he knew what he was putting in, and he got what he expected out.*

Lussenhop: *Oh my God.*

Lerner: *Yeah. And when I pointed out to him, “Well, you know, like, it’s actually been quite a trauma for her, very difficult.” He said, “I didn’t say I was a nice guy.”*

Lussenhop: *When Sharon reached out to Kris’ second boss, he told Sharon he didn’t remember the specifics about his interactions with Kris.*

Lussenhop: *What did Kris say when you told her about your conversation with Jim Johnson?*

Lerner: *She was upset.*

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PHONE CALL, Hansen: *Jim knew the historical data. He knew my data. His boss knew. So I, I just feel like it also implicates the others. And then they dragged me through that whole period of saying, you're wrong, you're wrong, you're wrong. And they all knew that I was right. Makes me so mad.*

PHONE CALL, Lerner: *Yeah. Well, Kris, I'm sorry to dump all this on you.*

PHONE CALL, Hansen: *That's OK. It's — I have a therapist now.*

PHONE CALL, Lerner: *That's good.*

PHONE CALL, Hansen: *It's all right.*

PHONE CALL, Lerner: *Off to the therapist with you, then.*

Lerner: *People, when they tell stories about what they've done in their lives to others and to themselves, they often see themselves as the hero, right? 'Cause they're the hero of their own life. Um, and I think that Jim sort of saw himself as the hero, as someone who did his best to get this information out and did it by setting up Kris. But it did get me thinking about how secrets are kept.*

Lussenhop: *Yeah, it's like — you know, a company is just a bunch of people. Why would they all kind of do their little part to keep this information a secret for so long?*

Lerner: *Well, I think that the genuine affection for the company was real.*

Lussenhop: *Yeah, I have to say that again, as someone from Minnesota, I really do understand this kind of just, like, general affection towards 3M. And I also think that the first time I learned about some of these chemicals and the effect that they were having, I didn't wanna believe it either.*



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Boston Globe and boom, you know? And, and there, that is sort of the Hollywood narrative of things, like that there's a dark secret and then it gets exploded in a moment and that's certainly not how this played out. It isn't all clear-cut like that.

Lussenhop: In 2025, 3M phased out manufacturing PFAS. In a statement, a 3M spokesperson said, “3M has led industry in addressing PFAS in the environment.” The company is “proactively managing PFAS,” and that 3M’s approach to the chemicals has evolved along with “the science and technology of PFAS, societal and regulatory expectations, and our expectations of ourselves.” “3M has taken, and will continue to take, actions to address PFAS manufactured prior to the phaseout. This includes a \$1 billion global investment in state-of-the-art water treatment technologies at our largest water-using locations. In 2024, 3M committed \$10.3 billion to assist public water suppliers across the United States that had detected PFAS in their water or would do so in the future.”

The company and its scientists have not admitted wrongdoing or faced criminal liability for producing forever chemicals or for concealing their harms.

Sometimes Kris looks back on all of this and fantasizes about what she could have done differently. What would the best version of herself have done in that meeting with 3M’s CEO?

IN PERSON INTERVIEW, Hansen: *The hero version of myself would say, let's just wait until the CEO has finished his nap, and then, you know, he can tune back in because this is important. Superhero Kris would've been stronger, um, would have been more deliberate and more inclusive in the communications because I think sort of the wider you communicate things, the harder it is to control it.*

Lerner: *So is she a whistleblower? Is she not a whistleblower? I don't know. She's a human, you know, who found herself in this really difficult situation and helped a lot. She could've helped*



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hear in this episode.



Jessica Lussenhop   

I am the host of "Paper Trail," a podcast about following the evidence.

Need to Get in Touch?

Please reach out if you have ideas for a future episode of our podcast.



Sharon Lerner   

I cover health, the environment, foreign aid and the agencies that govern them.

Need to Get in Touch?

I write about health in the U.S. and abroad as well as human rights, the environment and foreign aid. I'd like to speak with government workers and anyone who has an important story to tell. I take confidentiality seriously.

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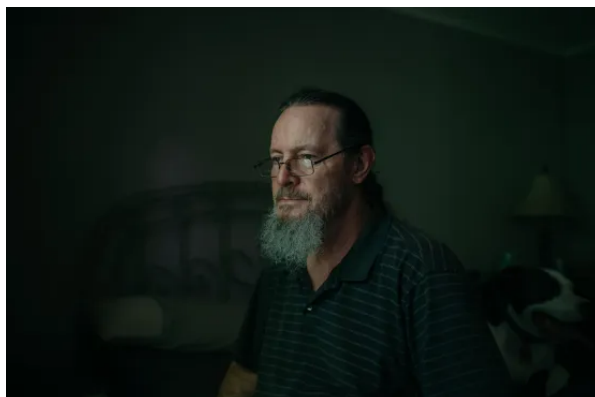
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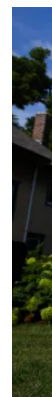
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