For the fifth year, Restoring Eden is partnering with public health researchers from the Indiana School of Public Health and Wheaton College. Local eco-justice activists in South Chicago living near the petcoke piles have story after story of increased asthma, heart disease and respiratory illness. But with no way to confirm, measure and compare the illness rates with control groups and national averages, they lack solid, unbiased scientific research; such as a household health census collecting data that compares their disease rates to that of control communities and to national averages.

These neighborhood’s have long been located near oil refineries, which are inherently dirty, but a new threat has recently emerged from the refining of Canadian tarsands and the huge uncovered piles of petcoke. The petcoke is a talcum-like dust loaded with toxins like arsenic, mercury, lead. Researchers have found little to no research that measures the petcoke dust at the nanoparticle level. Pollutants at the ultra fine level are suspected of passing through the lungs, enter the bloodstream and spread toxins through out the body.

Local community members are asking tough questions that need solid answers. Are the cancer rates higher for those living near the refineries? Are more people dying earlier? Do more kids have asthma? Does the public health of those people living closer to the refiners differ from similar communities living further away?

*No one knows. But we aim to find out. Join us this March!*
That’s why we need your help. Come stay with us over your spring break week.

We will be staying at Wheaton College’s Urban House in North Chicago (not at their main campus). Every day we will commute to impacted neighborhoods, knock on doors and ask people to participate in an anonymous health survey. Later, researchers with air monitors will measure the level of nanoparticles in the community atmosphere.

This year is a pilot project. Our goal is to gather enough household health histories to establish a baseline for further research. Nearly 75% of the impacted communities speak Spanish as their primary language, so volunteers who speak/read Spanish will be paired with those who do not.

This is real research. Our past research has been published in five peer-reviewed journals. Restoring Eden and the public health researchers work hard to make sure the survey and the sample populations are unbiased. You will spend about six hours a day interviewing community members in groups of two, and vanloads of six with a driver. All teams will stay connected using two-way radios with GPS maps showing each other. While we are not expecting any trouble, the local police precinct will have an officer nearby in case we need a speedy response. All student volunteers will have to be IRB certified by Indiana University, which is free but takes about three hours online to complete.

Consider asking your professor if you can get extra credit, especially those studying in nursing, social work, urban studies or other programs that emphasize cross-cultural communications and research. Cost includes training, lodging, food and transportation for the project. Volunteers are responsible for getting to Chicago. We can arrange for pick up at bus, train stations or the airport. Space is limited. If you can afford to pay the $250, please do, as money is tight for this type of eco-ministry and we can use every dollar we can.

However, if you are willing to volunteer but your money is tight, we have raised some funds for need-based scholarships; lowering the cost from $250 to only $100 for proficient Spanish speakers and from $250 to only $150 for non-Spanish speakers.

This research is about real people suffering real hardships. After the first few nervous knocks on a door, almost every past surveyor found the experience heartwarming, if a little bittersweet. Sweet and friendly, but unable to move away, these communities are coming together to confront the polluters. To make their case, they need more than anecdotal stories of illness. They will need solid scientific data able to withstand the scrutiny and attacks of the energy industry and their attempt to discount the community’s health concerns.

Is this project a good fit for you?

Restoring Eden is a Christian organization, concerned about ecological stewardship and environmental justice. We welcome volunteers from all faiths. Nonetheless, some of the discussions will be framed primarily within a Christian framework. In addition, we will also be staying at the Wheaton College Urban House and so we fall under their standard Christian college covenant; no tobacco, alcohol or coed housing.

What you will take away, however, is a changed heart as you have spent the week hearing deeply personal stories of people, hearing their tragedies, seeing their dignity, sharing their pain. Household health histories, especially in zip codes considered some of the most toxic in the country, bring back bittersweet memories for people who have lost loved ones. This research is desperately needed by the locals who have asked for our help.

Spring Break
Mar. 1 to 7
Mar. 8 to 14
Mar. 15 to 21
Mar. 22 to 28
in South Chicago, IL
$250 cover all costs

Cost: $250 for the week
Scholarships available

Request an electronic application and/or more detailed information at
info@restoringeden.org

Neighborhood next to oil refineries