

Sick of asking why

Cancer doc pairs personal strife with science

by [Ali Gadbow](#)


Director Chanda Chevannes's *Living Downstream* is a convincing and necessary documentary. It's also, despite its daunting subject matter, a movie you'll want to watch.


Noted biologist and author Sandra Steingraber was diagnosed with bladder cancer when she was 20 years old. She survived, but nearly 30 years later there is no guarantee her cancer won't come back. Like every cancer patient her first question was, "Why?" But because Steingraber's a scientist, she kept on asking. *Living Downstream* does not attempt to explain Steingraber's cancer, and despite her strong hunch that human-made chemicals in the environment where she grew up had a lot to do with it, neither does Steingraber.


"I am a population of one," she explains in the film. For a biologist, one is not a useful sample size. All she can claim to know, on the basis of her experience, is what it's like to have cancer. That makes Steingraber a likely mouthpiece for public health concern, but her success as the voice of the "environmental human rights movement" is due to conscientious scientific precision, her calm authority and her ability to construct a strong, concise narrative from a stack of mind-numbing study publications.


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Living Downstream

High incidence in cancer crops up in areas exposed to agricultural runoff, industrial waste and other sources of chemical contamination. While no one has been able to demonstrate an indisputable connection between environmental contamination and these cancers, it's a fact that industry and agriculture have released and continue to release carcinogens. Carcinogens, by definition, cause cancer. People die of cancer.

Steingraber's voice literally dominates the film in the form of interviews, lectures and voiceover, but Chevannes manages to provide context through the work of scientists across North America and the legacy of biologist activist Rachel Carson, plus a separate perspective on Steingraber's more intimate struggles. A few pitch-perfect moments provide all the emotional force you would expect from a "cancer movie," minus the unpleasant tang of emotional manipulation.

When confronted with unpleasant realities, looking the other way is natural. *Living Downstream* does an excellent job of engaging the viewer's curiosity and telling an inconvenient truth through the lens of interesting science and one fascinating woman.

Living Downstream screens at the Wilma Theatre Friday, March 5, at 7 PM, in celebration of Women's Voices for the Earth's 15th anniversary. \$10/\$8 advance at Rockin Rudy's.