

Boston University School of Public Health

Department of Environmental Health

Gallery I

From the monograph & traveling exhibition

*Breath Taken: The Landscape &
Biography*

of Asbestos

an exhibition by Bill Ravanese

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Joe Darabant, Johns-Manville Plant in H Building. The workers chipped in to present Joe with two wedding gifts—a clock, so he can get to work on time, and a rolling pin so his wife, Helen, can prod him on a bit. Joe's clothing is covered with chrysotile asbestos fibers. 1949

Joe Darabant was forced to retire in 1974 at age 50 due to his poor health. He died from asbestosis on April 26, 1990 at the age of 66. This photograph was made in 1989 in Joe's bedroom in Manville, New Jersey. [Retirement photograph](#)

JOE DARABANT, Manville, NJ. Joe worked in "E" & "H" Buildings at the Johns-Manville Plant for more than 30 years, cutting asbestos shingles, and making asbestos block and pipe-covering materials. He remembers the dust being so thick that much of the time he couldn't see from one end of the building to the other. When he retired in 1974, the JM Medical Center attributed his poor health to "chronic bronchitis" and a "weak heart." He was subsequently diagnosed as having asbestosis. Such is the insidious and progressive nature of this disease that now, fifteen years later, he must take oxygen twenty-four hours a day. more than a dozen of his friends and acquaintances at the plant have died of asbestos disease. "If JM had only told us that there was something dangerous, we would all be here today," he said recently. "I wish I would have some friends. Now, all my friends are in the cemetery."

Note: In [Paul Brodeur's essay, *The Asbestos Tragedy*](#), he outlines the cover-up and JM's company policy with respect to informing the work force about their medical condition. Below are a few caveats from the essay, *The Asbestos Tragedy* (© 1990):

In 1943, Vandiver Brown told representatives of the Union Asbestos & Rubber Company, Paterson, New Jersey, that Johns-Manville did not inform its employees when their chest X-rays showed that they had developed asbestos disease. Brown said that if the workers were told, they would stop working or file claims against Johns-Manville, and that it was company policy to let them work until they quit because of asbestosis, or die as a result of it.

In 1949, Dr. Kenneth Smith, who would subsequently become the medical director of Johns-Manville, sent a memorandum to company headquarters concerning seven asbestos mill employees whose X-rays showed signs of early asbestosis. The memo, which did not come to light until 1976, provided written evidence that Johns-Manville was following a policy of not informing its workers when they developed the disease. "But as long as the man is not disabled it is felt that he should not be told of his condition so that he can live and work in peace and the company can benefit by his many years of experience."

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