

CTOPINION

How two women got Ireland to repair crumbling homes

BY CAROLYN LUMSDEN

Dream homes in Ireland, just as in Connecticut, are turning to nightmares because of dangerous minerals in their concrete.

In Connecticut, pyrrhotite is causing basement walls to crack and crumble. But if there's any mineral that can rival pyrrhotite for ruining a home, it's Ireland's muscovite mica.

Chunks of houses in Ireland's Donegal County are falling off because of muscovite in their concrete block walls. This type of mica weakens the concrete to the point where it's easy to dig a hole in the wall with a fingernail. (Muscovite mica is, incidentally, fairly common in Connecticut.)

"I want this house tossed," says Veronica Lafferty, whose four-bedroom home in Carndonagh overlooks lush green fields. "It's not safe. It's 10 years we've been going through this. I've just had enough of it."

Ireland's plight will sound familiar to the nearly 800 homeowners who have filed complaints with the state about their cracking basement walls.

'We Were Called Nut Jobs'

Mrs. Lafferty's home is one of thousands in the far north of Ireland that are believed to have excessive muscovite mica. Most of the concrete blocks have been traced to a single manufacturer.

Homeowners are reluctant to sue, however, because lawsuits are expensive in Ireland, and the manufacturer has no insurance.

The Laffertys can't afford to repair their home. So they have nowhere to turn but the government that failed to protect them.

The Irish government, though, is already spending tens of millions of Euros fixing homes around Dublin, 150 miles to the south, that are buckling from another mineral, pyrite.

Fortunately for the Laffertys, Donegal County has the Mica Action Group, including two of its leaders, Eileen Doherty and Ann Owens.

These two homeowners, with the help of other afflicted residents, have mounted a remarkable campaign. In six years, they've gone from a small band meeting around Ann's kitchen table to more than 1,200 registered members.



CAROLYN LUMSDEN PHOTOS

The house of Joanne and Don McLaughlin in Inishowen Peninsula, County Donegal, Ireland. Chemicals in the concrete are causing it to crumble, not unlike homes in northeastern Connecticut.



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homes. The minister for education singled out Ann and Eileen for praise.

"We were called vexatious, we were called nut jobs, all kinds of things before it went from local level right up to meeting Leo Varadkar [the Irish prime minister]," said Ann, whose day job is as an information officer for the county.

It's citizens like Eileen and Ann who force governments to recognize that dangerous concrete is a community problem — and a failure of government oversight — rather than just tough luck.

'Big Grown Men Sobbing'

In 2013, local engineer Damien McKay spoke on a local radio show about unusual cracks in houses in Ireland's beautiful, windswept Inishowen Peninsula, the heart of the mica problem. The phone lines lit up.

He then held a public meeting in Letterkenny, the largest town in the county. A hundred people showed up — a considerable number for a town of 19,000 on a cold Thursday night.

He suggested the homeowners band together. The Mica Action Group was born at Ann Owen's house. Eileen was an early member.

At first, the group asked for a government investigation. They were told, "You have no evidence to suggest this is a big problem. Even if you do, it's not our problem," Eileen said at Caffé Banba in Malin Head, the northernmost town in Ireland.

So Eileen set up an online registry. She has a Ph.D. in business management.

She got 1,200-plus people not just to register but to fill out a detailed survey. The Mica Action Group then held a meeting that 350 people attended, including prominent politicians. They'd been warned if they didn't show up, their empty chairs onstage would have their names on them.

Homeowners told the politicians their stories. "People were bawling, big grown men sobbing into the microphone," Ann said.

Within weeks, the women had their first of several meetings in Dublin with ministers and members of Parliament. Their findings pinpointed the areas affected and the dates homes were built — and showed that the overwhelming majority of homes had the same block supplier.

There was one more obstacle, however: The Mica Action Group had to show that homeowners had nowhere else to turn.

"This was done through writing to insurance providers, mortgage providers, lawyers, etc.," Eileen said.

Still, the group knew the odds were long. Parliament was already helping thousands of pyrite-damaged homes around Dublin. "There are loads of votes there. We're too far away geographically," Eileen said.

One politician told them, "You girls better stop. You gotta stop exaggerating the numbers."

But it was becoming obvious that the mica was eating away not just at homes but schools and welfare housing as well.

In 2015, the investigation that the Mica



Ann Owens, one of the leaders of the Mica Action Group in County Donegal, Ireland.



Eileen Doherty, one of the leaders of the Mica Action Group in Ireland.



Oliver and Veronica Lafferty in their crumbling home in Carndonagh, Ireland.

Action Group had sought began. Its report two years later found that nearly 5,000 dwellings could have mica.

Last fall, the prime minister came to see the damage for himself. "This has to be fixed, it's only fair," he said.

It was a triumph for the kitchen-table strategists.

'Email torture'

A few years earlier, across the Atlantic Ocean, homeowners in Canada had slightly different tactics.

Pyrrhotite was destroying Trois-Rivieres basements — the same mineral afflicting northeastern Connecticut. The Canadians mobilized in 2009.

They held several marches, spoke out at shareholder meetings of the company that built their homes, and practiced "email torture," questioning insurance and government officials daily for a year.

That group, now named Coalition d'Aide aux Victimes de la Pyrrhotite (Coalition for Aid of Victims of Pyrrhotite), eventually got government to pay for fixing thousands of homes. It's also won major reforms in the home-warranty program.

Here at home, Tim Heim and Cheryl Cranick began the Connecticut Coalition Against Crumbling Basements in 2016, soon after reporter George Colli broke the pyrrhotite story on NBC Connecticut. Hundreds of people attend the coalition's meetings, and its Facebook page is followed by nearly 3,000.

Connecticut also has the "crumbling concrete queens," as they call themselves. This group attends every public meeting

on pyrrhotite and educates politicians from the benches. It includes Linda Tofolowsky, the first known victim of pyrrhotite; Debra MacCoy, whose table is piled high with research; Christina Beebe Mailhos, former first selectman in Willington; Mary Anne Williams, who keeps reporters up on pyrrhotite news; and engineer Michelle Burnham.

Their work and the heartbreaking stories of many other homeowners told in newspapers and on television have made lawmakers take pyrrhotite seriously.

The state is bonding \$100 million over five years to fix homes. A surcharge on insurance policies is expected to raise another \$70 million, at least, over a decade. There are also tax breaks for victims.

Ancient Romans knew how to make a concrete that would last 19 centuries. Many homes in Connecticut are cracking after 19 years. It's a shame that today's consumers are so poorly protected from bad concrete. It's heartening that when they band together, they can get justice.

All these leaders — from Ireland, Canada, Connecticut and now Massachusetts, which also has pyrrhotite problems — will talk at an Oct. 5 public forum at Ellington High School from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Carolyn Lumsden, the Society of Professional Journalists' 2018 Pulliam Editorial Writing Fellow, is working in partnership with The Courant to continue to examine Connecticut's crumbling concrete problem. Lumsden retired in December as The Courant's opinion editor.

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