

## The “WHO says we need fresh air?” MCS awareness campaign



**This MCS awareness campaign was done by a single person, using her artistic creativity to get the message out to the general public.**

*Keywords: activism, art, MCS, multiple chemical sensitivity, environmental illness, Marie LeBlanc*

### **The need for awareness**

Most people have never heard about multiple chemical sensitivity (MCS) or environmental illness (EI), or they may have seen something in the media which typically portray the sick people as weird, or even as mentally ill.

When someone gets sick and needs to ask for some understanding of their need for unpolluted air, it helps tremendously if people have heard about the illness before. That goes both for family members, coworkers, and bosses.

Building awareness can also help when activists demand that basic civil rights also apply to people with this disability. Politicians, judges, lawyers, administrators, and bureaucrats need to know too.

## **Marie LeBlanc**

Marie LeBlanc is a Canadian who has lived with MCS for many years. She has used art to raise awareness about MCS for a decade, especially through photography, which has been displayed at several art galleries and museums.

She started her campaign in Winnipeg, Manitoba, where she lived. As she became unable to find housing that didn't make her sick, she moved into a modified van and took her campaign around the western provinces of Canada, as she traveled to look for places she could live safely and with proper medical care.

At times, she was so affected by her computer that other people had to step in and do some of the work when she was too sick to finish it.

## **The campaign**

The “WHO says we need fresh air?” campaign took place in the years 2017 to 2020. It took brief quotes from people with MCS and put them in front of regular people to make them wonder and think.

“Someone told me that they only wore a little perfume.

I replied ‘Sure as long as you don't mind a little rat's poison in your coffee!’ as she was just about to take a sip.”

~ Theresa, Canada

*Sample quote that was displayed*



*Marie LeBlanc in front of the Winnipeg Centennial Concert Hall.*

During an opera performance at the Winnipeg Centennial Concert Hall, she put up a table outside the entrance door (see picture). She displayed the quotes on a large monitor there, and they were also displayed on some screens in the walk areas inside. It is important that people can see the text without having to walk up to the table, as people can be reluctant to do that.

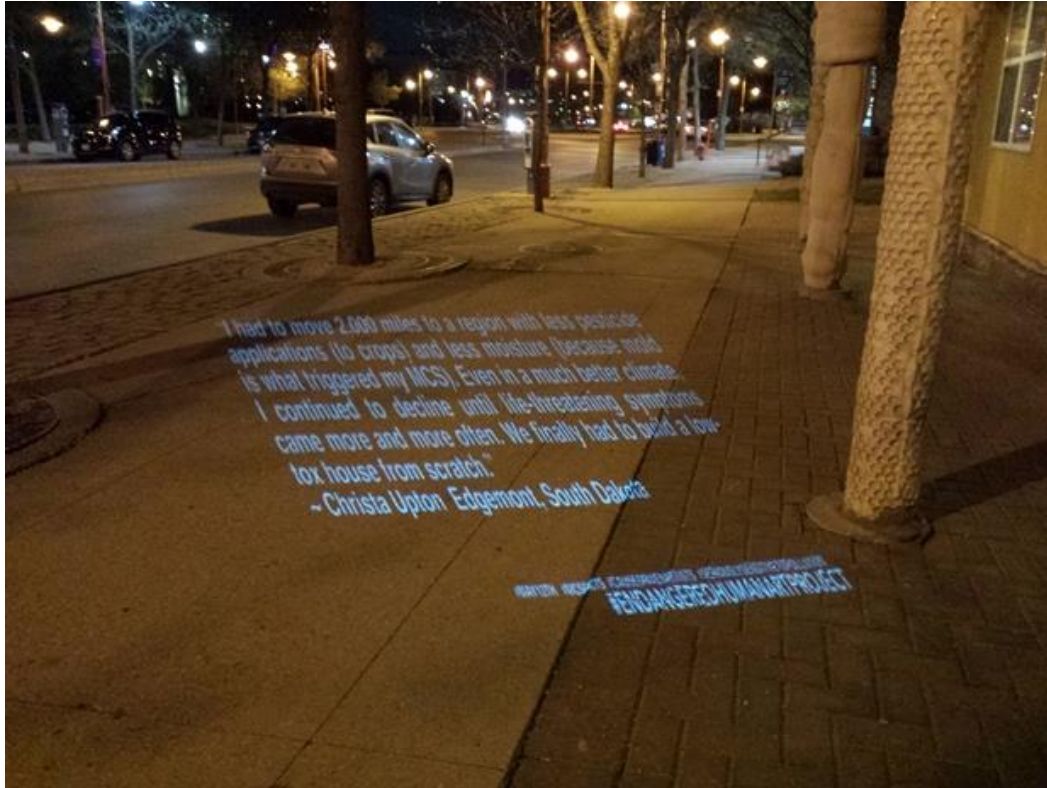
She was also able to get her messages displayed on the electronic scoreboard at the local baseball stadium during a game between the Winnipeg Goldeneyes and the Sioux Falls Canaries. The manager had already heard about the project, so that made it easier when Marie called and asked.

## **The projector**

Someone who believed in the project gave Marie a digital projector for free. It was so powerful she could use it to project the quotes onto sidewalks, walls, parked cars, and elsewhere. She did that around the Old Market Square in the center of Winnipeg, and other places.

She usually did it on a normal evening, but once she also did it while there was a festival with booths on the square.

The picture at the start of this article shows people watching the projections on the side of a building on Old Market Square.



*Projecting a quote onto the sidewalk near Old Market Square.*

The projector was hooked up to Marie's laptop computer. Both needed electricity, so she had to ask permission to use an outlet.

She had to be present to set it up, take it down, and protect the equipment from theft and rain. That also allowed her to talk to some of the spectators.

It was such a novel way to get the message out that people paid attention.

## **Nuit Blanche**

Marie participated one year in the annual Nuit Blanche festival in Winnipeg. It is an overnight outdoor contemporary art festival with exhibits and performers, where hundreds of people saw at least some of her projections.

She received a lot of positive comments, though there were also a few hecklers in the audience.



## **Art galleries**

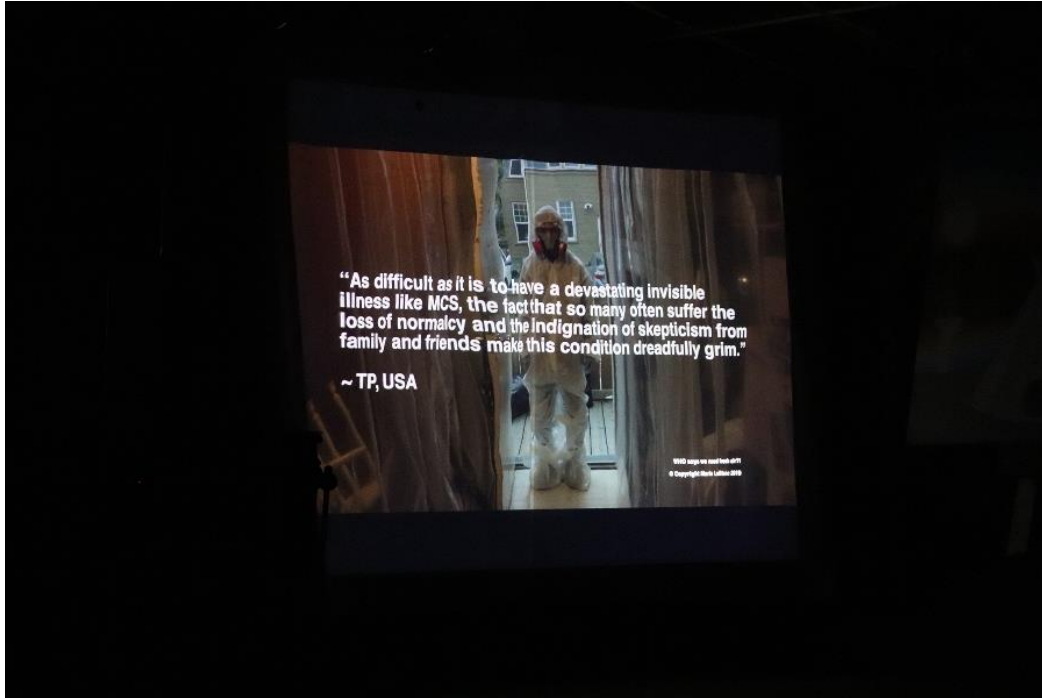
Several art galleries displayed her pictures, which are much more subtle than the quotes. Many of her pictures include herself in some way.

It was mostly small local galleries, but she also exhibited at the Women's Art Museum in Edmonton, Alberta.

One gallery allowed her to set up her projector on their outside patio area in the evening. They hung some sort of sheet to use as the projection screen.



*Audience at the Little Manitou Art Gallery.*



*Projected image at the Little Manitou Art Gallery.*

When she had a good projection screen, she used pictures underlying the text. Such detail would not work on coarser surfaces, such as building walls.

### **The media**

As Marie drove around rural western Canada in her van, she contacted some of the small town newspapers and radio stations. She was interviewed a number of times and it was always done respectfully.

This approach probably wouldn't work so well in big cities, where the media have more competition and thus tend to make their stories more antagonistic and sensational.

One of these small town newspapers allowed her to project the quotes on their building. It was announced by a local radio station. Lots of people actually drove there and parked to watch the sequence from their cars (not much happening in such a small town).

### **Engaging the spectators**

Marie was nearly always present whenever the quotes were displayed. Sometimes people approached her, sometimes she approached them. This was always done

outdoors, to limit the impact of the chemical plume surrounding nearly all people. She was mostly alone. A few times a friend would be there too.

There were a lot of positive responses. Many people stated they had problems with chemicals too, but it was something they didn't normally talk about. One woman tearfully told how happy she was that finally somebody did something to make MCS more visible.

A couple told her that they knew a person with MCS, and they had not believed her illness was real. They stated that they would now try to contact her and apologize.

There were also several people who still wouldn't accept the illness. A few were loud and rude about it, one so much that onlookers started to object and intercede.

One time a person aggressively tried to get Marie to say negative things about certain types of industry. Why was never revealed, as Marie sensed she had to be really careful and didn't take the bait.

### **Photo credits**

All photos are by Marie LeBlanc, used with permission.

### **More information**

More articles about environmental illness activist work on [www.eiwellspring.org/activist.html](http://www.eiwellspring.org/activist.html).