Cleanroom Safety Fatality File

The Clean Room’s Dirty Secret

By all measures, Armida Mesa was an unlikely candidate for breast cancer. She is Latina (Hispanic women have a lower rate of the disease than most ethnic groups); she has given birth to two sons (childbearing also lowers susceptibility); she doesn’t smoke or drink; and neither her mother nor any of her seven sisters has any history of the disease. Why Mesa beat the odds and was diagnosed with cancer in 1984 at age 40 will never be known for certain.

Mesa, now 57, believes she knows why she got sick-and why her co-worker Suzanne Rubio died of breast cancer at age 36, and why several more of her acquaintances also developed cancer. They all worked at an IBM semiconductor plant in San Jose, California, making the silicon chips that run computers, cell phones, and other high-tech products. Now, along with 250 other semiconductor workers and their families, Mesa is trying to prove that the toxic mixture of chemicals used in high-tech factories has caused cancer in workers and birth defects in their children-and that their employers knew of the hazards but did not act to protect them.