

No Justice For Pesticide Victims

People harmed by pesticides speak out for change

By Shawnee Hoover

This article is the second part of a periodic series that highlights the stories of people whose lives have been adversely impacted by pesticides. Part one, published in the Fall 2003 issue of *Pesticides and You*, provided an introduction to the subject of pesticide poisoning, which includes such issues as toxic body burdens and pesticide incident monitoring. It also profiled the cases of Loretta Haines, a victim of poisoning from a termite extermination and Lou Ann Pack, a department of transportation employee made sick by spraying herbicides. This issue of *Voices* will highlight the stories of Brenda Jones and her family whose life changed forever after a lawn care treatment, and the Hannans who lost their health and home to ant control pesticides. Many people think that because pesticides use is so common, then it must not be harmful, or because a pesticide is registered with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), then it must be safe. But as you will see, no pesticide is safe and no one is immune to the impacts of exposure to a dangerous mix of chemicals.

Typical lawn care treatment sickens family

Like most people, Brenda Jones believed the lawn care applicator of Tru-Green Chem-Lawn when he told her that the chemicals he was going to use on her lawn were so safe that he didn't even need to wear a mask. According to Brenda, she was still hesitant and asked him to wait until she was safely inside the house before he started to spray. While Brenda waited for her dog, the applicator began spraying some 15 feet behind her. Suddenly, her eyes began to burn and a cough welled up in her throat. She turned to see a cloud of silver mist coming from the nozzle held by the applicator. Instantly, she grabbed the dog and dashed into the house to escape. She washed herself and the dog off, but it was too late; the damage was already done.

As a registered nurse (RN), Brenda knew immediately she was sick. Her eyes, throat and chest burned. Her head

pounded. Her stomach was nauseous, and she couldn't stop coughing. But it wasn't until later that evening when her two children, Jeffrey (7) and Kara (3), and husband Wayne began complaining of headaches, dizziness, loose stools and other symptoms, that she really began to worry. The next day they called the lawn care company and found that they had been exposed to the commonly used weedkiller, atrazine, and synthetic pyrethroid bug-killer, bifenthrin. "We closed the windows," she says, "but the chemicals were still getting in."

The next day, the most Brenda and her family could do was lay as still as possible in their beds. Brenda was the worst off, with a burning chest, incessant cough and shortness of breath. Even the dog, who was vomiting the night before, lay very still and would not eat – classic behavior of pesticide poisoning for dogs. Being a Saturday, she left a message for her doctor and, like many people who are acutely poisoned, hoped the illness would pass on its own.

Two days after the incident, Brenda went to the doctor and was diagnosed with chemical poisoning and given some antibiotics and steroids. Her children were similarly treated. She called Florida's Poison Control Center to report the incident and was incorrectly told that they do not handle pesticides. Eventually, Brenda was told by

a lung specialist that her airway had become reactive – a condition with no real treatment except the absence of chemicals in her environment.

After working fifteen years as an RN with an impressive resume that includes Johns Hopkins Medical Center, University of California Los Angeles, Stanford University, and the John Wayne Cancer Group in California, Brenda has now lost her livelihood to this incident. The few times she has tried to go back to the operating room she has become symptomatic with dizziness, weakness and tremors and unable to complete her shift. But, she says, this is the least of her worries.

Jeffrey, Brenda's son, has had to be permanently removed



Brenda Jones and her family.

from his school due to reactions he now gets to chemical treatments either on or near the school premises. When Brenda witnessed pesticides being applied on a field adjacent to the school she asked the applicator not to spray during school hours. She received a commonly heard response: “Weed killers and pesticides are registered with the EPA and are safe to use,” the applicator told her. “They won’t hurt the children.”

Since Florida is known for its manicured lawns, Brenda was worried about others suffering a similar fate and felt compelled to report the poisoning. Roughly two weeks after the January 2003 incident, she contacted Florida’s Department of Environmental Protection. In April, Brenda received a letter from a division of Florida’s Agriculture Department telling her that the lawn care company had been questioned, but that too much time had elapsed to do an on-site inspection to determine if there was a violation of the pesticide’s label.

Atrazine is linked with endocrine disruption, neuropathy and cancer, and despite the EPA’s own findings that atrazine has widely contaminated groundwater across the country and specifically in Southern Florida, as much as 82 million pounds of the chemical are still used on lawns, fields and golf courses throughout the country. At least six countries in Europe have already banned or severely restricted its use.

“My cousin Amanda was diagnosed with a type of cancer caused by poison exposure at nine years old and died at thirteen,” says Brenda. “I will remember Amanda and every child that I have seen over the past 15 years who have died from cancers linked to pesticide exposures, and I will try to prevent this from happening to other children,” vows Brenda. “If the public were not led to believe that these pesticides were safe,” she argues, “then perhaps more people would push for laws to protect us from the unnecessary use of these chemicals.”

Toxic ant control leads to great losses

Several hours after a professional treatment for ants, Mary Jane and Lawrence Hannan and their daughter Kaitlyn reentered their home. Upon doing so however, all three of them instantly began experiencing severe flu-like symptoms and extreme fatigue. All signs indicate that the Hannans had been acutely exposed to two toxic organophosphate insecticides, chlorpyrifos (Dursban™) and diazinon (Knoxout™).

The Hannas quickly realized that their symptoms mainly persisted while they were in the house but not outside in fresh air. With little option, they were forced to vacate their home and most of their belongings and live in a motel. Upon entering the home on several occasions, even months after the application, exposure to the remaining residues put Mary Jane in the emergency room and made others sick.

The Hannans sued Pesco, the Illinois company responsible for applying the pesticides. Despite a deposition from the applicator admitting that he applied Knoxout™ at fifteen times the legal rate and medical records showing decreased levels of the enzyme cholinesterase (a key indicator of organophosphate poisoning), the Hannans lost in court because the judge said they could not prove the symptoms were not caused by an “unknown infectious agent.” To this day, almost 11 years after the tragic incident, the Hannans are unable to sell their home due to the contamination and unable to return to it due to persistent residue levels.

Organophosphates are extremely hazardous to human health. Studies in animals indicate that early childhood exposure can lead to lasting effects on learning, attention, and behavior, just like the environmental neurotoxin lead. They are also considered by the EPA to be the most likely pesticides to cause an acute poisoning. 63,000 reports, almost 25,000 involving children under 6, were made to U.S. poison control centers about unintentional residential exposures to organophosphates between 1993 and 1996.

In 2000, EPA finally pursued a phase-out agreement with the industry to stop many common uses of chlorpyrifos and diazinon. But because the phase-out deals are so weak and riddled with loopholes, countless people will continue to be poisoned by the neurotoxins. Most

victims of these pesticides, such as the Hannans, still have not received justice for the damage to their health and property. Meanwhile, environmentalists, health advocates, and many individual activists continue to push for an all-out ban that will force the agency to stop allowing industry profits to take precedence over human health and safety.

These pesticide-poisoning victims and many others will be featured in a future report from Beyond Pesticides chronicling the effects of commonly used pesticides on society. For an initial summary of the report or if you would like to share your story, please contact Beyond Pesticides.

Tools for Activists

Toxic pesticide use is unsafe and unnecessary. See *Info Services* and *Lawns and Landscapes* webpages at www.beyondpesticides.org for:

- pest management fact sheets
- organizing materials
- scientific studies
- model local policies
- U.S. GAO reports
- and more.

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