

# The Dispossessed

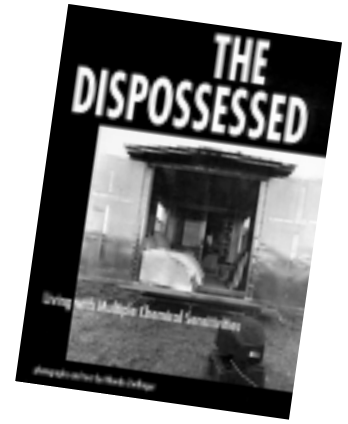
## Living with Multiple Chemical Sensitivities

by Hilary Melcarek

Photographs and text by Rhonda Zwillinger. (The Dispossessed Project, 1998). Rhonda Zwillinger, a worldwide renowned photographer who was instrumental in the East Village art movement of the 1980's, developed a severe case of Multiple Chemical Sensitivities (MCS) in 1991 and created this book to inform the general public of the existence and crippling nature of the disease. "MCS," she states, "is one of the most challenging public health problems of our time and the incidence is thought to be on the rise." With stories told in the first person and with photographs, *The Dispossessed* offers the reader a peek into the lives of more than 40 chemically sensitive people, all living within an hour and a half of Zwillinger's home in an area of Arizona that is relatively chemical-free. Victims of MCS generally need to avoid all chemicals, cannot enter toxic areas, such as schools, churches, or malls, due to the use of pesticides and toxic cleaning agents in these areas. They have a very difficult time finding medical and governmental support and non-toxic housing. Future exposure to toxic chemicals in even very small amounts could lead to seizures, dizzy spells, memory loss, disorientation and even death. The case stud-

ies involve people from a variety of backgrounds and ages. The victims have become chemically sensitive from misapplications of pesticides in the homes,

yards, and work places, from installation of new carpeting in badly ventilated office buildings, from breast implants, or from exposure to toxic fumes while fighting in the Gulf and Vietnam wars. Zwillinger conveys the message that MCS is a disease that could affect anybody at any time, and that it needs more public, medical, and governmental support and recognition. The book is designed so as not to overwhelm the reader while creating a clear picture of what MCS victims must endure just to survive every day. Below are some of the moving stories of ordinary people coping with MCS that the author shares. *Beyond Pesticides/NCAMP*, through a seed grant program, provided financial support for this project, as it has for dozens of others. For a copy, send \$18.00 to The Dispossessed Project/R. Zwillinger, P.O. Box 402, Paulden, AZ 86334-0402.



"I was born on the south shore of Long Island, New York, where many lawn chemicals and pesticides are used. I developed parasitic infections after living in Mexico and was exposed to large doses of formaldehyde during an anatomy class at the City College of San Francisco. At the age of 23, I developed MCS and Multiple Sclerosis."

— Jerry D.

"The interiors of the buses were routinely sprayed with a kerosene-based pesticide which, when outlawed, was replaced by a more toxic pesticide. I organized a petition signed by more than 400 of my co-workers protesting the unsafe working conditions. The *L.A. Times* covered the story, as did a local TV station. Approximately 5-10 percent of the bus drivers were chemically injured or MCS."

— Randy H.





"I experience personality disorder symptoms when exposed to pesticides and petrochemicals. I go into rages, slam my head against a wall, feel paranoid and regress into childlike behavior. For years, I thought I had a multiple personality disorder until I was diagnosed with MCS. The chemically injured fear discussing such symptoms because they would be labeled mentally ill and face additional discrimination, especially by the medical profession."

– Kelly S.

"The baby's father and I were very concerned when we found out I was pregnant. To help us make a decision about the pregnancy, we consulted a doctor who is an MCS specialist. The doctor had experience with babies born to a healthy parent and an MCS parent, but had no experience with pregnancies resulting from two sick people like us. The doctor thought that since our illness had been stable prior to the pregnancy, there could be a chance the baby would be born healthy."

– Ciara S.



" In 1978, I became an architect. By 1992 my health was steadily going downhill. Each job site was a chemical soup of paint, solvents, pesticides and formaldehyde; I had constant brain fog. I reinvented architecture for myself with a mission to discover what makes a building healthy. As an architecture student and apprentice, I was never taught that building materials could be detrimental to one's health; I assumed safety was being regulated by someone."

– Paula B.

"There are restrictions for two married people with MCS. We have to respect each other's food allergies and not use treatments that cause the other person to react. Our doctor suggested we do not kiss on the lips to prevent transmission of bacteria and viruses. Our health has improved and we both have put back on some weight.

We attribute this to new treatments and to our love and companionship, which is healing."

– Arlene & Larry M.

