

11/09/09

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Debbie O'Neal thought her house would kill her.

Her family had multiple nosebleeds, migraines, rashes and showed signs of osteoporosis. Debbie's osteoporosis was deemed severe. Her menstrual cycle had stopped, her muscles ached constantly and she now has fibromyalgia.

But worse, her kids were sick...all the time.

Her son Sam – through 12 years of living in their doublewide manufactured home on her in-law's Idaho ranch -- had slowly but steadily developed a growing number of medical conditions...asthma, respiratory infections, nosebleeds and constant allergies. The nosebleeds went on for an hour at a time necessitating a trip to the hospital emergency room. Sam experienced constant ear infections, nausea and several experiences with vertigo that laid him flat on the floor.

Dede, her daughter had begun to have unexplainable seizures, one that even left her turning blue.

But Debbie's husband, Ted, who spent most of his time outdoors, rarely got sick.

Then Debbie happened to turn on the television one day to a story about the victims of Hurricane Katrina and the FEMA manufactured homes that had stood for months awaiting delivery to the homeless and displaced.

High levels of formaldehyde and other forms of toxicity had registered in the drywall of the FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) trailers intended as temporary shelter for victims of Katrina in New Orleans. Air quality tests of trailers by the Sierra Club confirmed it.

Hundreds of victims of Hurricane Katrina still live in temporary housing today. However, legal guidelines regarding use of formaldehyde in manufactured and mobile homes have been approved by the U.S. Department Housing and Urban Development and for trailers being built for FEMA. The levels of allowable toxicity in manufactured homes have been severely reduced.

Debbie looked at the walls of her home – a home she had loved and cared for almost 12 years – and she knew the answer to their mysterious illnesses lay inside them.

“One night my son said, ‘Mom, I think I’m going to die if I spend another night in this house.’ That was it for me. We packed up our bags and were out the same day,” Debbie said. The entire family moved into the basement of her in-law’s house. They worked to fix the mobile home, readying it for a sale, but during every attempt, the family grew sicker.

Ted, her husband, spent most of his days outdoors, working on the 360-acre cattle ranch, away from the manufactured home.

“But at night, he would walk in the door, sit down in his chair, and just want to go to sleep,” she said. But her husband, a lifetime cattleman and rancher, experienced constant headaches and a persistent cough whenever he was in the manufactured home.

Multiple chemical sensitivity – it was a group of words that this dyed-in-the-wool, all-American, hard-working family would slowly grow to understand the meaning of as they marched from doctor to doctor. Debbie, Dede and Sam hoped for a diagnosis of the unusual combination of symptoms that afflicted them.

Dede, Debbie’s now 21-year-old daughter, began having serious respiratory attacks. In three different situations, Dede had succumbed to anaphylaxis....a severe allergic reaction.

Each episode was unexplainable, unexpected and completely terrifying. The worst happened on a golf course in Arizona that had been sprayed earlier in the week with fertilizers. Dede was hospitalized, given anti-biotics and steroids, but doctors could not

determine that cause of her illnesses. They suggested sinus surgery, but neither Dede nor Debbie approved.

Slowly, after leaving the golf course and being hospitalized for nearly two weeks, the symptoms eased but did not completely subside.

Finally, after viewing the news story about the FEMA trailers, Debbie thought she might have a piece of the puzzle.

“It was awful. None of us knew what was wrong with us and the doctors didn’t have any answers,” said Debbie, who underwent three biopsies related to her gynecological difficulties. “I think they thought we were crazy.”

When Debbie had taken extra steps to seal up her home from the cold winter Idaho weather, she had unknowingly sealed in the toxins trying to escape from the manufactured home’s formaldehyde-filled walls and what were probably other complex chemicals in the plywood press board cabinets.

“We loved our home,” said O’Neal of the doublewide where her children spent most of their childhood. “But we just couldn’t stay there.”

The National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (a division of the NIH) defines MCS as a “chronic, recurring disease caused by a person’s inability to tolerate an environmental chemical or class or foreign chemicals. MCS has also been described as a group of “sensitivities to extraordinarily low levels of environmental chemicals,” according to the institute.

According to the institute, MCS appears “to develop without cause in some individuals following acute or chronic exposure to a wide variety of environmental agents including various pesticides, solvents, drugs and air contaminants” including those found in environmentally-unhealthy buildings.

Environmental medicine specialists claim that MCS causes negative health effects in multiple organ systems, and that respiratory distress, seizures, cognitive dysfunction, heart arrhythmia, nausea, headache

and fatigue can result from exposure to levels of common chemicals that are deemed as safe.

Dr. Marilyn Black, chemist, founder and CEO of the third-party “green” certification company Green Guard, based in Atlanta, Ga., agrees that the American Medical Association does not recognize MCS as a disease, but the syndrome appears to be growing.

“If you continually challenge the body’s system with something that irritates it, then the cells start to change,” says Dr. Black, whose organization was founded out her of concern for the safety of children being exposed to chemicals in homes. Green Guard Environmental Institute emphasizes environmentally healthy air-quality programs, products and construction in homes and schools.

“We have an increase in asthma and an increase in learning disabilities nationwide,” says Dr. Black, whose interest in chemical sensitization and environmental health began when she first investigated “sick” buildings several years ago. “We realized the need for a program...our goal is to help create safer products overall.”

Formaldehyde exposure, though the focus of the investigation of FEMA trailers, may cause irritation in those exposed to it, Dr. Black says, but each individual may have a different level of sensitivity.

“Generally, it causes irritation in the eyes, nose and throat,” she says, but prolonged exposure may result in asthma and respiratory problems.

Formaldehyde’s long-term exposure is now being investigated for its ability to act as a carcinogen, says Dr. Black. In traditional homes, formaldehyde is estimated to exist at levels of 60 parts per billion. The new manufacturing requirements for FEMA trailers are at 16 parts per billion according to HUD.

But as Dr. Black reiterates, each individual responds differently to chemical exposure and often multiple chemicals may trigger a reaction.

Debbie and her children were prescribed anti-biotics and other treatments for allergies but as MCS is not recognized by the American Medical Association as a disease or disorder, doctors were not able to prescribe anything further.

But Debbie, Dede, Sam and Ted had had enough of feeling badly.

Debbie and her family never returned to that manufactured home. The original manufacturer, based in Texas, had gone out of business in the meantime, and the statute of limitations, which would have enabled the O'Neal's to file any kind of claim, had expired on their decade-old purchase. The family had no recourse against the manufacturer even though heavy amounts of formaldehyde had been found in the walls.

The house was sold to a California family that now uses it as a hunting cabin, visiting only two or three times a year.

"They never complain about anything. We told them upfront the kinds of problems we had, but they felt comfortable buying the place because they would be there only a few times a year," she says.

Debbie and her family are now weeks away from moving into a new nearly tox-free home.

After determining the source of the family's various health problems (bloody noses, tiredness, allergies, dizziness, fibromyalgia, osteoporosis, seizures, interrupted menstrual cycles); Debbie has made every attempt to include toxic-free materials in their new 2,500 square-foot home.

O'Neal admits that she expects to struggle with her health for the rest of her life. She regularly sees a naturopath, and frequently sees a chiropractor for the pain resulting from fibromyalgia.

"As my daughter says, 'We're sick, but now we know what is wrong with us) but there are a lot of other people in the world much sicker than us,'" says Debbie.

What has been most difficult for both Debbie and Dede are the limitations that their sicknesses have put on their lives. Both were forced to quit driving temporarily due to repeated episodes of vertigo and dizziness.

Dede, now living in Montana, had to quit her job temporarily but unfortunately also lost one of the great passions her life...rodeo. She left the rodeo circuit, unable to keep up physically with the typical round of weekend competitions each season. Then, since she was unable to work at the time, both her pickup truck and her horse trailer were repossessed.

But the family is slowly moving on from the invisible tentacles of chemical off gassing.

Debbie walks down the halls of her freshly painted home without worrying about the off-gassing of toxic paints...paints which release invisible toxic gases into the air leaving her with migraines, fibromyalgia and severe osteoporosis.

Instead, Debbie inhales and exhales standing inside her freshly painted without hesitation. She knows the walls of her newly completed ranch house are covered with Earth Safe Finishes, a unique toxin-free, VOC free paint that Debbie says she actually enjoyed putting on her interior walls.

"I searched for this paint," says Debbie of her quest for a voc-free paint.

The paint, designed and created by Earth Safe Finishes CEO Nancy Burkhart, is completely toxin free.

"And it lasts," says California-based Burkhart, who spoke with Debbie at length before shipping off a pallet of paint from her California-based business to Idaho.

The paint even smells good, says Debbie.

"It's a pleasure to paint," says Debbie, who recently completed the interior of her newly constructed a nearly toxin-free 2500-sq. ft. home

with a light beige coat on her walls. “I don’t know anybody that shouldn’t try these paints.”

Debbie found Earth Safe Finishes (www.earthsafefinishes.com) on the internet. Having tried all other major competitors offering low (volatile organic compounds) VOC’s such as Dunn-Edwards, Sherwin-Williams and in-house Home Depot paints.

All failed the test for toxicity tolerance, says O’Neal, who worked with toxin experts utilizing a simple plastic bag test to judge the level of each paint’s chemical emissions.

A freshly painted piece of wood is placed in a bag brown and then taped shut. When the bag is opened 24 hours later, the paint’s gases are released. Dried painted wood placed in plastic baggies for a week, each separate from the others. A bio-energetic testing machine was used, also.

“Nancy’s paints had absolutely no chemical odor and no signs of gas,” says Debbie while she discerned an odor and gases in the other paints.

While Debbie does not deny the consumer value of the other paints tested, her individual ability to tolerate chemicals is so low that only the Earth Safe Finishes were safe to her.

“I love it,” says Debbie of both the primer and paint used throughout the house. “It doesn’t need a primer. It’s like playing in whip cream.”

The house nearly finished, O’Neal is excited to move in. Earth Safe Finish products, including varnishes and stains, have been used throughout the house.

Because the family must live as tox-free as possible, Ted O’Neal is building much of the family’s furniture. He has already built a vanity for the guest bathroom completed with varnish and stain from Earth Safe Finishes.

“It’s just beautiful,” says Debbie. “The stain looks great. The varnish goes on like satin.”

Debbie says she felt great sympathy for the victims of Hurricane Katrina, many who lost their homes and now three years later, are still without permanent shelter.

“Ironically, that we experienced, too,” Debbie says. “But after time you realize that being alive and going forward is what life is all about.”