

SENSITIVITY TO POLLUTION CAN BE INHERITED

by Marie Coady

Recently, as I searched the archives of my home for a missing car title, I found a bunch of papers held together by a rusty staple. They were among a musty pile of papers stashed in a box in the cellar. They were stained and looked as if a mouse had been nibbling on the corners. The first page was missing, and I couldn't imagine what they were, but page two began with the words: There is a positive association between the incidence of childhood leukemia (ages 19 or under at diagnosis) and the availability of water from wells G and H. I'd forgotten about that report. I'd even forgotten the circumstances by which I came to have it. It had been years since I'd seen it, but now all that came flooding back in a confusing kaleidoscope of memories which needed, especially now, to be sorted out.

It was early summer of 1980, and I was new in my neighborhood. My twin sons, Sean and Philip, were also new at the Reeves School. It was early morning and very hot when the knock came on the door. A woman introduced herself as being from the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta, explaining she was doing a health survey on children in Woburn. She'd had gotten my name from the Reeves School and wanted to ask me questions about my twin sons who attended there. I was still mystified, but wanted to be cooperative. We sat at the dining room table while she asked if my children were classmates of Jimmy Anderson. I explained that Jimmy was from East Woburn, but he did attend the Resource Room at the Reeves. He was in the same grade, and my boys did have contact with him at lunch, recess and homeroom but did not know him well.

The first time the twins met Jimmy was at recess, and I think it was fall of 1979. They spied this pale, thin boy alone and leaning against the building, and decided he must be new there like them. They tried to entice him to play, but he seemed disinterested. They didn't understand an illness that could make a ten year-old boy not want to play. They continued to try, but Jimmy only wanted to talk, so they would stand with him at recess. As you may imagine Jimmy missed a lot of school due to his illness, so their contact with him was brief. That following autumn of 1980, Jimmy's illness took hold. By December of 1980 he was hospitalized, and by January, 1981 he had been released from a life of pain and suffering that no child should ever have to endure.

I explained all this to the woman doing the survey and that I had no special knowledge of the problems the G and H wells had created and had never lived in East Woburn. I also told her my children were not raised on the West Side either, and that we had only recently moved from the Highlands section of Woburn. She seemed interested and asked if anyone in the family had suffered allergies. I told her my older son and I had developed allergies while

living on Highland Street. I remembered each spring, my throat would become scratchy, then I'd lose my voice altogether. This would occur over and over throughout the spring and summer months.

On one occasion my throat became so swollen and sore I went to the emergency room at the Choate. The doctor asked me where I lived and when I told him he said, Oh yeah. You're downwind of the tannery. Until then it never occurred to me the tannery emissions could be the problem, but a few summers later, after that sole remaining tannery on Conn Street burned to the ground, I never again suffered a sore throat or lost my voice.

Now, I can't prove that it was the tannery that made me sick, but I can put two and two together and make an educated guess that the emissions from the tannery had something to do with my sore throats. I don't know of anyone else from the Highland Street area who suffered as I did, so it wasn't as if it were an epidemic. It's just that I have a particular sensitivity to pollution.

The woman from the Center for Disease Control wrote all this down and asked if she could come back another time for follow-up questions. When she had finished her study, she said I'd be sent a copy of the report. It arrived in the fall of 1980. That was the year I took a job as a teacher's aide at the Shamrock School. One of the teachers there was Diane Aufiero. I didn't know Diane lived near the G and H wells, until she began speaking of it at lunch one day. She was concerned because her daughter, about age seven, had been tired and listless of late. The doctor could find nothing wrong, but as it turns out she had much to be concerned about. I mentioned almost casually that my twins had been involved in the Atlanta study and that I had a copy of the report. Diane sat upright and looked earnestly at me, asking if she could look at that report. I can only imagine her shock when she read those opening lines on pages two.

All these memories caused me to think that, but for a few circumstance of fate, my children could have been poisoned like Jimmy Anderson. My sensitivity to pollution has been inherited by my children, but they didn't live near the G and H wells and were saved. Now, at this late date, that sensitivity to pollution has taken a strange turn and caused my son Sean to have to abandon his post with the Peace Corps in China and return home.

After three weeks at the Queen's Medical Center in Hawaii and many tests, doctors are still not sure what made his teeth so translucent you could shine a light through them, or how much longer it will take for his lungs to clear of the infection caused by the heavily polluted air in the city in China where he lived for over sixteen months.

In a future column I will let you know how all this came about and if the outcome is a happy one. Right now, Sean has only been home a few days, and we are sorting this all out.

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