

Poisoned Dreams

Family's home contaminated, health threatened



Photo of the Frandsen family home

by **Karen Frandsen**

A few years ago, my husband and I built a beautiful new home. We had planned and saved for years to build our dream house, which made everything even more exciting when we were finally able to start construction. No expense was spared structurally, as we planned to live there the rest of our lives. Never before had I enjoyed granite and quartz counter tops, custom cabinets, or a jetted bathtub. We would finally have enough space so that each of our children could even personalize and have their own rooms. You can imagine our excitement!

Discovering Toxic Practices Next Door

As we began building, we noticed jugs and barrels of pesticides stored in the tree line next to our home. In fact, at one point, my oldest son even mentioned to me that I should probably turn the business in next door as what he was doing was illegal. However, in my ignorance, I thought: "Obviously the neighbor will see that we will be moving in soon and move them. He wouldn't do anything that would potentially bring harm to my family." I was sorely mistaken.

In the springtime, after we had lived in our home for just barely a year, our youngest son, Josh, who also has autism, began to complain of dizziness. After several falls, we realized that whatever was happening was serious. We immediately started to see doctors. An MRI and countless other tests were run to rule out anything physiologically wrong.

Deteriorating Health

After all the tests, it was concluded that perhaps Josh had Meniere's disease. We began treating him at once. Despite the treatment, we watched as Josh's health declined and symptoms became worse. Now he was not only hanging on to walls and furniture to help him balance, but he also seemed extremely lethargic and exhausted all the time. He slept 12-16 hours a day.

We had to pull him from school because of his health and the risk of falling. Headaches and terrifying eye tremors (where his eyes would shift uncontrollably back and forth) became a regular thing. We tried changing our diet to help. Nothing was working. After months of treatment, we were sent to Primary Children's Hospital.

We saw multiple doctors there and were even referred out to more specialized clinics and centers. Each doctor seemed to see that something wasn't right, but didn't know what to do to help Josh. Finally, it was suggested that we look into environmental factors.

The smell of fertilizer and chemicals was strong at our house. The business next door, which turned out to be an exterminator that stored chemicals in our tree line and was the source of the odor, generated a smell that was extremely potent to even walk by on the sidewalk. We began to take careful notice of the happenings next to us and realized that it was common practice for them to load, rinse, and dump their tanks into the soil above our property. Many times trucks would drive out of the small field next to our home after emptying their tanks. We had to keep our windows closed to keep the smell out.

Could this be the source of our problems? The business stored multiple chemicals in an old garage that was, many times, stacked to capacity with chemicals and fertilizers. It was never locked, doors were always left propped open and the venting system in place consisted of a removed window.

We went to city officials to ask about policy and the safety of what was going on so close to our family. Our city told us that it was the state's responsibility to deal with these types of things because the business owner's license had been issued by them, not our town. When I questioned why this kind of business was operating inside of a residential area, I was told it was because

he had been “grandfathered in.” Rules were set in place after he had already established his business, so new policy didn’t apply to him. We were also told by our city that, “Just because you can smell something, doesn’t mean it will hurt you.”

By the end of the summer, I fell down from dizziness. I had been having headaches and my eyes would hurt or sting frequently. I also was having a hard time thinking clearly. I had the sense of not feeling well, but didn’t know why. I found myself moving slowly because I was losing my balance.

Josh, at this point, was dizzy all the time. He only spent several hours a day out of bed and wasn’t able to participate in any of the things that previously made him happy.

School resumed in the fall. Our other children started struggling. They were missing many days of school because they weren’t feeling well. Everyone was having a hard time focusing and concentrating. My husband, who had always had a very sharp memory, began to say that maybe he had better be checked to see if he had Alzheimer’s. He was struggling to remember things.

The very strong chemical smell outside continued.

Requesting Government Assistance

I called the county to complain about the business next door. I was told that if I requested an audit of the business they would come out and check things and take a soil sample. Prior to the audit, chemicals that had previously been stored outside were “mysteriously” removed.

Our county sent an inspector to our home. He was polite as I spoke with him. He told me he needed to go see the owner of the business. When he came back, he told me how the owner’s place reeked from residuals. A soil sample was taken. In fact, when the sample was taken, the inspector smelled it and told me he could smell residues in it.

I was surprised when I didn’t get any feedback from the county. So I called them and was shocked at their response. I was told they had decided not to test the soil sample. I questioned why and was told, “...then what? Where would it go from here?” This was the beginning of my disappointment from county or state help.

Later, as I talked with the inspector, I asked him if he could pursue our case further. He told me his boss would have “strung him up” if he did. During one of our phone calls, he told me that if something had been spilled, it would most likely break down in 30-90 days. We live in a small town where I know many people. We thought we would just move out of our home for a short time and all of this would pass. Then, we thought, there wouldn’t be bad feelings with our neighbor.

No one ever mentioned the half-lives of chemicals or their toxicity



Karen Frandsen’s neighbor ran a pesticide business out of his residential home. These photos, taken by Ms. Frandsen, show the shed and the unmarked containers strewn about on the property, with no signs indicating that pesticides were being stored, mixed, or dumped.

problems. We saw multiple trees and plants die. We saw many dead birds on our property. My son’s pet bunny got sick and died. Our symptoms persisted and we realized that this problem wasn’t just going to go away in one to three months. We continued trying to find someone to help us.

Lack of Responsiveness

The people at the State Department of Agriculture told me that we didn’t have a pesticide problem. Outside of the inspector, no one in the Ag Department showed any amount of concern for our situation. My phone calls to them weren’t returned. I was being ignored with stalling tactics. After a phone call to my State Senator and pressure from him, I finally received a return phone call. I had previously asked for our report. I was told I would have to file a formal request to receive it. It took months to get this report, for which I was charged.

The report conveniently left out nearly all relevant details about the problems we were facing and the findings that the inspector had discovered during that initial audit. When we questioned Clarke Burgess, the Pesticide Program Manager at the Utah Department of Agriculture and Food (UDAF), we were simply told, "That was not in the report."

Health Problems Become More Dramatic

About seven months after Josh began showing symptoms, we were outside in the yard laying sod. The chemical smell was very strong in the air that day. Our married daughter came to help. She went down dizzy in our front yard. This is when I started to realize how serious our problem was.

Josh was so sick at this point that we moved him out of the house to sleep at our daughter's home. Some days, he would not even respond to us when we talked to him or asked him questions. We were seeing problems with his blood work. We also were seeing tremors in him and my husband. Headaches, hurting or stinging eyes, malaise and fatigue were consuming our daily lives.

I spent literally hundreds of hours on the phone and at appointments trying to get help for our family. It soon became apparent to me that the resources for someone with chronic chemical exposure were almost non-existent. Not only did no one seem to understand the chemicals and the health problems they caused, but there wasn't even a regulating agency to enforce safe practice and stop these types of exposures from happening!



More of the unmarked containers strewn about on the property.

More Agencies Get Involved

The Health Department found highly volatile organic compounds (VOCs) in our home but didn't know where they were coming from or what to do about them. UDAF (which we kept being referred to) said their job was just licensing and training. So who is responsible for the safety and the well-being of the citizens? Who protects them? What is the job of the regulator when they come out to check the sprayers? I asked these questions to Mr. Burgess directly. His response was that the Ag Department checks to make sure the sprayers are wearing the correct clothing and that their tanks are secured on their trucks. "But who protects the citizen?" I asked again. He shrugged his shoulders and said, "Maybe DEQ."

I made several calls to the DEQ, or the Department of Environmental Quality, and was told they dealt mostly with industrial problems. They did finally agree to send someone out to assess our situation. It took a month and they called the owner prior to coming. He hauled truckloads of chemicals away before they arrived. (These chemicals were returned to the property after they left.) They also came in the winter when things are frozen. The way these audits were being handled made no sense to us. It literally felt like they were doing everything they could to not be the ones to find anything.

The Politics of Pesticides

Clark Burgess was the Pesticide Program Manager at the UDAF, and recently became Deputy Director of Plant Industry at the department, overseeing various aspects of pesticide enforcement. While Pesticide Program Manager, Mr. Burgess sat on the board of directors of the Utah Pest Control and Lawn Care Association, a clear conflict of interest. As Brian Monech, M.D. of Utah Physicians for a Healthy Environment wrote in an op-ed to the Salt Lake Tribune, "It's like the tobacco companies regulating smoking."

Do you know the background of the person that regulates pesticides in your state?

Pressure for Action Builds

Finally, after pressure from the media, the Department of Agriculture agreed to come out and test our soil. This was over a year and a half after we first started seeing symptoms. The morning they arrived to test at our property they got out of their truck and immediately told us they would not be testing for any breakdowns, residuals, benzenes (a chemical we had previously detected in an air test that we had done at our own expense through a private, professional lab), etc. We provided a backhoe on the property that morning, as well. But, UDAF refused to take anything but surface soil samples, despite the opinions of experts that deeper samples would provide the greatest chance of discovering the causative agent. It became instantly apparent to us at this point that they were there only to protect their name. They were testing for pesticides only. (Even though the time frame suggested that breakdowns and residuals would be the main concern at this point.) And when, despite the sampling techniques and



Pesticides: Dangerous from Cradle to Grave

Where are the pesticide storage facilities in your town? Do you know where chemicals are being mixed? Residue from pesticide containers can be a source of groundwater contamination, and can endanger public health and the local environment. Community discussions on pesticide reform should include questions concerning the storage, mixing, and disposal of hazardous chemicals in your town. When taking into account the wide range of adverse effects and the cost associated with pesticide production, use, and disposal, the importance of adopting nontoxic policies and protection becomes that much more important.

the lapsed time, the test DID come back with a pesticide, they said it “does not move in the soil,” and wouldn’t be “considered a health hazard in this case.”

Who is Being Protected?

The state of Utah has over 7,400 pesticide applicators. There are only a handful of regulators. It is still unclear to me what they regulate, as it appears they are there to protect the sprayer only. We and many neighbors have seen many regulations broken. We have seen pesticides stored in the trees. There are many who have seen the emptying of containers and dumping in inappropriate places by this company. The shed was not properly ventilated. It was not locked. “POISON” signs were printed on paper and only posted during the state’s inspection. They disappeared after the first strong winds.

Yet, I recently received a letter from our Governor’s office stating, “With regard to the pesticide issue, UDAF is required under federal and state statute and rule to regulate the licensing of pesticide applicators and the enforcement of the proper use of pesticides. The investigation conducted by UDAF found no pesticide violations coming from the property next door, related to how the pesticides were being stored or applied. The containers on the property that were not in the shed were empty and contained no pesticide residue.”

Their letter continued, “The UDAF chemistry lab does not have the ability to test for chemical breakdown as there are no standards available... We wish there were agencies to refer you to or tests to do or samples to run that would give you answers to your health problems.”

It is beyond frightening to me that the government agencies that I thought were set up to protect the people don’t understand the chemicals they are charged with regulating.

Look for Signs

I share our story so that if you find yourself in a position where you are seeing illegal spraying and dumping happening, report it. Don’t wait for it to pass. If your neighbor has someone spraying their yard in the wind and it is drifting, report it. Insist on help immediately. Don’t let it be put off for months or years.



Karen Frandsen (center) and her family stand in front of their “dream home” that they had to leave behind nearly two years ago.

We have had to walk away from our beautiful new home. It is sitting vacant and has been for nearly two years. Our health has been challenged. Thankfully, our son’s and family’s symptoms have improved immensely after leaving our home. Josh has returned to the wonderful, fun-loving kid we all knew before this whole ordeal began. But, we don’t know what the future will

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bring us after the repeated exposures we've experienced, or what long term problems we may face.

If someone tells you, "Just because you can smell something, doesn't mean it will hurt you," DON'T believe this! There are serious side effects from inhaling pesticides.

For the last two and a half years, our family has been living through a horrible nightmare. We don't know how long this will last. We don't know how to resolve it.

Pesticides CAN BE DANGEROUS. They are not studied very well, especially long term effects. Our society has made it seem that they are safe, but so much about them and the side effects of being exposed are still unknown. Even if you are not the person spraying, you may be affected in ways you never considered.

We weren't safe within the walls of our own house. We were poisoned at home.

Editor's Note: Stories of poisoning and contamination are too frequent. This story of the Frandsen's pesticide poisoning in Utah reflects the failure of the regulatory system to manage adequately those who store and use the pesticides, in this case as a business. There is a lack of responsiveness to those who are poisoned by dumping of pesticide containers, the mixing of pesticides, the rinsing of equipment and the resulting non-target effects of

pesticide drift and chemical run-off to neighboring sites. Those in positions of authority to protect communities and people from poisoning and contamination often are advocates of those they're regulating, rather than those who are being poisoned. Typically, they see the practitioners that pollute as their constituents, having come from the user community or from the chemical industry.

This is a heart-wrenching story. And while there is a tendency to see the solution as better restrictions, ultimately our dependence on these chemicals has created the situation the Frandsen family is suffering through. We know from our work at Beyond Pesticides that the typical hazardous pesticides widely used for pest control are not necessary to manage pest populations. If we begin the transition to alternative practices in our communities, either by doing it ourselves or demanding it of service providers, the polluting businesses and exterminators described here will disappear. The Frandsen house is the equivalent of a "fenceline" community where people struggle within the toxic chemicals that invades communities where chemical plants are operating.

The answer is within our grasp if we advance in our communities land and building management practices, and organic systems that don't rely on the toxic chemicals that have unnecessarily invaded peoples homes, schools, and work places.

Thanks to the Frandsen's for sharing their story to help others advance the necessary changes in local, state, and national policy to protect our health and the environment.

—Jay Feldman