



Faces of AGENT ORANGE

California



The Holybees

By Jim Belshaw

The Holybee's story is brought to you by The Vietnam Veterans Peace Initiative.

Sonja Holybee says of her oldest child, Stephanie, 35: "She will not give in to it."

She says the same thing of her other two children, Melisa, 33, and Dan, 30. But Stephanie is the oldest, the first to be diagnosed with illnesses never before found in either her immediate family or the extended families of her parents.

Her mother can find only a single connector: "I feel that the only way Stephanie could have gotten any of these things is from Agent Orange," Sonja says. "There's nothing in me or my family or in Ken's family that shows this stuff showing up. The lone factor is Agent Orange."

Sonja's husband, Ken, former VVA California State Council President and an Army veteran, served in I Corps. He swam in Vietnam's rivers; he was sprayed frequently with Agent Orange by the lumbering aircraft charged with the mission of killing vegetation in Vietnam. Ken reports they were told that they were killing Mosquitoes.

He has not been diagnosed with any Agent Orange-connected disease by the VA.

But disease has been visited upon

his children. Stephanie was the first, diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis, scleroderma, and Raynaud's Phenomenon.

A brief visit to MedicineNet.com is required to draw an elemental picture of what the young woman faces in her life.

Rheumatoid arthritis is an autoimmune disease that causes chronic inflammation of the joints. It can also cause inflammation of the tissue around the joints and in other organs in the body. Those with autoimmune diseases have antibodies in their blood that target their own body tissues. Rheumatoid arthritis typically is a progressive illness that can cause joint destruction and disability.

Scleroderma is a chronic connective tissue disease classified as an autoimmune disease. Hardening of the skin is one of the most visible symptoms. It is not contagious or infectious, cancerous or malignant.

Raynaud's Phenomenon is a condition resulting from a series of discolorations of the fingers and toes after exposure to changes in temperature. At first, the digits turn white, then blue. Then the blood vessels reopen, turning the digits red. Raynaud's most frequently affects women.



Ken Holybee served with the 528th Quartermaster Company (Petroleum Supply). He was stationed in Vung Tau from June 15-July 15, 1969, and in Phu Bai, from July 1969-September 1971.



Ken Holybee during his tour in Vietnam



Melisa, Dan, and Stephanie Holybee



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The Holybees's Story Continued...

Stephanie Holybee, first diagnosed at 17, suffers from all three. She was in special education classes until her junior year in high school, when, her mother said, she was moved into “bottom classes” to finish her high school education.

Sonja Holybee said her daughter has never surrendered to any of the afflictions.

“All of a sudden it just hit,” she said. “They diagnosed her with one thing after another, all one on top of the other. But this girl forces herself to lead a very active life. She works two jobs. She’s a grocery clerk at Safeway and works in a daycare facility, too. She bowls on Thursdays, because she just won’t give in to it. She says, ‘It’s not going to kill me.’ When she was first diagnosed, the life span was 10 years. She just won’t give in.”

Sonja’s second daughter, Melisa, was born with an extra ankle. She can turn her foot “in really weird positions.” The extra bone that made this happen has been removed. Nine years ago, at age 24, she underwent surgery for supraventricular tachycardia (a rapid heart rhythm). Melisa’s thumbs are short and stubby; when she first started text messaging, she found she could do it better than most. A friend noted that her unusual thumbs worked quicker on the keys because of their size.

“Melisa works with disabled children in group homes,” Sonja said. “She’s been doing that ever since she got out of high school. She enjoys it.”

Her youngest child, Dan, 30, a sheet metal worker, is sterile.

None of the children are married.

“No one in the extended family has

ever been diagnosed with any of these diseases,” Sonja said.

She said her husband, Ken, is “one of those people who keeps everything inside, but he feels he gave all these problems to his kids. He doesn’t think they would have them if he hadn’t been exposed to Agent Orange.”

Sonja Holybee believes the government needs to acknowledge that the children of male Vietnam veterans suffer from rare disorders.

“They should, at the very least, be treated for the same conditions as the children of female Vietnam veterans,” she said. “If you’re the child of a male veteran, there’s no chance that you’ll be taken care of. More than just acknowledgment, kids like Stephanie should get some kind of treatment. Stephanie would love it because her meds cost a fortune every month.”

The Holybees live in Forestville, a small town in northern California’s wine country not far from San Francisco. Long ago, Sonja said, her husband went to the VA and discussed their situation with a doctor.

“Kenny asked that VA doctor about Stephanie, and that doctor said there’s no way that Agent Orange had anything to do with Stephanie’s condition. No way.”

Significant numbers of Vietnam veterans have children and grandchildren with birth defects related to exposure to Agent Orange. To alert legislators and the media to this ongoing legacy of the war, we are seeking real stories about real people. If you wish to share your family’s health struggles that you believe are due to Agent Orange/dioxin, send an email to mporter@vva.org or call 301-585-4000, Ext. 146.

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