



Faces of AGENT ORANGE

Pennsylvania



The Morrises

By Jim Belshaw

Bobbie Morris sells cars in Pennsylvania, car sales being something that runs in the family. Her Vietnam veteran husband, Philip, worked in the car business for 37 years. When Bobbie first sits down with a customer, she likes to “break down the walls,” make the customer comfortable, and create an atmosphere in which conversation is open and easy-going. It helps her to sell a car. It helps some customers in ways she hadn’t dreamed.

“You have no idea what happens when I talk to some of the men,” she said.

They talk to her about things they don’t discuss with men who sell cars. When the sales associate is a man, it’s all business. Everyone in the cubicle is there to discuss buying a car—interest rates, down payments, monthly payments. It’s all business.

When the sales associate is Bobbie, other matters come up.

“There was one guy, he came in to buy a utility vehicle,” she said. “So we got to talking, and all of a sudden, he’s telling me about problems he’s having with his legs and with his diabetes.”

When the conversations turn this way, there is a question she always asks: “Were you in Vietnam?”

The man with diabetes said yes, he had been in Vietnam. She steered the talk to Agent Orange and told the customer where he could find more information on it and how he could get tested to see if he qualified for VA benefits.

He called the next day and said he was coming in to talk about the payment schedule on the vehicle. His wife came with him. She pulled Bobbie aside.

Bobbie recalls what the man’s wife said: “She said, ‘Do you know why he came back? It wasn’t about the payment. It was because you talked to him about Vietnam.’”

He wound up joining VVA Chapter 862, to which Bobbie’s husband belongs.

Bobbie said the “light bulb” on Agent Orange came on a year ago at the AVVA Leadership Conference in Louisville, Kentucky, where speakers at a town hall meeting spoke about Agent Orange and its effects, not only on veterans, but on their children and grandchildren. Veterans spoke, too, telling of health problems suffered by their children.

Bobbie could not help but think of her daughter, Dara Rae, who has been deaf from birth, 37 years ago. She now has three leaks in her heart. Doctors worry that she may not be up to the surgery because of other health problems.





Faces of AGENT ORANGE

The Morris's Story Continued...

Thinking about her daughter inevitably brought tears. Her AVVA regional director saw her crying and asked if she was all right.

"I told her about Dara, and she said, 'You're not alone,'" Bobbie said. "I always thought I was."

Before the town hall meeting switched on the Agent Orange "light bulb," Philip and Bobbie hadn't given herbicide a thought. Over the years, he had received two letters urging him to be tested, but he threw them away. The letters spoke to "in-country" Vietnam veterans. Philip served with the Air Force in Thailand.

After the convention, Bobbie struck out on a search to gather as much information as she could. She found that Agent Orange, thousands of barrels of it, were stored at Korat Air Base, where Philip was stationed.

Her brother, 100 percent disabled and a Vietnam veteran, told her that when he first arrived in Vietnam, he thought it was raining. He was soaking wet. He was the newbie, and he asked if it was the monsoon.

The Air Force was spraying.

"A year ago, all of this came together for me," Bobbie said. "We need to get information out to as many people as we can. I see myself working on this for a long time. This is something I'm going to continue with. First and foremost is Beaver County, because I live here."

To that end, she and others held a second annual Veterans Day balloon release to generate publicity in the local media and draw attention to the Agent Orange issue. While working on an AVVA project, she called widows in her chapter whose husbands had died from Agent Orange-related diseases.

"I wanted to know if they could tell me one thing they wished they'd had," she said. "They all said they didn't have enough information on Agent Orange. So I guess what drives me now is to get the information out. That's what they need."

Bobbie said her boss, Keith Edwards, at Morrow Ford Lincoln & Mercury, is very supportive of her Agent Orange outreach efforts. He contributes the orange balloons for the Veterans Day balloon release.

"My boss says people tell me everything," she said. "He doesn't know what it is, but they sit at my desk, and they tell me everything. Well, I think people are called to do different things. I am honored when veterans open up to me and talk to me about Vietnam. I have tremendous respect for all they have gone through—their physical, spiritual, and mental suffering, and if I can help just one person, I've done some good."

Significant numbers of 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.

Many Thanks To Our Sponsors

VVA Buckeye State Council

*VVA North Dakota
State Council*

*California Veterans
Benefits Fund*

*Missouri Vietnam
Veterans Foundation*

*Vietnam Veterans
of Michigan*

*Vietnam Veterans
Peace Initiative*

*Chapter 176,
Centralia, Illinois*

Nona Bear

Paul Cox

Dan Stenvold

Herb Worthington

John Weiss

*Susan Carson and the
Carson Family Foundation*

*Chapter 635
Oconomowoc, Wisconsin*

*Associates of Vietnam
Veterans of America*