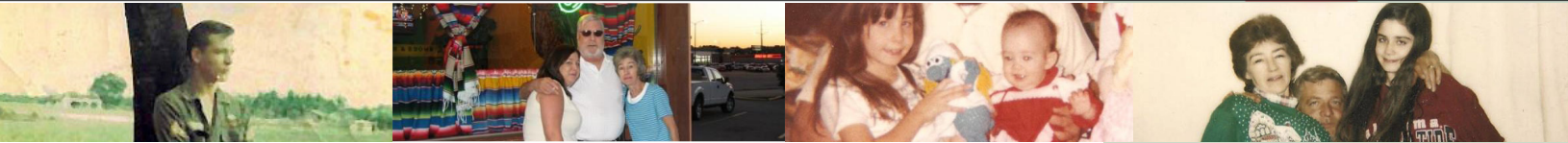




# Faces of AGENT ORANGE



## Sherri Wise

By Jim Belshaw

When an Agent Orange diagnosis first confronted Sherri Wise's father in 2002, he denied the fact of it.

"He said this is our country, that our government would not do this," she said.

He went into the hospital two days before 9/11. On that fateful day, Sherri and her mother rode a hospital tram to visit him. They found themselves surrounded by veterans.

"We saw these men who were disfigured, emotionally distraught, physically incapable of fighting," she said. "But the minute that first plane hit, you could see the wheels turning in their heads. When the second plane hit, we were surrounded by men who said they would protect us. We were never in danger, but it was the most touching thing. The whole time we were there, everywhere we walked, there was a man trying to reassure us that everything would be OK."

Soon the fact of her father's condition became too much for him to deny—heart attack, stroke, diabetes, eyesight failing, kidneys failing...

"It was one thing after another," she said. "The VA doctors said they could

relate everything he had to Agent Orange. His main reaction was to worry about the family. His first question was: 'Could I pass any of this on to my kids?' We were all born after his exposure."

He served in Vietnam with the 82nd Airborne in 1966-67.

"He had such faith that our country's government would make it right," she said. "I'm angry. We're all angry. But he kept saying: 'They'll make it right. I did what I had to do in Vietnam. I'd do it all over again.' That amazes me."

Sherri has undergone 13 back surgeries. Diagnosed with degenerative back discs at 20 years old, her doctors expressed disbelief that it could happen to someone so young.

"I have fibromyalgia, neuropathy, Type 2 Diabetes, arthritis, and depression," she said. "I'm 35 years old. The doctors said there is no reason for me to have degenerative discs at this age. I was born with a leg out of socket, as well."

Her older brother has been diagnosed with degenerative discs and severe depression; her younger sister suffers from depression.

Sherri's youngest child was born with a congenital heart defect; her oldest is



*Sherri's mom and dad: Vietnam veteran Ronald Steve Harrison with his wife, Reba Harrison*



*Sherri, with daughter Andrea, and Grandpa Harrison*



*The Harrisons: Ronald, Reba, Sherri, and baby Ginger*



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## Sherri Wise's Story Continued...

bipolar. There is no family history of such things.

"I look at them, and I wonder if I passed this on," she said. "Deep down, I know I did, and it just breaks my heart. Any time any little thing comes up with them, I'm really hit by the fact that I did this to them. I know logically I didn't, but it makes no difference. The VA won't do anything. They either don't know how or don't care."

She praises one doctor the family has met throughout the years, the first doctor to diagnose her father. She said he was an older man who was straightforward about Agent Orange and the fact that so little research has been done to determine its effects on the children and grandchildren of Vietnam veterans.

"That man sat with us and talked to us about it, and I think he was the most honest man we met."

In May 2008, her father entered the VA hospital for the last time. She said he died as a result of an allergic reaction to a drug and that his last 11 days were spent in confusion, unable to respond to those around him, unable to eat.

"It was very difficult," she said. "But he never stopped saying, 'They'll take care of it. They'll make it right.' Until the day he died, he believed that our government would take care of it."

She said she was consumed with anger when he died and that her anger did not find a release until she became involved with Agent Orange Legacy, an Internet support program for the families of Vietnam veterans. She began meeting

and talking with other family members whose experience tracked with hers.

"It was strange talking to other people who had gone through it, and I started realizing all the things that correlated," she said. "These people were going through the exact same things and experiencing the exact same things with their loved ones."

She stresses the importance now of spreading information about Agent Orange. Like so many others, she is adamant that the VA must research the question of links between the veterans' Agent Orange diseases and health issues arising in their children.

"It needs to be talked about," she said. "Somebody has to talk about it. The biggest thing to tell the government is: You did this. Now help us. Honor these veterans."

*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](mailto:mporter@vva.org) or call 301-585-4000, Ext. 146.*

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