



Faces of AGENT ORANGE

New Jersey



THE WORTHINGTONS

By Jim Belshaw

**The Worthington's story is brought to you
by The Missouri Vietnam Veterans Foundation.**

Herb Worthington's e-mail, meant to provide background on his own Agent Orange-connected diseases and the diseases now afflicting his children, is not yet two sentences long before the words leap off the page.

"It rips me apart with self-hatred every time I tell it," he writes. "I get so sad, the tears flow like a stream, and it makes it that much more difficult, because the keyboard is totally blurred." Asked about it later, he says, "I hate myself. Why? For bringing all this pain and suffering to my children. They don't deserve it." He has not spoken to his children about it. "I don't have the courage," he said.

His daughter, Karen, 35, suffers from multiple sclerosis (MS). His son, Michael, 33, has suffered from bronchitis and allergies since infancy. Michael's own children also have been diagnosed with chronic bronchitis, and Herb says the grandchildren also display uncontrolled and inexplicable fits of anger. Herb, himself, is 100 percent disabled, diagnosed with Agent Orange-caused Type II Diabetes. He suffers from

"terrible" Peripheral Neuropathy, which the VA recognizes as a service-connected condition.

"It starts out as a tingling, like pins and needles," he said. "Hands and feet get cold. You think they're cold, but they could be warm to the touch. As it progresses, they go numb and have stabbing knife-like pains. They say it's a circulation problem, a secondary condition usually to diabetes. Now the VA in Newark is trying to deny guys because of self-medication because the disease is also symptomatic to alcoholism."

Married for 41 years to Angela Sorrentino ("She supports me 10 million percent"), he is President of the New Jersey State Council. They met in high school. Both went to college, Herb working a full-time factory job to stay in school at the New York Phoenix School of Design in Manhattan. They married in 1968, the summer before their senior year. Five days after he graduated in 1969, he was drafted. After completing AIT, he received orders to Vietnam as



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1970: Herb at a fire support base in the Plain of Reeds near the Cambodian Border



children, Michael and Karen



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The Worthington's Story Continued...

a Light Weapons Infantryman. He was assigned to the 2/60 Recon Battalion, 3rd Brigade, 9th ID. He found himself in “charmingly named hell holes” such as the Parrot’s Beak, Tan Tru, the Plain of Reeds, and then with the 25th ID in Cu Chi. “What is significant of such places is the amount of Agent Orange dumped on the Plain of Reeds and the barren dust bowl camp known as Cu Chi,” he said.

Three years after he came home, he and Angela started a family, the firstborn being Karen, who would grow into such an attractive woman that strangers stopped her on the sidewalks of New York to ask if she were a model or an actress. “She was talented, played two instruments, was an athlete (all state softball catcher), and an A student,” he said. “Everything went well until her senior year of high school, when she started getting migraine headaches.” Several MRI’s and doctors later, she was diagnosed with MS. She married, then divorced, and swears she will never have children for fear of passing the disease to them. “She still works, but she uses a cane, and the right side of her face is numb,” Herb said. “Now she’s beginning to fall down. She goes to the MS center in New York. She’s seen so many specialists and tried different treatments, but I think most of it is a bunch of crap. It’s so sad to see her like this.”

He sees signs of disease in his grandchildren, too. His son, Michael, has two children, one 3 years old and the other soon to be 5. “Both suffer from bronchitis,” he said. “And they can

turn to anger in a second. I can see the physical change in them when they do it. I can see it coming, because I watch them like a mother hen. I’m looking for anything, you know?”

He has worked as a veterans service officer and has visited the VA to discuss his diseases and the illness of his children. He comes away angry. “I went to doctors I knew in the VA,” he said. “I went to the regional office and spoke with people I knew, and I asked if there was anything, and there was nothing. You talk to these doctors, and you mention the possibility of Agent Orange, and they ‘yes’ me to death and say, ‘Oh, that’s interesting.’” He doesn’t know what the future will bring. In the present, he carries a great anger toward the VA and the government and the Vietnam War. “I had a map set out for me (his life), and the war ruined almost everything,” he said. “It ruined whatever chance I had to do in life; it ruined my health; it ruined my children’s health. The VA hates me. They will tell you that I have an acid tongue. This thing has consumed my life like no one can imagine.”

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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