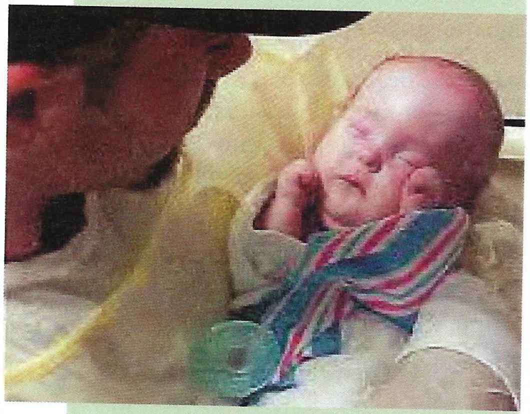
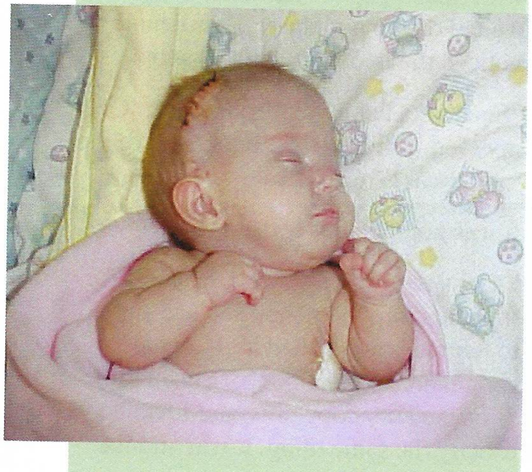
Faces of AGENT ORANGE

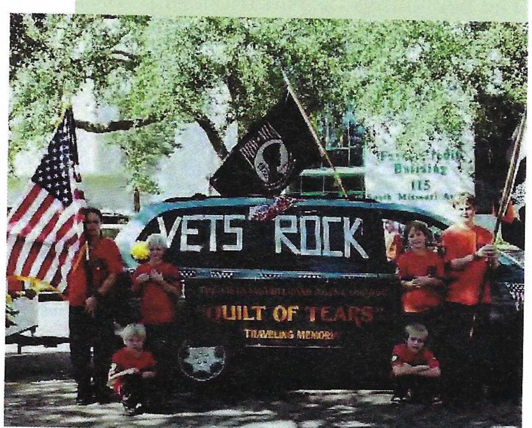
Florida

Shelia and Henry Snyder

By Jim Belshaw







Shelia Snyder asks a straightforward, troubling question: "Why do I have to worry about my grandkids because their grandfather served our country? There is nothing to justify that."

Her husband, Henry, served in Vietnam with the Army in 1968-69. He is diabetic and the recipient of a VA-approved claim related to Agent Orange. One of her grandchildren, born with multiple and devastating birth defects, died a few months after her first birthday. When the founder of the Agent Orange Quilt of Tears, Jennie LeFevre, died in 2004, Shelia and Henry took over, travelling with the Quilt, and sharing information about the horrific effects of Agent Orange.

It wasn't until the late 1990s that Shelia became aware of the Agent Orange issues veterans and their families had been dealing with for many years. Her husband, Henry, had met a Vietnam veteran, Jack Griffin, in an online chat room and over time forged a close friendship. Because the chat line was voice, not typed, Shelia often picked up bits of the conversation while at home with Henry.

Both men came from Michigan, and there was much talk about hunting and fishing and other things they had in common. One day one of those commonalities caught Shelia's ear.

"Jack told Henry about Agent Orange," she said. "At that time Henry had become diabetic. He used to drive a truck for a living, but once he became diabetic, he had to stop. Jack told him he needed to make a claim with the VA. He was just on him and on him and on him about having that checked out. Finally, Henry got tired of hearing Jack push, and he went to the VA."

Henry put in a claim for diabetes. Shelia called it a "lifesaver," because it allowed both of them to educate themselves about Agent Orange. Jack advised him on what to do and how to handle the VA. When Henry's claim finally was approved, though, the celebration was bittersweet.

Jack Griffin had serious health issues of his own — non-Hodgkin's lymphoma.

"Jack died of Agent Orange-related cancer almost to the day that Henry got the letter from the VA saying that his claim had been approved," Shelia said. "Henry went into a terrible slump when Jack died. It was like Jack was part of our family. His voice was in our house every day. It was very strange for me. Henry and I had lost parents together, and I never saw the kind of reaction I was getting after Jack passed away."

About the same time, two people came into Shelia Snyder's life that would have great influence over the years to come. One was Fred Wilcox, who had written a book, *Waiting for an Army to Die: the Tragedy of Agent Orange*. The book tells the stories of veterans and their families and the legacy of Agent Orange that

Shelia and Henry Snyder's Story Continued...

afflicted them.

The second person was Jennie LeFevre, the widow of a Vietnam veteran and the creator of the Agent Orange Quilt of Tears. (On the Web it is at **www.agentorangequiltoftears.com**)

After the death of Jack Griffin, Shelia read about the Quilt of Tears traveling to a town not far from the Snyder's Florida home. She thought she might get ideas for making a quilt in remembrance of Jack. It took some doing on her part to talk Henry into going, but he finally acquiesced.

Shelia took the Wilcox book with her. When she finally got a chance to speak with Jennie LeFevre, Jennie was busy with other people. Shelia and Henry waited on the periphery. Then Jennie noticed the book in Shelia's hands.

"She looked at my book and said, 'Oh, my God, you have that book! I have the same book!'" Shelia said.

It was not the only coincidence.

"It was really weird, because she thumbed through it, and she had started to tell me how she had highlighted certain areas of the book," Shelia said. "I opened my copy of it, and I had done exactly the same thing. It was strange."

The beginnings of their friendship "broke the ice" with Henry, and he started coming out of the depression that had come with the death of Jack Griffin. Shelia found herself working with Jennie on the Quilt project, an effort she found to have great importance.

"Now I feel like the Quilt is Henry's PTSD therapy," she said.

In 2004, their granddaughter, Hope Nicole, was born. Before the birth, the family faced a grim prognosis. Tests showed that the infant had no brain, only a brain stem. Babies such as this are expected to die at or shortly after birth. Hope Nicole would live more than a year.

While speaking with a hospital counselor, Shelia mentioned Agent Orange. In an online retelling of the story, Shelia wrote: "I brought up the subject of dioxin/ Agent Orange … but she honestly didn't seem to have a clue about dioxin. After I explained some about Agent Orange, the counselor dismissed the subject quite quickly, which I didn't really like, but I was becoming too overwhelmed with the options and decisions that were being explained to my son and pregnant daughter-in-law."

The possible Agent Orange connections to birth defects in the children and grandchildren of Vietnam veterans is something Shelia Snyder does not want to see so easily dismissed.

"I want to prevent these things from happening in the future," she said. "I don't want to see this happening to generation after generation. The VA needs to pay attention to birth defects. There's research and information others have done. Legitimate scientists a whole lot smarter than I am have done a lot of work on these questions. The VA needs to pay attention to these people. All of this information has been there for years, and they just keep shoving it under the carpet. They pay no attention to it. "

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.

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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.

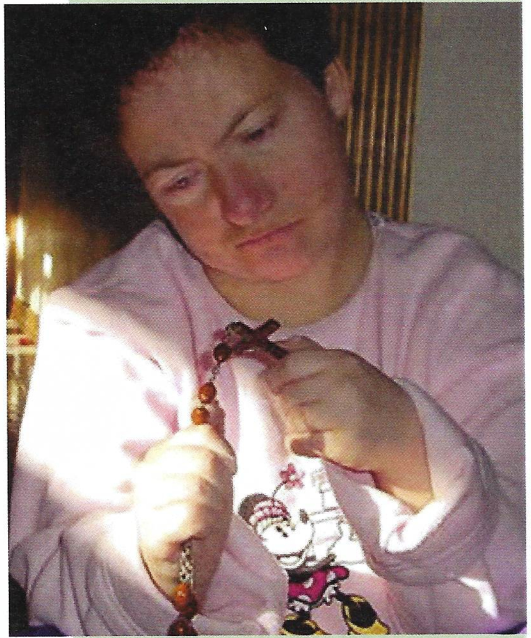
He called the next day and said he was coming in to talk about the payment schedule on the vehicle. His wife came with him. She pulled Bobbie aside.

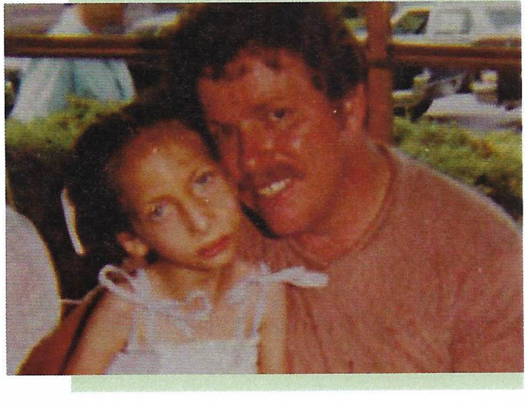
Bobbie recalls what the man's wife said: "She said, 'Do you know why he came back? It wasn't about the payment. It was because you talked to him about Vietnam.' "

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.





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."

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Faces of AGENT ORANGE

Pennsylvania

The Petroskys

By Jim Belshaw

The Petrosky's story is brought to you by Chapter 176, Centralia, Illinois.

Pete Petrosky and his wife had planned on having a large family. They talked about it before getting married. At least five kids, they agreed, a house full of kids. They stopped after two daughters.

"I was not going to bring anyone else into this world," Pete said. "We wanted to have a large family. But after those two kids came, I said something's wrong. There's either something wrong with me or something wrong with you [his wife], because we have no history of anything like this in either of our families."

Those "two kids" who came were his daughters, Lisa and Kimberly. Lisa was born with some kind of "soft tissue" growth covering the roof of her mouth. He remembers trying to get more information from doctors, but it never went beyond "a soft tissue growth." Whatever it was, it did not belong there.

Kimberly, his second daughter, was born with a cleft lip that would evolve into even more serious health issues and a long history of surgeries. At one point in her young life, she nearly died and would have done so had not the Petroskys rushed her to an emergency room.

Pete believes he knows what caused the birth defects—Agent Orange, and it has shadowed him since his time in Vietnam.

"I want some kind of explanation or a better understanding from the VA that it accepts that veterans have a connection to something like my daughter's cleft lip," he said. "They'll recognize women Vietnam veterans as having problems with these kinds of things, but not men, not me. It makes no sense to me. This Agent Orange thing has stuck in my craw for a long time."

He served at Bien Hoa in 67/68 during the TET Offensive in the Air Force. He worked in the motor pool, servicing all of the vehicles on the base and working with the Army as well.

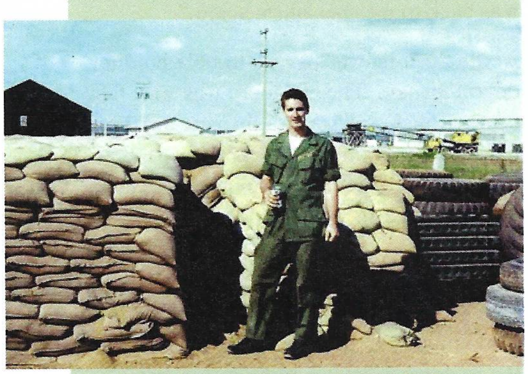
"We had a service that went out on the perimeter at night to bail out the 101st and 173rd when they got stuck," he said, laughing at the memory of pulling the Army out of the mud. "I went out on the perimeter with a wrecker. Real quiet vehicle, right? We worked on all the equipment they used."

He remembers the base being sprayed with Agent Orange. He remembers the aircraft overhead dumping their loads of vegetation killer.

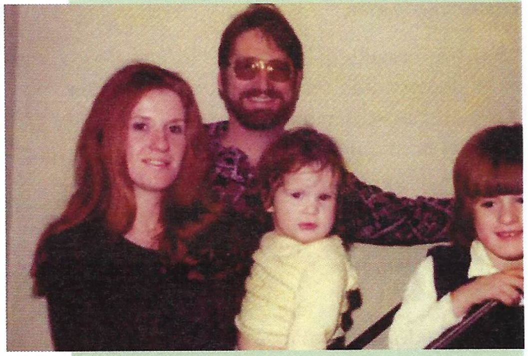
Back home, he no longer gave any thought to Agent Orange. He and his wife began what they thought would be that large family. The first was Lisa.

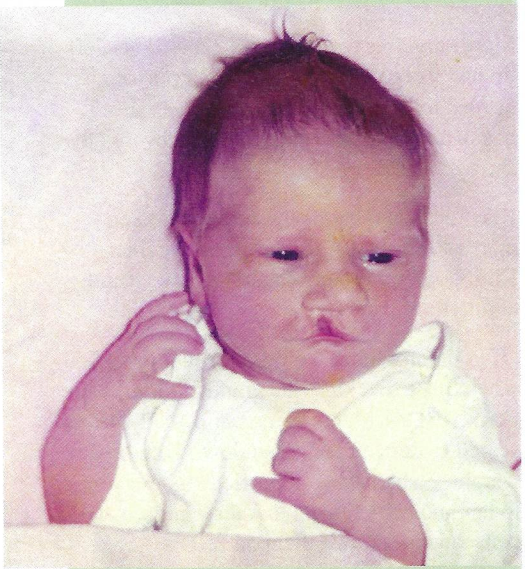
"We didn't know anything about Agent Orange with the first one," he said.

They went for a regular check-up on the new baby one day, and the doctors found the odd "soft tissue" covering the roof of her mouth. They took her to a specialist to have the tissue surgically removed.



Pete Petrosky, Bien Hoa, 1967





Kimberly

The Petroskys Story Continued...

In 1973, Kimberly was born with a cleft lip.

“The doctor brought her out to me, and she was wrapped up in a blanket,” he said. “It was quite upsetting. The doctor said, ‘Don’t get too excited. She’s a very healthy baby.’ Well, it was back to the specialists again.”

At the time, he was having trouble holding on to jobs, too. The economy was sour. The nearby Pittsburgh steel mills were anything but solid economically. Meanwhile, surgery to correct the cleft lip beckoned for Kimberly, who was then six months old.

At nine months, she nearly died.

Pete’s wife called him at work. She couldn’t get Kimberly to wake up. Pete rushed home. He couldn’t wake her, either. They put her in the family car and rushed her to the emergency room.

“She was breathing, but very little,” he said. “The doctors didn’t know what was going on. After all was said and done, it turned out to be a bowel obstruction and gangrene had set in. If we hadn’t gotten her in when we did, she probably would have died.”

But Kimberly was far from being out of the woods.

“Later on down the road, it got infected and she needed surgery again,” he said.

More surgeries for Kimberly came. The cleft lip had flattened her nose and her nostrils needed to be rounded. Years later, as she began attending school, it was discovered that she had a “still eye.”

His oldest daughter, Lisa, has never been married. She is 40. His younger daughter, Kimberly, 36, is married and has two healthy children.

“If you don’t think we went through pure hell when those two kids [his grandchildren] were born ...” he said, his voice trailing off. “I was scared to death. I had to sit down with my daughter when she got married and explain to her and her husband that they might have consequences down the road.”

At a recent Agent Orange meeting, he began talking to a Marine who served at Khe Sanh. The Marine told him one of his sons was having a serious problem with anxiety. Pete told him he had noticed a change in his youngest daughter since the birth of her children. She seemed to be anxious frequently.

“It was my wife who said it had to be the Agent Orange,” he said. “I’ve watched documentaries on TV about how many Vietnamese children have cleft lip/palate. My thing with the VA is it won’t even recognize male veterans as being carriers of anything. I haven’t talked to the VA about it. I’ve gone in for PTSD, and I mentioned that the kids might be connected somehow to my PTSD problems.”

The VA has awarded him a disability due to PTSD.

“I sit in on meetings with veterans from all over Pennsylvania, and what are we doing? Nothing,” he said. “They say there’s nothing we can do. I say, ‘Bullshit.’ We’ve hit a stumbling block, and it needs to be opened up and recognized nationally as far as I’m concerned. I’ve been on a vendetta about this for some time now.”

He spoke of a chapter member whose daughter was born with severe birth defects. She is 36 years old and has never been able to walk or talk.

“She’s never driven a car, she’s deaf, she crawls around on the floor, and those two parents have never abandoned her,” he said. “To never hear your child speak, to never hear your child say ‘I love you’ or anything like that—it has to be a very tough row to hoe. My wife and I have managed to raise a family, and we have a home and two grandchildren, but this Agent Orange thing bugs me. It really bugs me.”

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Faces of AGENT ORANGE

Missouri

Jim “Butch” Whitworth

By Jim Belshaw

When Jim “Butch” Whitworth went home to Missouri from the recent Vietnam Veterans of America Leadership Conference in Orlando, he needed to buy an extra suitcase to take back all of the Agent Orange materials pressed upon him by those at the conference who had been involved with the issue for many years.

Butch, too, stresses the importance of communication when it comes to such matters. It is critical that Vietnam veterans know they may be due substantial assistance from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) concerning diseases related to Agent Orange exposure.

“When they gave me that material, I copied and copied and copied, until I finally had to buy a $60 suitcase to bring all the stuff back for my fellow veterans in St. Peters VVA Chapter 458,” he said.

He had a special, compelling interest in the Agent Orange material, the most striking being that after years of battling disease himself and having gone through the heartbreak of serious medical difficulties with his daughter, he had been unaware of the VA help available to him. He hadn’t even considered contacting the VA about it. He was, in fact, exactly the kind of veteran to which he now finds himself so dedicated.

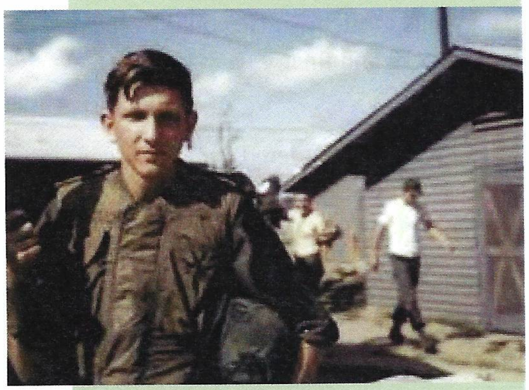
“People in VVA gave me the information,” he said. “And I read articles in *The VVA Veteran*. I’ve got a couple of guys in my chapter with problems or their kids or grandchildren have problems. I’m reading all this stuff, and I know something’s not right. And people from VVA are telling me I needed to make a claim with the VA. Well, I hadn’t done any of that.”

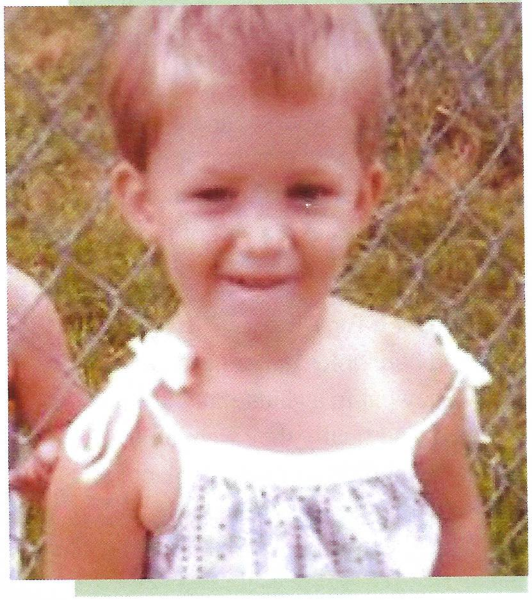
Over the years, he had spent $10,000 of his own money on insurance, and $5,300 for medicines.

“The people at VVA were flabbergasted,” he said. “I didn’t figure the government owed me anything, and boy, they jumped all over my butt.”

He served in Vietnam in 1968 as a radio operator with the 1st Air Cav. In addition to the workaday exposure to Agent Orange, he remembers reading in later years about chemicals involved with the diesel fuel used to burn human waste.

“I remember wearing gloves but no mask,” he said. “I remember that black smoke curling up all over the place. We all had to take a turn at it. It was a detail like KP or guard duty.”





Jim "Butch" Whitworth's Story Continued...

About eight years ago, his heart problems began. Today, he's on his second pacemaker. A third back operation in 2002 ended his career in construction. Then in December 2007, he had a terrible pain in his groin area. He couldn't shake it for weeks and finally went to see a doctor.

Blood tests were ordered and a CT scan done on his stomach area. There was no hernia. But there was leukemia.

Admitted immediately to a hospital in St. Louis, chemotherapy began. Then a bone marrow transplant when it was found that his sister was a perfect match. He lost 33 pounds.

"It was quite an ordeal for me and my sister," he said. "I got the transplant and spent three weeks and three days in the hospital. I've survived two years this past July."

Long before his own health deteriorated, he and his wife faced a long, difficult battle with a brain tumor diagnosed in their toddler daughter, Emily, in 1978. She was 2 ½ years old. A neurosurgeon told them Emily would not live to see her tenth birthday.

Today, she is 32, married and a marine biologist at the Mayport Naval Base in Jacksonville, Fla. But she must deal with severe handicaps as a result of the brain tumor and the efforts to control it.

"We fought it for 18 years," Butch said. "They'd bore holes in her head and run tests. They put in a shunt that became infected, and finally they went after it with a Gamma Knife. They took out all of the tumor, except for one little piece. She's handicapped now. She has a terrible limp, her right foot is turned inside, her hip gives out, and she lost the use of her right arm."

Butch's father gives insight to his granddaughter.

"My dad said, 'That daughter of yours has the most incredible drive and determination. She'll work four hours to do a job that would take you or me two minutes.' "

Butch has three claims pending with the VA. In addition to his VVA friends, his own doctor insisted on him making the claims when she found out he was a Vietnam veteran. He's on YouTube, too, doing everything he can to spread the word.

"If nothing else, I'm hoping that sharing my story will help," he said. "I just tell people this is what I had, and I had it bad."

He comes from an extended family with many children. He is unique among them.

"I'm the only one who has these cancers," he said. "I'm the only one who has a pacemaker. And I'm the only one who served in Vietnam."

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Faces of AGENT ORANGE

Louisiana

Dayna Dupuis Theriot

By Jim Belshaw

Dayna and Keeyan's story is brought to you by The Missouri Vietnam Veterans Foundation.

Dayna Dupuis Theriot writes a letter filled with questions, not the least of which is to whom she should send it for answers. She scours the Internet looking for such answers and finds only tantalizing clues, or more to the point, one clue, one connector between her son and the various abnormalities that have been visited upon him. The clue repeatedly shows itself, but never to the degree that she can say it is the answer with any certainty.

"Every time I put in one of Keeyan's abnormalities with that information about my dad, Agent Orange in the first thing that would pop up," she said.

With the exception of a too small body, his physical appearance gives no indication that her young son knows firsthand the medical mysteries that Dayna includes in her letter:

"Esophageal Atresia/stricture
"Dyslexia and learning disabilities
"Speech and hearing problems
"Asthma and allergies so severe that Keeyan is on Xolair injections (normally for people who are 12 years of age or older according to the Xolair Web site)
"Illecolitis (a form of Crohn's disease)
"Premature Ventricular Contractions (heart disease)."

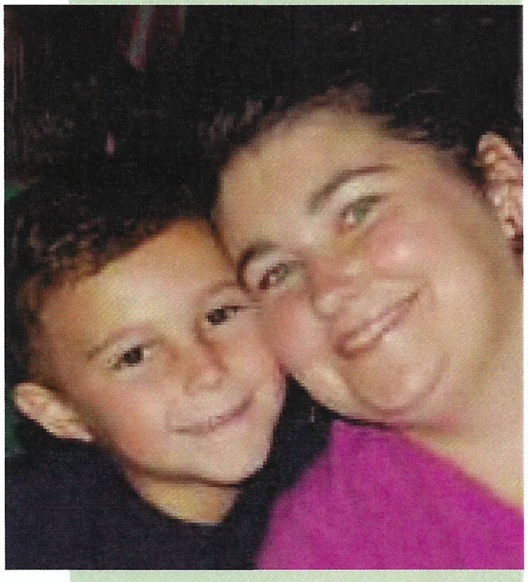
Her father, a Vietnam veteran who served in the Army, is under treatment for PTSD, but has never been diagnosed with a disease connected to Agent Orange. Nonetheless, pointing to the presence of Agent Orange in her Internet research, Dayna finds yet another clue hard to pin down.

"My father was in an area that was heavily sprayed with Agent Orange," she said. "He's been through a lot. I don't know how he would handle it if we found out this kind of thing was transferred from his body to us. It would have a powerful emotional effect on him. I would hate for him to blame himself. What I'm doing now is just looking for answers. You don't know who else is out there with the same problems."

Dip in anywhere in her letter and "powerful emotional effect" becomes understatement.

"My son, Keeyan, was born August 2, 2000, weighting only 4 lbs., 14 oz.," she writes. "He had problems before coming home with his sugar levels and body temperature. We stayed in NICU (Newborn Intensive Care Unit) for five days before allowing us to go home. He then came home to vomiting, choking, and almost losing him in our home.

"He was checked by his pediatrician to discover his esophagus was strictured. It was narrowed so severely that it only allowed a few drops in at a time and not



Dayna and her son Keeyan - Keeyan is 8. He weighs 48 pounds

Dayna Dupuis Theriot's Story Continued...

even his own mucus could be digested. It is similar to Esophageal Atresia. He was admitted, and the surgeon dilated the esophagus. It lasted two weeks before collapsing again. So in September 2000, only 4 weeks old, a thoracotomy was done. They would cut out the narrowed part and resection the damaged esophagus."

As her letter continues, it takes on a peculiar phenomenon of language, one in which mothers become conversant in a medical language usually reserved only for specialists, men and women who have spent the greater part of their lives studying such things. It falls to mothers to understand medical terms and procedures that would leave most people scratching their heads.

This is not the case with the mothers of children like Keeyan Theriot. They understand the complications, because the complications become the stuff of daily life.

"After the procedure was done, he assured us that Keeyan would be fine," she writes. "He then began vomiting, choking, and the esophagus was so irritated that it began to bleed. We began PH probe studies to find out what was going on. The studies showed reflux and it was really bad. So they put him on a drug given to patients with esophageal cancer to be able to tolerate feedings. It didn't help …

"We went to see a Pediatric Surgeon for Rare Anomalies. He gave us a few options … He mentioned doing a fundoplication/nissen so he would not be able to vomit. The procedure was done at age 4 1/2 … only to be discouraged by vomiting and bleeding …."

Some of the questions Dayna asks are the same questions asked by the wives of other Vietnam veterans exposed to Agent Orange:
+If the children of women veterans are determined to suffer from such service-connected disabilities, why are the children and grandchildren of male veterans excluded? (Dayna's son, as well as the children of other women, were born with conditions that are on the presumptive list for children of women veterans.)
+Studies show more defects in women than men. Why?
+There are cases of second and third generations, but no proven studies. Why?
+Are there more studies planned for future generations?
+In the small study of 24 Vietnam veterans, they all had some type of chromosomal changes. Why was the study stopped?

It is a proven fact, Dayna points out, that more children of Vietnam veterans suffer learning disabilities, health issues, asthma/allergies, birth defects, and other health issues. "They all seem familiar to me," she says. Kids are also born with rare disorders that may show up later."

"It's been rough," she said. "You always have in the back of your mind that [answers] would leave you with some closure and you would be done with this. I mean, you have to live with it, but at least you know why and you say, OK, this is the way life is going to be. We're going to have to live with it, like it or not. This has been my life for the last eight years. I have no idea how I get through this. It takes a lot."

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Faces of AGENT ORANGE

Texas

TOMMY THORNTON

By Jim Belshaw

> *"I remember being sprayed several times. We didn't have any idea what it was they were spraying. When we were out on the road between Pleiku and Dak To, we were recovering a couple of tanks and a bulldozer, and they sprayed us. A bunch of planes, C-130s, I think, came over. They were spraying along the road."*
>
> — Tommy Thornton

Tommy Thornton had four children, all daughters — Tracy, Hope, Angela, and Chelsey.

Tracy was born in 1970. She had numerous problems from birth. She stayed sick for about the first six months of her life. Thornton says he never really got an answer as to why. Eventually, Tracy also was found to suffer from severe dyslexia. But by then, she had been labeled.

"Retarded," he said. "But she wasn't."

She died in 2002.

"She had surgery on her back," he said. "They say she committed suicide, but I don't believe it. She woke up in pain, took some medication, went back to sleep. Woke up in pain again, took more medication, went back to sleep and didn't wake up. I think she overtook her pain medication. It's easy to do, especially when they give drugs that are dangerous. She was 33 or 34. My memory's crap, man. When I need to remember something, I can't."

Hope was born a year after Tracy. She, too, suffered from numerous problems. He provided a list:
Migraines, seizures, chemical imbalance causing syncopal episodes, Barrett's Esophagus in first stage, gerd (gastroesophageal reflux disease), acid reflux, irritable bowel syndrome, polyps, colitis, mitral valve prolapse, asthma, bronchial spasms, chronic bronchitis, chronic pneumonia, interstitial cystitis, diabetes, neuropathy in legs, cervical cancer, cancerous tumor removed from abdominal wall, cancerous tumor removed from left breast, losing hair and teeth.

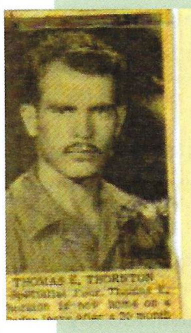
"This is the short list so far," he said. "There may be more to come."

Angela, born two years after Hope, is a cancer survivor and unable to have children of her own.

"She's doing OK, but I've kind of lost contact with her," he said.

The youngest, Chelsey, is 15 years old.

"She's losing her hair, clumps of it come out," he said. "And she has bad pain in her legs that hasn't been diagnosed."



TOMMY THORNTON's Story Continued...

He served in Vietnam in 1967-68. He said he worked on recovery teams and spent a lot of time out on Vietnam's roads, bringing back helicopters, tanks, trucks, APCs, and even men killed in action.

"I traveled on every road you can name in Vietnam for one reason or another," he said.

When he returned to the states, and after his release from the Army, he had digestive problems for about two years. He suffered from acne as well. He continues to suffer from chronic fungus infections, athlete's foot, and other related problems.

"I'm on the Agent Orange Registry with the VA, but I didn't get nothing out of it," he said. "I had skin problems all the time."

He's 61 years old and lives alone, about fourteen miles outside of Woodville, Texas.

"I didn't connect any of it to Agent Orange until way later, because nobody ever said anything about it," he said. "I didn't know nothing about it until somebody said I was showing signs of stuff connected to Agent Orange."

Those conversations were a long time coming for him. He didn't talk much about Vietnam.

"You have to understand that for a lot of years I didn't talk to people much," he said. "That was a lot of my problem getting my VA benefits. I didn't talk a lot about what I did, and I didn't talk a lot about what I went through. It was eating me from the inside out. And when I did try to tell someone about what was bothering me, they'd say things like that didn't happen. They'd say I was lying. Those people don't understand. They didn't care. So I was diagnosed as being paranoid schizophrenic and all kinds of weird stuff. But I was just suffering."

He said he's talked to the VA about his children but that nothing comes of it. He is haunted by the guilt he feels for having "caused" the problems for his children, and he now worries about grandchildren and the possible health problems they may face as they grow older.

"I stay pretty much to myself," he said. "I haven't worked since 1986. I've had back problems since I got back from Vietnam, and they tell me the pain in my legs is peripheral neuropathy, and it's directly related to Agent Orange, but I don't know and I don't care. But when it starts showing up in my kids … man, it sucks. I don't get it. But I guess it's how our government works — denial, denial, denial."

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Faces of AGENT ORANGE

Alabama

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

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."

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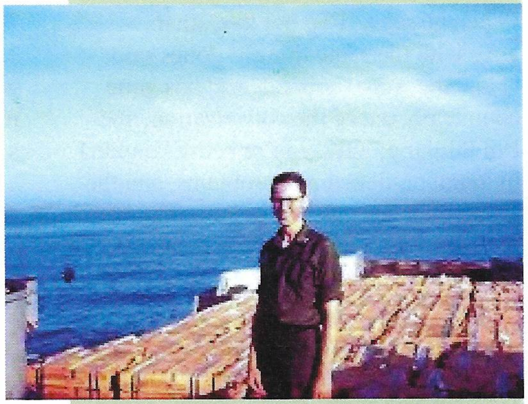
Faces of AGENT ORANGE

Ohio

Gary Jones's Story

By Jim Belshaw

Gary Jones's story is brought to you by the California Veterans Benefit Fund.



Gary Jones in Vietnam

Jones and family

For Gary Jones, the puzzle that is Agent Orange can be explained, or more to the point, not explained, by two words — "circumstantial" and "coincidence." The words are at once the core and the conundrum of his Agent Orange experience.

"The problem with all this Agent Orange discussion is that everything is circumstantial," Jones said. "We can't prove anything. But after awhile, the word 'coincidence' just doesn't work anymore. Something is causing all these different problems."

He pulled two tours of duty in Vietnam, one blue, the other brown. The first for the young Naval officer came in the deep water off the Vietnam coastline; the second came inland, in the brown water of the Cam Lo River, near the DMZ, where he worked delivering supplies with Marines and an ARVN unit.

"My job was kind of like being on the old Red Ball Express, but on water," he said.

Before Jones returned to Vietnam with Vietnam Veterans of America in recent years, the dominate memory of the country for him always came with a reddish hue, not the deep, rich green that stretches across Vietnam as far as the eye can see.

"Everything was reddish," he said. "Red mud, red water. Everything in my mind was red because we'd killed off the vegetation."

The area in which he operated was heavily saturated with Agent Orange, the chemical defoliant being delivered by air, from the backs of trucks, and by hand. At the time, he said, no one knew much about the defoliant.

"We didn't have a clue," he said. "You could smell the stuff. I thought it was mosquito spray or something. No one told us anything."

Because he was stationed near a large base, certain amenities were enjoyed. The locals washed the Americans' clothes — in barrels that once held Agent Orange. The Americans, if they could get their hands on one of these barrels, often cut it lengthwise and used it as a barbecue.

For many years, Jones congratulated himself for escaping the lingering effects of the chemical that had brought so much misery to the lives of others. Then several years ago, he noticed a rash near his ankles. It would come and go, and come and go, never rising above the level of irritant.

"Then I had a pretty substantial breakout up and down my legs, and they did a biopsy on it and came back as 'psoriasis-like,'" he said. "It's basically an immune-deficiency disease. In the most critical cases, it can become nephrotic. A year or two ago, I started getting pretty sick, and it turned out I was dealing with a nephrotic syndrome that attacked my kidneys. So now I have

Gary Jones's Story Continued...

two problems, and both are immune-deficiency related."

At his own local VVA chapter, he spoke with a former Army warrant officer. The Army friend struggled with exactly the same health problem.

"Then he says, 'I've got five other guys with the same thing,'" Jones said. "Now the word 'coincidence' has gone completely out of the conversation, and I'm thinking, 'OK, you're being hounded by immune-deficiency problems, and the group includes only those guys who were in-country in Vietnam. What does that mean?'"

He can prove nothing, continually finding himself circling back to "circumstantial."

Then his oldest son developed the same rash, but on his chest, not on his legs. His youngest son battled a serious attention deficit disorder that still plagues him. Neither Jones nor his wife knows of anyone in their immediate or extended families with either of the medical diagnoses given their sons.

"I don't expect to go to the VA and have a conversation about any of this," Jones said. "I'm already being compensated for PTSD and a hearing loss. At one point I had decided to go in and talk about it, but I decided I needed to get a lot more evidence and a lot more of the story before I submit anything. But I plan to put it on my record."

He said he has no complaints about the VA and, in fact, calls himself "a kind of advocate for the VA." He's heard all the horror stories about VA health care and says he believes them, but he also believes that, in the larger picture, the VA provides good health care for veterans. Still, he sees room for improvement and changes.

He said statistics show that 80 percent of veterans don't use the VA system at all. He would like to see the VA work closer with civilian doctors so the general practitioners will be more likely to make inquiries of veterans.

"In all the intake interviews I've done with new civilian doctors, I have never been asked: Are you a veteran? Where did you serve? What were you exposed to?" he said.

Jones wants the VA, and the government in general, to recognize that men and women in the armed forces are routinely exposed to toxic situations rarely faced by civilians.

"There should be a general health program where these people are monitored throughout their lives so that problems that are not only proven to be connected to their service, but are probably connected, are watched," he said. "We need to stay on top of these health situations so when something connected to military service arises, they can respond to it quickly."

Jones doesn't think the VA can do this by itself. He sees a need for civilian health professionals to be part of the system.

"If what I'm suggesting is too much for the VA to do, and I'm inclined to think that it is, then the civilian medical community should be supported to take care of veterans who are not in the VA system," he said. "These Agent Orange guys are dying 30 and 40 years after the fact with no treatment. That should never happen. We owe our veterans the support they need."

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