



AKIRA SUWA / Staff Photographer

Danielle and David Beety outside the West Deptford house they abandoned because of mold and bacteria. The builder disputes the house is to blame.

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Newlyweds chased from their home by mold, bacteria

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After a honeymoon in Mexico, Danielle and David Beety returned to their dream home, a \$407,000 yellow stucco on a cul-de-sac in Gloucester County. Their future seemed golden.

"We were on cloud nine," said Danielle Beety, a first-grade teacher who also coached high school field hockey. "Everything was going completely great," added David Beety, a mortgage loan originator.

That lasted two weeks.

Suddenly, Danielle Beety was stricken with severe throat pain and developed flulike symptoms. Her baffled doctors ordered myriad tests. Three times they admitted her to Thomas Jefferson University Hospital in Philadelphia. She required two operations to remove a 5-centimeter abscess inside her neck.

"It was like living a live episode of *House*," David Beety said, referring to the Fox TV show in which the eccentric Dr. House diagnoses mystery illnesses. Each time Danielle Beety returned to

their home on Shira Court in Paradise Homes in West Deptford, her fever returned. Her neck would stiffen with such pain she would cry out when she moved.

Their house emerged as a suspect when they received an urgent phone call from an environmental engineer who did air and wipe testing in their leaky basement.

Michael Stocknoff, owner of A&M Engineering Services in Cherry Hill, reported that he had found elevated levels of mold and gram-negative bacteria - a resistant group of superbugs that can cause respiratory and other ailments. He said they should grab their dog and move out immediately. Doctors seconded the advice.

That was nearly a year ago. The couple moved in with Danielle Beety's parents, leaving all their belongings behind. Her health quickly improved, but now the couple struggle to pay mounting bills and to replace their possessions.

Last week, the Beetys received notice from PHH Mortgage/Charles Schwab that foreclosure on their vacant house would begin next month. David Beety said that could jeopardize his license and job, under new regulations on lenders, plunging them into deeper debt.

Paradise Realty Group L.L.C., the Lakewood, N.J., builder, disputes that the house caused the illness. The company has built seven other homes on the court and says it has received no other complaints.

Chin S. Yang, an internationally known microbiologist with Prestige EnviroMicrobiology laboratory in Voorhees, sees a link between the housing boom and an uptick in environmental-health issues similar to what the Beetys described.

Though he has not examined their house, Yang said he had been involved in numerous "sick building syndrome" and similar cases across the country in which he found toxic bacteria and mold to be a trigger of health problems, including homes contaminated as a result of Hurricane Katrina.

"When the housing market was hot, everyone was in a rush to finish a house and go on to the next," Yang said. Workmanship suffered, he said, and construction defects allowed moisture to creep inside and create a petri dish for mold and bacteria.

"By the time the homeowner finds out, the house may have been leaking for months," Yang said.

Susceptible people, including those with compromised immune systems, breathe bacteria, mold, and the endotoxins the bacteria give off and may develop flulike symptoms, infections, and other problems, he said. Other occupants may not be affected.

Yang said the Beetys' story was one of the more horrific he had heard because of the operations and was relatively rare.

The Environmental Protection Agency says indoor pollution may be as much as 100 times more contaminated than outdoor air. There is increasing awareness of the issue, the EPA says, but no federal standards have been established.

The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention advise the public to contact local health departments for help. In New Jersey, the local, county, and state health bureaucracies point to one another as the responsible party and insist their role is limited to providing information.

Deborah Sellitto, Gloucester County spokeswoman, said the Health Department did not inspect private residences. Homeowners should hire a private inspector and correct the problem, she said.

John Tiffany, a prominent Hopewell, N.J., industrial hygienist, said home inspectors had begun routinely checking for mold only about five years ago. The key is to correct the problem early and completely. In the worst cases, he said, including foreclosures, demolition may be required because of hidden and pervasive mold and bacteria growth.