

Family's Dream is Shattered by Toxic Mold

by Pat Smith

In November of 1993, Larry and Alda Brunson moved into their dream home, a beautiful brand new two-story house in Alden Bridge in The Woodlands, complete with a separate fenced yard for their dogs, and a large swimming pool and hot tub with mosaic tile pictures.

They spent lots of extra money to customize the house and make it truly theirs, putting a hardwood floor of Larry's own design laid diagonally throughout much of the first story. They also spent some extra money they now regret- instead of having the synthetic stucco exterior siding in just a few places as decorative accent, they paid to have the entire house sheathed in the product. And that decision sealed not only their house, but their future.

For unbeknownst to the Brunsons, the EIFS or Exterior Finishing and Insulation System product they had put on their home would eventually trap water deep inside their walls, which led to rotting wood and a loss of structural integrity of the home. That was bad, but worse yet was the hidden growth of a deadly poison, *stachybotrys* mold, so dangerous that it almost cost the Brunsons the life of their daughter, Iris, before they discovered what was going on.

"I felt bad almost from the day we moved into the house," Iris, now 16, recalls, "but it didn't really start to get bad until 1996 or so when I was in sixth grade. By the seventh grade, I'd had my first trip to the emergency room when I went into anaphylactic shock in my bed."

Iris's lips became so swollen she thought they would burst. The extreme swelling shut off her air supply, and doctors had to fight to get a breathing tube down her throat. After an injection of adrenaline, the swelling started to come down and the crisis was over. Since Iris had been home from school sick that day, doctors believed the episode somehow had some relation to Iris's illness, and sent the girl home with her parents. She had a few more episodes of shock, but still it didn't register with anyone that her problems may have been caused by the house.

she was living in.

When Iris entered eighth grade, she had her braces removed, and real trouble started. She had developed the habit of putting her retainer on the window sill of her bedroom during the day, so it would be handy to grab and put into her mouth at night. But growing behind the wall underneath that window was a thick carpet of deadly *stachybotrys* mold, which grew larger each time it rained and water leaked through the poorly installed flashing surrounding the window. When the weather was dry, the mold released millions of spores into the air of Iris's room. By the time she put her retainer into her mouth each evening, it was covered with thousands of invisible mold spores, and minutes later, she would go into anaphylactic shock and almost die. ER personnel would grill Iris and her family relentlessly with each visit. "Did you take a drug? Have you eaten shell fish?" "It was humiliating," Alda says. "No one stopped to think that what was poisoning her was the air she was breathing in her own bedroom."

The episodes became so frequent that emergency personnel trained her father, a dentist, and her mother, a dental hygienist, to administer the injections necessary to arrest the allergic reaction and save their daughter's life.

Alda was beside herself with worry. Doctors could offer no explanation for the chronic nosebleeds that Iris suffered, or her increasingly frequent attacks of anaphylaxis. They couldn't figure out why Alda's son, Blake's had repeated sniffles, or why she had near-constant migraine headaches and sinus problems. Most troubling of all was her mental confusion and foginess. "I would go to the grocery and buy food, then come home and wonder where it was," Alda says. "Then I would find out I had walked off and left it at the check out line in the grocery."

Blake would never accept any medicine from his mom for his colds, because he said it always cleared up after he left the house. Alda says she was so foggy she couldn't put all the clues together, to see that Blake felt better and stopped sniffing once got on the school bus, and that Iris only went into shock after she went to bed at night. Only

Larry Brunson was free of physical symptoms. Alda thinks that's because her husband spends much of his time each day in his office seeing patients, and was at home fewer hours than other family members. Finally, Iris's condition was getting so bad that Alda began to worry she might lose her daughter. "It was getting harder and harder to 'get her back' from each episode, and I really was terrified there was going to be a day when she went into anaphylaxis and no one was going to be there to help her, and she would die."

Alda says that one day she just fell down on her kitchen floor crying, asking God to help her find out what was wrong so she could save her child. The very next day, a neighbor came by with some information she had downloaded off the Internet about sick house syndrome. The woman had gone to the web site after seeing a 48 Hours episode on CBS that featured several families who had either lost family members to stachybotrys mold, or had family members who had suffered devastating toxic mold side effects like blindness or brain damage.

Alda had her answer. A microbiologist confirmed the presence of the deadly mold inside several of the home's walls, and recommended they get out immediately. When her husband came home from work that evening, he found Alda packing. "We've got to get out of this house before it kills us all," she told him. "He thought I had lost my mind." (Toxicologists now recommend that families immediately abandon not only the house, but all its contents, including all furnishings clothing, books, toys, videos, CDs, pictures, dishes, pots and pans, etc., but the Brunsons did take some of their hardwood furniture to their new house, along with some of their clothing and a few personal effects, but they had to leave all their good friends in the neighborhood behind.)

Though the move solved the immediate problem, (Iris hasn't gone into shock in the ten months the family has been in their new home) it has created other worries. The Brunsons now have two house notes, one for the place they are living, and another for the house infested with toxic mold. They cannot sell the house with mold because it couldn't pass an inspection, and the bid to just go in and