

“Our dream house turned into a nightmare”

By Kathryn Casey

Shortly after they moved into their new home, the Devault family began to get sick. What they discovered behind the walls left them hundreds of thousands of dollars in debt—and tore the family apart

“We couldn’t live in our house because it made us sick,” says Brooke, 12.

“Black stuff was growing down the wall,” adds Alyssa, 7, wrinkling her nose.

Dyan Lattin Devault, 42, winces as her children recall their ordeal. Within weeks of moving into their sprawling home in Dripping Springs, Texas, in October 1999, Dyan, her husband, Kevin, and the girls became ill. Over the next few months, their conditions worsened: Brooke was having seizures, and Dyan was coughing up blood. Finally, the family was forced to flee, leaving behind everything they owned.

It’s a story that’s becoming more and more common across the country. In the past year, insurance claims for mold-infested houses have surged by about 500 percent in Texas alone. Experts say part of the reason is that modern building methods allow less ventilation, so molds are more likely to proliferate. And today’s building materials often include cellulose-based products, such as paper-coated plasterboard. “Once those materials get wet,” says David C. Straus, Ph.D., professor of microbiology and immunology at Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center in Lubbock, “mold starts to grow.”

How toxic are molds? So far, that’s an unanswered question. Some experts argue that they are little more than allergens, capable of causing sinus infections and coughs, while others insist that a handful of acutely noxious species of mold cause infections, lung diseases, cognitive injuries and, in infants, pulmonary hemorrhages and even death.

Dyan has no doubt that mold caused her family’s health problems. “Could everything that happened to us be a coincidence? Sure. But I don’t believe it,” she says. “Five months in that house and our lives changed forever.”

A MEDICAL MYSTERY

Before moving into their dream house in 1999, the Devaults were living near Austin, Texas, where Kevin had climbed the corporate ladder to become a program manager at Dell Computer. “We suddenly had a lot more money,” says Dyan. “The house was our reward.”

Twenty minutes from the city, the six-year-old, 5,000-square-foot white stucco house was on two rolling acres with trees and a swimming pool. “It reminded us of the California mission where we married,” she says.

The previous owners had moved out months earlier, auctioning off nearly everything in the house, even packages of toilet paper. “Not taking anything with them was a red flag,” says Dyan, who now believes the couple knew about the mold.

Before they bought the house for \$417,000, the Devaults had it inspected for defects. The home inspector discovered that the roof had been damaged by hail. Farmers Insurance, the sellers’ company, sent an adjuster who agreed to repair the roof, but the work kept getting delayed.

When the Devaults moved into their home in late October 1999, the roof hadn’t been fixed. (At the time, the Austin area was experiencing a drought, so the family didn’t have to worry about leaks.) Within a few weeks, the entire family got sinus infections. Alyssa had constant sore throats.

Dyan called the roofer, asking when he was going to start. He said he’d be there soon, but he never showed up.

By late November, Brooke was getting frequent nosebleeds. The doctor pegged the most likely cause as allergies. The whole family suffered from what they describe as a mental fog. “It’s like being

drugged,” says Dyan. “You can’t make decisions. Your judgment is impaired.”

In December, persistent flu-like symptoms, including nausea, diarrhea, vomiting and muscle aches, struck them all, putting a damper on the holidays. Two months of illness had taken their toll, and the family grew irritable. Dyan sometimes snapped at the children; she and Kevin began to argue.

Even the family pets were acting oddly. Ashes, the cat, had become a recluse. Their dog, Josh, began gnawing on his paws. “I’d never seen him do that before,” says Dyan.

And the roof still wasn’t fixed. The drought had ended, and now, when it rained, the roof leaked. Dyan called the roofer, who again promised he’d start work soon. Frustrated, she hired a new roofer who patched the leaks.

On top of everything else, Brooke and Alyssa began having problems in school. Brooke, who (continued)



The Devaults’ house is considered a biohazard. They will have to pay to have it burned to the ground

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NIGHTMARE HOUSE

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had previously scored above average in intelligence tests, was having trouble with her lessons and was getting into arguments with classmates. Alyssa, who'd once been able to spell simple words, couldn't even recite the ABCs. Dyan had both girls tested. The results showed that Brooke was having trouble with easy math problems, and both girls' short-term memories ranked in the lowest quarter for their age groups. Dyan made an appointment to speak with the girls' pediatrician about their problems, but she was too sick to go.

After the holidays, the family's list of maladies grew. Dyan and Alyssa developed staph infections, and Dyan began coughing up specks of blood.

WITHIN THE WALLS

In February, Dyan noticed something black and furry growing on a wall in the master bathroom. She wiped it off

with a strong cleaning solution, but it quickly grew back.

A few days later, her mother-in-law called. "Turn on *48 Hours*," she told Dyan. The TV newsmagazine was doing a report on a multimillion-dollar mansion that was being consumed by mold. The owners claimed the mold had made them horribly ill. "What if that's it?" Dyan asked Kevin anxiously.

The couple hired a company that tested indoor air quality to inspect their home. Nine days later the company called Dyan. "You have airborne toxic mold in your house," a representative told her. "It's not safe to breathe the air. You need to leave now. Don't take anything but a few clothes with you, and wash those immediately. Poisons emitted by the mold are in everything in the house."

Stunned, Dyan contacted their insurance agent at State Farm, who told her that mold is not covered by homeowner's insurance policies.

In tears, Dyan walked through what

had once been her dream house, looking at all the things she would have to leave behind—from photographs of the children to family heirlooms. Then, she walked out the door. "I knew I was never coming back," she says.

At her mother-in-law's house, Dyan logged onto the Internet, gathering information on the types of molds found in the house. The molds, she learned, emitted mycotoxins, many of which are associated with diseases in humans and in animals. The list of illnesses matched many of her family's complaints over the past months.

Kevin seemed doubtful that the mold could be the source of their illnesses. Over the next few months, the couple argued often. "I think that we would have been all right without the mold," says Kevin. "But with all we went through, it just fractured the marriage."

The family rented a furnished apartment in Austin. Meanwhile, Dyan hired an air-quality company to test the whole house.

Wearing a hazmat suit with a respirator, the inspector took numerous samples of the air and drywall. He uncovered a massive infestation, the result not only of the roof leak but also more than 13 slow leaks in the plumbing, which the Devaults didn't know existed. One of the most contaminated areas: the wall next to Brooke's room. No one could guarantee that the house could be cleaned up and that the mold wouldn't return, so Dyan and Kevin made a decision: "We couldn't move back in," she says.

Their dream house had become a financial albatross. They couldn't live in it, they couldn't sell it and they had to continue making payments or face foreclosure. The only good news came from their insurance policy. While other states limit coverage of water damage to sudden incidents, like a broken pipe, in Texas at that time, damage caused by slow leaks, like the ones in the Devaults' plumbing and roof, was covered. State Farm agreed to pay either to repair the house or to reimburse them for the insured value. "But we found out we were underinsured," says Dyan. "We didn't have (continued)

(continued) enough coverage on either the house or our possessions.”

A SLOW RECOVERY

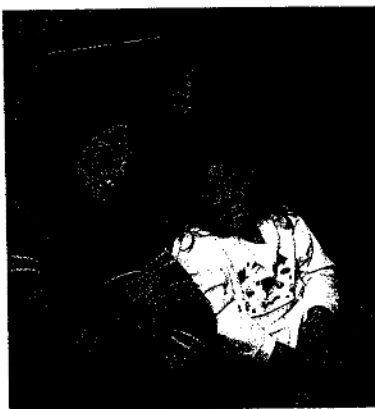
Today, the Devaults have just finished making payments on the house, which is boarded up. One day they'll have to pay to have the house burned to the ground or torn down and hauled away to a landfill. “We'll end up losing \$300,000 to \$400,000,” says Dyan. “But it could have been worse. Brooke could have died.”

In August 2000, five months after moving out, Dyan, Kevin and the girls went to Benson, Arizona, to be evaluated by Michael Gray, M.D., M.P.H., an internist with a specialty in occupational and environmental medicine. Gray, who has treated more than 150 patients who have been exposed to mold, diagnosed Brooke with petit mal seizures. He also discovered that Dyan's immune system was hyperstimulated, making her more likely to get sick.

Saying that their symptoms were not unusual compared to other patients exposed to mold that he'd examined, Gray explained to Dyan and Kevin that there were no definitive studies indicating whether patients ever fully recovered. But he was certain they would have been much sicker if they hadn't moved out.

Gradually, Dyan says, most of their physical symptoms have lessened in the two years since they moved out of their home. Brooke no longer suffers from seizures. “We'll never be the same,” says Dyan. “But we're getting better.”

The biggest hurdle has been the neurological damage the



Dyan and her daughters Brooke and Alyssa now live in Boulder, Colorado

Devaults blame on the mold exposure. Neuropsychologists say the girls have not only short-term memory deficits but a lack of simple math abilities.

Hard work and persistence are slowly bringing them back. With the help of tutors, last fall Brooke earned her first A in a math class since the exposure. Alyssa now can write not only her name but other words as well.

Unable to save their relationship, Dyan and Kevin filed for divorce in April 2000. Last year, Dyan and the girls moved to Boulder, Colorado.

The Devaults have also filed a multimillion-dollar lawsuit against the couple they purchased the house from, charging that they failed to disclose the mold problem. One bit of evidence they'll present: small sections of wall the previous owners had taken out and repaired at the site of nearly every place the inspectors discovered mold. “We think they were trying to aerate it, hoping it would dry up and die,” says Dyan. They're also suing the real-estate agent who sold them the house, the real-estate agency, Farmers Insurance and the insurance claims adjuster.

Despite all they've been through, Dyan is positive about the future. Kevin visits the girls often in Boulder. Brooke recently ran for student council at her new school, and Dyan is going back to college. “Before all this happened, we were living in a suburban pink bubble,” she says. “We took all that good fortune for granted. I don't anymore. Life is different, but it's good. We're becoming happy again.” ■

TOXIC MOLD: Is your home at risk?

Experts have vastly differing opinions on the dangers of mold. “There is no scientific literature proving a link between what is being called toxic mold and human disease,” says Daniel Musher, M.D., a professor of microbiology and infectious diseases at Baylor College of Medicine, in Houston. “Those types of studies have not yet been done.” However, at Mount Sinai Medical Center, in New York City, Wayne Gordon, Ph.D., professor of rehabilitation medicine, has noted cognitive injuries in patients exposed to molds.

Preventing mold in homes is a simple matter: prevent leaks, says David C. Straus, professor of microbiology and immunology at Texas Tech University

Health Sciences Center, in Lubbock. “Without moisture, molds can't grow.” If you do experience a leak in your home, remove and replace all wet materials as quickly as possible. When buying a house, inquire about leaks. If the house has ever had a problem, get an indoor air-quality test to rule out mold.

If mold is found in your house, proceed cautiously. Experts say that some mold removal companies are trying to cash in on fears by charging exorbitant rates. Paula Vance, co-founder of Houston's Microbiology Specialists Inc., one of eight environmental microbiology accredited labs in the U.S., suggests that homeowners do their own research.

“Ask how long a company has been in the business.”

Qualifications are important because improper testing and removal can spread mold. Though small areas, less than 10 square feet, can be safely remediated by a homeowner using strict precautions, the EPA advises that larger infestations be handled by a specialist. (The agency's guidelines are available at www.epa.gov.)

Despite the controversy surrounding mold, experts agree on one point: “Molds contain allergens,” says Harriet Burge, Ph.D., associate professor of environmental microbiology at Harvard University School of Public Health, in Cambridge, Massachusetts. “People should not live in moldy houses.” —K.C.