

Gwinn Family (Oklahoma)

I'd like to take a bit of time to tell you our story. I'm doing this with every person I encounter, not for sympathy, but to spread the word of what mold can do. I know that God has allowed this tragedy to happen to our family for a reason, and I think two reasons are so that we'll give Him the glory for bringing us through it all and because He knows I will tell everyone I know!

Our first son, William, was born in 2003, and he was frequently ill with all types of respiratory and upper-respiratory infections and gastrointestinal problems. We were repeatedly at the doctor's office with him, and at one time I asked the pediatrician whether we needed to see a specialist since William was sick so often. She looked me straight in the eye and said, "You don't need to take him to a specialist. This is our bread and butter." (If I had known then what I know now . . . !)

Then, Peter was born in 2005 and had the same problems as William had and worse. Lars joined our family in 2007, and we had a house full of three wonderful blessings from above, but we were all frequently sick. We were diagnosed with allergies, asthma, multiple throat and sinus and ear infections, irritable bowel syndrome, and migraines. We were becoming increasingly fatigued, some of us had excessive hair loss, and our constant muscle and joint pains were called "growing pains" in the boys and "arthritis" in my husband and me. Two of our sons had tubes put into their ears, and all three underwent very painful surgeries to have their tonsils and adenoids removed.

In February of 2009, we took Peter for an appointment at Oklahoma Allergy and Asthma because his breathing problems had flared up. The doctor said to increase his breathing treatments. On the way home from Oklahoma City, Peter vomited and spiked a fever of 103. William "suddenly" had a terrible sinus infection, and Lars had fluid leaking from his ear. All three were put on antibiotics, and the following day I took Peter to the pediatrician who didn't seem to believe Peter's complaints of extreme pain that came and went in his shoulder and stomach. Within an hour, Peter was admitted to the hospital with pneumonia.

A couple weeks before that, our washing machine had broken, and we were waiting on replacement parts, so I was washing my family of five's laundry at the Laundromat while staying with Peter in the hospital across the street. Everyone in my house was sick, and I thought it couldn't get any worse than that. Then I called our babysitter to say we'd be out for a few days, and she said, "Do you think you might possibly have mold in your house? You guys are sick all the time." I now know that those were the words of God being spoken through her. The doctors in the hospital completely dismissed mold as being a

possible cause of Peter's illness. Peter was loaded up on antibiotics for several days, and then we went home. He became worse again right away.

When the parts to the washer arrived in the mail, my husband began repairing the machine, and when he removed a panel from the wall, there was mold inside--everywhere. We immediately tested it and found it to contain huge amounts of *Aspergillus*, *Penicillium*, *Chaetomium*, and *Stachybotrys*--all of which produce mycotoxins (mold toxins). The problem is that mycotoxins are neurotoxic to humans and pets too. We immediately moved into a rental house, and my husband went to work tearing out walls and floors, finding more and more mold as he worked. (At the time, we didn't know how hazardous this was, but -- thankfully -- he wore a respirator.)

Within a few weeks, we learned that the house we'd paid off three years earlier was a complete loss, insurance wouldn't pay a cent for mold damage, and the rental house we were living in was full of mold! In April, in desperation, we moved into a new Hampton forty miles away to try to have the time to decide what in the world to do. On the day we moved in, I had pneumonia again, William and Peter had sinus infections again, and Lars was so sick with strep throat that he vomited on the counter as I was signing the registry. We were a sight! Nearly three weeks later when we moved out, we were all amazingly well for the first time in years!

We had signed a contract on the construction of a new house. We located a 31-foot 1971 Airstream for sale, and, surprisingly, the owner allowed us to test it for mold. Even more surprising, it didn't have high volumes of any kinds of mold that concerned us, so we bought it to live in while our house was built. We thought we had a plan! It wasn't an ideal plan, but it was all we could come up with at the time. On our fourth night in the Airstream, an Oklahoma spring hailstorm moved through, and the noise inside that aluminum trailer was terrible, but we were all safe and dry . . . or so we thought until the next night when we found the water had soaked through the walls. By that time, I had studied so much about mold that I knew *Aspergillus* and *Penicillium* would begin growing within 48 hours.

So, we began the search for a house in sparsely populated Oklahoma—a house with no mold. We found a two-year-old rental house thirty miles away, and I thought, “You can't do much better than that!” But on our first day in the house, all three boys woke up from their nap with sneezing and coughing and watery eyes. I immediately tested the house, and the bathroom closest to their bedroom had large volumes of *Aspergillus* and *Penicillium* in it. The landlord's words were that he didn't think he “wanted to do anything” about it. I was frantic. I called in a service from Oklahoma City that, for \$750, sets up plasma peroxide/ultraviolet light/HEPA filtration/ozonation machines all through the

house for several hours and promises to remediate the mold. We sealed off the guest bathroom and its ventilation system. We bought an Oreck vacuum with ultraviolet light and HEPA filtration to use on the floors and walls. We bought HEPA filters for each room in the house, and we tried just to hold our own there while waiting for our house to be complete. Despite our best efforts, we failed.

On October 31, we were back in the emergency room with Peter, and we were rushed to Children's Hospital (a teaching hospital of the University of Oklahoma in Oklahoma City) because he had another terrible case of pneumonia. We moved out of the house and moved into a small farmhouse with my mother-in-law.

Since March of 2009, I had been reading anything and everything I could get my hands on regarding mold, mycotoxins and human health. I spoke to a researcher and professor at the medical school of a major university in a nearby state. He's one of the world's foremost authorities on Sick Building Syndrome, and he told me: "We just don't teach doctors about mold." We found that to be true when we explained the entire ordeal to Peter's pediatric pulmonologist, and her best advice was to put him on inhaled steroids. Twice daily. Indefinitely.

In April, I sent an e-mail of inquiry to the Medical Mycological Society of the Americas, and it was forwarded to their entire membership. The following day, Dr. Thomas Walsh from the NIH called me, and he listened to our story and our long list of symptoms (including those mentioned above but also things like blurred vision, memory loss, inability to concentrate, hallucinations (and we don't even use alcohol in our home, let alone drugs!), crashing fatigue, and the list went on and on. He flatly told me that our symptoms sounded to him like allergies, but then he did something else. He sent an e-mail to the entire membership of the Medical Mycological Society of the Americas stating he had contacted me and answered my questions and that I would need nothing further. At the time, I could not even begin to understand why he would do that!

But now, looking back, I see that for more than 7 years we were misdiagnosed. I believe that most of our physicians acted in good faith but simply don't understand what mold can do to the body. But I also know in my heart that – for whatever reason – there are doctors who aren't being completely upfront about what research has been showing for years. I don't know if it's because of ties to the insurance industry, to the pharmaceutical industry, or to wherever else they may have sold their souls. But here's what I've prayed for continually: wisdom. And the wisdom given to me by God tells me that there are people who are trying to keep this under wraps like asbestos was for years. All the while, families are sick. Families are losing their homes.

Children are dying. And it's all completely unnecessary. Inhaled mold CAN cause more than allergies. Inhaled mold DID nearly take the life of one of my children . . . twice. Inhaled mold HAS made all five of us unbelievably sick. Knowledge is power!

Ten years ago, I saw a news story about a family outside of Austin who had just lost their brand-new multi-million-dollar home to mold. The husband, wife and son were repeatedly and increasingly ill, but they saw the mold and the water leaks, and they were fighting with their contractors to fix the problems. So, in my mind, I suppose I thought that in order for there to be a serious mold problem, you have to be able to see or smell something. Ten years later, I learned that's not true! The mold in our house was behind our walls and under our floors, and we had NO evidence of it . . . except that we were always sick. Within 6 years, we paid out of pocket over \$60,000 in medical expenses. Not until our babysitter said the word "mold" did anyone ever suggest it to us as a possible cause for all of our health problems.

My research led me to a book called *Mold Warriors* by Dr. Ritchie Shoemaker (written in 2004) about what mold and mycotoxins can do to the body. I found there are several doctors around the country who treat mold injury, but most of them won't accept health insurance plans. Since we were treating an entire family of five, we couldn't afford the minimum of \$1,200 per person just to walk through the front door. Then I found Andrea Fabry, wife of Christian author and radio show host Chris Fabry, who went through this same nightmare, but with nine children, and she suggested I try one more doctor—Dr. Janette Hope.

So, I called Dr. Janette Hope in Santa Barbara, California, and all five of us went to see her over Christmas break 2010. Ten years ago, Dr. Hope probably would have treated us with the same medications that all the other physicians had been using. But then her family became ill after being exposed to mold. She began learning about the health effects of mold and the treatment protocols, and she eventually opened a new medical practice focused on environmental medicine.

Dr. Hope found that, while Peter does have extensive respiratory damage, all of us have a lot of neurological damage. She gave us a treatment plan and performed a lot of labs. We were devastated when Dr. Hope told us that we could take absolutely nothing from our old house into our new house because of cross contamination. After the lab results came back, she called and said all three boys' labs show signs of liver damage (from the mold toxicity). Most recently we've learned that three of the five of us have positive fungal nasal cultures and rather alarmingly, Lars's results show the yeast-like organism

cryptococcus laurentii growing in his culture. At times, it seems that we have more questions than answers.

We have had many ups and downs, and we have learned many lessons--primarily that God loves us and hasn't forsaken us for a minute during this entire time. We have also learned that we need to do everything within our power to spread the word so that this doesn't continue to happen to others. I have sent countless letters in an attempt to prevent maybe just one more family out there from having to go through what we've gone through--losing our health, losing all earthly possessions, and losing hundreds of thousands of dollars, but – thank God! – not losing our lives.

I want everyone to know: If you know of people who are constantly sick, have something wrong with virtually every system in their bodies, have been to doctor after doctor after doctor and don't get better, maybe they don't "just" have allergies, asthma, fatigue, IBS, fibromyalgia, brain fog, etc. Please have them consider testing their home or workplace for mold. Please let our story light the way for someone else!

Sincerely,

Laurie Gwinn