

Toxic mold forces family out of home

By Sally Rummel
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Dana and Adam Voss have been living with their parents in Fenton Township since early December, when toxic black mold was found in their rental home in Grand Blanc. Their children (from left) Jenna, 4, Noah, 3, and Connor, 1, have been affected by the mold, but have since recovered.

Adam and Dana Voss and their three young children escaped from their Genesee County home with just the clothes on their backs in late November 2010. But, it wasn't a fire that sent them running. It was black toxic mold, which wreaked such havoc with their health that they no longer could stay in their rental home.

Since that time, the Voss family has been living in the basement of the Linden home of Dana's mother and stepfather, Donna and Greg Hehn, trying to pick up the pieces of their own lives, while warning others about the dangers of mold. "I wouldn't want anyone else to have to go through what we have," said Adam.

The Voss family moved into a rental home last March in Grand Blanc. The Vosse's settled into their daily routine of working — Adam as a machine setter at TDM International in Flint, and Dana as owner of WP Latchkey in Grand Blanc — plus taking care of their three children, Jenna, 4, Noah, 3 and Connor, 1.



In June, Noah began showing the first signs of illness, with vomiting and diarrhea on top of the asthma problems and celiac disease he had already had since he was born. “We took him to the doctor, thinking maybe he was sick from wheat allergies by eating the wrong food at a babysitter’s or something like that,” said Dana. “Then, Jenna started getting sick, and then I did, too, all with severe stomach pain.”

Once they started getting sick, the illnesses never stopped. “Every three days, you knew you’d be getting sick,” said Dana, who got sick enough to go to the hospital, along with Jenna and Noah. While Adam didn’t get the stomach pains the rest of the family had, he experienced difficulty breathing, even with no history of asthma. Dana even had to shut down her childcare business for a while, because of her family’s illnesses, and spent her days at the doctor’s office, testing for parasites, water contamination, etc.

But, it was the youngest child, Connor, who became the sickest. “He was diagnosed by the doctor with ‘failure to thrive,’” said Dana. “He was losing weight, not growing and still not walking.”

As a last resort, the Voss family’s doctor suggested testing the air. When Dana put out a dish to test for mold, it literally sprouted all over the dish. The doctor said mold could cause all of the symptoms shown by the family except for vomiting — unless they had been ingesting mold. “We had no idea how bad it was,” said Dana. “All of a sudden, mold came breaking through the walls, and the landlord hired Clean Air Management, an air quality company out of Chelsea, to do some testing.”

It turns out the situation was much worse than originally thought. Underneath the house, the crawl space was literally filled with standing water, brimming with black toxic mold. The house’s heating ducts weren’t sealed, which is why the Voss family was so sick. “That’s why we were all throwing up,” said Dana. “The heating ducts were pulling wet mold spores throughout the house. “When we found out on Nov. 24 — the day before Thanksgiving — from the company’s Mold & Moisture Survey that the mold was all over the house, our furnishings, our clothes, bedding, etc., it was the most stressful day we’ve ever had.”

Jim Kukalis, president of Clean Air Management, agreed that they had a pretty serious problem, more than a typical mold problem. He said that mold is a huge issue with foreclosed houses, because many of them have been vacant for long periods, with no power.

“The vast majority of mold problems result from crawl spaces and basements,” said Kukalis. “It’s especially a problem with duct work running through crawl spaces and floor slabs, especially if you have a high water table. Humidity tends to grow mold and bacteria.”

Since evacuating the house in November, the Vosse’s have returned to their former residence only to pick up paperwork for taxes, bills, etc., which are scanned, and then immediately shredded. They have also returned to their general good health, for which they are most grateful. “The doctor has told us that Connor has already gained weight and is no longer diagnosed with ‘failure to thrive,’” said Dana. “He still doesn’t weigh what he should, but the doctor said he’ll get back to where he should be for his age.”

Adam just went into the home this past week, fully suited in a hazardous materials suit, protective gloves, etc. “Everything in the house has been ruined, including appliances we had bought for the house, new furniture, all of our family’s clothes, even all of the Christmas gifts we had bought for the kids,” said Adam. “We even had to destroy the clothes we wore on our backs when we were leaving the house.”

They’re still hoping to salvage some of the outdoor play toys not apparently harmed by the mold, such as a wooden swing set, a trampoline and swimming pool.

Thankfully, the Central Church of the Nazarene on Bristol Road in Flint has stepped up to help the family. College-age students threw a Christmas party for the Voss kids at the church, bringing some much-needed joy back into their lives. A church benevolence fund provided money for the Voss family to each get a new coat and a pair of shoes, in addition to other clothing.

The Great Wolf Lodge in Traverse City sent a new "Penguin Daisy" to Jenna, whose original souvenir stuffed animal from a family vacation had to be discarded. This sentimental stuffed animal had been purchased for Jenna during therapy she underwent after a burglary at the Flint home they were living in at the time. The Great Wolf Lodge was so touched by the Vosse's story that they sent another "Penguin Daisy" to Jenna, plus two outfits for the stuffed animal. "It was way beyond what we ever expected," said Adam.

Some of the other losses aren't so easily replaced. Medical bills amounting to more than \$22,000 plague this young family, as do all the bills for household goods they can no longer use.

But, there is some good news on the horizon for the Voss family. They'll be moving into another home in two weeks, knowing the couple who currently lives there. "We've had our angry moments about this situation, but we've also been blessed with such huge support," said Adam. "We're glad to be healthy again and out of that house."

The best defense against purchasing or renting a foreclosed home with mold problems or any other defect is a good quality home inspection, according to Patrik Welty of Legacy Realty in Fenton.

For about \$250 to \$300, a good home inspector will go through a home from top to bottom, and can detect a sign of moisture in a home. Mold is everywhere, but when there's water infiltration and building materials are saturated, then it becomes an environmental issue.

Check for mold issues before you rent or buy

- Find out if there has been any history of flooding or water damage in the home.
- Look for water staining, water lines and mineral salt residue. They are all signs of moisture problems.
- Freshly painted walls may be a sign of a "cover-up" of a mold problem.
- Have a professional inspect the crawl space or basement.

Source: Clean Air Management