

**“It wasn’t  
long before  
my son’s peak  
flow readings  
for his asthma  
were  
dropping very  
low.”**

# Indigo Canary

Continued from last month:

First grade started off on a fast note for both my son and I. I learned how to juggle getting the oldest two off to school on their own and then timing our proper arrival to the school with my youngest in order to miss the diesel exhaust of the buses and fragrant parents. This was not easy to accomplish due to the fact that my own health was challenged with FM/CFS and MCS. My son would settle into the classroom, close to the air cleaner, as I would update his teacher on his condition for that day. After that I would head to the nurse’s office to check in with her. The first few days I did feel comfortable leaving him at the school. I was led to believe that he was in an informed environment.

During my trips into the school I would encounter parents of his classmates who would comment on how they were happy that their child was in a room with an air cleaner. I received gracious remarks from custodians who were thankful for the non-toxic cleansers that they would now be working with. I supplied safe soap and lotion in the classroom for all to use. I left brochures in the office to be distributed as needed. My child was excited to be back in school and to be with his friends that he had met over a year ago.

It wasn’t long before my son’s peak flow readings for his asthma were dropping very low. He was required to take meds before school but soon he also had to have them as a precautionary measure while in school, along with an additional inhaler that was suppose to help with inhaled irritants such as fragrance. His allergic shiners were very noticeable when I would pick him up at the end of the day. His cheeks were clammy and bright red. I began to ask the teacher questions concerning when she would notice these reactions. Sometimes I was told that “he just had gym and he gets so excited in the class.” Other times I was told “he plays so hard at recess.” I decided it was time for me to start visiting the school at various hours during the day.



***“The music teacher gave all the students those scratch-n-sniff stickers as a reward for their good behavior.”***

The first visit was easy to accomplish. I had forgotten my son's lunch so I quickly went home to get it after dropping him off to school. By the time I returned back to the classroom my son was already reacting to an exposure. I could smell perfume in the air as soon as I walked into the building and it was even stronger in his classroom. The teacher informed me that a parent had stopped in to visit and that she apparently had on some form of fragrance. I quickly took my child outdoors so he could breathe some fresh air. He didn't have to return to his classroom because he was scheduled to go to the Reading Room. “Great,” I thought, “a room full of books and no air cleaner.” At least I would be with him in case he had any further reactions. The reading teacher was surprised to see me there. I was just as surprised to find out that she did not have a clue about my child's condition yet she would be spending time with him regularly. Ironically, she was fragrance free and in spite of all the would be asthma triggers in the room- he was symptom free!



The next morning I spoke with the teacher about how we should address the fragrance issues with other parents and with all the school personnel who had not been informed of my child's condition. I was told by the school administration that they would not ask parents or school employees to be fragrance free, nor would they post any signs because then they would be violating the rights of others. I asked them if I could address the issue personally by educating with brochures, etc. and I was told “No.” I was also informed at this time that the school could not even legally give out the name of my child to anyone within the school due to HIPPA regulations but obviously the teacher and aid in the classroom were informed. The original brochures that I had provided to the school were still in the Special Education Office in case anyone inquired for more information. This made no sense to me as I thought, “Who would request the info if they hadn't a clue that there were any concerns?” Needless to say, I made many trips into the school protecting my child and meeting with the school administration. There are two outstanding occurrences that I will never forget.

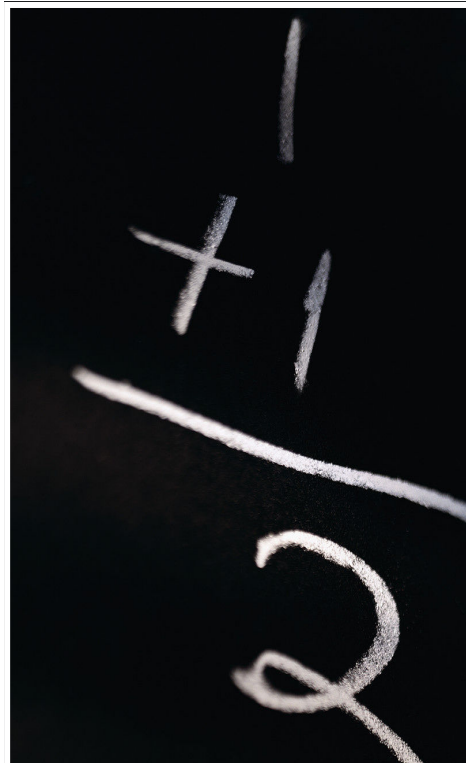
The first was when the music teacher gave all the students those scratch-n-sniff stickers as a reward for their good behavior. I was standing in the hall watching the class march by single file back from music class and I could hear my son coughing at the end of the line. As I ran towards him I noticed that every child had a sticker on their nose!

**“The Superintendent of the school and I had a very professional debate in the parking lot.”**

My son was in the middle of an asthma episode, with a fragrant sticker on his nose, and no one even noticed! He was so excited about the sticker that he disregarded his own health. This was understandable as he was only 6 years old and chemical exposures caused an increase in his developmental delays. This was also reflected in the tests that he took in class. He would know the information at home but in school his mind would go blank. I remember the teacher telling me that this was “normal” for children. “How sad,” I commented as I explained to her that if there were no changes made soon that I would no longer bring my child to the school.

The other time the teacher’s aide thought that my son didn’t bring a coat to school. It is mandatory

that every child must have a coat on when the weather is chilly so she sent my son to the nurse’s office to get an extra coat there. I arrived right after recess to find my son, again, in the middle of an asthma attack due to the laundry products on the coat...and no one noticed. My reaction was very strong- my words were not very “parenting” for a school environment and the coat was flailed to the other end of the hall as I rushed my child to safety. I literally looked like a wild woman while I stripped his clothes off in front of all the teachers and students. It didn’t matter to me; I realized that they didn’t understand that his clothes had also become contaminated from the coat. I knew at this point that no one was the least bit educated about my son’s condition as it was the school nurse who administers his meds everyday who put the coat on him.



That afternoon I was informed by the school administration that they had no other choice but to have my child wear that coat. I could only disagree due to the fact that my son’s coat was still in his classroom as I didn’t even take time to get it that afternoon. Plus they should have kept my child indoors instead of jeopardizing his health. The Superintendent of the school and I had a very professional debate in the parking lot. I couldn’t tell you whose cheeks were the hottest but it did provide entertainment for all the teachers watching out their classroom windows.

**“One would believe that if a child’s life was in danger that any parent or teacher would do all that they could to keep the child safe.”**

At this point the new elementary school principal suggested that we design a letter that could be sent home with all the elementary school children and the employees involved in that area. The principal, school nurse, and I were to meet to create a letter that would also stay within the legal limitations of the school district. It read as follows:

*Dear Parents and Guardians,*

*This letter is to inform you that a student in the primary building has severe asthma. The school has made several modifications such as using an air purifier in the classroom, controlling dust, using green products, removing rugs and modifying educational materials. The student is also very sensitive to perfumes, colognes and scented lotions. The fragrances in these products appear to trigger a severe asthmatic attack. We have made several changes in the school*



*environment to provide a healthier educational setting for the student. We are asking for your help in providing the student with a safe and healthy school environment.*

One would believe that if a child’s life was in danger that any parent or teacher would do all that they could to keep the child safe, even if the child wasn’t their own. I sadly found out that this just isn’t true. After the letter was sent out I overheard many parents discussing that they would not stop wearing their favorite perfumes and that if a child was that ill then he should be kept home. I noticed many of the elementary teachers were wearing very strong fragrances that lingered in the air of the hallway long after they went into their classroom. Many mornings I would arrive at school only to do an about face and bring my child home.

My son’s teacher was growing more concerned and was upset at the response to the letter. Again, I offered to sign a release on the HIPPA issue so that I could be allowed to educate the people in hopes of opening their minds to what they apparently were not understanding. The people needed to know that my child would be completely healthy if he didn’t have the exposures. They needed to know how these chemicals affected their own children and how beneficial it would be for their children’s education to eliminate the toxic environment that we all expect our children to learn in. Again I was denied.

**“Welcome to  
MCS 101.  
I hope you  
have all  
learned  
something  
today.”**



I was spending most of my day at the school in order to assure my child's safety. I would leave with him early as soon as I saw him beginning to react. After so many consistent exposures his health was failing and so was mine. He would try to hide his asthma attacks because he knew that he wouldn't be able to attend school. He had such enthusiasm for learning and being with his friends. The teacher became exceptionally watchful of his reactions as she knew he wouldn't tell her if he was having difficulties. The doctor had informed me that he wanted my son brought directly to him, no phone call needed, when the next asthma episode occurred in school.

One morning I had to take my truck to the local garage after I dropped him off to school. The entire time took approximately 30 minutes for me to leave the truck and amble home. By the time I got home there were 2 messages on my answering machine. "Please come to the school immediately" and "he is stable now but please come." I quickly called the school nurse to let her know I was on my way and I jumped in my car and flew to the school. Knowing that they said he was breathing better I decided to go to his classroom and get his belongings before signing him out. As I walked into the room I began to panic. The cherry/berry smelling odor was so thick that it took my breath away and I began to feel extremely faint. I looked at the teacher's aides and

could only cry as I ran out of the room. I knew that my son was not stable then. There was no way he could be after that severe of an exposure.

As I ran down the hall I met the teacher who was crying outside of the nurse's office entranceway. "He was on the floor under the desk and couldn't get up...he couldn't breathe... he couldn't talk... the teacher's aid had on some lotion.....Oh my God....this IS serious."

I entered the nurse's office and found my child scared but breathing, tears in his eyes, and then I saw the can of Lysol spray on the nurse's desk... as I stood there trying to sort through my mind everything that was happening I began to cough and collapsed into a chair directly behind me. The nurse stated, "That came on fast. Does that happen often?" I could barely utter the words, "Only when I have an exposure such as....." and then the nurse jumped up quickly and grabbed the air freshener that was about one foot from my head. I got myself back together, grabbed my child to flee to his doctor's office. On the way out his teacher shook her head in agreement as I told her that he would not be coming back to school. I called to them all, "Welcome to MCS 101- I hope you have all learned something today."

To Be Continued...

Wanda Finney