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ASTHMA



“I was not going to remain silent. I thought that by accessing celebrities, legislators, and high-profile lawyers, we could turn this toxic train around and really help people.”

Who knew that asthma would allow me to testify before the Senate, go to the White House, and meet Barack Obama? Or meet Erin Brokovich, write a book, and now a screenplay? Before 2001, I never even thought about asthma. I was a national champion on the U.S. women's bobsledding team, and my children, Kerri, Katie, and Tommy, were with me for most of my training.

When I retired, we moved to Midlothian, Texas, the “cement capital” of the state. That little town took in hazardous waste from seven other states, and in 2004 nearly 400 tons of various kinds of toxic pollutants were released into Midlothian's air. At the time, industry was legally allowed to call the burning of hazardous waste a “resource recovery” practice. Two months after settling into our new home, Tommy couldn't breathe, but we couldn't figure out why.

Because Midlothian was a small, blue-collar town, no one would talk to us. Only years later, after my son's school was mentioned in a 2008 USA Today special report as being in the upper one percent of the most toxic elementary schools in the nation did school nurses, teachers, and parents come forward. Not only did they tell me that they know what was causing Tommy to be so sick, but that many other children have died from or are suffering from upper respiratory diseases, rare tumors, cancers, and birth defects.

I was not going to remain silent. Having lived in the Olympic Training Center, traveled on the World Cup, been around the HBO Sports and ESPN crowd, and written for Sports Illustrated, I had some fairly good contacts and used them. I thought that by accessing celebrities, legislators, and high-profile lawyers, we could turn this toxic



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Asthma is a chronic disease that swells the airways, or breathing tubes, of your lungs. This swelling (inflammation) causes the airways to make thick, sticky secretions called mucus, and it causes the muscles in and around your airways to get very tight or constrict, which makes it very hard for you to get air into and out of your lungs.

Asthma can be caused by genetics, allergies, respiratory infections, and irritants such as:

- Molds and dust
- Exhaust fumes from vehicles
- Chemicals in garden sprays
- Strong odors from paint, perfumes, colognes, hair spray, deodorants, and cleaning products
- Tobacco smoke
- Weather changes
- Stress or exercise
- Medications
- Sulfites in foods such as dried fruits, wine, and beer

Learn more: ATS Patient Information Series. "What is Asthma?" New York, NY: American Thoracic Society, 2013. patients.thoracic.org

train around and really help people. When I brought Erin Brokovich to town, I was threatened.

In two months, Tommy was hospitalized six times. One time when he turned purple and stopped breathing, and I was flying down the back roads to the hospital, he asked me, “Could a little boy die of this?” I screamed at him not to be so stupid because I could not let him think—not even for a second—that he could. A few months later, I testified before the director of the Environmental Protection Agency. He commented about it “just” being asthma and asked if I couldn’t “just” treat it more aggressively. I replied about “just” putting my foot up his arse and said he could “just” remove it when he felt able. I went home, and two days later read in the Dallas Morning News that limits for mercury levels increased. That’s when I began writing the book, *Damaged Goods*, a fictional account of life in a cement town.

“Just” asthma changed our entire lives. Tommy is much stronger now, but we don’t do outside sports. We had to move, and my kids changed schools. Before relocating, my oldest daughter was diagnosed with asthma, and my middle one had a tumor removed due to sinusitis. We used to be a big soccer family. In the Midlothian soccer fields, you could forget your purse or cell phone and walk back to find them sitting right where you left them. But if you left an inhaler, consider it gone! So many families would not or could not see a doctor, yet they knew enough to steal inhalers whenever possible. Although frustrating, I never once blamed them. I figured they were victims in all this, too.