



Faces of AGENT ORANGE

New York



DAN GRIFFIN

By Jim Belshaw

In any conversation about the effects of Agent Orange on the children of Vietnam veterans, Dan Griffin's daughters provide a clear demarcation line for him.

He has two daughters – Kim, born while he was in Vietnam, and Shannon, born after his return. Kim is healthy. Shannon is not. She has been diagnosed well into adulthood with numerous blood-borne diseases and dysfunctions of her autoimmune system. One of these diseases has so disfigured her face, she cannot bring herself to leave her home. Her nose has virtually disappeared.

“She’s a prisoner of war,” Dan said. “She’s a POW of the Vietnam War.”

She adamantly refused to have her picture included in this story until persuaded to do so by her father.

“She was a beautiful young woman,” he said. “To me, she’s still beautiful, and I love her. But I hope she never sees this story or these pictures.”

He said Agent Orange came to mind immediately when Shannon began having health problems.

“I made the Agent Orange connection pretty much as soon as she started having problems,” he said. “One born while I was in Vietnam, and she’s fine; the second, born after Vietnam, and she’s not fine. It wasn’t too hard for me to come up with a connection there.”

He has his own Agent Orange connection in a melanoma removed from his back. He served in Vietnam from 1968-69 as an infantryman with the 1st Cav. He has no memory of being sprayed directly, but there is no doubt he spent a year in an area that saw spraying.

“In the early years, you had to prove you were sprayed, but you no longer have to do that,” he said. “You have to prove only that you were in Vietnam. They sent me a map with the locations where my unit operated. They had an overlay that showed where Agent Orange was sprayed. Three of them were right where we were.”



Dan Griffin, 1968



Dan Griffin, 1992



The Griffin's story continued...

He received a check from the Agent Orange settlement.

"I got my \$600 check," he said. "Did you know you get the same amount if you die?"

His battle now is on behalf of Shannon. She is 38 years old. Her quality of life is poor. She is always tired, always beset with fevers. Her father said she's been diagnosed with Hansen's (leprosy); Sjogren's syndrome (an autoimmune disease); Mitral valve prolapse (when the valve between the heart's left upper chamber and the left lower chamber doesn't close properly); Raynaud's disease (discoloration of the extremities caused by blood vessel spasms, resulting in cold and lack of sensation in the fingers and toes); and "saddle nose."

"She's gone to just about every specialist there is, and most of them say, 'Well, we're just not sure,'" he said. "One disease is disintegrating the cartilage in the hip, ankle, heart, and nose. The nose is gone. Basically, she doesn't have a nose. And not just because I'm her father, but she was a very attractive woman, and now she won't leave her home."

They cannot get insurance coverage for the damage to the nose, because insurance companies say the surgery is "cosmetic."

He has had no discussion with the VA about his daughter, even though he is more than familiar with the theory that says he should put in a claim and wait to see if it is granted.

"You look at the diseases they're compensating veterans for, and it's a long list," he said. "It's common now to see guys making claims connected to Agent Orange. I've been to a lot of funerals, too. A lot of guys I know died with an Agent Orange-related disease."

But they don't grant compensation to the children of male veterans. He has been involved in veterans' affairs for many years and is the executive director of VVA Chapter 49 in Westchester. His experience in veterans' affairs leaves him doubtful about any forthcoming help from the VA for the children of Vietnam veterans.

Like so many other veterans with children suffering from exotic diseases with no family history to connect them with such diseases, Dan Griffin says the VA must conduct studies on the diseases and Agent Orange. He does not expect that to happen until the VA culture is changed.

He says what is needed is some kind of collection point, a telephone number or e-mail address, where veterans could call to report birth-defect problems. He points to the importance of knowing the numbers of children and grandchildren in the veterans community who suffer from diseases and birth defects likely connected to Agent Orange.

"The whole mentality at the VA is Save Money," he said. "They're slowly taking care of us veterans, but they're not doing anything for children with birth defects, except for spina bifida. I thought maybe after they did that it would open the door, but there has been nothing added for children. And it's been years now."

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Significant numbers of Vietnam veterans have children and grandchildren with birth defects related to exposure to Agent Orange. To alert legislators and the media to this ongoing legacy of the war, we are seeking real stories about real people. If you wish to share your family's health struggles that you believe are due to Agent Orange/dioxin, send an email to mporter@vva.org or call 301-585-4000, Ext. 146.

