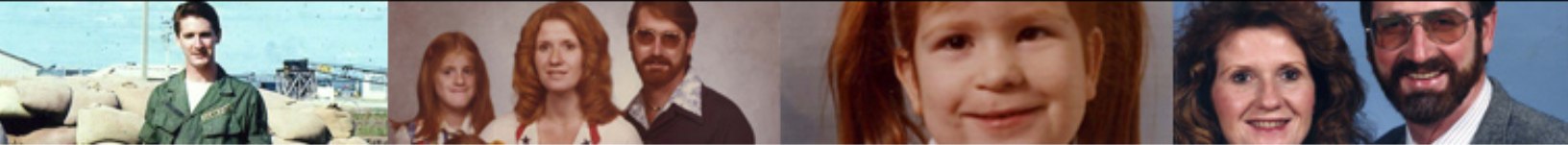




Faces of AGENT ORANGE

Pennsylvania



The Petroskys

By Jim Belshaw

The Petrosky's story is brought to you by Chapter 176, Centralia, Illinois.

Pete Petrosky and his wife had planned on having a large family. They talked about it before getting married. At least five kids, they agreed, a house full of kids. They stopped after two daughters.

"I was not going to bring anyone else into this world," Pete said. "We wanted to have a large family. But after those two kids came, I said something's wrong. There's either something wrong with me or something wrong with you [his wife], because we have no history of anything like this in either of our families."

Those "two kids" who came were his daughters, Lisa and Kimberly. Lisa was born with some kind of "soft tissue" growth covering the roof of her mouth. He remembers trying to get more information from doctors, but it never went beyond "a soft tissue growth." Whatever it was, it did not belong there.

Kimberly, his second daughter, was born with a cleft lip that would evolve into even more serious health issues and a long history of surgeries. At one point in her young life, she nearly died and would have done so had not the Petroskys rushed her to an emergency room.

Pete believes he knows what caused the birth defects — Agent Orange, and it has shadowed him since his time in Vietnam.

"I want some kind of explanation or a better understanding from the VA that it accepts that veterans have a connection to something like

my daughter's cleft lip," he said. "They'll recognize women Vietnam veterans as having problems with these kinds of things, but not men, not me. It makes no sense to me. This Agent Orange thing has stuck in my craw for a long time."

He served at Bien Hoa in 67/68 during the TET Offensive in the Air Force. He worked in the motor pool, servicing all of the vehicles on the base and working with the Army as well.

"We had a service that went out on the perimeter at night to bail out the 101st and 173rd when they got stuck," he said, laughing at the memory of pulling the Army out of the mud. "I went out on the perimeter with a wrecker. Real quiet vehicle, right? We worked on all the equipment they used."

He remembers the base being sprayed with Agent Orange. He remembers the aircraft overhead dumping their loads of vegetation killer.

Back home, he no longer gave any thought to Agent Orange. He and his wife began what they thought would be that large family. The first was Lisa.

"We didn't know anything about Agent Orange with the first one," he said.

They went for a regular check-up on the new baby one day, and the doctors found the odd "soft tissue" covering the roof of her mouth. They took her to a specialist to have the tissue surgically removed.



Pete Petrosky, Bien Hoa, 1967



Kimberly



Faces of AGENT ORANGE

The Petroskys Story Continued...

In 1973, Kimberly was born with a cleft lip.

“The doctor brought her out to me, and she was wrapped up in a blanket,” he said. “It was quite upsetting. The doctor said, ‘Don’t get too excited. She’s a very healthy baby.’ Well, it was back to the specialists again.”

At the time, he was having trouble holding on to jobs, too. The economy was sour. The nearby Pittsburgh steel mills were anything but solid economically. Meanwhile, surgery to correct the cleft lip beckoned for Kimberly, who was then six months old.

At nine months, she nearly died.

Pete’s wife called him at work. She couldn’t get Kimberly to wake up. Pete rushed home. He couldn’t wake her, either. They put her in the family car and rushed her to the emergency room.

“She was breathing, but very little,” he said. “The doctors didn’t know what was going on. After all was said and done, it turned out to be a bowel obstruction and gangrene had set in. If we hadn’t gotten her in when we did, she probably would have died.”

But Kimberly was far from being out of the woods.

“Later on down the road, it got infected and she needed surgery again,” he said.

More surgeries for Kimberly came. The cleft lip had flattened her nose and her nostrils needed to be rounded. Years later, as she began attending school, it was discovered that she had a “still eye.”

His oldest daughter, Lisa, has never been married. She is 40. His younger daughter, Kimberly, 36, is married and has two healthy children.

“If you don’t think we went through pure hell when those two kids [his grandchildren] were born ...” he said, his voice trailing off. “I was scared to death. I had to sit down with my daughter when she got married and explain to her and her husband that they might have consequences down the road.”

At a recent Agent Orange meeting, he began talking to a Marine who served at Khe

Sanh. The Marine told him one of his sons was having a serious problem with anxiety. Pete told him he had noticed a change in his youngest daughter since the birth of her children. She seemed to be anxious frequently.

“It was my wife who said it had to be the Agent Orange,” he said. “I’ve watched documentaries on TV about how many Vietnamese children have cleft lip/palate. My thing with the VA is it won’t even recognize male veterans as being carriers of anything. I haven’t talked to the VA about it. I’ve gone in for PTSD, and I mentioned that the kids might be connected somehow to my PTSD problems.”

The VA has awarded him a disability due to PTSD.

“I sit in on meetings with veterans from all over Pennsylvania, and what are we doing? Nothing,” he said. “They say there’s nothing we can do. I say, ‘Bullshit.’ We’ve hit a stumbling block, and it needs to be opened up and recognized nationally as far as I’m concerned. I’ve been on a vendetta about this for some time now.”

He spoke of a chapter member whose daughter was born with severe birth defects. She is 36 years old and has never been able to walk or talk.

“She’s never driven a car, she’s deaf, she crawls around on the floor, and those two parents have never abandoned her,” he said. “To never hear your child speak, to never hear your child say ‘I love you’ or anything like that—it has to be a very tough row to hoe. My wife and I have managed to raise a family, and we have a home and two grandchildren, but this Agent Orange thing bugs me. It really bugs me.”

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.

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