



Faces of AGENT ORANGE

Florida



SHARITY KEITH-REICHARD

By Jim Belshaw

These are some of the things Sharity Keith-Reichard wrote on an Agent Orange Web page:

- I was 2 when they diagnosed me with Alopecia Universalis (loss of scalp and body hair).
- I was 11 the first time someone tried to pull off my wig.
- I was almost 16 when they told me I would never have children and that I would have to undergo either a “procedure” for many months or surgery to have a “normal” sex life. I had never even had a date.
- I was 21 before I could even talk to a therapist about the embarrassing thing that was wrong with me.
- I was 34 when I found out my condition actually had a name — Mullerian Aplasia.
- I am 39 and I am still sad sometimes that I will never have a child.

There is no history on either side of her family that accounts for any of this. The only known potential environmental factor was her father’s exposure to Agent Orange in Vietnam. He died in March 2009 of Agent Orange-related cancer.

She was 25 years old before she met him for the first time.

She speaks with a strong voice, the sound vibrant and energetic. It is much like her laugh and her sense of humor.

Her father was a Marine in Vietnam. He and her mother never lived together. She did not meet her father until after her mother died of cancer.

“There was a lot of secrecy,” she said. “My mom didn’t like to talk about my dad. I had seen one picture of him in profile. I went through a period in my teens when I was intensely curious about my dad, but my mom wouldn’t answer any questions.”

Shortly after her mother died, Sharity’s father contacted her. A relative had called telling him about her mother’s death. They exchanged letters for a few months. They tape recorded a few conversations. When she thought she was ready, she called him.

“I had typed out a list of 40-something questions that ranged from what color are your eyes to what’s your favorite food,” she said. “I couldn’t say what we talked about. We talked about everything. We talked for eight or nine hours. Where I had been, where he had been. When I actually went to meet him a few months





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SHARITY KEITH-REICHARD's Story Continued...

later, I found out that I walk like him, I talk like him, I'm a little version of my dad, from my coloring, to my facial structure, to everything. It was amazing. I went to his house to meet him, and when I sat down, the first thing my stepmother said she noticed was that my father and I arranged ourselves exactly the same way."

They talked about her surgery and, in her words, "You can't miss the bald thing." They didn't talk much about Vietnam. He didn't like talking about it. He told her to look forward, not backward. He suffered from PTSD, and once became so angry with her that the two of them wound up speaking to a VA counselor.

They talked about her physical difficulties and the long journey it has been for her. She tried speaking with the VA about Agent Orange and the possibility that it played a role in her health problems, but she said she never received a response from the VA.

She has been married for two years. She and her husband have been together since 2001.

"My life has been full of highs and lows," she said. "I can't say I've always handled it beautifully. I set goals in life. I have a master's degree in Special Ed. I don't see the things that have happened to me as reasons to stop trying to have a life. I've gone down black holes. I've had to rebuild my life a couple of times. I've been largely blessed with good friends and people who love me. I guess, though, that it's mostly been a one-woman show. Yes, I have a husband ... a stepchild ... a stepmother ... cousins — nonetheless, I feel a little alone and a little scared."

She will be 40 this year. Regardless of what the VA does about Agent Orange research, she sees no help coming in time to make significant changes in her life. Nonetheless, she recognizes that others might benefit from such research, and she hopes the VA will at least study the Agent Orange questions.

"I'm hoping one day that they will research it," she said. "I'm about 40. I'm not going to make my hair grow, and I'm certainly not going to go back and grow a uterus so I can give birth. But there are a lot of people out there who will have children and grandchildren who will be affected by this stuff. I worry that the same things that happened to Vietnam veterans will happen to veterans of other wars. These things need to be addressed and a policy put in place. They need to take responsibility for those they're responsible for."

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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