



Faces of AGENT ORANGE

Florida



Shelia and Henry Snyder

By Jim Belshaw

Shelia Snyder asks a straightforward, troubling question: “Why do I have to worry about my grandkids because their grandfather served our country? There is nothing to justify that.”

Her husband, Henry, served in Vietnam with the Army in 1968-69. He is diabetic and the recipient of a VA-approved claim related to Agent Orange. One of her grandchildren, born with multiple and devastating birth defects, died a few months after her first birthday. When the founder of the Agent Orange Quilt of Tears, Jennie LeFevre, died in 2004, Shelia and Henry took over, travelling with the Quilt, and sharing information about the horrific effects of Agent Orange.

It wasn't until the late 1990s that Shelia became aware of the Agent Orange issues veterans and their families had been dealing with for many years. Her husband, Henry, had met a Vietnam veteran, Jack Griffin, in an online chat room and over time forged a close friendship. Because the chat line was voice, not typed, Shelia often picked up bits of the conversation while at home with Henry.

Both men came from Michigan, and there was much talk about hunting and fishing and other things they had in common. One day one of those commonalities caught Shelia's ear.

“Jack told Henry about Agent Orange,” she said. “At that time Henry had become

diabetic. He used to drive a truck for a living, but once he became diabetic, he had to stop. Jack told him he needed to make a claim with the VA. He was just on him and on him and on him about having that checked out. Finally, Henry got tired of hearing Jack push, and he went to the VA.”

Henry put in a claim for diabetes. Shelia called it a “lifesaver,” because it allowed both of them to educate themselves about Agent Orange. Jack advised him on what to do and how to handle the VA. When Henry's claim finally was approved, though, the celebration was bittersweet.

Jack Griffin had serious health issues of his own — non-Hodgkin's lymphoma.

“Jack died of Agent Orange-related cancer almost to the day that Henry got the letter from the VA saying that his claim had been approved,” Shelia said. “Henry went into a terrible slump when Jack died. It was like Jack was part of our family. His voice was in our house every day. It was very strange for me. Henry and I had lost parents together, and I never saw the kind of reaction I was getting after Jack passed away.”

About the same time, two people came into Shelia Snyder's life that would have great influence over the years to come. One was Fred Wilcox, who had written a book, *Waiting for an Army to Die: the Tragedy of Agent Orange*. The book tells the stories of veterans and their families and the legacy of Agent Orange that





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Shelia and Henry Snyder's Story Continued...

afflicted them.

The second person was Jennie LeFevre, the widow of a Vietnam veteran and the creator of the Agent Orange Quilt of Tears. (On the Web it is at www.agentorangequilttears.com)

After the death of Jack Griffin, Shelia read about the Quilt of Tears traveling to a town not far from the Snyder's Florida home. She thought she might get ideas for making a quilt in remembrance of Jack. It took some doing on her part to talk Henry into going, but he finally acquiesced.

Shelia took the Wilcox book with her. When she finally got a chance to speak with Jennie LeFevre, Jennie was busy with other people. Shelia and Henry waited on the periphery. Then Jennie noticed the book in Shelia's hands.

"She looked at my book and said, 'Oh, my God, you have that book! I have the same book!'" Shelia said.

It was not the only coincidence.

"It was really weird, because she thumbed through it, and she had started to tell me how she had highlighted certain areas of the book," Shelia said. "I opened my copy of it, and I had done exactly the same thing. It was strange."

The beginnings of their friendship "broke the ice" with Henry, and he started coming out of the depression that had come with the death of Jack Griffin. Shelia found herself working with Jennie on the Quilt project, an effort she found to have great importance.

"Now I feel like the Quilt is Henry's PTSD therapy," she said.

In 2004, their granddaughter, Hope Nicole, was born. Before the birth, the family faced a grim prognosis. Tests showed that the infant had no brain, only

a brain stem. Babies such as this are expected to die at or shortly after birth. Hope Nicole would live more than a year.

While speaking with a hospital counselor, Shelia mentioned Agent Orange. In an online retelling of the story, Shelia wrote: "I brought up the subject of dioxin/ Agent Orange ... but she honestly didn't seem to have a clue about dioxin. After I explained some about Agent Orange, the counselor dismissed the subject quite quickly, which I didn't really like, but I was becoming too overwhelmed with the options and decisions that were being explained to my son and pregnant daughter-in-law."

The possible Agent Orange connections to birth defects in the children and grandchildren of Vietnam veterans is something Shelia Snyder does not want to see so easily dismissed.

"I want to prevent these things from happening in the future," she said. "I don't want to see this happening to generation after generation. The VA needs to pay attention to birth defects. There's research and information others have done. Legitimate scientists a whole lot smarter than I am have done a lot of work on these questions. The VA needs to pay attention to these people. All of this information has been there for years, and they just keep shoving it under the carpet. They pay no attention to it."

Significant numbers of 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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