

Catalanotto Family

In the summer of 1999, we moved into a four-bedroom, brick, leased home in Metairie, Louisiana. At the time, I was running a successful family restaurant, where I managed 37 employees. My husband, Joe, was managing a local business. Our two children, Stephanie and Joseph were age 14 and 10 at that time. Stephanie was very involved in sports at her school and Joseph was an active 10-year-old who played with friends.

After several months of living in the home, I began experiencing severe headaches, fever and nausea. I was rushed to the hospital, admitted and diagnosed with viral meningitis. After being released from the hospital, and while I was trying to recover, I discovered that my 10-year-old son had ringworms on his spine and also had a fever, diarrhea and vomiting. While still waging my own battle with meningitis, I consulted our pediatrician about my son's deteriorating condition. The doctor said Joseph had a virus. However, they could not get the vomiting under control and had him admitted to Children's Hospital in New Orleans.

The doctors concluded that he was suffering from a paralyzed stomach which was caused by an airborne virus. They added that nothing could be done for him. For the next two years, Joseph was in and out of Children's Hospital and East Jefferson Hospital with gastrointestinal difficulties, where he was fed intravenously because he was not able to hold down anything, including water. At one point, the doctors considered inserting a tube to feed him. Joseph was forced to leave school due to illness. Although the school provided a home-bound teacher, it was very difficult because of this ongoing illness. Joseph celebrated Christmas, Thanksgiving and his birthday in the hospital. After several years of being ill, surgeons at Children's Hospital suggested re-constructive surgery on his stomach to correct the damage and allow his stomach to function properly. The surgical procedure was a success, but because of the nature of the surgery, he is under constant threat of the surgery reversing as he grows.

At the same time, 14-year-old Stephanie began suffering from chronic debilitating fatigue, severe headaches and reflux. After her 8th grade year, she was, like her brother, forced to leave school and was provided a home-bound teacher. She missed her 8th grade graduation due to this illness. She then started having chronic diarrhea (IBS) and muscle spasms. Stephanie lost 60 pounds and was hospitalized four times at East Jefferson General Hospital before being diagnosed with cysts on her thyroid glands. She was put on a regimen of supplements and medicines to minimize the symptoms. Because of her immune dysfunction, doctors have a strong suspicion that Stephanie suffers from Fibromyalgia.

While caring for two ill children in February of 2001, I was admitted to East Jefferson General hospital suffering with nausea, vomiting, fever, severe headache, diarrhea and neck pain. I stayed in the hospital for two weeks and was sent home with no relief of the symptoms. I have been diagnosed with brain fog, resulting in cognitive and memory impairment; severe chemical sensitivity, which causes adverse respiratory reaction when I come into contact with any perfumes, ink, household products, candles and numerous other items that we encounter in our daily lives, which makes everyday living very difficult; swollen lymph nodes; fibromyalgia and immune dysfunction which leaves me vulnerable to a host of other illnesses. I live daily with a

variety of symptoms that include severe chest tightness, shortness of breath, headaches, eye pain, fatigue, fever, chills, anxiety, chronic cough, muscle spasms, night sweats and chronic insomnia.

This illness caused our family to have to sell the restaurant that we spent nearly a decade building. It was devastating to give up our dream, but we were too sick to operate it. Our restaurant was one of the most popular restaurants in the area.

In the summer of 2001, I saw a television program on "48 Hours" where it chronicled a family who was very ill and had similar symptoms. The program gave instructions on where to look in your home for toxic mold and described what the mold looked like. Up until this point, we never suspected that our home was making us ill. She called her doctor and told him about the mold. He told her to immediately leave the house. She was also told not to take ANYTHING from the house because of the contamination. We were forced to move in with a family member. Since that time, we have lived in a converted garage. We lost everything we owned.

After the family left, the house was tested professionally and results confirmed the presence of thousands of toxic spores. It was concluded that the house was highly contaminated with Stachybotrys, Aspergillus and Penicillium--three types of toxic mold.

We were later informed that the house had been previously flooded and was never remediated resulting in a significant, but hidden, mold infestation. The house had a crack in the foundation and there had been prior roof leaks that were patched, but the damage was never correctly repaired. None of this was disclosed before we signed the lease or at any time while we lived there.

Our illnesses were caused by the toxic mold in that rental house.. After falling victim to the toxic mold, we lost our health, our home and our personal belongings. We pursued costly treatment for our family--traveling to New York and California to see specialists. We have seen a pulmonary doctor, rheumatologist, gastroenterologist, infectious disease specialist, an allergist, immunologist and doctor of functional medicine. This resulted in extreme financial hardship due to our inability to continue to operate the restaurant and the thousands of dollars of medical care (most of which was not covered by insurance).

Stephanie and Joseph are still home-schooled by satellite, and they live daily with residual effects of their illnesses. The children (now teenagers) are not able to enjoy a social life because of their illnesses. We are still seeing help from medical specialists.

Roxanne Catalanotto
Metairie, Louisiana

A personal account from Roxanne's daughter, Stephanie Catalanotto:

I am in 8th grade, and my family is sick from toxic mold. I would like to create and organize a Mold Exposure Association to help others like my brother, myself, and my mother and other people who can't recover financially from their experiences with toxic mold. This association would provide money to clothe and feed these families. It would also be used for other needs like replacing home furnishings and

providing tutors for their children. I would also like to give these families information about doctors who know how to cure the health effects caused by toxic mold.. This would be a great idea because my family was in this situation, and we would have been homeless if it weren't for my grandma. Actually, I should say homeless and close to death.

I would like to share the way I felt through this in my own words. In 1991, it started with my mother being so sick she couldn't lift her head, and she didn't even have the energy to get a sip of water which lead to a trip to the emergency room.

My ten-year-old brother, Joseph, was diagnosed with meningitis and then he had a case of ringworms not knowing it was caused from mold. Joseph started vomiting. It was the worst thing to watch. My family was so sick, and we didn't understand that all of this was caused by TOXIC MOLD.

After a few weeks, I noticed that I was starting to struggle in school, and it was becoming difficult to get through a full day. I thought all of this would go away, but I was wrong.

With my mother and brother in the hospital, I thought I would be on my own at a very young age. It was the worst thing to think about losing my mom and my brother at the same time. These two people mean the world to me.

I kept going to school to try and finish my 8th grade year and often would be asked by fellow classmates why can't I go anywhere. I had this crumbled feeling like there was no life left in me.

My brother was in the hospital for two years not knowing how to find a cure for his stomach. Then they found out that his stomach was paralyzed. My brother couldn't hold down a sip of water. He went through something that no one especially a ten year old should go through. I sat and watched as he lay in the hospital bed for two years. Then I got so sick, I couldn't graduate my 8th grade year. I had to go to summer school and then had to get into home schooling. I lost my friends and couldn't do anything.

After my mother watched a show on TV about a family suffering from toxic mold having the same symptoms as my family, we left our house. We had to leave everything behind. We had the house tested, and this beautiful home that we thought was the house of our dreams was infested with POISON meaning TOXIC MOLD.

So, now we live with my grandparents. I would take showers at night and while washing my hair chunks would fall out like I was going bald. Then I had to go through some of the most uncomfortable tests for years and always worried if they would be able to stop the pain I was going through.

A normal child my age would have been going to dances, playing sports, being healthy, and living a normal life. Instead, I was worrying if I would live to see the next day. All of the fight I had in me was no longer there. I couldn't fight anymore. I would sit on the side of my bed very weak, not able to hold my head up, and tell my sick mother I am going to make it this time. All my mother would say is please don't give up, we can make it. Fight for me and please pray.

Well, that night, I made it through. Thank God. A couple weeks later, after going through this every day, I began crawling out of the covers in my mother's bed to lean over the toilet with everything coming out of me. So I began to fight like the person I am and kept it up. This went on all night with me leaning over the side of the bed to throw up. I felt like I had no life left in me with tears rolling from my eyes and telling my mother and father--This is it. I can't make it. I am going to die. My grandmother then awoke not knowing what was going on, but she knew I was sick, and all she could hear was those words coming from my infested mouth I AM GOING TO DIE. My grandmother grabbed me, and I could barely

comprehend what she was saying. All I could hear was “You are my angel, and you will make it. You are a fighter.”

After my dad carried me to the car, we made it to the emergency room. I didn't know where I was. All I know is that I was repeating myself constantly--I AM GOING TO DIE. They laid me in the bed in the emergency room. My skin was yellow, and my head was hanging. I was gasping for air. I knew I had my best friend (my Nan) beside me, and with her near me, I knew she would fight with me. As they gave me fluids, I started to fall asleep. It was 5:00 in the morning. All I could do was open my eyes and squint to look at my best friend holding my hand and praying for me. I winked at her to let her know I knew she was beside me through this.

I made it through. I have this guardian angel in my life who has been beside me since birth and has stood by me through sickness and health. This person means the world to me and if there was any way to describe the way I feel about her MY NAN would be the song THE WIND BENETH MY WINGS. I really don't know where my family and I would be without her. She is the greatest thing in my life. She is the only one who has believed in me my whole life and has always made things better. While going through all of the uncomfortable test and procedures, my Nan stood by.

My family has been through hell and back. I don't need anything in the world, but my HEALTH & MY FAMILY. After I got out of the hospital, I began to suffer more and more like there was no end to all of this. I lay in bed with my mother next to me, and she was just as sick as me if not worse. My mother began to weaken more and more each day and didn't look like the woman she used to be. Though the only way I could recognize her was her strength, and she is a fighter just like me. There is one thing about my family that I can proudly say--we are fighters and no one can tear us apart. It's terrible to say, but I don't even know what a normal life is anymore.

Stephanie Catalanotto
Metairie, Louisiana