



Faces of AGENT ORANGE

Michigan



SHEILA CLEMENT

By Linda May

Sheila Clement looks at things like any other nurse would, and she would like to see medical science focus on what it can do for the children and grandchildren of Vietnam veterans.

She was married for about two years to Jerry Fox, whom she called “JD.” He was in the U.S. Army and served in Vietnam 1968-69, at the same time as his brother, Rick, now 62, who was a Marine.

JD died in 1994 at the age of 41.

“JD’s brother is dying, as we speak,” she said.

Sheila and JD married after his tour of duty.

“I knew them a long time. JD and Rick were happy, normal teenagers. They’d go fishing together and things were fine. But they came back very different,” she said. “My ex-husband quickly disintegrated after he came back from Vietnam. He was bloated-looking. From the chest down, he was huge. He looked 20 years older.”

Her belief is that an herbicide like Agent Orange affected his internal organs.

“He was only a teenager when he went over. It gradually ate away at him,” she said. “When he died, they figured his heart just exploded.”

After a domestic violence episode, JD and Sheila divorced, but she is not buying the assumption that Post-traumatic Stress Disorder is the only cause of antisocial behavior in some Vietnam veterans.

“I knew JD and his brother from teenagers. They weren’t like that back then. Plus, Vietnam veterans were not all on the front line, but that didn’t mean they were not exposed to Agent Orange,” she said. “They could have been working in the motor pool and not on the DMZ. Some have no horror stories, but so many of them came back acting the same as those that did, looking older than they are.”

JD’s brother performed a supply job in the Marine Corps, and now he is only middle-aged, but he is deathly ill.

Sheila has a friend upstate from her Michigan home who surrounds himself with Vietnam paraphernalia and speaks in phrases he learned in-country. He neglects his health and keeps to himself.

“I’m from a tiny lakeshore town, and I personally know at least five people who are messed up or who died from this chemical. I would like to know what’s going on inside of these people.”

It was at her friend’s home that she picked up a copy of *The VVA Veteran*



Rick Fox and family.



The Fox brothers before Vietnam: Jerry “JD” Fox (front, center); Rick Fox (back row, right).



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SHEILA CLEMENT's Story Continued...

magazine and read about Agent Orange and saw the number of obituaries of Vietnam veterans in their 60s.

Suddenly her list of five names seemed to grow exponentially.

“Looking at this magazine, all the emotions came back. I was sitting there thinking, here I go again. You think you put it away, and then something happens that keeps it coming back. Was I meant to read this?” she said.

Sheila (who retired from nursing because of fibromyalgia) and JD had one child, a son who is now 38 years old. He has two daughters, who are 11 and 14. Her son has had bouts with Bell's palsy, and he has increasing pain in his joints and muscles.

Sheila is proud of his children, her A-student granddaughters. But her eldest granddaughter was born with “lazy eye” and had to wear special eyeglasses. She took seizure medication for a time and has been referred to a lung specialist for intermittent fluctuations in her oxygen level. She was subjected to multiple EEGs and underwent sleep studies. Sheila's younger granddaughter was born with galactosemia, a rare genetic metabolic disorder severely affecting the body's ability to break down enzymes. If left untreated, galactosemia can cause brain damage, an enlarged liver, or kidney failure and the child can die. It is likely to be passed on to her children. Her younger granddaughter also has severe allergies.

“Are they doing genetic testing? Are they doing blood tests? When did that gene kick in and mutate? My son's blood work showed that he passed it on,” she said.

Sheila thinks that miraculous things can happen now because of gene therapy, and she would like to see a massive registry of blood and tissue samples and the results put into a research databank.

“Collect it and log it until something pops up in the research,” she said. “Figure out these connections. It's not far-fetched. It's also not about compensation; it's about relief. Just do the testing and the studies. It's possible now to alter the course, to manipulate a gene, to fix it or stop something from happening. There has been enough heartache already. We need to stop this now. We can't afford to have it affect our future generations. With the medical advances of today, we can deal with it. The time has come to stand up and admit what has happened. We can no longer brush this under the rug.”

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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