



Faces of

AGENT ORANGE

Michigan



Amy King-Applewhite

By Linda May

Amy King-Applewhite's younger daughter once had to leave her classroom in the middle of a teacher's instructions, but it wasn't because she didn't want to hear what her teacher was saying. Because of a problem with her eardrum, it sounded to her like the teacher was screaming.

Her eardrum vibrations speed up and slow down abnormally, so that, without warning of the oncoming change, she either hears things at a painfully loud level, or at a level so low that she cannot hear the sound.

It's only one small part of the story of the child's problems, her older sister's problems, and their mother's problems.

Amy, 35, was born with an undeveloped digestive system.

"I went through many years of testing to find out why my stomach and abdomen hurt," she said. "Being 12-years-old and having multiple colonoscopies and throat scopes were painful and a violation to my body."

In spite of the invasive procedures in the 1980s, that were even more uncomfortable than they are today, doctors never came up with a diagnosis.

Amy's rashes, particularly on her hands and feet, made her skin red, itchy,

painful, and peeling. Other children's reactions can range from tactless to cruel.

"I remember being asked once if I was part snake," she said.

Her teenage and early adult years were plagued with painful, irregular menstrual cycles (and misdiagnoses for the cause), endometriosis, bilateral fibroid tumor breast disease, and ovarian cysts. Doctors tried numerous medications, laparoscopies, and other surgeries.

"I have painfully gone through many biopsies to make sure that the cysts were not cancerous. My stomach and abdomen problems continued, and my cycle got worse. I was rushed into surgery after they found a large mass growing on the side of my stomach. The biopsy from that also came back 'unknown tumor, noncancerous,'" she said.

In spite of Amy's medical conditions, she proudly became the mother of two girls. She wanted more children, but she ended up with a hysterectomy. The ovaries that had been left intact, produced cysts that ruptured.

"The emotional pain of being 22-years-old and not being able to have any more children was devastating personally for me. I have remarried, and I am not able to share a child with my husband," she said.



Keith King and Amy King-Applewhite



Keith King in Vietnam



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Amy King-Applewhite's Story Continued...

Amy's eldest daughter is 15. She has Osgood-Schlatter disease that causes the bones and ligaments to not grow at the same rate. She also has arthritis in her knee, along with chondromalacia patella, a painful cartilage problem. She was born with a stomach condition called mesenteric adenitis. She could not tolerate breast milk, and she cannot tolerate dairy products.

Mom and daughter share the same hand and foot rashes, and allergies to hand sanitizer, aerosol sprays, and fragrances.

The condition that results in the most doctor appointments currently is her reflex sympathetic dystrophy, a neurological disease that disconnects the nerves in her brain to her limbs.

"It started in her leg with extreme pain, swelling, discoloration of her limb, and different temperatures throughout her leg," Amy said. "She went from walking, to being on crutches, to being bedridden, to being in a wheelchair, unable to walk on that leg at all. Extensive physical therapy, medication, emotional issues, and hospitalizations were how my daughter has spent the last year of her life.

"Then as things were looking up in her recovery, it spread to her arm. Being 15 years old and not being able to go to school, go shopping, go out with her friends, only sitting in the house knowing that she will have this disease for the rest of her life, just hoping and praying she will stay in remission is the only thing we hold on to. If she has another relapse, she may never walk down the aisle, she may never be able to drive, and she may

not completely be able to take care of her children some day. That's our reality," Amy said.

Amy's younger daughter is now 14. When she was an infant, they tested her for Down syndrome and Fragile X syndrome. As a baby, she was once rushed to a hospital with an enlarged, failing liver. A blood infection, a dangerously high fever, and a stay in an isolation unit also marked her babyhood. Her immune system was severely compromised until the age of 6. At age 4, they discovered the hearing difficulties that affected her speech. She learned sign language and lip-reading, and doctors suggested shock therapy to the eardrum. The education system is helping her catch up to her chronological peers.

Both children have been put on medications formulated for adults, and some of the drug reactions compound problems they are meant to solve.

"As a woman, and as a mother, searching for answers about my health and my children's health has always been difficult," Amy said. "Both sides of my family, especially the women, are very healthy. There are no known stomach problems, female problems, or cancer. My great-grandmother is 104 years old and is predominately healthy. Physically I have been through a lot of pain. Emotionally it has taken a toll on me."

The children's medical issues and her own difficulties have kept her from going back to her job as a social worker for which she was educated and trained. There is a laundry list of specialists and therapists the family has to see.

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Amy King-Applewhite's Story Continued...

“This is my story of being a child of a Vietnam veteran, and also the story of grandchildren of a Vietnam veteran,” she said.

Her dad is Keith King, who served in the U.S. Army from August 1969 to August 1971 as a military policeman. For most of 1970 he was a convoy escort gunner with the 218th MP and 630th MP companies.

He has a hearing loss from his service and said he filed a claim “for Agent Orange-related medical issues.”

Amy has brought up her dad’s presumed dioxin exposure with doctors, but they admit they do not have knowledge about the issue. In fact, with her younger daughter, Amy was grilled about drug or alcohol use during her pregnancy. But she’s not looking for blame; she’s looking for answers.

“What I would love to see happen is for the government to have a group of family members and do research to find out what is going on with their health,” Amy said.

“I’m not a person to say ‘send me a check every month.’ Our insurance covers my medical bills, and my daughter is covered through her biological father, but we’ve still got medical bills. I would like to see these children covered under government medical insurance.”

Extra coverage, better benefits, and Medicaid for affected children is what she seeks. “The medical expenses kill us financially,” she said. “The high deductibles leave us with thousands of dollars to pay.”

“It would also be a relief to finally have some support and validation and

answers,” she said. “You live a good, drug-free life. You work and do all of the things you are supposed to do, and then something hits your children. When you are a mother, and you go through things like this, you just don’t know whether this could be coincidence or this could be because of Agent Orange,” Amy said. “That’s unacceptable for me. I want to know. I just want to know.

“A government’s job is all about protecting you. It’s past time to get back to what our government is supposed to be doing. It’s pretty scary when the government only cares about protecting itself,” she said.

She wonders aloud about her own grandchildren: “How many generations is this going to go on?”

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.