

ASTHMA STORIES

Amy S., Travel Agent Detroit, Michigan



Amy and her 10-year-old son, mother and grandmother all suffer from asthma. Her grandmother died with a nebulizer in her hand. Her mother has had breast cancer, kidney cancer and lymphoma, and beat them all, but “It’s the asthma that’s killing her.” As a child, Amy missed over 180 days of primary school due to asthma attacks. She spends between \$10-15,000 a year out of pocket on asthma medications and treatment.

Amy S. is the caretaker and nurturer of a large, tight-knit Irish family that has resided in the Detroit area for five generations. Asthma, cancer and respiratory illness have riddled her family’s health since her great-grandfather’s days in the factories of Flynt.

Amy was diagnosed with asthma when she was 6 months of age. She missed over 180 days of primary school—the equivalent of one full school year—due to her asthma and related bronchitis. She could not take physical education or participate in normal childhood activities. “My mom took the job as lunch lady from second to sixth grade because she wanted to watch over me in case I had an attack.”

Amy’s mother Shirley lives about fifteen miles from Amy in the Detroit area. She likes to tell you about the days when she worked as Shirley Temple’s stand-in as a young child. Shirley has had breast and kidney cancer, cancer of the lymph nodes, lymphoma, and is hospitalized approximately fifteen times a year for asthma attacks. She lost her husband to cancer in 1999, and if you walk down her street, “you can’t find a family that isn’t suffering from either cancer or asthma.” Shirley takes thirty medicines a day and Amy is always checking in on her to make sure she doesn’t miss any doses and is breathing well. “Cancer she beat, it’s the asthma that’s killing her” says Amy. Shirley resides near an expressway, factories, and a garbage dump. Amy says that Shirley’s asthma didn’t start to get the better of her until the expressway was built a few years ago.

According to proud mom Amy, her son Antonio is “good at everything he does.” Antonio loves to play soccer but is no longer able due to severe asthma attacks. It was so hard for Antonio to give up soccer that Amy found an indoor soccer league for him to join, but the dust and dirt led to more attacks, so he had to drop out.

Amy’s family and extended family love to gather for barbeques and other family events but they are always scheduled for the evenings when it is easier for the multiple asthma sufferers in the family to breathe. “It’s how we grew up—scheduling our lives around all of the asthma in the family.”

Amy was always very fond of her grandmother who modeled locally until the day she died. Amy gets very emotional when she speaks of the day that she passed away with a nebulizer in hand and her phone on the floor next to her. Amy used to check in regularly to make sure that she remembered to use her inhalers and take her medicines, and she can’t stop thinking that her grandmother may have been trying to reach her when the asthma attack took her life.

Until 1995, auto emissions were tested in the Detroit region. Amy’s asthma has progressively worsened since these laws were repealed. Her family hasn’t taken a vacation since 2004 due to the astronomical medical costs of managing Amy and Antonio’s asthma. They spend \$10-15,000 a year on out-of-pocket medical costs. If it weren’t for all of these medical expenses, “We could live in a really nice house” Amy says.

Amy feels overwhelmed and frustrated that she and her community have to suffer from these illnesses. She thinks that if people were better educated on the issue and took the time to connect the dots between their health and air quality, they’d become more engaged and the laws would be different.