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# Left Out in America's Wasteland

**Lesli Moore Dahlke    Salem-News.com    March 18, 2011**

**The cost of Agent Orange's personal body invasion is stupefying — with its life consuming selfishness and the financial destruction it has caused.**

(LOS ANGELES) - I live in soulful frustration along with stunned amazement at how this beautiful country of ours can ignore many hidden American civilians like myself.

In 1970, while traveling with the USO as an innocent, 18-year old volunteer, I was repeatedly and unexpectedly exposed to Agent Orange (I have written about those times in [alossofinnocence.com](http://alossofinnocence.com).)

All of us who were there—volunteers, nurses, photographers, contractors, and others—were exposed to this lethal chemical we did not know was everywhere.

Many of us are paying a lifetime price for our giving and devotion during our time in Vietnam. We now suffer serious illnesses caused by these lethal herbicides with the lovely sounding pastel pallet names: Agent Orange, White, Purple and Blue — the rainbow herbicides. Patriotism comes in many forms — it doesn't always need a uniform.



*Lesli Moore Dahlke in Vietnam*

I have suffered two cancers that grew insidiously throughout every cell in my body silently and quietly, slowly taking my life from me. Agent Orange has been my silent partner over the past twenty years of my struggling life. These cancers are life threatening, burning killers that have taken control over my organism, as it aggressively changes everything in its path.

The cost of Agent Orange's personal body invasion is stupefying — with its life consuming selfishness and the financial destruction it has caused.

The astronomically rising health insurance costs, out-of-pocket prescription costs, and every financial sacrifice made over the years has been devastating. These past nineteen months of reaching out, looking anywhere and everywhere for help has been very painful, a journey — mostly traveled alone.



**U.S. Army armored personnel carrier (APC) spraying Agent Orange over Vietnamese rice fields during the Vietnam War**

Coming to terms with the silent anguish of the realization, that this injustice, “just doesn’t seem to matter” to anyone. No one wants to talk about Agent Orange. Agent Orange is not a partisan issue, it is not a blue state or red state issue or even a “which side of the aisle” issue...it is an American issue. But, it is of great and personal importance to me, and many others affected — and, I hope, to all Americans.

No one wants to acknowledge the ravages it has brought to many unseen civilian Americans — let alone get to the point where there is an interest to help or provide needed compensation for these lethally exposed Americans.

Over the past year and a half, I have reached out for media exposure, searched for helpful resource contacts, and asked for the assistance of an unbelievable list of varied, important, and influential Americans.

Senator John Kerry. Senator Barbara Boxer. Senator Dianne Feinstein. Senator Bernie Sanders. Congressmen Bill Filner. Rep. Barney Frank. The Department of Army. The Department of Labor. The Department of Veteran Affairs. The USO. The Secretary of Defense. The Secretary of Labor. The Former Governor of California, Arnold Schwarzenegger. The Former California First Lady, Maria Shriver. Anderson Copper. Michael Moore. Los Angeles Times Columnist Steve Lopez. Oprah. Katie Couric. Diane Sawyer. Brian Williams. Chris Cuomo. Larry King. Keith Olbermann. Rachael Maddow and The Huffington Post.

Of those I contacted above, no one answered me. No one even sent the perfunctory “form letter” or an e-mail thanking me for my letter. No response from some of the most prominent Americans. Only my Congressman, Rep. Elton Gallegly, when told of my plight, wrote a letter declaring that while in Vietnam, I was exposed to Agent Orange, and my cancers were caused by that exposure. For his coming to my aid and being strong enough to make this statement I am grateful.

However, other than the letter he wrote on my behalf, he, too, was unable to link me to any help or services. In addition, I contacted five prominent American lawyers and their firms.

They did respond — although none of them were able to help. Simply put, there is no law that exists to help me. Without “legal precedent” there is no way to help.



**Lesli during her Vietnam USO Tour**

No “slot” for me to fit into. I, then, boldly reached out to the authority on Agent Orange research, Jeanne Stellman, PhD of Columbia University. She replied in an email; "I don't actually have much to offer other than empathy. I wish there were more to offer."

Through my extensive outreach, a few local news outlets picked up my story — I am sincerely appreciative to them for lending me a forum. Albeit it a small one. Ironically, from that simple coverage, hundreds of Vietnam veterans wrote to me. Many offered thanks for my going to Vietnam and for being there to support them during a difficult time of war.



They have offered emotional support, and links to find possible financial help. Many reached out to numerous veteran sites and blogs to get the “word” out about my desperate need. Unfortunately, even their suggestions lead to no help. I thank them from the bottom of my heart.

I will hold them near and dear for a lifetime and always value their good wishes. Their words and thoughts were pure and genuine. Most remarkably, Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff read my story in the Salem-News.com. He extended to me the helping hand of Colonel David W. Sutherland, Special Assistant, Warrior & Family Support, to search for any information or resources that might be available in my quest for assistance, support or aid.

They were not promising any outcome, but willingly offering to explore any possibilities that existed. Respectfully, and with great appreciation, I offer my thanks to Admiral Mullen, for reaching out to me, showing concern for an American civilian and seeing if a difference could be made.

**Lesli Moore Dahlke in 1990 after chemo.**

Over the course of many months, Colonel Sutherland, has pursued many avenues only to find the same bureaucratic dead ends on a very frustrating highway.

However, Colonel Sutherland has been tireless in his meeting this Herculean challenge. He will never give up. His offer of hope and encouragement has helped me believe this battle can be won.

His spirit of caring, dogged determination, and dedication are indefatigable. His gift of friendship is cherished and I will treasure it all my life. I thank him for all that he has done for me, tried to do for me, and his warrior fight that he continues to wage for me.

The unsuccessful and painstaking search for help, whether it is from an American civilian inflicted with the consequences of exposure, like myself, or even a high-ranking member of the pentagon unable to find the answers, still magnifies the reality of Agent Orange today. The lack of help or a system in place to help innocent civilians is staggering.

Finding out this truth in the harshness of bright light is overwhelming. Where are those in political positions who can help all of us who suffer the devastation of illnesses, cancers, and the ultimate deaths caused by Agent Orange? Where are those in the national media with the attention of millions of Americans who could give the needed voice to this tragedy? It is heartbreaking.

Not only am I speaking for myself, and others of the Vietnam War generation, but, those veterans and civilians of today who are serving or have served in the “current” wars of Afghanistan and Iraq.

What are the health challenges that these men and women are facing in the future? What systems and services are in place to help all those who will need it?

If there is nothing in place for the wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, how can we possibly be prepared to help the 21<sup>st</sup> Century soldier?

Aren't we all deserving?

When did we stop taking the time to listen?

When did we stop hearing the cries for help?

When did we stop caring for our own Americans?

Where did the America that cared go?

***The willingness with which our young are likely to serve in any war, no matter how justified, shall be directly proportional to how they perceive the Veterans of earlier wars were treated and appreciated by their nation.***

**George Washington -1789**

***Lesli Moore Dahlke is a Salem-News.com Contributor based in Los Angeles who was born and raised in the Golden State of California. She describes herself as a child of the 50's, growing up in the same place she has always lived- the San Fernando Valley, which is a vast suburb of Los Angeles, where her father Del Moore was a noted television and movie actor.***



***Lesli studied journalism and recieved a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Television and Film Production from California State University Northridge. Her credits include commercial film production, numerous areas of television production; including producing live sports programming, documentaries for The Discovery Channel, PBS Network programming and Telecourse, as well as producing the first series for the Playboy Channel and various other ventures. Her experiences were vast, challenging and never routine, yet Lesli's most challenging experiences were yet to come, with the diagnoses of two virulent cancers caused by her exposure to Agent Orange while with the USO as an innocent 18-year old girl.***

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