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Mold Attacks!

If Gilbert school officials had played straight, Mesquite Junior High kids and teachers would've run for their lives.

By **Robert Nelson**

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Jeff Corn didn't have a doctor before 1988. Never needed one.



Mesquite Junior High in Gilbert. Black mold could've become the school's mascot.



Jeff Corn says the school building made him deathly ill.

Subject(s):
Toxic mold

He may have been the healthiest health nut in Gilbert. The former collegiate runner coached Gilbert's junior high and high school cross-country teams by running out ahead of his athletes, playing rabbit to make his greyhounds stronger. He ate smart; he was a cauldron of positive energy. In physical-education class, his students loved him because he was a walking runner's high.

In 1987, a new Gilbert High School was built. That year, Corn and the other junior-high teachers moved into the old high school, a collection of 24-year-old buildings just south of Gilbert's downtown.

And all of a sudden, the 40-year-old superhuman needed a doctor.

He began having sinus infections and high blood pressure. He began getting fungus growths on his body. Through the 1990s, he was visiting the doctor almost monthly -- sinus infection, fungal growth, fatigue, pneumonia, eye ulcers, cysts.

In 2000, he was diagnosed with testicular cancer, and 13 lymph nodes were removed. Several months later, new cancer was found, which led to more chemotherapy. Again, he beat the cancer.

Corn kept returning to work, kept coaching. But by 2003, he was barely making it through the school day. When he wasn't at school, he was usually asleep.

In August 2003, Corn returned to school after the summer break. What he found in his office, he says, explained

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It was the building that was killing him.

When he arrived, men in hazard suits were tearing out parts of the gymnasium's ceilings and walls. Most of the gym was cordoned off and locked up, but teachers and students could still walk through the girls' and boys' locker rooms.

After one student walked past a worker in a hazard suit, he asked Corn, "How come we don't have to wear those suits, if they do?"

Great question. And Corn had no answer. Like all the teachers, he wasn't told what the workers were doing or why they were treating the gym like a Superfund site.

When teachers asked why parts of the gym were being torn apart, their principal, Marti Farmer, said it was just routine maintenance.

That wasn't true.

The truth was, the gym was full of mold and asbestos. It had been that way for years.

And the wall against which Corn's desk sat for 17 years was one of the worst spots.

What Corn discovered from speaking with other employees, and a *New Times* investigation seems to confirm, is that Mesquite Junior High had been a breeding ground for black mold since at least the early 1990s.

For years, though, school officials essentially told maintenance crews to just paint over the problem, not fix it. And school officials spent that time ignoring staff concerns that the buildings might be toxic.

The health effects of their actions on students and teachers can never be fully known.

However, anecdotal evidence, and a review of teacher and student illnesses while in the buildings, would suggest that Mesquite Junior High was -- and, to a lesser extent, continues to be -- a sick complex of buildings.

For his part, Jeff Corn is a broken man.

He continues to be plagued with odd ailments, so much so that he felt he could no longer work by autumn 2004. He can't sleep, then he sleeps for days at a time. His memory is hit-and-miss; he has trouble concentrating. He now has no medical insurance and no job. He recently sold his home to free up money for living and medical costs.

Gilbert school officials contend there is no scientific proof that links Corn's illnesses to toxic mold at the school. They say the medical pathologist -- who says Corn is full of mold toxins -- could be wrong and definitely can't prove Corn was exposed at work.

"How do we know he wasn't exposed at home?" the Gilbert Public School District's attorney asked *New Times*.

Therefore, Corn is on his own.

Over the past few years, officials say, they have removed the swamp coolers and faulty plumbing responsible for any mold problems at Mesquite. Air tests in 1998, 2003 and 2004 show the school is now free of mold,

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they contend.

In fact, though, this isn't what the tests say.

In addition, a Mesquite custodial employee says the officials' assessment doesn't fit with the reality of the aging buildings involved.

"We're still chasing the problem," he told *New Times*, on condition of anonymity. "The mold is like a cancer in these buildings."

Now, Corn says, his only interest is in making sure that Mesquite Junior High doesn't destroy anyone else.

"I know that building did this to me," he says. "So how many others have been affected, how many more will be affected? The district administrators don't care about those questions. All they care about is finding a way to avoid liability."

He is concerned that the same game may be being played at schools across the Valley.

"All you need is a leaky old building, a district strapped for money and [school officials] trying to keep things running at all costs," he says. "It's a deadly combination."

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