

Quest for Answers Leads to Awareness of Deadly Gas

By Jennifer Wake



Simi-Wilson with her daughter, Gabby, and cat, Roxy, sit outside their home in Lafayette Photo Jennifer Wake

This past summer, after learning of her aunt's cancer diagnosis, 7-year-old Gabby Wilson set up a lemonade stand near her home in Lafayette to raise money for research. Two weeks later, events took a terrible turn. Gabby was diagnosed with a rare form of lung cancer.

"It was so eerie," said Dana Simi-Wilson, Gabby's mother. "In August she had her picture in the paper because of the lemonade sale for her aunt, then two weeks later she was diagnosed."

After Gabby's diagnosis (which is so rare that only about 10 cases are reported worldwide each year) she had one lung removed and started her recovery. Dana began searching for answers.

"Since her diagnosis I have been looking into the causes of lung cancer," she said. "It is pretty scary what I found: Radon - a gas produced in the earth that seeps into homes -- is the second leading cause of lung cancer behind cigarette smoking."

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) states that exposure to radon is the number one cause of lung cancer among non-smokers, and estimates that radon causes more than 20,000 lung cancer deaths in the country each year.

The EPA describes radon as "a naturally occurring radioactive gas released in rock, soil, and water from the natural decay of uranium." While levels in outdoor air pose a relatively low threat to human health, radon can accumulate to dangerous levels inside buildings. "You can't see, smell, or taste it, but an

elevated radon level in your home may be affecting the health of your family," the agency noted.

The California Department of Health Services estimates the number of California homes exceeding the EPA's recommended radiation threshold of 4 picocuries (pCi/L) is roughly one percent, or approximately 100,000 homes.

Although Gabby's doctors could not pinpoint the exact cause of the cancer, Dana has taken steps to ensure that radon will not be a future risk factor. After learning that the U.S. Surgeon General recommends all homes in the United States be tested for radon, Dana tested her home for the gas, asked friends and family to test their homes, and teamed up with California's Radon action office to give away free test kits from her office at Freskos Realty in Lafayette.

"I am just a local mom trying to save someone else the horror we have been through," Dana said. "I did not find high levels of radon in my house but will test again in the spring. Everyone I am close to has tested their homes and are waiting for the results. They listened because they had never heard about it before, and because it is so easy to test."

According to the EPA, testing your house for radon is as easy as "opening a package, placing a radon detector in a designated area, and, after a set number of days, sending the detector back to a lab for analysis." The lab will then inform you of your radon test results. If your house has a radon problem, there are technicians trained to fix the problem, which usually involves patching cracks or openings where the radon gas can enter the home.

Testing should be done in every household since two homes right next to each other can have vastly different radon levels.

Dana is also concerned about schools. "That will be my next target."

As for Gabby, she now tells everyone about radon. "She said she wants to tell everyone so they don't have hurt lungs like she does," Dana said. "It's amazing what a 7-year-old can do."

Free radon testing kits are available at Freskos Realty (3451 Plaza Way in Lafayette) while supplies last. Radon test kits are also available at many home improvement or hardware stores, or can be ordered from the National Safety Council (NSC) Web site at www.nsc.org/issues/radon or radon testing companies.