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Living a Full Life with Asthma

By Sophie Braccini



Justin Archangel

Photo Carol Shenon

Justin Archangel would probably have preferred another reason to be on national T.V. rather than his asthma, but when Nickelodeon suggested that the 15-year old boy be featured in a program about allergies, he accepted and decided to take the opportunity to pass on some messages regarding his condition.

"When he was 10 months he got a cold, and I saw he had problems breathing," said his mother Carol Shenon. "I put my head on his chest and it sounded like a flock of seagulls." She took her son at once to the pediatrician who gave the baby a medication to open his airways and directed the mother to take him immediately to the emergency room for complete treatment. Justin stayed there for 24

hours. After that first episode he didn't have asthma attacks for a while, but it came back with a vengeance when he was seven.

"Asthma is a chronic condition that can be well controlled, but there is currently no cure," Shenon says. The American Lung Association reports that asthma is the most common chronic disorder in childhood, currently affecting an estimated 6.7 million children under 18.

Asthma causes the narrowing of the small airways in the lungs. Typically, asthma patients develop wheezing and have increased mucous production in their lungs. The alarming fact is that the number of asthma sufferers is growing. According to the Contra Costa Asthma Coalition, "The prevalence of

asthma has been increasing steadily over the past 20 years with the largest increases in asthma among children under the age of five."

The causes and triggers of asthma vary from one individual to the next. According to the American Lung Association more than 50 percent of current asthma cases in the U.S. can be attributed to allergies. Secondhand smoke exposure in both adults and children is a risk factor for new asthma cases. Outdoor and indoor air pollution also worsens existing asthma.

"The cause of my asthma is an allergy to dust mites," explained Justin, "and those are found everywhere in a house, in carpets, upholstery, bedding, pillows, even stuffed animals." In the Nickelodeon program, Justin showed the reporters the specific bedding that his parents got him to remove further triggers.

"By making easy changes we've been able to improve the air quality inside our home," explains Shenon, who cleans very often using cleaning products that are as innocuous as possible. "For example, I buy large jugs of distilled vinegar that I dilute with water to clean my floors," she says.

But besides indoor air quality, there are outdoor air pollutants that can trigger asthma incidents, so Shenon started to research and advocate in her community and beyond.

In the district where her son goes to school, Shenon started ad-

vocating for the use of "green" cleaning products. "We've been working with Carol for some years now," says Moraga School District Superintendent Rick Schafer, "and we've asked all our schools to use only sealants and cleaning products that adhere to the State's environmental standards."

Bruce Leslie, Maintenance Supervisor of the Orinda School District, confirmed that the same type of policy was in place in Orinda. "We've been using zero-reactivity cleaning products in the schools for years," he said. "It's efficient and doesn't trigger asthma reactions." (The Lafayette School district did not return our calls in time for this article.)

"In movies, kids who are weak and nerdy are the ones who suffer from asthma," said Justin, I wanted to show a different image." Justin continues playing the trumpet even though he was told at age nine he wouldn't be able to, he practices karate as his sport of choice and does not miss P.E. classes. "I have to be conscious of my asthma, but it does not run my life."

"No child should be prevented from living a full, active life because of his or her asthma," says Shenon, "and if we can all reduce the ways we pollute, with our cars, wood fire burning, the use of chemicals, etcetera, it could help stop this condition from affecting so many children."

Local Vocalist Wins 2009 CoCo Awards

Submitted by Janice Nickelson



Amy Beth Nickelson

Photo submitted

On Sept. 13, Lafayette vocalist Amy Beth Nickelson, 21, won the final round of the CoCo Awards Talent Competition, sponsored by Esses Productions in association with the Rossmoor Recreation Department, and held

at the Del Valle Clubhouse in Rossmoor.

The 10 final contestants advanced from the first two rounds that took place in August. Each level of competition was judged by Professional Entertainment Industry members.

Three contestants, Douglas Bryson, Brynne Faye and Amy Beth Nickelson, received the three highest scores from the judging panel and became the CoCo Award Winners. The audience then voted for their favorites to decide on the first, second

and third place awards. Nickelson was the first place winner receiving a \$500 cash prize. She is a vocal performance major at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo and hopes to pursue a career on Broadway.

Controversial Rules for Couples

By Margie Ryerson, MFT

There are many expert opinions on what steps a couple can take to improve their relationship. Many ideas are helpful and practical, but a few make me wonder what pipe a particular "expert" was smoking.

One rule that has been around for decades is "Never go to bed angry with your spouse." This sounds like a great idea... just one that is practically impossible unless you don't need much sleep or you like pulling all-nighters from time to time.

The reality is that we can't always choose the time when issues arise in our relationships, and sometimes we are still upset with our partner when we're tired and ready to go to sleep. The last thing we need is to feel guilty because we're not supposed to go to bed angry! Not only that, but how effective are we able to be when we're physically tired and perhaps emotionally exhausted?

I suggest that couples acknowledge that emotions are at a high level and that the discussion will need to be continued. Then agree on a specific time to revisit the issue the next day. Yes, you may lose some sleep because you are agitated, angry, or hurt, but hopefully the knowledge that you will resume problem-solving the next day may help get you through the night. If you don't have time with each other the next day, it is still important to specify the next time you can both address the problem. And in the meantime, you can write down your thoughts to share when you are able to get together. Couples say that it helps them get more perspective when they take time to cool down.

Another rule I often question is how couples are supposed to disagree with each other. According to some professionals, we are supposed to keep our voice intensity

and tone modulated, listen respectfully to our partner's perspective, and basically behave in a controlled, reasoned, and polite manner. Some experts even suggest that highly compatible couples do not engage in arguments with each other – they merely have discussions.

I have worked with couples who are puzzled that their relationship is in trouble since they never argue with each other. Sometimes one or both partners are conflict-avoidant; they suppress their negative feelings either to keep the peace or because it is difficult and frustrating for them to communicate effectively. This is not a recommended approach since a pattern of holding back strong feelings over time can result in pent-up resentment and alienation.

Perhaps there are a few perfect couples reading this, but for the rest of us I think it is better to be realistic. First we need to expect that we will be highly upset with each other at times, maybe even irrationally angry. Then, we need to decide how we are going to deal with our own emotions and those of our partner. Yes, we can attempt to apply the rules of fair-fighting and remain as calm and reasonable as possible. And we certainly need to avoid words that "hit below the belt" and being physically or emotionally abusive. But we are most likely going to have strong reactions from time to time, and this is not only okay – it is healthy.

There are strategies for de-escalating anger in arguments, such as time-outs, agreeing to disagree, or trying to understand the issues and emotions underlying the issue so that the discussion can be more rational. We need to be prepared for times when intense negative emotions arise in our relationship and not be caught off-guard. But often such intense sharing of feelings

brings us closer to each other and provides us with more information for building a better relationship.



Margie Ryerson, MFT, is a marriage and family therapist in Orinda and Walnut Creek. She can be reached at 925-376-9323 or margierye@yahoo.com



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