



The lead menace

Portland's Tamara Rubin, the founder of Lead Safe America Foundation, hopes to educate more families about the ravages of lead with her new film, *MisLEAD*

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Five years ago, Tamara Rubin founded Lead Safe America Foundation, a nonprofit organization that offers education, support and advocacy for families of poisoned children.

In those few years, Rubin would never have guessed how her work, spurred by the poisoning of three of her children, would become so important to tens of thousands of people across the United States. Two of Rubin's children were poisoned by improper practices of a contractor who was hired to renovate her family's home. A third child was poisoned by the renovations happening in her neighborhood.

The award-winning organization works with young mothers and families across the nation, many of whom Rubin has connected with on social media, mostly Facebook and Twitter. Last year Lead Safe America connected with 25,000 families.

Rubin will talk to anybody about lead poisoning from presidential candidates to a mom in Nowhere, Ark., or Flint, Mich. Recently, the drummer of the band Phish, Jon Fishman, and his wife reached out to LSA. Their child suffered lead poisoning and they made a donation to the Portland-based nonprofit. In fact, Rubin's foundation is funded nearly entirely by donations received from parents of lead poisoned children.

The group has three goals: emergency intervention and support if your kids have

been poisoned; outreach and intervention and education for childhood lead poisoning prevention and parent-advocate support. The idea is to help more parents to become advocates, to feel empowered to tell their stories, and reach out to more parents of lead poisoned children. The ultimate goal would be to hold the lead industry responsible for releasing the poison into our environment for decades.

This summer, Rubin hopes to connect with many more of the nation's lead poisoned families with the release of her film: *MisLEAD: America's Secret Epidemic*.

There is a public screening of the film (maybe the last one until it is released this summer) on Monday, April 11, at the Clinton Theater in Southeast Portland at 6:30 p.m. The event is free and open to the public, and will be followed by a discussion with members of the Eastside Portland Air Coalition (EPAC) – the group organized of neighbor activists after the news of concerning levels of heavy metals emissions in a number of Portland neighborhoods.

Suzanne Zalokar: *Though you were raised in Massachusetts, you were born in Saginaw, Mich., just 37 miles from Flint. When you became aware of the lead poisoning there, what was your first thought?*

Tamara Rubin: There's like 100,000 people poisoned. What can I do? I'm a low-income mom in Oregon running this nonprofit.

Then I realized that I have done about 85

of these presentations around the country where I show the preview screening of my film, I bring free lead blood testing (a limited number), I bring free lead paint test kits. I realized, I could answer people's questions in Flint. I can give them unbiased information that they are looking for.

S.Z.: *You recently traveled to Flint and were on a panel with Sen. Bernie Sanders.*

T.R.: In January, in the first six weeks of the year, I went to Flint three times. The last time, I had a Lead Safe America event where I invited all of the (presidential) candidates and Bernie was the only one who said he would come.

What I said in my introduction speech is that we need to stop blaming the citizens, the state government, the local government. We need to blame the lead industry because they are the perpetrators of this crime. And nobody is blaming them.

I got a large applause at the event, but the media doesn't seize on that.

S.Z.: *The media does seem to seize on your story, though.*

T.R.: My kids were poisoned in Irvington. We actually moved to Portland in 2001 and our house burnt down and we lost everything.

We had a two-year protracted lawsuit with the insurance company. We were on the verge of homelessness the entire time.

My family stepped up and helped us out and we ended up buying the house in Irvington. We thought, "Okay, we're going to start over again." We planned to live our lives (in the Irvington house).

We got back on our feet after the fire and were going to get our home in Irvington into our own name, finally. In order to do that, we needed a new appraisal, so we needed a new mortgage in order to get the new appraisal. Our mortgage broker told us we should get the house repainted (as a part of) a new appraisal.

So we got the house repainted and refinanced in our own name and then we were told we had to move out of the house immediately because our kids had lead poisoning from the repaint job.

S.Z.: *My god.*

T.R.: We tried to sue the contractor, but there was no recourse, essentially. The law was an administrative law that had no enforcement and no fine. So basically, if you poison someone with arsenic or any other kind of poison, you'd go to jail, but if you poison someone by using unsafe work practices and poison a whole family with lead, (nothing happens).

Our contractor had used an open flame torch to burn the paint off the exterior of our house. My baby, seven months old, inhaled the fumes. Because we were ostensibly white and middle income – from looking at you, your doctors make assumptions – they didn't test us for lead. They never even suggested it. So for two months my kids were violently ill.

Finally, I said, "Have them tested for everything." My older son was positive for lead. They didn't want to test the baby because he was only 9 months old, but I insisted. He was sick too and we needed to know what was going on. He was acutely blood poisoned with a blood level of 16 micrograms per deciliter. (Since 1995, the Center for Disease Control has set 10

micrograms per deciliter as the toxic blood level in children).

S.Z.: *It's been 10 years since then. How are the boys doing today?*

T.R.: They have permanent brain damage. My 11-year-old has a documented, significant permanent brain damage from lead exposure. My 13-year-old, there is a little more grey area. He has a whole lot of issues that correlate with lead exposure. It's not as black and white as my other son's brain injury.

My youngest, it turned out, ended up testing positive for lead even though we thought we were doing everything we could. We (made our house) lead safe, but everybody in the neighborhood is doing demolition or renovation. That is part of the



COURTESY OF TAMARA RUBIN

Tamara Rubin in a scene from the documentary *MisLEAD*, due out this summer.

hazard of living in the city, I tell parents.

I tested positive for lead with a blood level (BLL) of 1.0. My doctor recently did a study that shows that 0.4 - 0.5 level can cause low birth weight in newborns and other birth complications.

S.Z.: *So is everyone living in urban areas probably lead poisoned just because we live in the city?*

T.R.: Oh yeah. Depending on where you lived between your birth and 1996, depends on the level of your lead exposure.

We were lead poisoned. Some people say, "Well it didn't hurt me!" So I ask, do you have thyroid disorder? Weight issues? Kidney issues? Who has diabetes? Who has headaches? There are all of these symptoms that are collectively (more pervasive) health impairments over the last 100 years since we aggressively introduced lead into our environment.

S.Z.: *What is Lead Safe America Foundation involved with today?*

T.R.: Right now, it's tipping the scales with the air quality issue, so usually I'd say 20-35 percent of the families that we help are in Portland. Right now it's probably closer to 50-60 percent.

We've got all this soil testing to do. We have 190 test kit requests that we have to fulfill. That's a lot. We used to get 10 to 20 a month. Just this month, we have 193 requests.

My original goal was to help 100 the first year, help 500 the second year and maybe 2,000 the third year. In reality, our third year was 6,000, our fourth year was 16,000, and then this year we helped 25,000 families.

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