

FROM WITHIN

A continuation of "The Killing Fields of Texas"

By: Iris Salinas



From within the trenches comes a heart-wrenching story about the price the children of Mission are forced to pay in the name of corporate greed, corruption, and contamination.

Sara was a hearty 9 pounds 10 ounces when she was born in 2003. Her mother, Noeli, hadn't had any complications during her pregnancy. But as Sara took her first breaths of life, Noeli and the doctor noticed Sara had a large purple-red spot on her little face. The doctor told Noeli it was just a bruise that Sara had obtained during delivery, and that it would go away. Three days later, the bruise became swollen and raised. It changed to red then maroon. At two weeks old, Sara was crying constantly. Noeli took care of her little baby and continuously tried to ease her. But by the end of the first month, Sara was crying 12-13 hours a day, incessantly.

That Easter, Sara accidentally scratched what had become a large, puffy-red lesion that covered one of her eyes. The scratch enflamed and then quickly turned white. She was rushed to a doctor who advised Noeli to just apply Neosporin on the wound. Trusting the doctor and his orders, Noeli complied. But as the days passed, the lesion itself continued to swell and grow bigger. She returned to the doctor, who told her to simply continue applying Neosporin. She also asked him to test the lesion, which he did. The only thing the doctor was able to tell her about Sara's condition was that the lesion was not malignant.

Noeli, a Mission native, was living in Austin during her pregnancy and during Sara's birth. Struggling economically and emotionally, she returned to Mission so that her family could assist her and little Sara. They arrived at their family's house, which was located in the neighborhood near the Holland Plant in Mission, a place that had been declared both a State and Federal Superfund Site. For over 40 years, the Holland Plant had produced some of the most dangerous toxins known to man in concentrated form, toxins such as DDT, Toxaphene, Agent Orange, and Chlordane, just to name a few. Decades of chemical emissions and contamination had made everything around the plant so toxic that even the federal government had to step in. Although EPA researched the area and released shocking reports about catastrophic levels of contamination and danger to human life, the Spanish-speaking, low-income barrios of Mission that are just four

miles from the border were never advised, informed, nor assisted. A different population study from the 60's documented outbreaks of rashes among the factory workers and neighboring community. Details of other "outbreaks" of illnesses, diseases, and various other health problems were also reported but to this day remain to be resolved or even addressed. They are still kept secret even though decades later the community continues to be plagued with the same ailments.

Within a few hours of arriving in Mission, Sara broke into a terrible fever and became overcome by a red rash. She continued to suffer from a fever that reached 104 degrees and lasted 24 hours. She was rushed to the hospital, which gave her Tylenol and cold showers. The hospital did not provide any answers as to why Sara became so ill. They simply said it was a "common" rash and told Noeli that all they were obligated to do was keep Sara there until her fever came down.

Finding appropriate medical care for the people of the Superfund barrios in Mission is virtually impossible. No doctor in the Valley (and at times, the state) specializes in treating the rare and violent illnesses that plague this particular community. A doctor from the United Nations that recently visited Mission confirmed, "This is a landmark case."

Every month since the initial hospital visit, at least twice a week Sara suffers from random fevers and rashes, in addition to having her lesion continue to swell and grow. Needing to find out why Sara was getting rashes and fevers, Noeli took her baby to a local pediatrician, who was literally scared at the sight of the lesion on Sara's face. After a few insulting remarks about Noeli's inability to properly care for her child, the doctor ordered a referral for Sara to see a plastic surgeon because he refused to treat her.

Incidentally, stories of uncompassionate and outright rude treatment by doctors are common in this low-income community. "Oscar", an earlier chapter of The Killing Fields of Texas, also talks about other instances of uncompassionate/unprofessional treatment by local physicians.

Again armed with no answers, Noeli encountered yet another brick wall with the new surgeon. He also refused to assist Sara, but did offer a few insights on the situation. He claimed Hydrogen Peroxide would reduce the lesion and also said that complications would be too severe if he were to surgically remove it. A few more referrals later, Noeli was informed that Sara had extreme Hemangioma, which is a raised and colored lesion of blood vessels and capillaries. It is said to occur in 1 out of every 100 babies (with more severe cases being even more rare. In some cases, lesions become malignant.) Four separate MRI's had also revealed that the lesion was not merely on Sara's little face – it was in her nose bridge, ear canal, skull, and in the covering of her brain...and it was growing from the inside out, slowly consuming one of her eyes. There is a possibility that the lesion could disappear over time, but it is unlikely. Noeli was told that Sara could suffer from brain damage or even mental retardation because of the severity of her condition. Since her eye was being overtaken by the lesion, Noeli was informed that Sara

would also be partially blind. To make things worse, any time that Sara cried, the blood would rush to her head, making the lesion swollen.

Continued applications of Peroxide were helping the swelling, but not much. Noeli eventually found a doctor in Corpus Christi, over 150 miles away, that specialized in plastic surgery for children. She had obtained Medicaid, which helped with the ever-mounting healthcare costs. With no vehicle and only the help of her family, Noeli managed to take Sara to Corpus twice a month for steroid and laser therapy. The swelling appeared to be reducing and the treatment working. After some time, Sara would eventually have to undergo a major surgery that would remove the external part of the lesion, which included the removal of one of her eyelids.

Noeli and Sara had just moved into a tiny one-room apartment in Mission, which was a blessing despite the fact that they couldn't afford an air condition unit to keep them cool through the oppressive Valley summers. But just as things were slowly improving and as Sara continued to respond positively to the treatments, Noeli was sent a letter stating that Sara was going to lose her Medicaid coverage. **With** Medicaid helping to pay for the doctor's visits, Noeli was able to allot \$200 a month out of her tight budget for Sara's food and clothing. But **without** Medicaid, Noeli was unable to pay for the high premiums of health insurance or Sara's treatments. In February, treatment for Sara ceased. In between the continued rashes and fevers, the lesion grows daily.

"I never really thought about *why* Sara was always getting so ill. I thought that was just the way she was born," says Noeli, who constantly prays for help for her daughter. "It wasn't until I spoke to my family about it that we made the connection." A major lawsuit had been filed several years earlier in Mission against 34 chemical and railroad companies, in which Plaintiffs claimed extreme contamination caused death and major birth defects. The issue is still a hot topic in the town, and slowly the docile and humble Mission community is comes to grips with the reality of it, as well as its severity. Sara's cousins were also sickly, suffering from seizures, extreme mental problems, and mental retardation. She even has a cousin that has a similar lesion on his leg.

"I figured since we weren't around [when the plant was in production] that we couldn't have been affected by the contamination," says Noeli. Just recently, however, a study done by Washington State University showed that toxins are indeed transferred down genetically for at least four generations. "Once we realized what it really was that got Sara and all her little cousins so sick, it all started to make sense."

Noeli is not only worried about getting medical help for baby Sara, she worries about the psychosocial effects Sara will have from her condition. "For a long time, I didn't let her look in the mirror...I was scared she would look at herself and think she was ugly." Since then, Sara has seen her reflection and constantly gets positive reinforcement from her family about herself.

"Sometimes she rubs her lesion and asks me 'Do you love me, Mommy?' "

Bound by a harsh economic situation and caring for her baby, Noeli struggles to survive and stay focused.

“I just want Mijita to have a normal life. At first I didn’t want to let people see or hear about her. But if her story can help other children, I’ll tell it,” says Noeli with tears in her eyes.

Unable to pay for doctor’s visits and treatments, Noeli has no other option but to help Sara however she can. Sara requires almost constant attention, since crying complicates her condition. The rashes and fevers are commonplace now, and come and go; Noeli continues to treat Sara herself as best as she can.

***BABY SARA NEEDS YOUR HELP
HOW YOU CAN HELP***

In an attempt to help Baby Sara, we are appealing to the public for the following:

1. Assistance with Medical Care -

If you are a qualified Doctor who can help Sara despite her economic situation, or if you are willing to contribute to a fund for Sara, please contact adelita@mission-texas.com.

2. An Air Conditioning Window Unit -

Summertime in the Valley is known to be oppressive. If you can help make Sara more comfortable at home by donating an Air Conditioning Window unit or even contributing to a fund for it, please contact adelita@mission-texas.com.

3. Any other form of assistance for Sara and Noeli is direly needed and welcome.

“I’ve never been on Food Stamps. I will feed her, clothe her, and put shoes on her feet,” says Noeli, even though to many \$200 a month for food and clothes does not go very far. Noeli has become a thrifty shopper and although she cannot buy the most expensive clothing, she makes sure that Sara is covered.

“Nadamas lo que quiero es que le ayuden con su carita,” she says. (*All I need is for her to get help with her little face.*) “I want her to have a chance.”

Noeli is currently attempting to put Sara in the Mission lawsuit (C-4885-99; Acevedo vs. Union Pacific, et al; 332nd District Court, Hidalgo County, Texas.) The ongoing drama between not only the Defendants, but the Plaintiff’s Attorneys and the Plaintiffs themselves continues to become ever more public. Parents of several deceased and very ill children as well as many others claim to have been carelessly tossed from the lawsuit with no notice or reason as to why.

If you can help Baby Sara in some way, please contact adelita@mission-texas.com.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE GO TO WWW.MISSION-TEXAS.COM