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profile

Protecting the Green Green Grass of Home

What Susan JunFish began in a park in Moraga has grown into an environmental movement

by Patricia Kutza

The success of Parents for a Safer Environment is based on collaboration with other concerned organizations, individual volunteers, and private funders.

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By all accounts, Susan JunFish would be considered a conscientious mom. When her family relocated to Moraga in 2002, JunFish, an environmental health scientist, canvassed eighteen preschools in Moraga, Lafayette, Orinda, and Walnut Creek, looking for the best school to send Benjamin, their then three-year old son.

While she was pleased to see that most of them shared the same child-rearing philosophies as she and her husband, JunFish wasn't prepared to see conditions that other parents, lacking her environmental health background, may not have noticed.

"I noticed that some of these schools were spraying pesticides [in their lawns and playgrounds]—pesticides are one of the top ten things in general that can hurt the healthy development of a child," she says. Looking up the specific toxicity of the products being used, JunFish was able to give the school administrators an informed discussion for the disuse of these products. However, she found them to be often unconcerned or uninterested.

As she began visiting other area preschools, JunFish witnessed negligence ranging from bad to worse—cut and exposed asbestos in classroom ceiling tiles, children handling solvents used to polish silver, hazardous disinfectants inappropriately being used for cleaning, building renovations occurring in the presence of children, and even projects where old computer screens were opened, and children were allowed to play with the myriad of mercury and lead present there.

What she saw catalyzed the Moraga resident to take action; so much so that JunFish now devotes a majority of her time to her passion: reducing preventable environmental hazards and in the process foster an environment that leads to the optimal development for children. JunFish works incessantly to improve the environmental health in schools, town and county parks, and buildings. More recently, Susan and volunteers have been working at the State Legislative level to pass bills to protect public health and the environment.

Are Kids in Harm's Way?

Yes, says JunFish. "A child's immune system is not mature and does not have as much of a defense mechanism as that of an adult. Dried pesticides are invisible but still active. Kids can inhale or absorb them through their skin (like when handling solvents) and it may be many years before diseases manifest as a result of these contacts." According to Junfish, studies have shown a link between environmental hazard exposure and an increase in children's cancers and diseases

like ADD, ADHD, and autism. In addition, chronic asthma and allergies have been shown to increase significantly in children who've been exposed to pesticides—including herbicides, fungicides, insecticides, and disinfectants.

If we choose to ignore these facts, we can be damaging our kids' future health as adults. "Parents are teaching kids not to get hit by a car or burnt by fire when harm is immediately experienced," says JunFish. But when it comes to these invisible environmental threats, she found a large awareness gap.

Working Passionately

In the past seven years, JunFish has been working fast and furiously to close that gap.

In 2002, she organized a conference, "Reducing Environmental Hazards in Preschools." The conference was attended by over sixty public health experts, nurses, doctors and preschool directors. "I had no intention of actually starting a movement," says JunFish of the conference. "But the parents who attended got really excited and urged that we continue this work." Based on this feedback and urgency, JunFish founded Parents For a Safer Environment (PFSE) in 2003.

Nurtured by an infusion of small community grants, PFSE has grown to include an eight member steering committee and a twelve member advisory board that includes many high profile names in the environmental health sector. "Over the years, my focus has actually narrowed," JunFish says. "When we started, I wanted to educate preschools on all possible environmental hazards. Seven years later, ninety per cent of our work focuses on 'least toxic pest management,' or what we commonly call 'integrated pest management,' where we focus on decreased pesticide use and safer pest control."

The threat of weeds

In the crosshairs of PFSE's current campaign is Contra Costa county and its use of pesticides to control weed growth along creeks, roadsides, and on turf in parks and around county buildings such as health clinics, preschools and libraries.

"Parents should be aware that these areas are currently sprayed with pesticides," she advises. "The county doesn't currently post when they spray." These pesticides have a half-life that can range from a week to two years. The problem is less a matter of inhaling it, unless a bystander is nearby while they are spraying it, than exposure to it by absorption into the skin or tracking it home on clothing and shoes. According to JunFish, one only needs to go as far as Santa Clara and San Francisco counties to see how weed abatement can be done with less herbicides. Mechanical means

Child-care facility checklist

At the Parents for a Safer Environment Web site (<http://www.pfse.net/>) you can find a list of categories to consider when evaluating a child-care facility for environmental hazards. Here is a summary of PFSE's recommendations:

Location Is the building near a road where one can smell exhaust fumes? Studies have shown kids who live near freeways have much higher rates of hospital visits for asthma. magnetic field)

Indoor air quality Is there a peculiar smell in the air? (A chronic smell may indicate poor air quality due to chemicals or mold present in the area)

Pesticide use The amended CA Healthy Schools Act of 2005 requires that all schools, including pre-schools must notify parents regarding any pesticide usage as well as track usage. <http://apps.cdpr.ca.gov/schoolipm>

Go to www.bakidsmagazine.com for a more complete checklist.

such as mowers and goats are used to keep the weeds in check, and they do not spray so close to creeks.

Her tenacious approach to identifying hazards, evaluating them, and implementing solutions has created waves in the community. "In any bureaucracy, people have an established way of doing things. Susan doesn't take 'no' for an answer," says Steve Scholl-Buckwald, managing director of the Pesticide Action Network. "As a trained scientist (JunFish has a Master of Public Health degree from UC Berkeley and worked many years in research and for Cal/EPA), she knows her facts. So when she approaches agencies, they know they can't buffalo her, as they might try with those who are less-informed."

"Don't sabotage our kids for life."

Susan uses well-thought-out strategies in her current initiative. "In her most recent work, she won a grant award for a collaborative county project to study goats as an alternative for managing weeds near creeks," says Scholl-Buckwald. "The goal is to find effective and less toxic weeds-management systems to protect public health and the ecosystem."

Got her science down

Scholl-Buckwald attributes Susan's success, such as her ability to get a county-integrated pest management position created, to her unusual skill set. "She not only has her science down—so folks she needs to influence tend to listen to her—but she's also very effective at networking and pulling in expertise when needed. Her organization is an authentic community-based group that JunFish has given an amazing amount of energy to. As a volunteer, she gets as much done as many full-time salaried environmental scientist positions." BAK