

Single Mom Spearheads Spray Fight

By: Helen Gao, Staff Writer

March 26, 2004

Robina Suwol was dropping her sons off at Sherman Oaks Elementary School one sunny spring day when she saw a man wearing a hazardous-materials suit spraying the side of a building. Her sons, Brandon and Nicholas, then 10 and 6, walked right into a fine mist of what turned out to be pesticide. Nicholas, who suffers from asthma, experienced a severe respiratory attack.

That was five years ago. Since then, Suwol has founded a nationally recognized program in the Los Angeles Unified School District that alerts parents to the use of chemical sprays on school campuses, allowing them to make alternate arrangements to address their children's needs. An estimated 6,000 parents have registered for notification.

"We are nationally renowned for this program now. Other districts are looking at us to change their policy as well," said school board member Julie Korenstein, who was an early champion of Suwol's cause.

At a news conference Thursday at Columbus Elementary School in Van Nuys, the National School Pesticide Reform Coalition released a report highlighting the LAUSD's policy as one of 27 exemplary programs around the country. Korenstein and Suwol were honored by Environment California, a member of the pesticide reform coalition.

"It's been an effort of love in terms of protecting kids," said Suwol, who spends many of her weekends at health fairs to spread the word about pesticides. "I want to help other people so their kids don't get sick."

A single mother who never thought of herself as an environmental activist, Suwol has since become a leader in a national movement to limit pesticide use in schools. She helped found California Safe Schools, a nonprofit public education group, and serves as its executive director. Occasionally, she travels to speak at conferences.

A year after the LAUSD adopted its pest management policy, the California Legislature passed the Healthy Schools Act of 2000 to raise awareness of the dangers of pesticides and promote the least-toxic means of killing weeds and bugs.

At the LAUSD, maintenance workers have been trained to use pesticides only as a last resort when infestations persist. The district has reduced the number of pesticides it uses from 137 to 37. And pesticides are no longer administered routinely, but are limited to an average of one application per school per year.

Current practices represent a sea change from the way things used to be done, said Ashley Posner, a Sherman Oaks parent who serves as chairman of California Safe Schools. Through a public records request, Posner had found out that school maintenance workers were spraying pesticides and herbicides at levels 10 times or higher than the manufacturer's recommended dosage. "They were buying in bulk and mixing concentrates. Apparently, the people doing the mixing weren't following the directions," he said.

More importantly, the district's pest management policy gives parents the right to know about chemicals used to kill bugs or weeds at their children's schools. They can now sign up to be notified 72 hours in advance of pest exterminations, so they can make arrangements to address their children's health concerns. To prevent infestations, schools now thoroughly clean kitchens every six months, rather than every other year.

Suwol is launching a public education campaign to spread the message of pest prevention to children. With support from a local printer, the California Wellness Foundation and other organizations, she has printed color posters aimed at different age groups. The posters urge students to clean up after they eat, to keep food and drinks in sealed containers, and to not leave food in their lockers.

Suwol and a crew of volunteers deliver the posters to schools. She also is talking to United Teachers Los Angeles to see whether pest management can be incorporated into the science curriculum. "She is just a great example of grass-roots activism at work," said Kagan Owens, program director for Beyond Pesticides, a national advocacy group.

For more information about the LAUSD's Integrated Pest Management Policy or California Safe Schools, visit www.calisafe.org.