

Excerpts taken from *Justice for Janey* by Amanda Greene with Star News (08.26.07)

Leukemia.

Hearing that word in July 1983, Marine Corps Master Sgt. Jerry Ensminger buckled toward the white tile floor of the Camp Lejeune Naval Hospital in Jacksonville. The word thundered in his head. How could Janey, his 6-year-old daughter, have cancer? Not his dark-haired angel.

...chances for survival “greatly diminished.”

Then he hit the floor.

“I went to my knees and I started sweating, and I soaked my shirt,” Ensminger recalled some 24 years later, sitting on the couch at his White Lake home. “I started getting nauseous, and I had to reach deep down inside myself and pull myself together because Janey was resting in the next room.”

Ensminger said he didn’t cry once in front of his daughter through all her treatments, until her death at age 9 on Sept. 24, 1985, at Duke Children’s Hospital and Health Center. But telling Janey’s story now makes him sob as if her death happened yesterday.

Just below the former drill instructor’s tough exterior is a father’s unrelenting grief. It’s his constant reminder to see justice for Janey. Ensminger blames his former employer of 24 years- the Marine Corps- for failing to protect his family against water contamination that he believes caused her illness and her death.

In his 10-year search for justice, Ensminger has become one of the most outspoken advocates for the thousands of families possibly affected by the contamination, which the Marines acknowledge occurred at Camp Lejeune between 1957 and 1987. He’s also become an ad hoc investigator and harsh critic of the military, helping bring the issue into the national spotlight.

ENsminger has joined the approximately 900 cases of pending litigation against the Pentagon, filing a wrongful death lawsuit with the Greensboro law firm Anderson, Weber & Pangia. So far, former residents are seeking at least \$4 billion in damages. But Ensminger said he’s not in it for any possible monetary settlement.

He said he’s turned his anger into “a terrible resolve” that if he “can stop one more Janary from ever happening again, my fight’s worth it.”

A silent poison

Ensminger first brought his young family to live in Camp Lejeune’s Tarawa Terrace neighborhood in 1973 and stayed there through 1975 while he worked at the Drill Instructor School on Parris Island. His oldest daughter, Teriko, was 7 months. Janey was conceived on base and born in Beaufort, S.C. in 1976.

From 1982 to 1983, the family lived in a house outside Camp Lejeune but used the swimming pools on the base. By that time, the Ensmingers’ third daughter, Jessica, had been born. The youngest daughter,

Veronica, was born in 1989 after the family moved away from Camp Lejeune. (Teriko and Jessica are now experiencing health problems that Ensminger believes are linked to the water contamination. To maintain their privacy, he declined to discuss details of their illnesses.)

Government health experts believe that for 30 years people living and working at Camp Lejeune drank, bathed in, swam in and cooked with water contaminated with dry-cleaning solvents and industrial degreasers.

Researchers who study the contaminants, primarily TCE, trichloroethylene, and PCE, tetrachloroethylene, say the chemicals are possible carcinogens. The chemicals have been linked to childhood leukemia, neural tube defects, and liver, kidney and lung cancers. But no scientific studies of the contaminated Camp Lejeune water and its possible health effects on humans are yet complete. The Agency of Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR), the environmental health arm of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, is studying the water's effects on the in-utero population at Camp Lejeune from 1968 to 1985. The study, "Exposure to Volatile Organic Compounds in Drinking Water and Specific Birth Defects and Childhood Cancers, United States Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune, North Carolina," is expected to be finished by spring.

Because neither Ensminger's nor his wife's family histories showed any childhood leukemia, he said he believes the water Janey drank as she grew in her mother's womb and was exposed to as a young child was to blame for her disease. Ensminger and his first wife, who lives in Jacksonville and prefers to stay out of the media's spotlight, have since divorced. The years following Janey's death were tough for the family.

"I felt like I was losing my mind, and my whole world was going to hell in a handbasket," Ensminger said.

After Janey's death at Duke Children's Hospital in 1985, Ensminger began searching for answers, asking doctors what could have caused her cancer. He found no answers, and he was angry at God.

"If we have a loving and caring God," he thought, "then why is he allowing these kids to go through this hell when he could stop it?"

In 1997, a nightly newscast from New Bern's NBC Channel 12 gave Ensminger some hope. It was a story about the water contamination at Camp Lejeune.

For the 10 years since that broadcast, Ensminger said he never questioned that Camp Lejeune's water caused his daughter's leukemia.

"Immediately, it made sense," he said. "It was like God just said, 'Hey, Jerry.'" But Janey's doctor, Suzanne Stelmach, a former Navy pediatrician who lives in Jacksonville, isn't sure there will ever be a definitive answer for what caused Janey's leukemia.

"At times, when I've felt demoralized by this process, when everything was quiet, I would find myself talking to Janey and to God about if what I'm doing is right, just give me a sign," he said. "It never failed, I got the sign. I'd like to believe that this is an omen that God and Janey are both pleased."