

Worried about drinking water

2-10-81/CC

Child's defect threw mother into spotlight

By Susan Yoachim
Staff Writer

Just after Juliana Ross was born last April, her mother and grandmother expressed more than the usual relief that she seemed healthy.

"My mother said, 'Thank God. We're so glad she's OK.'" Juliana's mother, Lorraine Ross, said in a recent interview. "There was a large problem with other births on our block, and we worried that something was going on in our neighborhood."

Two miscarriages

In the Los Paseos neighborhood in South San Jose, Ross had counted two miscarriages and four children with birth defects, two of whom had died at birth. Another child was stillborn.

Ross' relief at Juliana's normal birth was short-lived. Two months after she was born, Juliana nearly died of congestive heart failure caused by a previously undetected heart defect.

"Until *your* kid gets sick, you, until *your* kid gets sick, most people don't pay attention," Ross said. "I'm looking at it in a totally different way than I did two years ago. I thought, 'Oh my God, what is going on in the neighborhood?'"

Chemicals suspected

The subjects of birth disorders and their causes came up frequently. The parents agreed that their prime suspects were chemicals, primarily those they could smell in the air from nearby electronics companies and particularly those from Fairchild Camera and Instrument Corp.

Tonight, they will state their suspicions, fears and complaints publicly at a San Jose City Council meeting.

Lorraine Ross will be spearheading that effort, although she said she believes her leadership on this issue has been by coincidence rather than design.

But she conceded that her involvement in the issue was not by accident. It was Ross who first wrote to local authorities, outlining the neighborhood's facts and fears. Ross wrote her letter after she read a newspaper article Jan. 20 that detailed the chemical contamination of one of the neighborhood's drinking wells.

The industrial solvent 1,1,1 trichloroethane had seeped into one of the Great Oaks Water Co.'s 12 wells from a leak in an underground solvent storage tank at the Fairchild plant.



Lorraine Ross wonders about the cause of daughter Juliana's birth defect

PI 036035

Ron Burda — Mercury

Ross, a 30-year-old mother of three who has not worked outside her home since the birth of her second child, wrote to the water company's president, Betty Roeder. Roeder in turn notified state health authorities, who contacted county health officials. They de-

ided that her fears were worth investigating.

When news of that investigation reached the newspaper, Ross became an overnight media target. She was besieged by telephone calls from area newspapers, the Associated Press and,

ultimately, such publications as the National Enquirer and the Star.

She was visited by all of the Bay Area's major television stations. Radio interviewers called and visited, as did two

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Mother wants water questions answered

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women who identified themselves as representatives of the communist press.

For nine days, the two telephones at the Ross house rang incessantly, eventually forcing a hoarse Ross to seek refuge at a friend's house.

It was quite an experience for Ross, a Santa Clara Valley native who grew up in San Jose and married her high-school sweetheart, Jeff Ross, 10 years ago. Before January, Ross said, her sole experience with the media was "sending my wedding announcement in to the Mercury News."

She said she was overly optimistic about agencies' official re-

sponses and the speed of their reply.

Although Bernice Gianstracusa, Santa Clara County public health director, has appointed an advisory committee of medical and health professionals to study the problem, Ross and her neighbors are impatient with the system's slow progress.

Ross and her neighbors want to know why a company that uses a large volume of toxic chemicals was allowed to locate 2,000 feet from a drinking well and to build an operation with heavy chemical use directly across from a neighborhood of young families.

Ross and her neighbors will go before the council tonight with a

list of 60 questions they want the city to answer. Ross also will ask the council to set up a special investigatory committee in addition to the existing health-advisory committee.

Ross, a striking woman with shoulder-length blond hair, can be both articulate and unrelenting in her remarks.

"Overnight, I've been thrown into a situation where I would not have wanted to be," Ross said. "Thank God for a quick study."

"We still think we have a problem, and the problem is still there, nothing's changed. It's something that's going to nag at us until we get some answers."