

Ban Asbestos in America Act
U.S. Senate Employment & Workplace Safety Subcommittee
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Consider the irony, if you will, of a hard working science teacher who went on to become a leading national advocate for workers and for the environment dying suddenly from work-related exposure to a natural substance found in the environment.

Consider, if you will, the possibility to reduce such life-threatening exposure and to increase medical knowledge and the possibility of prolonging lives.

He grew up in a large Italian & German family on St. Paul's eastside, the second oldest of 8 children. He learned the importance of hard work at an early age from his parents and from delivering newspapers and bussing tables in a hotel restaurant. He worked at factories and a brewery in order to pay his college tuition to become a science teacher. At 30, he was elected to the MN House of Representatives, and 6 years later, he was elected to his first of 12 terms in the US House, where he served on the Natural Resources and Banking Committees. He was Bruce Vento; he was my best friend and my husband.

There was little that ever slowed down Bruce. He was a very active person – traveling almost every weekend back to Minnesota's 4th Congressional District to meet with constituents and to do his best as their representative in the US House.

Regardless of where he was, he'd typically start each day by swimming, using the nautilus or bicycling on St. Paul's gorgeous trails. In mid-January 2000, Bruce was on a congressional trip. Early in the trip he mentioned in one of our evening phone calls that he wasn't feeling well - he noted a shortness of breath and back pain. Immediately upon returning he went to the House physician and was then taken out to Bethesda Naval Hospital. The following day, Bruce was told he had lung cancer.

He flew home that evening, and we spent the weekend talking about how best to proceed. He decided he wanted to see specialists at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, MN. At Mayo, we were introduced to the term "mesothelioma." Arrangements were made for further testing. On the morning of January 29th, Bruce was told that he did not have lung cancer, but instead he was diagnosed with pleural mesothelioma.

The diagnosis was puzzling. Bruce wracked his brain to determine where he could have been exposed to asbestos. He later recalled those jobs at the factories and the brewery during the early 1960s. His exposure to asbestos was no more significant than that which so many Americans have experienced in their work and home settings.

On Valentine's Day, surgeons removed Bruce's right lung, the lining of the lung, and half of his diaphragm. At the end of March he began chemotherapy followed by six weeks of radiation therapy. Physicians, nurses, technicians and staff quickly came to understand that Bruce was not their typical patient. With his science background, he was quick to question them in detail about

procedures, medications, side effects. Even when in wrenching pain or when totally exhausted, he'd quiz them before he'd let them do anything.

For Bruce's family and friends, but most especially for Bruce, 2000 was a year focused on his well-being and doing everything we could to beat this mysterious disease. The mantra was, "If anyone can beat this, it's Bruce," due to his tireless tenacity and passion.

Following the completion of the radiation, we were confident that Bruce was through the worst of it. But within a few weeks, we were told that the cancer had spread to Bruce's other lung. On September 25th, we were urged to arrange for hospice care, which we did the next day. On the beautiful, autumn morning of October 10, Bruce died at our home with his family at his side.

Since Bruce's death I have had the privilege of becoming involved in advocacy organizations that represent mesothelioma patients and their families and have met many of them. Let me tell you about just a few of them.

Chris. A quiet, hard-working young man was exposed to asbestos while working as an airline mechanic. He battled mesothelioma so bravely for 7 years with his wife Wendy and their daughter Taylor at his side every step of the way. Chris lost that battle this past December 21. Chris was 44.

Klaus. A proud man, fiercely determined to beat the odds when it comes to mesothelioma. Klaus's quiet determination has made him a role model to so many who have met him. He was exposed to asbestos working a summer job with a construction crew putting up drywall as well as during several renovation projects. He was diagnosed in 2001. He and his family have explored every possible treatment option. He is currently battling a reoccurrence and struggling to prolong his life.

Mary. Quiet, reflective, a pretty young mom who lives with her husband and two darling daughters just north of the Twin Cities. She also lives with the reality of a ticking time bomb – mesothelioma, which she was diagnosed with in October 2002. She was exposed to asbestos as a little girl while sitting on her dad's lap as he drank coffee at the end of his work day. He was a construction carpenter. He suffers from asbestosis and the brutal reality of knowing that he brought those fibers home from work on his clothes.

Bev. A vibrant, joyful nurse who provided such loving care and endless support for cancer patients and their families, including Bruce and me during the summer of 2000. Just months after Bruce's death, Bev was diagnosed with mesothelioma. Despite extensive treatment, Bev died in November 2005. Her exposure to asbestos occurred in one of her first work settings – a Minneapolis hospital.

Mary and Bev did not work directly with asbestos, and yet, it has forever impacted their lives and the lives of their families and friends.

Klaus's, Chris's, Bev's, Mary's, and Bruce's stories are just a few of the thousands of tragedies that are occurring throughout this country every day.

Senator Murray's bill will bring hope to all of us whose lives have been touched by this disease –

- It will prohibit the use of asbestos in products in this country and will correct the mistaken belief held by so many that asbestos was banned decades ago.

- It will increase public awareness which is needed to dispel the myth that only intense and prolonged exposure is hazardous.
- Finally, it will provide desperately needed resources for medical research, life prolonging early detection and treatment options, and ultimately a cure.

Thank you, Senator Murray, for your years of tireless work on this issue. Thank you to each of the members of this subcommittee who are here today to hear our pleas for your support of this important legislation. Please know that your efforts to help secure passage of this bill will be deeply and forever appreciated by mesothelioma patients and their families throughout this country.