

[\[back\]](#)



Bearing legacy of lead exposure Poisoning affects Durham family

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DURHAM -- Sara Kerley never imagined that her unusually weak bones, panic attacks and her children's learning disabilities were caused by the home they all grew up in.

When her son Brandon was 18 months old and still not walking or talking, Kerley took him to a pediatrician, who suggested a lead test.

Brandon tested at level 18, eight points above normal, and was found to be nine to 10 months behind other children his age because of lead poisoning.

After that discovery, Kerley had her home, built in 1900 and passed down through her family since 1940, tested for lead by the Partnership Effort for the Advancement of Children's Health. The agency found high lead levels everywhere: on the steps, on her children's toys, in the sink, the back yard, the plumbing and the water.

Kerley was at a loss.

"It was the house I was brought up in, the house my grandma and my mom owned," she said. "I didn't know what to do."

Rebecca Morley said that most children are poisoned through contaminated dust created by destructive methods of renovation in houses built before 1960, and not through eating paint chips as is commonly believed. Morley is executive director of the National Center for Healthy Housing in Columbia, Md., a research organization that makes policy recommendations to federal agencies.

Kerley started aggressively researching lead and attended several conferences about lead poisoning. The Health Department put the Kerleys on a renovation waiting list, and two years later the construction began on their home at 1005 Worth St.

She was pregnant with her daughter Tiffany at the time, who was born with a lead level of nine. As the renovation progressed, Tiffany's lead level rose, reaching 19 at one point. Kerley's other children also experienced higher levels of lead during renovation.

Kerley did some digging and realized that the construction workers were not taking the proper precautionary measures for dealing with high lead levels.

According to Morley, there are "three C's" to appropriate renovation in a high-lead home: contain, control and clean up, which require setting up plastic in the room under construction, avoiding the creation of dust and cleaning up thoroughly.

There is a fourth "C," clearance, that Morley said is missing from the renovation regulations passed by the Environmental Protection Agency in March.

"The inspector does a dust test and sends it to a lab, which tells if the lead left over is in hazardous levels. The EPA opted not to require this," Morley said. "Our concern is that you're going to leave people with a false sense of assurance."

Morley said that homeowners can assume levels of lead in their home based on its age and should get their home tested, especially if they have or plan to have children.

According to the Center for Healthy Housing, lead poisoning affects the nervous system and parts of the brain that control impulse and memory. Children are more significantly affected than adults because their nervous systems are developing, but at very high levels lead can cause impotence, coma and death in adults.

"Even very low levels of exposure can cause lifelong learning disabilities, behavioral problems and criminal activity later in life," Morley said.

Both Tiffany, now 8, and Brandon, now 11, are in special education classes at Hope Valley Elementary School. Tiffany has a severe reading handicap, having just graduated from the third grade at a first-grade reading level. Brandon is exhibiting behavioral problems and has become increasingly rebellious.

"Brandon's stealing money out of pocketbooks," Kerley said. "He's wearing gang colors and won't cut his hair. I'm afraid if I don't get help for him he'll be in jail."

Kerley's oldest son, Jeremy, 19, recently graduated from the Occupation Course of Study at Jordan High School and cannot read past the third-grade level. He is unable to drive a car, and has been receiving disability benefits since he was 18.

"The older my kids get, the more problems I'm coming in to. I can't work because I'm always taking them to therapy or the psychiatrist. They can't be normal kids, they can't do day-to-day living stuff by themselves," she said.

Kerley, who was working in a day care during her family's ordeal and noticed the vast disparity in developmental levels in children, has been doing lead abatement work for the Partnership Effort for the Advancement of Children's Health, testing and assessing lead levels in homes and removing the harmful materials safely.

Kerley moved her family to a different home in 2004, and one of the first things she did was test it for lead, which she found and removed. But the damage has been done.

"Right now we have no program in Durham after your kid reaches age 6," Kerley said. "There's lead prevention, but no plan after they're poisoned. What do we do after they're diagnosed?"

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[\[back\]](#)