



Lou Gehrig's Disease (ALS) or Mold Illness?

How One Attorney Found the Truth

Interview With Ryan Schnack

SPEAKERS

Kendra Seymour, Ryan Schnack

RS

Ryan Schnack

00:00

I noticed my left arm was twitching, and this was like every three seconds. It was the weirdest thing. I never experienced anything like it, and wouldn't go away. And then it kind of spread to where my arms were burning, my legs were burning. I couldn't feel my feet for a while. I remember driving and coming up to a stop sign, and I'm pressing down on the brake pedal, and I'm thinking, I can't really feel my toes and my feet. So go through all the testing, and it was the last appointment, and he said, well, I think the leading cause is ALS, Lou Gehrig's disease.

KS

Kendra Seymour

00:41

Hello everyone, and welcome back to Your Indoor Air Podcast. My name is Kendra Seymour, and today's episode is a powerful reminder that unsafe air isn't just a problem in our homes. It can show up anywhere, including the very places we work. So our guest today is practicing attorney Ryan Schnack, who became seriously ill after repeated exposure inside the courthouse where he worked. His story is one of persistence and advocacy and harrowing insight. You know, from his initial symptoms and pushback from professionals to lessons. You know, he now shares with others. I had the privilege of seeing Ryan speak at CIRSx this past year. This conversation today, I think, is going to shed some light on what needs to change to protect people in public buildings. And you know what we can do if we suspect that maybe the air around you is making you sick. So thank you so much, Ryan, for being here. It means so much to us.

RS

Ryan Schnack

01:33

Thanks for having me. Appreciate it. It's Saturday morning, so hopefully we don't get too many interruptions, this is great. Thank you very much.

KS

Kendra Seymour

01:43

No problem. And I should say, I do want to also give a shout out and for people listening, Ryan has been one of the instrumental folks involved in Illinois in getting our first bill passed, his public testimony, his work, his advocacy. We could not have done it without you, Ryan and the others who were involved. So thank you. I want people to realize that change is possible, and also honor the volunteers who put in so many hours to make this change possible. So just, just a huge thank you to you for that as well.

RS

Ryan Schnack

02:15

Well. Thank you to you as well. It was a it was a team effort, and the others involved certainly were instrumental in helping out, and your organization is great. So thank you for everything that you do, and there's more things we can change. So we're going to plug ahead and looking forward to seeing what the future holds. So.

KS

Kendra Seymour

02:36

Yeah, and if you're listening, I'll go do a quick shout out. If you're interested in some of our policy work, or the Illinois bill, or some of the other bills that we've gotten proposed, you can head on over to ChangeTheAirFoundation.org, and click on our policy tab. We have a couple great sections there. We have an interactive map where you can dig in and learn about the laws that are or aren't in place in your state, and even read some of the bill proposals and the Illinois bill that was passed into law last year. So all that information is easy to find on our website, but before we continue, I do need to take a moment to give a special shout out to our sponsor for this episode. That's Dr Jill Crista. A huge, huge, thank you. We are a nonprofit. We're 501(c)(3). We rely on the generosity of people like Dr Crista our other corporate sponsors, listeners just like you, to make our work possible. So all of our free downloads, all of our step by step support our phone and email help, our policy work, even the fund, small scale research we fund, is only made possible because of people like you. So thank you Dr Crista, thank you to everyone listening and all of our donors. So now I don't, before we jump in, I do want to emphasize that while Ryan is a lawyer, that nothing in today's episode should be construed as legal advice. As always, please consult with the appropriate professional, whether it's a healthcare practitioner, an IEP, a remediator, legal counsel, whoever

it is that can advise you on your unique situation. So Ryan, let's kind of set the stage here for people, because we often hear on mostly, not always, from people who are made sick in their homes. But in your case, it was the very place you worked, a courthouse. So can you walk us through what happened and how you kind of started to connect the dots between your health and where you are working?

RS

Ryan Schnack

04:21

Sure, so it's kind of a long journey, as many people say. So at the time, I was 40 years old, married. Have wife, four young children. My wife is a physical therapist. I was physically active, doing well. I used to be division one athlete. Years and years ago, my law practice seemed to be going well. I was taking cases in Illinois. I was taking cases in Missouri, Wisconsin, Colorado, on a pro hoc vice basis, which means that not licensed there, but another attorney would help supervise for those cases. So I really had no medical history. And then I went to a functional medicine doctor down in St Louis, just I was having some fatigue and a little bit of brain fog, not, not bad. So I saw this functional medicine doctor, and about a month later, I noticed my left arm was twitching, and this was like every three seconds. It was the weirdest thing. I never experienced anything like it, and wouldn't go away. And then it kind of spread to where my arms were burning. My legs were burning. I couldn't feel my feet for a while. I remember driving and coming up to a stop sign, and I'm pressing down on the brake pedal, and I'm thinking, I can't really feel my toes and my feet. This it was, it was very, very weird. And so my next step was I went to a local neurologist, went through testing, went through an EMG and MRI. Everything turned out normal, except for the the twitching. They call it a fasciculation. I was actually in my my left tricep as well as my right tricep. So go through all the testing, and I'm thinking, okay, you know, this isn't too bad. Maybe this will go away. And usually my wife would go to these appointments, and then she said, or she wasn't at this one, and it was the last appointment. He said, well, I think the leading cause is ALS, Lou Gehrig's disease. So I, as you can imagine, was distraught. I didn't know what to do at that time, and that really changed my life. I mean, things were going well, and then all of a sudden, you hear that news. So I'm thinking, I'm going to end up in a wheelchair. My kids are going to have to see me go through a lot of pain, and when I was somewhat familiar with ALS, and it's, it's more or less a death sentence. I mean, I think there's some some research out there now where people, and it's very rare, but are overcoming that illness. But typically it's, it's very bad when you get that diagnosis. So my next step was I went to Mayo Clinic and they basically ran me through the same test. I did the EMG, I did the MRI, and they came back and they said, well, we think you have a post viral, para infectious, inflammatory type process, and it seems to be improving a little bit. So that was obviously good news. They couldn't really rule anything out, but that was their opinion at the time. So my health journey then went to Utah for an ALS conference, and let me tell you, that was a very good experience, but it was awful with some of the things that I saw. So my wife and I fly out to Salt Lake, and I'll never forget, during the conference, there was one gentleman in a wheelchair. He had a C collar on, and he was wheelchair bound, and the nurses, there's about four, around him, would have to stand him up about every five minutes and then suck the spit out of his throat, otherwise he was going to suffocate. And

I'm just thinking to myself, I do not want that to be me, and I'm going to do everything in my power to get better, and I'm going to do everything that I can to help other people out. I just that to today's date I can, I can see that image vividly in my mind, and that was awful. So my next step was I went to a functional medicine doctor that was back in, I think, October of 2022, and then this individual really knew about CIRs. He wasn't a CIRs Shoemaker certified doctor, but knew about that. So I went through the HLA testing and so forth, and that turned out where I was susceptible to mold, I was susceptible to Lyme. Lyme test turned out okay, and then I went from there, and I found someone that was a Shoemaker certified doctor. So at that point, that doctor told me, why don't you test your spaces? So I did. I went around and I tested my house, I tested my office, and then got some testing on the courthouse. So my house was kind of borderline. I think I was around 14, you know. So some people it affects. Some people it doesn't. And so it wasn't, it wasn't that bad. And then my office, a little bit higher. And then the courthouse, the testing that was done there, the Aspergillus, I think, was in the 47,000 range, safe levels, I think are 1000 or 500 and then there was Wallemia that was around 800,000 and safe levels were supposed to be about 2500 so I'm thinking, this is where I'm getting exposed. And I had a lot of trials in there. I would spend almost every day I'd be over at the courthouse for long periods of time and then I started talking to other employees, and I didn't realize it, but there were many other employees that were sick. At the CIRsX conference when I spoke, I showed a picture of our chief public defender, his name is Todd Nelson, and his throat was closing up, and it looked like he was punched by Mike Tyson about 10 times when he would come to into the courthouse. One, there was one picture that I showed where his eye was starting to close shut, and it looked like someone had punched him, but they had to stitch it open, from what I understand, so that he could see. So this was really affecting people, and I started bringing this to the attention of the county board, to other employees, that, hey, I think this is a problem. Let's get some professional testing, and let's see what's going on here. So that's really how I got involved with the courthouse and going through that process, and it was just a process of elimination. I had talked to my doctor about the numbers that we saw, and he indicated he's never seen levels that high. So it just started to add up after I got the testing done and talked to the other employees, and that's where we went from there,

KS

Kendra Seymour

12:11

Ryan, I mean, I've heard your story before, but it every time I hear you tell it, it still leaves me like utterly speechless. And I think there are so many elements of your story that resonate, and will probably resonate with a lot of listeners, is you were really put in a position to become your own advocate, right? Advocating for your symptoms. I can't imagine early on, like, how scary that would be, right? You're 40, you're healthy, you have young kids, you know, all of a sudden you can't feel your feet, you're driving. I'm sure the worst case scenario goes through your mind, and then you get this possible diagnosis of ALS, which is very scary and very overwhelming. To then have to keep fighting for answers and to put the pieces together yourself and your resilience and that spirit to keep figuring this out and fighting is is really inspiring, because I I know how hard it is when you have health symptoms. Sometimes you're just trying to get through the day,

let alone feeling like you have to be your own detective. So the and I don't know how much you're allowed to share about the specifics of the courthouse, but it really took some crazy turn, like it almost sounds made up, right? Can you speak to what the response was when you brought this up, either to colleagues or professional, you know, people who are managing the building, about, hey, I think there's a problem in this building that we need to address. And I'm not the only one being affected. What did that look like?

RS

Ryan Schnack

13:32

Yeah, so that, I mean, that was a long road to I mean, when I initially had sent correspondence to the county board. I didn't hear back right away, and it seemed like a lot of people didn't believe me. This, as you know, is not a well known problem, so it's not like cancer. You know, you hear of cancer all the time, and when you bring up mold that people look at you like you've grown three heads,

KS

Kendra Seymour

14:08

or it's an allergy, oh, you have the sniffles, yeah, like you don't understand it.

RS

Ryan Schnack

14:12

That's exactly right. And so they initially didn't believe me, so I went and did further investigation, talking to people. I mean, we had a few judges, one of them that was very outspoken, that were not feeling well. I mean, the one judge that was really speaking out about the the courthouse in this situation had been tested from head to toe, had all sorts of different symptoms, whether it was unexplained rashes. She had tingling in her her limbs in different parts of her body. She had been tested for MS and cancer and a plethora of other things, and had idiopathic neuropathy, I believe. And so just gathering as much information as I could to then go to the county board and say, look, this is not just me. There was one meeting where the judge that was outspoken, she came in and she had a manila folder full of mold chunks that were coming out of her vent. And so at this meeting, it was one of the subcommittees of the county board. It was the building and grounds committee. So she brought this folder in and then gave it to the committee to see, to show them. Hey, I've got a lot of this mold coming out of my vents. We need to do something here. This is a true problem. And so,

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Kendra Seymour

15:49

So Ryan, she brought the physical mold. That's a very Erin Brockovich type moment. I feel like, for those to be like, here it is. I'm physically holding what I pulled out of my vents. Wow!

RS

Ryan Schnack

16:01

Right. So there was some pictures that were taken throughout the courthouse that was shown to the building and grounds committee. In one of the courtrooms, it looked like an animal was ripping through the wall. And the way that the courthouse is set up, from what I understand is there's some open chains, so chains, which means that in the HVAC system, you have the pipes, and then sometimes there's a gap in the pipes, and it just goes through walls. So if you get real humid day, or if there's humidity running through the I can only imagine what's behind those walls, but in one of the courtrooms, you can see it. It seemed like the moisture was coming through and making different bubbles in the wall. And it, it just, it looked horrible. So then that was covered up with plywood. And then in one of the recording rooms, there was a lady or some gentleman that pushed his hand through, there was a lot of moisture in there. So it's a very old building, and there was testing done, as you know, but I would be very curious to see what's behind those walls. And my feeling is it would not be good once those are open up and it would show a lot of mold behind the walls.

KS

Kendra Seymour

17:26

Yeah, well, and then I don't know how much you can speak to this. You eventually, they eventually brought in an IEP, local IEP, to do an inspection. It was someone that you had been talking with, even though he was more expensive. Can you speak to a little bit about what was happened and the results of that investigation, and then how the, they handled that information?

RS

Ryan Schnack

17:50

Right? So we we finally got the building and grounds committee to go out for bids to do some testing, some professional testing. And there was two bids that came back. The first bid was from a company out of St Louis called Fungus-A-Mungus. And then the second was from Safestart in Chicago. And so we, I wanted Safestart to do the testing. I was familiar with them. And they take different cases throughout the country, and they, they're really widespread. Larry Schwartz has some awesome credentials, and I didn't know much about the Fungus-A-Mungus. But what I learned, and it's my understanding, that they did more of the traditional testing. They didn't do a lot of the PCR testing, and this would have been a lot of air testing, and they weren't, from what I understood going to do as comprehensive of a test. So I really pushed for Safestart to come in and do the testing, and fortunately, the committee approved Safestart, and then it was ultimately approved through the county board. But so that's how that all came about. I think the the Safestart bid was about \$10,000 higher than Fungus-A-Mungus, but it was, it was kind of a battle to get there. At the building and grounds committee, the committee seemed to want to go through with the lower bid. And I actually got Larry Schwartz on the phone, and I walked up and I put the phone in the middle of

the table for the committee to talk to him so he could answer their questions. Why was his testing better, and why was what he was planning to do better than Fungus-A-Mungus. So fortunately, we got Safestart to come in. They did the testing. Found that the building was not safe and then after that happened, there was a second round of testing done by a firm out of St Louis, and that was that was not so good, because they had recommended, among other things, that all the windows and the courthouse be screwed shut, and so the employees couldn't open up the windows to get fresh air. And we had an engineer that came in at one of our meetings between courthouse employees, and she explained how bad that was. How the building needed ventilation. In addition to that, there was stucco put on the outside of the courthouse so it didn't have the ability to breathe, and so it would just one thing after another. But at the end of the day and where we are now, the county board has approved about \$10,000 or excuse me, ten million to fix up the roof and the HVAC system, and so they're going through that process now. I the problem for employees and people like me, it doesn't appear that they're going through this like they would be for someone with CIRS, so we're still dealing with that, and we'll see where that goes. But my guess is the courthouse is not going to be that much better as time goes on, because you still have the problems lingering within the walls, and you've got pipe leaking, pipes leaking and so forth. I mean, one of the judges there, there was apparently a crew that came around and they put coffee cans in the ceiling to catch dripping water. So these pipes were leaking. And one of the judges was having water leak on his desk, and so he called, and this crew came, and they put a coffee can, apparently, above his desk, in the ceiling tiles to catch some of the water. So I didn't personally see it, but obviously we've got more problems than just the roof, so you gotta fix the plumbing. And quite frankly, it's an old building, and I think that the the building to this, it just needs to be shut down. And unfortunately, the there was a new jail that was built on to the courthouse, and the county board approved about \$20 million for that. So there was talk before that jail was going to be built, to move the courthouse somewhere else, and it was decided that wasn't going to happen. And then this all came up after the new jail was built. So we're in a situation where there's a financial problem. I'm sure that is another factor in why the courthouse hasn't been shut down, but we'll see where this goes. I'm not optimistic that the problem is going to be fixed.

KS

Kendra Seymour

23:19

Yeah, and what you're describing, I know there is a lot more here that we don't have time for. It happened or this is a multi year thing like this has been going on for a while. And I think what is troubling here is you really have this sick building right. The end, there's systemic issues going on. And what from what you describe, like we're talking wide scale mold remediation, fixing, which involves removal, not just stopping the water, for those who are new to listening. And then the part that always just blows my mind is the nailing the window shut. You know, like these temporary band aid I don't really want to call them solutions, but I don't know if it makes people feel like something's being done, right, but it doesn't actually move you towards a solution to stop the water and remove the mold or to fix any of like the the more

systemic issues going on here, and so it i my heart breaks for the people who have to go and work in that building every day. And are you still working in that building? Or no?

RS

Ryan Schnack

24:29

I'll pop in and out, not nearly as much as I used to. So I've really transitioned my practice to limit my case law load at that courthouse. So I found cases throughout the state, and I'm getting a lot of clients that call me about the toxic tort matters, whether it's water, whether it's mold, and so I'm seeing a big uptake in those types of cases, and taking those a not only in Illinois, but throughout the country now.

KS

Kendra Seymour

25:02

So you said something, and that's legal talk toxic tort. Can you just explain what that is, for people who don't know what it means?

RS

Ryan Schnack

25:10

Sure. So a toxic tort is a tort is like a wrongdoing. And so when I refer to toxic tort, it's basically an environmental type problem that is causing people to be sick, whether it's water. I have a water contamination case going on now, was making individual sick. Could be mold, whether that is in a household, whether that is at someone's place of work and so forth. And so it's basically an area law that I wasn't familiar with until I got sick, and then all of a sudden, the floodgates open. So I've really expanded my practice into that, and that's what I want to do now, I having experienced it and knowing what people go through, I feel like I empathize with a lot of my clients now where I didn't understand it before, and I also know a lot about it because I've gone through it myself. So,

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Kendra Seymour

26:22

Yeah, I think like there's something really powerful, whether it's a lawyer or a healthcare practitioner or an advocate who has experienced it firsthand, because it's not really something I think you fully get until you have either lived it personally or it's been very close to home, right, like an immediate family member or something like that, because it can be very hard to explain, I think, and we don't have to get into too much of this. The very frustrating and angering part here is that Safestart delivered a report that basically explained how widespread, how serious the situation was and the impact it could potentially have on human health, as evidenced by not just your situation, but colleagues and stuff who were also having health symptoms. But it seems like, in an attempt to like downplay that, they went and got a second

opinion right was, was my understanding why they brought in that other company they wanted. I don't, I don't want to say anything that gets you in trouble, but.

RS

Ryan Schnack

27:28

Sure, that's what it seemed like. They wanted to go out and get their own opinion. I, it was a debacle, because after they approved this second company to come in. I wanted to be present for the testing to see how they did it. I knew when Safestart came in. We had the maintenance crew at the courthouse, went around and monitored them, and I wanted to see what kind of testing they were doing and how this was done. They wouldn't let me do this. So I have, I think I have an email to that effect as well. So after, after that, all takes place, and they basically said that the courthouse was pretty good. Maybe there's a few hot spots, but it wasn't bad. It wasn't unsafe. I think that the biggest problem area was the jail. And their recommendation, if I remember right, was to close off the jail and do some hyper filtered type vacuuming and make sure that it gets cleaned up that way. But again, no one seemed to really dig into the walls. And I can only imagine what there is behind the walls. And there could have been a lot more done, in my opinion, but they came in maybe a day, or a half a day, did their testing and that was it. Think Safestart was in for three, maybe four days at the courthouse, doing their testing.

KS

Kendra Seymour

29:03

Yeah, and that's one of the things we talk about at the foundation, is really true nationwide, although we're working to change it, Illinois included, and we've had success with with making some steps across the country. But when we talk about an inspection, whether so, an IEP, an indoor environmental professional. We assume that we're talking about the same thing, but the reality is, when I talk, when I think about what an inspection looks like, is going to be very different than probably the company I call and the second company I call and the third company I call, and we're all going to have different understandings of what that looks like, and that's part of the problem and right? You can have one company go in and all they do is maybe some air testing, right? And air testing, listen, folks, there's no perfect test out there. Each test has specific strengths and limitations, right? I could make a case for every type of test. If it's used in the right way, and most importantly, if it's used in combination with that thorough inspection, which takes into account, you know, visual inspections and moisture readings and thermal imaging and all of those things and understanding of building science, occupant health, that come together because you can have one company and this is where I see just even in residential they come in, they're in and out in like an hour. Most of that time is spent setting up and taking down air testing equipment, which is done in the center of a room. And then they say, you know what the air test will tell us if there's a problem. And one of the messages we're trying to help people understand is that is not what you want when we talk about an inspection. Because that's like taking one piece of the puzzle, and is that blue piece because it's an ocean,

or is that blue piece a piece of a frosting on a birthday cake? Like you can't make a decision about the health of the building based on any single type or single data point. And I think that's what's really frustrating, is we see this in rental properties too. A renter will pose a concern, right? They bring in their own IEP, and then the landlord sends in someone else who does the testing in a way that favors the landlord or makes the situation seem maybe less severe than what it is, and so this is why, you know, we're pushing for more consistency, for more regulation. But the most important thing that you can do, whether you're a homeowner or renter or you're working in the place, is understand some of these basics about inspection and remediation, so that when you see it and you see you know some of these practices, you can say, you know, I know that's not going to be the most accurate way to determine what's going on in building. Sorry, to go off on a tangent.

RS

Ryan Schnack

31:44

No, that is great

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Kendra Seymour

31:47

I just want to be aware. And I'll do another plug, because I know we're talking about workspaces, which we're going to talk a little bit more about, because it is unique in the sense that you have a lot less control, as opposed to if you owned your home. But if you are listening, if you head on over to ChangeTheAirFoundation.org, go to our resource tab, the very first thing you're going to see is Start Here for mold and water damage, and we're going to take you step by step through, how do you find that good IEP, right? What are the red flags? How do you sort out the ones who are just going to do that quick, in and out testing and call it a day, versus someone who's really going to go through your home or building top to bottom, and we go through what remediation should look like. So we do have those resources available, so be sure to check them out. So Ryan, this is really frustrating, I imagine, for the people still in that building. Like, do you feel that you or anyone who brought this to the attention of people in the position to change it. Ever did you worry about your career or repercussions or anything like that? I know sometimes when people speak out like one of the reasons they don't is that they're worried that they might think I'm crazy. I might get a bad review. I don't want to lose my job, and it doesn't have to be about your specific situation, but just in general, do you have any thoughts about that when you speak out about the workplace and the conditions there?

RS

Ryan Schnack

33:14

I do. There was a lot of negativity that some people had in terms of what I was presenting. So I really saw a dichotomy between the people that were frequently going to the courthouse. So we had judges that

seemed to take complete opposite positions. We had some of the judges that were not feeling well, and then others that thought, well, I've been in here for years and I'm not sick. And so they didn't understand it. We had employees. You would see the the same thing. Well, some employees were not sick, the other ones were not feeling well, and they seemed to, you know, take one side or the other. The count that we had, there was probably 50 people to 60 people that reported symptoms. There was a lady locally. She's a retired nurse that did testing on at least 50 people, and I think maybe all but one of them were having symptoms from the courthouse. I saw arguments between, it seemed like the state's attorney's office versus the public defender's office. The public defender's office, like the chief public defender, who I talked about before, was not feeling well, he was very instrumental and being a voice going to the meetings, but the state's attorney's office, it didn't seem like they were so much on board with the problem, and, you know, I don't know if that was because they're worried about liability. The way that it works is the sheriff is in charge of the courthouse, the judges are in charge of the courtroom. That's the way the law works in Illinois. So the state's attorney really had to back the sheriff's department, but really the employees and the people that were frequently in the courthouse just wanted to see the problem fixed. And it wasn't initially anything about a lawsuit, and we just wanted to get the the problem fixed, and it would just, you're on one side or the other, unfortunately. And I remember initially, I'd walk into the courthouse with a mask, and some people would walk in with a mask, and people look at you like you had grown three heads, and what in the world is this person doing? And I really I felt like for the first time in my life I wasn't normal, like this is I just felt like I was living in a world that I was not used to. I felt kind of like an outcast, and I hated that feeling. You know, you a lot of people I found didn't want to come forward because you don't want to tell people you're not feeling well, you're sick. Nobody wants to hear that. They like to hear good things, positive things, and this was all negative. I feel like I presented a problem. I think that it was acknowledged by everybody that this was an issue. Now, the extent of it, they would argue, but, you know, I'm just trying to get the problem fixed. I want to work in a safe environment. I want employees to work in a safe environment and to go in and to face some of this resistance and disbelief. It was really disheartening.

KS

Kendra Seymour

37:11

Yeah, yeah. I appreciate you sharing that piece and that perspective, because Brandon Chappo, our co-founder, and I know someone you know well too. He always says, we like to think our stories are unique, but they're not. And while we're talking about one courthouse, this is happening in public buildings across the country. There was an EPA based study not too long ago, and I think it said something like 45% of the randomly selected buildings in the US have current water leaks, and as many as 85% have passed. I get calls and emails every day from people in schools or other workplaces just like yours, who are having problems, and people just want to work in a healthy building, right? They want to feel well, and that seems like a basic need, right? Like safe air, safe water, safe place to work. And so we do have a big problem here, and I acknowledge that these fixes are expensive and they're not easy, but not dealing with them is also

expensive, right? The cost to employee health and productivity and your ability to focus. So there, are solutions. We know how to make buildings healthier. We know how to remove mold. It's about us all agreeing, as a society or locale or wherever, that these problems deserve to be fixed. So I'm wondering, just broadly speaking,

RS

Ryan Schnack

38:38

I would add to that too, if you don't mind, please. One of the heartbreaking things, and I witness it almost every day, when I go into certain offices at the courthouse, have some employees that are not making very much, and they rely on that job to feed their family. They rely on that job for health insurance, and they don't understand why they continue to get sick, and it's either they feed their family, or they work in this environment and continue to get sicker. And it just breaks my heart every time that I walk into one of these spaces and see these people, and I really want to do what I can to help them out. There's been a number of employees that have left, and the follow up that I've had, including with Todd Nelson, our chief public defender, they're doing better. I mean, I talked to Todd, and he appreciated me bringing this to light, and he said, you know, he is doing great now. So that's another big indicator that the building is bad. But it truly breaks my heart for people that are stuck, and in a way, I'm still transitioning my practice. I have to be in there from time to time, but I love to go into my local courthouse and be able to feel safe and not feel like garbage when I come out. And it just it really breaks my heart to have to see this day in and day out, but at the very least, I know that employees have notice of this, and they can make a decision. And I'm hoping that for the ones that are affected that they're getting the right treatment, that they're able to eventually get out so

KS

Kendra Seymour

40:42

Well. Thank you for sounding the alarm and for pushing this issue right for everyone who goes into those buildings. And it's funny, there's a Harvard professor, and he talks about there are only two places in the US where we require people to spend time. One is schools and the other is jail or prison, right? And so if you mentioned the prison and those you know, a lot of people don't always have the choice, whether it's because they're forced to or this is the job I have, and I don't, if I don't work, I don't put food on the table, and my family goes hungry. And so so often we see people having to sacrifice their health because of just mere basic necessities that's provided from the job. So you had mentioned other people's health real quick. How are you doing with your health now that you're in treatment, you've reduced your exposure, have your symptoms, symptoms subsided, or

RS

Ryan Schnack

41:35

Yeah, I would say I'm doing a lot better than what I was. I'm not 100% but I've made so many sacrifices. I've moved offices. We're in an old building. I've moved my house, made it a surge, friendly house with the HVAC system. I have the IQAir and set up the Perfect 16 and the ERV, where I'm getting fresh air from the outside. The floors, it's all vinyl flooring, where I don't have any carpet. And so that's been a huge change. I try to stay out of the courthouse as much as I can. And again, I just want to be normal. Nobody wants to be sick like this. And I'm very fortunate to have found the doctors that I was able to find, and to be able to recover in that sense. But there's been a lot of losses, too. I feel like I've had a lot lost a lot of friendships over this, where people don't understand what I'm saying, they don't believe me. Where I live, it's very small town. It's very political. And again, we have the it's just a split. It seems like right down the the middle, where people are 100% on your side, or they're not. They don't believe you, and that's really affected me. I felt like before all this happened, I had a good relationship with pretty much everybody, and now it's really been affected in that area.

KS

Kendra Seymour

43:16

Yeah, Ryan, from the time I've known you, you seem like a very you're a level headed guy, you're a nice guy, you're friendly and it's heartbreaking that something like this, as basic as just providing safe working environment, can divide people. And that's something I'm glad you brought up, and we talk about is this is just not something that impacts you physically, obviously impacts you financially, emotionally, mentally, relationships end and change and and there is a loss there. There's a morning. There is for some like a very real PTSD that comes through, having gone through this journey. And I relate to that, those feelings so much because it's complex, and unlike you know, another ailment that might be, you know, devastating a different way, there's just a different level of, like, public acceptance or understanding or compassion even. And sometimes there, I don't always see the compassion and empathy for those who are diagnosed with CIRs or mold related illness, because it's still not understood. So something we're trying to change. I know we're getting low on time, but I'm wondering if you could speak just your thoughts in general, like if you could give a message to employers or public agencies responsible for maintaining our public buildings. You know, what would you tell them?

RS

Ryan Schnack

44:39

I think it all starts with awareness and new laws being passed. That's why I love your organization so much. Is you put yourself out there. There's a great group of people that work at your organization, Brandon Chappo, good friend of mine. Rubino, I got to meet him at the conference, and just a lot of good and caring individuals. And I think it starts with the grassroot type stuff. That bill that was passed in

Illinois, there was virtually no laws in Illinois. I just couldn't believe it. When I started researching this and there was maybe a paragraph or two about mold, but that was it. And so we started with nothing, and then came up with the first law here in Illinois, where it mandates that the professionals providing mold remediation services, have to register with the state, as you know, and provide evidence of the third party certification and financial responsibility. So that's a start, and we need to do a lot more. I think that doctors need to get on the same page. For example, some doctors do not recognize CIRs. There's not an ICD code. I'm trying to work on that, as we speak. There are some ICD codes that doctors will use, such as the, I think, the Z77.010, the R65.10, the mast cell activation. And I really think that the Western doctors and the functional medicine doctors need to come together so that there's not one doctor saying one thing and another doctor saying another thing. I just see taking these cases throughout the country now, some of these doctors, they treat it differently, and it'd be nice to see more doctors having the same mindset. So I think it really we've got to start with the grassroots. We keep the awareness up, and the laws need to change too, whether that's building policies, worker protections, with the courthouse stuff, OSHA wouldn't do anything. So it's really the Illinois EPA that determines whether or not safe spaces, whether or not they're safe spaces. But the EPA came in and really they haven't done much in terms of oversight. From what I've seen, I've been very disappointed. I just can't believe that they would allow the windows to be screwed shut in this building, and the employees seem to be still sick. I know from a personal level, if I have a two, three day trial in there, I'm not feeling well. I hate to go out and feel like garbage, and when I'm not in there as much I'm feeling for the most part, okay. I think there needs to be some laws, like anti discrimination type laws. We need to beef up the inspection and remediation laws. I think insurance need to change and I think it really starts there. We need to put laws in place so that there are standards. And it's we're not there just yet. But I think with Change The Air Foundation and other organizations, we can do that. It just it's not as fast as a process as I wanted, and it's going to be a battle with some of this too. I mean, for example, with insurance. I mean, I'm sure insurance companies are going to be fighting some of this. I'm sure that you know when, when the EPA, if we ask them to get stricter standards. There's going to be a lot of research that needs to be that goes behind that. And I think there, there's some changes in that area, but there could be a lot more. We just cannot allow employees to continue to get sick like this.

KS

Kendra Seymour

48:55

Yeah, yeah. And you brought up so many good points, man, I wish we had like, another hour, because things like OSHA, people think, I can't tell you how many, like teachers, specifically, I called OSHA, and they can't help us. And then, like when you talk about the EPA, and then their ability to do anything is largely restricted. So then it defaults to the state laws. And Illinois was only the seventh state to require any kind of license or certification for, you, know, for people remediating your home. So in most places, you could go to bed tonight, wake up tomorrow and call yourself a mold remediator. Now, you have to, like, do some basic filing your company, but, like, you don't necessarily need special training. So this is, this is

system wide problem here. And one of the things too that for those listening, we're going to be sharing stories like Ryan's, if you're listening, but also from other teachers, from parents whose children got sick in schools. We're also going to be releasing a workplace guide, tips for navigating mold in the workplace that hopefully give you some tools that you can use to maybe navigate the situation, because the policy thought side of things too. One of the things I want people to understand is it is a slower process. And I know sometimes people are like, well, do one bill and put all the fixes, and I have a we did a great interview with Brandon about why those bills don't work and why, just because we had a bill passed in Illinois, we're not stopping. There's more work should be done in Illinois. There's more work to fix all of these things, and it takes time, but it's because of people like you, Ryan and all the volunteers at Change The Air Foundation, and people listening that come together to do that. And so if you're listening and you're like, wow, this really needs to change and you want to get involved, please reach out to us at ChangeTheAirFoundation.org to volunteer, because it's your voices. It was stories like Ryan's and so many more. Patrick Lee, who will we have an episode with him coming out to about his son who got sick in a school that make the difference? And the other plug I'll do is, because at Change The Air, we're unique, we are the only nonprofit, as far as I know, really pushing for reform on the policy side of things at the state and federal level. So whether it's home or residential, public spaces, military housing, we want to we want to fix it all, but we do that because of great people like you. So Ryan, I know we're just about out of time. If someone right now today is listening and they think, wow, I know I have mold, or I strongly suspect there's a mold and water damage issue in my building, what are some first steps? Again, not legal advice, folks. What tips would you give them for for next steps?

RS

Ryan Schnack

48:55

I would get the proper testing done and make sure that it's a company that's reputable, someone that has is experienced in it, so make sure that you have a problem. If they come back and say you have a problem, I would say, get out. And I know that's easier said than done, but you need to get out of these spaces and then find the right doctor, find someone that is knowledgeable in mold illness and biotoxin illness, and go through the protocol and go through the steps. And I'd also say, never give up. This has changed my life. I never thought that I would be doing these types of cases. But I love these people. I truly care about people. Not only do I want to help them from the legal perspective, but it's very important to me that they get better as well, and I've found that to be so fulfilling, to go through journeys with clients together and to help them out. And I think that's where God has placed me, and I'm going to continue on that path, and I'm going to keep fighting, both on the the new laws and trying to get legislation passed, but also helping out these clients to get them justice. And I would just say, keep fighting. Keep fighting for your life, and then keep fighting for other people as well.

KS

Kendra Seymour

53:20

I love that, and that hope is so important to hold on to when you go through this, because it can feel like a very dark and overwhelming journey, but it's there are people like yourself, myself and others who have come through this, and we want to help show you the way so we so appreciate it Ryan. Thank you for everything you do. People had follow up questions or wanted to get into contact with you. How could they do that?

RS

Ryan Schnack

53:43

Sure they could go to my website at ryanschnacklaw.com My address here, and it has all my contact information, so you can give me a call anytime, and I'd be happy to help out. So I appreciate everything that Change The Air Foundation does, and keep up the great work, and thanks again for having me on.

KS

Kendra Seymour

54:04

Well, we're right back at you. Thank you. And for everyone listening. Listen, we know this journey is hard. We know it's overwhelming, and we know it gets even more challenging when there's mold and water damage or other indoor environmental pollutants in your workplace. If you want more information, interviews like this, some of our workplace guides are gonna be coming out. Please head on over to ChangeTheAirFoundation.org, and sign up for our newsletter, because that really is the best way to get information like this and all of our free resources sent directly to your inbox. Thank you so much, everyone. We'll see you next time.