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## THE TOXIC MOLD RUSH: CALIFORNIA MOM HELPS FUEL AN OBSESSION

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The water line to the icemaker had leaked, and a small pool of water had incubated a modest patch of household mold. Kramer discovered it and was immediately worried, thinking back to the Code Blue. She alerted her home insurer, Mercury, which sent a remediation company to clean the black spot. Kramer remembers having heard that mold could be dangerous. Not wanting to take any chances, she moved her family out while cleaners did their work, sampled the air — and deemed her home perfectly safe.



Texas fold 'em: The Ballards' home, demolished with the furniture inside, became a sensation when a jury awarded \$32 million.



The Kramer family once lived in this posh Lake Hodges home where Sharon says mold sickened them.

But once back home, her youngest daughter, Meaghan, and husband, Mike, developed what seemed to be minor stuffy noses. Kramer swore the house was contaminated and ordered Erin to sleep in the family trailer in the driveway every night. "It wasn't fun," Erin, now 24, says. "But I understood why she was doing it."

Kramer herself began to feel ill. "I felt like hell," she says of her wide-ranging and often odd symptoms — an indication to many scientists and medical professionals that the culprit was not mold spores or toxins, which would produce clear, identifiable illnesses in those allergic to them. But Kramer insists, "One day, my ears would be ringing, the next day, my vision would be blurred. I couldn't remember anything and I dropped 30 pounds in a matter of about a month."

Like many people who suffer from mold exposure, Kramer bounced from skeptical doctor to skeptical doctor. Mike Kramer, who did not feel ill, remembers being skeptical too.

"It was frustrating, and I had my doubts," he tells the *Weekly*. "You look at it as an outsider, not being sick [yourself], and you think maybe there is some mental condition making her do this."

In 2003, another raft of huge mold news stories broke nationwide, and Kramer paid close attention. The most famous, and strangest, was that of Johnny Carson's sidekick Ed McMahon, who took a \$7.2 million settlement after suing for \$20 million in his claim that mold made him and his wife sick — and killed his sheepdog, Muffin. He wasn't the only prominent Californian to join the movement: Erin Brockovich also claimed her Conejo home grew mold.

Not everyone bought into the idea that household mold was a great new environmental danger. Hollywood began poking fun at its supposed victims. Fox's *King of the Hill*, in the late-2003 episode "After the Mold Rush," offered a taunting storyline in which the Hills' home was overgrown with mold. Peggy Hill declares, "Hey, Erin Brockovich has got mold. And Ed McMahon. Oh, it killed his dog Muffin. Maybe we'll meet them at a survivors' group."

In the McMahon case, some see the tragic unraveling of a popular public figure egged on by an attorney, Allan Browne. No hard, scientific evidence was ever made public proving that McMahon or his dog suffered the specific mold allergies and immune-system problems that, in rare cases, can be set off by household mold.

Since then, McMahon has become a sad figure, with a series of new troubles, including his default this year on his palatial 7,000-square-foot home on Mulholland Drive, involving a \$4.8 million loan from the infamous lender Countrywide. And he just sued again, bizarrely accusing investment tycoon Robert Day of having in his mansion a poorly lit staircase on which McMahon says he fell during a party last year. McMahon is belatedly alleging he broke his neck but that doctors missed it.

The longtime TV pitchman spent years convincing the courts and the general public that his home contained rampant, poisonous, deadly mold strong enough to fell a large dog. McMahon talked it up for so long that he now faces the daunting task of selling a home he can no longer afford, that people believe is riddled with toxins.

"Mold has not been a problem," insists McMahon's frustrated real estate agent Alex Davis — instead citing the real problem as the mansion's proximity to an annoying paparazzi infestation at the nearby Britney Spears estate. Sounding almost plaintive, Davis adds, "There is probably less of a chance of mold [at the McMahon mansion] than any other house in town because the house basically has been rebuilt. There is just the story behind it — and nothing else."

McMahon, through his publicist, Howard Bragman, declined to comment. But Anthony Marguleas, a real estate agent in Pacific Palisades, says that mold phobia is still a huge hurdle in home sales, regardless of reality. "Fifty percent of buyers won't even look at a house if it was 'infested' with mold," he claims. Less emotional, more sophisticated buyers understand that "there is mold in everybody's house."

While McMahon was fighting his demons, Kramer carved out her own niche: to blow the whistle on what she perceived as lies about the adverse effects of mold on thousands of people. She still believes that a ring of scientists, paid off by the insurance and construction industry, spun the scientific research to discredit the claims made by mold's purported victims.

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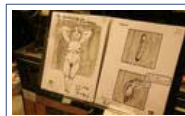
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